

Article

Interrogating the Comparative Method: Whither, Why, and How?¹

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Abstract: This essay seeks to illuminate the problematics, methods, and dynamics of comparison by interrogating how certain analytical categories in the study of religion, such as scripture and the body, can be fruitfully reimagined through a comparative analysis of their Hindu and Jewish instantiations. I consider a range of issues that are critical to any productive comparative study, and I reflect more specifically on the principal components of my own comparative method in light of Oliver Freiberger’s analytical framework: the goals of comparative analysis; the modes of comparison; the parameters that define the scope and the scale of the comparative inquiry; and the operations involved in the comparative process, beginning with selection of the specific traditions and analytical categories to be addressed and formulation of the organizational design of the study and culminating in the re-visioned categories and models in the study of religion that constitute the fruits of the comparative inquiry.

Keywords: comparative method; analytical categories; models of religious tradition; Hinduisms; Judaisms; Hindu-Jewish comparative studies; scripture; body; Veda; Torah

Jonathan Z. Smith, in his 1982 essay “In Comparison a Magic Dwells,” surveys and critiques four basic modes of comparison—ethnographic, encyclopedic, morphological, and evolutionary—together with their more recent variants, and concludes that none of the proposed methods is adequate. Yet he suggests that the comparative enterprise should not thereby be abandoned, for the process of comparison is a constitutive aspect of human thought and is critical to the task of the scholar of religion.

We must conclude this exercise in our own academic history in a most unsatisfactory manner. Each of the modes of comparison has been found problematic. Each new proposal has been found to be a variant of an older mode. . . . We know better how to evaluate comparisons, but we have gained little over our predecessors in either the method for making comparisons or the reasons for its practice. . . . So we are left with the question [posed by Wittgenstein], “How am I to apply what the one thing shows me to the case of two things?” The possibility of the study of religion depends on its answer². (Smith 1982a, p. 35)

Nearly two decades later, in 2000, a groundbreaking collection of essays, *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, edited by Kimberley Patton and Benjamin Ray (Patton and Ray 2000), not only evoked Smith’s 1982 essay in its title but also incorporated the

¹ The title of this essay was inspired by the essay by my mentor Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Comparative Religion: Whither—and Why?” (Smith 1959).

² Smith gives a more detailed critical analysis of these four modes of comparison in his essay “*Adde Parvum Parvo Magnus Acerous Erit*” (Smith 1978). The latter essay also contains a brief bibliographical survey of studies on the comparative method by historians of religions and anthropologists.

essay itself as a Prologue, along with Smith's concluding remarks as an Epilogue (Smith 2000). The contributors to the volume were asked to reassess the continuing viability of the comparative study of religion in response to the ascendancy in the academy of postmodern, poststructuralist, and postcolonial critiques that had called into question the validity of the entire comparative enterprise.

As one of the contributors to the Patton-Ray volume (Holdrege 2000), I am happy to report as a contributor to this special journal issue on the comparative method that the comparative study of religion has not only survived the onslaught of critiques but has also been reinvigorated by the development of a range of robust, rigorous, and innovative modes of comparative analysis that have assumed their rightful place in the academy as viable postmodern—and ultimately post-postmodern—approaches.³ In his recent critical assessment of the forms and functions of comparison, Michael Stausberg (Stausberg 2014) surveys a diverse array of comparative projects and concludes that comparison constitutes an inextricable and indispensable part of our scholarly enterprise and is the “modus operandi of research methods” in the study of religion, ranging from the formation of analytical categories to the construction of taxonomies to the formulation and testing of hypotheses.

[E]ven if “the comparative method” is no longer considered as the key method in the study of religion, comparison underlies most research activities, informs many research designs and is embedded in standard research methods that are not usually considered or labelled as “comparative.” There is simply no way of getting around comparison. (Stausberg 2014, pp. 34–35)

I have been invited by Oliver Freiberger to reflect in my essay on the comparative method that I deployed in my book *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (Holdrege 1996) in light of the analytical framework that he has described in his essay for this journal issue. In addition to explicating the comparative method deployed in my earlier study of Hindu and Jewish constructions of the category scripture, I will also reflect on the fruits of my ongoing comparative inquiries and will consider a variety of issues that are critical to any productive comparative study of Hindu and Jewish traditions, including, as outlined in Freiberger's analytical framework, the goals of comparative analysis; the modes of comparison; the parameters that define the scope and the scale of the comparative inquiry; and the operations involved in the comparative process, beginning with selection of the specific traditions to be addressed and culminating in the re-visioned categories and models in the study of religion that constitute the fruits of the comparative inquiry.

1. Configuration of the Comparative Study

1.1. Goals of Comparison

As a comparative historian of religions specializing in Hindu and Jewish traditions, my comparative inquiries in *Veda and Torah* and later studies are directed primarily to three audiences: scholars of religion, scholars of South Asia, and scholars of Judaica. With respect to the *goals of comparison*, my work as a comparative historian of religions has emphasized the role of comparative study as a method of critical interrogation that can serve as a means to dismantle the tyranny of hegemonic paradigms in the academic study of religion—whether Eurocentric paradigms, Protestant Christian paradigms, or other dominant paradigms—and to reconstitute our scholarly discourses to allow for a multiplicity of epistemologies. I have been concerned in particular with two functions of

³ Among recent examples of robust comparative studies, see McClymond 2008; Freiberger 2009; Shushan 2009; Bornet 2010; Freidenreich 2011. Among recent collections of essays by North American and European scholars of religion that explore a range of theoretical and methodological issues pertaining to the comparative study of religion, see Idinopulos et al. 2006; Burger and Calame 2006; Schmidt-Leukel and Nehring 2016. For a discussion of relevant works by scholars from other disciplines on the modes and functions of comparison in history, sociology, and anthropology, see Stausberg 2014.

comparative analysis: first, as a heuristic tool through which we construct and apply our scholarly categories and models; and, second, as a critical method through which we continue to test, reassess, refine, deconstruct, and reconstitute these categories and models.⁴

In my ongoing comparative work I have sought to illuminate the problematics, methods, and dynamics of comparison by interrogating how certain analytical categories in the study of religion—such as scripture, the body, sacrifice, purity, asceticism, and food—can be fruitfully reimagined through a comparative analysis of their Hindu and Jewish instantiations. Moreover, I have sought to demonstrate that this re-visioning of analytical categories through sustained comparative historical studies of particular Hindu and Jewish discourses can provide the basis for developing alternative imaginaries to the Protestant-based paradigms that have dominated the academic study of religion.⁵

1.2. Modes of Comparison

In his discussion of *modes of comparison*, Freiburger invokes the classificatory schema proposed by David Freidenreich (2004) in his survey of methods of comparative scholarship, in which he distinguishes among four types of comparative approaches that (1) focus on similarities; (2) focus on differences; (3) focus on genus-species relationships; and (4) use comparison as a scholarly lens to provide new perspectives on the religious tradition under examination. Freiburger correlates the third and fourth modes in Freidenreich's typology with his own formulation of two modes of comparison: the taxonomic mode, which "aims at forming or modifying meta-linguistic typologies, taxonomies, classifications, or categorizations and thus at theory-formation," and the illuminative mode, which "aims at illuminating a particular historical-empirical item, especially assumed blind spots, by drawing comparatively on other cases."⁶

Freidenreich (2004, pp. 89–90) categorizes my work, *Veda and Torah*, as an example of a comparative study that focuses on genus-species relationships. I find this characterization particularly apt, as it resonates with my own formulations of my comparative method not only in *Veda and Torah* but also in my ongoing work. In my comparative approach in *Veda and Torah* and later studies, the genus-species relationship operates on two levels: first, on the level of the *analytical categories* that serve as the constitutive building-blocks through which scholars of religion construct taxonomies; and, second, on the level of the encompassing taxonomic systems that serve as *models of religious tradition* in our scholarly discourses.

1.2.1. Analytical Categories

The genus-species relationship can be seen operating in the academic study of religion in the ways in which we use analytical categories—such as myth, ritual, scripture, law, ethics, and mysticism—to select, analyze, classify, and interpret religious phenomena. Comparative analysis is intrinsic to the process through which we construct and apply such categories, in which each analytical category functions as a genus in our scholarly discourse by means of which we classify religious phenomena according to whether they share or do not share certain properties. For example, we construct and define the genus "scripture" and then we survey and compare a range of potential

⁴ See Holdrege 2010. These two functions correspond, respectively, to the "heuristic" and "provocative" functions of comparison described by the comparative philosopher of religion Thomas Kasulis.

Comparison typically serves one of two purposes. It can, first of all, try to increase our understanding of one or both of the comparates by seeing one in light of the other. This is a *heuristic* function, a way of classifying and gathering information. Secondly, comparison may try to use the similarities and differences as a means of provoking a new perspective on a traditional issue. . . . This is a *provocative* function, one that leads immediately to questions, not answers. (Kasulis 1993, p. xiii)

⁵ See in particular Holdrege 1999, 2010, 2018a, 2018b.

⁶ For an extended analysis of these modes of comparison, see Freiburger 2016.

candidates—the Hebrew Bible, the Vedic Saṃhitās, the Qur’ān, the I Ching, and so on—to determine in each case whether the indigenous exempla accord with our scholarly constructions and thus can be ascribed the status of a species within the genus “scripture.” In *Veda and Torah* I focused my analysis on the genus “scripture” as represented in two species, Veda and Torah.

1.2.2. Models of Religious Tradition

The genus-species relationship can also be seen operating in the encompassing taxonomic systems that function as models of religious tradition in our scholarly discourses. The fundamental argument that grounds my comparative approach in *Veda and Torah* and in my ongoing work is that—contrary to stereotypical characterizations of Hindu and Jewish traditions as representing opposite ends of the spectrum of the world’s religions—brahmanical Hinduism and rabbinic Judaism constitute two species of the same genus of religious tradition and provide the basis for constructing alternative models to the Protestant-based paradigms that have historically dominated the academic study of religion and have served to perpetuate the ideals of Enlightenment discourse and colonialist and neocolonialist projects.⁷

I have suggested that one way of rethinking what constitutes a religious tradition is to posit a spectrum in which religious traditions are mapped according to different degrees of ethnocultural specificity, with the genus “embodied communities” on one end of the spectrum and the genus “missionizing traditions” on the other end. Among the array of Hinduisms and Judaisms, brahmanical Hinduism and rabbinic Judaism are paradigmatic species of the genus “embodied communities” in that their notions of tradition-identity, in contrast to the universalizing tendencies of missionizing traditions, are embodied in the particularities of ethnocultural categories defined in relation to a particular people (Indo-Āryans, Jews), a particular sacred language (Sanskrit, Hebrew), a particular sacred land (India, Israel), a particular corpus of sacred texts (Veda, Torah), and a particular set of sociocultural practices. Christian and Buddhist traditions, in contrast, as species of the genus “missionizing traditions,” construct their tradition-identities primarily in terms of universalizing teachings that are intended for potentially all peoples and cultures. In their early formative periods such missionizing traditions are generally concerned to disassociate themselves from identification with a particular people-language-land-culture so that they can spread their teachings across ethnic, linguistic, geographic, and cultural boundaries, beyond a single constituency.⁸

Brahmanical Hinduism and rabbinic Judaism, as two species of the same genus of religious tradition, share a number of characteristics: as *ethnocultural systems* concerned with issues of family, ethnic and cultural integrity, blood lineages, and the intergenerational transmission of traditions; as *elite textual communities* that have codified their norms in the form of scriptural canons transmitted in their

⁷ As I discussed in [Holdrege 2010](#), while recent developments in the fields of ritual studies and cultural studies have provided important correctives to such tendencies, the Protestant legacy still lingers—albeit unconsciously—in the practices of many scholars of religion. A number of scholars have raised issues concerning the persistence of Protestant presuppositions and categories in the academic study of religion. See, for example, [Neusner 1986](#), pp. 13–17; [Schopen 1991](#). See also [Staal \(1989, pp. 387–419\)](#) more general critique of Western paradigms of religious tradition, which he argues are inappropriate for the study of Asian traditions.

⁸ For a discussion of the distinctions between embodied communities and missionizing traditions, including a consideration of intermediary cases such as Islamic traditions, see [Holdrege 1999](#). It is important to emphasize that in differentiating between embodied communities and missionizing traditions, I do not mean to suggest a hard dichotomy between mutually exclusive models but rather a spectrum, with the ideal types “embodied particularism” and “disembodied universalism” at either end of the spectrum and a range of possible expressions of ethnocultural specificity in between. On the one hand, as the universalizing teachings of missionizing traditions are appropriated and adapted by different cultures, they of course become embedded in specific ethnocultural complexes and assume distinctive forms. Hence among the varieties of Christianities and Buddhisms, we find Spanish Catholics, Irish Catholics, Russian Orthodox, Romanian Orthodox, Chinese Buddhists, Japanese Buddhists, Tibetan Buddhists, and so on. On the other hand, in the course of their history members of embodied communities may move from their homeland—whether through forced exile or voluntary emigration—and, while attempting to maintain their distinctive ethnocultural identity and their connection with the sacred language and sacred land of their people, at the same time adapt to their host cultures in a variety of different ways. Hence in the long history of the Jewish diaspora, Jewish traditions have assumed variant forms as they have adapted to the local customs of different gentile cultures—as seen, for example, in the medieval period in the divergent traditions of the Sephardi communities of Spain and the Ashkenazi communities of France and Germany.

respective sacred languages; and as *religions of orthopraxy* characterized by hereditary priesthoods and sacrificial traditions, comprehensive legal systems, complex dietary laws, and elaborate regulations concerning purity and impurity. The feature that underlies these shared characteristics is that of *embodiment*: embodiment in the particularities of ethnocultural identity tied to a specific people, language, and land and to an authorized set of sacred texts and sociocultural practices. These embodied communities share an abiding concern for the body as a site of central significance that is to be regulated through ritual and social duties, maintained in purity, sustained through proper diet, and reproduced through appropriate sexual relations. Through such regimens of bodily practice, the biological bodies of those whose *ascribed identity* is Jewish or Hindu, by virtue of a birth into a community that defines itself in terms of blood descent, are reconstituted as “religiously informed bodies” that are *inscribed* with the socioreligious taxonomies of their respective communities.⁹

Freidenreich remarks regarding my multitiered analysis of genus-species relationships in *Veda and Torah*:

Barbara Holdrege, . . . writing on the subject of scripture in *Veda and Torah* (1996), analyzes and compares the role of these sacred texts in their respective traditions. Her argument, however, extends beyond the particulars of these two scriptures. Holdrege maintains that . . . Hinduism and Judaism share common characteristics—such as a focus on practice, observance, and ethnic identity—not found in belief-oriented and missionary religions like Christianity. . . . Holdrege thus sets up a three-tiered classificatory system: Hinduism and Judaism are distinct species in the genus “orthopractical, ethnic religions” (which Holdrege labels “embodied communities”); this genus, along with the genus “orthodox, missionary religions” containing Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, are both members of the broader family of “religious traditions.” This scheme enables Holdrege to offer a generic definition of scripture that applies to Hinduism and Judaism but not to Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam. . . . While “scripture” is a common feature of all members of the family “religious traditions,” Holdrege maintains, its function differs by genus. Methodologically, Holdrege’s focus on genus is able to emphasize both similarity (between Hinduism and Judaism) and difference (between these religions and Christianity, etc.) in its definition of the nature of that genus, and, as a result, this methodology produces a more nuanced conclusion than the simpler focus on genus used [in earlier studies] by Lincoln (1989) and W. C. Smith (1993). . . . (Freidenreich 2004, pp. 89–90)

1.3. Scope of Comparison

In his discussion of the *scope of comparison*, Freiburger distinguishes among studies with a contextual scope, cross-cultural scope, and transhistorical scope. My comparative study in *Veda and Torah* is *cross-cultural* in that it crosses cultural boundaries and is concerned with Hindu and Jewish traditions, two traditions that have generally been deemed to have had little historical contact—although recent studies have brought to light evidence that Hindus and Jews have engaged in economic, cultural, and religious interactions for over two millennia within the broader matrices of Indic and Judaic cultures.¹⁰ My comparative study is also *transhistorical* in that the tradition-specific phase of my analysis, as I will discuss in a later section, involves comparisons across historical periods within each tradition, spanning from ancient through medieval times.

⁹ My notion of a “religiously informed body” draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s (Bourdieu 1977, Bourdieu 1990) notion of a “socially informed body” in which the sociocultural taxonomies of a social field are inscribed in the bodies of its constituent members through the “logic of practice”.

¹⁰ See Holdrege 2018b for a brief survey of key historical moments in which economic, cultural, and religious connections were forged between ancient and medieval Indic and Judaic worlds as part of the broader commercial networks that connected South Asia and the Middle East over the course of two millennia prior to 1300 CE.

1.4. Scale of Comparison

With respect to the *scale of comparison*, Freiburger distinguishes among micro-comparative studies, macro-comparative studies, and meso-comparative studies. I would characterize my comparative project in *Veda and Torah* as a *meso-comparative study* in that I clearly define the limits of my analysis with respect to both the comparands and the *tertium comparationis*, or third term of comparison. Within the array of Hinduisms and Judaisms, I focus my analysis on those traditions for which the *tertium comparationis*, scripture, is a constitutive category: brahmanical Hinduism and rabbinic Judaism, with some consideration also of kabbalistic traditions.

2. The Comparative Process

Freiberger's analysis of the comparative process distinguishes among five operations that are integral to many comparative studies: selection, description, juxtaposition, redescription, and rectification and theory formation.¹¹ In the following discussion of the comparative process, as instantiated in *Veda and Torah*, I highlight how the principal phases of my comparative analysis correlate with the operations in Freiburger's model: selection, which corresponds to Freiburger's first operation; organizational design, which is not included in Freiburger's model; tradition-specific analysis, which corresponds to description; comparative analysis which correlates with juxtaposition; and cultural analysis, which involves redescription, rectification, and theory formation.

2.1. Selection

The *selection* process in my comparative study initially involved selecting the Hindu and Jewish traditions as the comparands and the analytical category scripture as the *tertium comparationis*. A more advanced phase of the selection process required narrowing the scope of my study even further by determining, first, which specific traditions among the array of Hinduisms and Judaisms and, second, which specific dimensions of the category scripture would be the focus of my comparative historical analysis in *Veda and Torah*.

Within the array of Hindu and Jewish traditions, as mentioned earlier, I chose to narrow my focus to those traditions for which scripture is a constitutive category: the brahmanical tradition and the rabbinic tradition, with some attention also to kabbalistic traditions that have absorbed and reinterpreted rabbinic conceptions of scripture. Both the brahmanical and rabbinic traditions, as elite textual communities, have sought to shape and articulate the central norms of their respective traditions through codifying symbol systems and practices in the form of scriptural canons of which they are the custodians. Canonical authority is constitutive of both the brahmanical and rabbinic traditions in that the authority of the brahmin priests and the rabbinic sages themselves is to a large extent derived from their privileged role as the preservers and transmitters of the scriptural canon. In each canon a certain corpus of texts has been set apart as having special sacrosanct and authoritative status: the Veda in the brahmanical tradition and the Torah in the rabbinic tradition.¹² The discursive strategies through which the brahmanical and rabbinic traditions have circumscribed and subsequently extended their scriptural canons—as instantiated in the categories of Veda and Torah, respectively—have served as a means of circumscribing and maintaining the particularized ethnocultural identities of their respective communities in relation to other peoples, of delineating and legitimating the hierarchical differentiation of socioreligious functions within each community, of accommodating competing currents within the tradition, and of authorizing certain ritual and sociocultural practices.

¹¹ Freiburger's fivefold model expands on the fourfold model proposed by Smith (2000), in which Smith distinguishes four principal moments in the comparative process: description, comparison, redescription, and rectification.

¹² In the brahmanical tradition acceptance of the authority of the Veda has been the primary criterion for distinguishing orthodox from heterodox systems since at least the period of the early Dharma-Sūtras and Dharma-Śāstras (ca. 3rd or 2nd century BCE). Acceptance of the authority of the Torah has constituted one of the few dogmas of the rabbinic tradition since as early as the Mishnah (ca. 220 CE).

With respect to the specific dimensions of the category scripture on which I focus as the *tertium comparationis*, my comparative historical analysis of the status, authority, and function of scripture in brahmanical Hinduism and rabbinic Judaism is concerned in particular with the manner in which Veda and Torah, as constitutive categories of these textual communities, are represented as cosmological principles that are identified with the Word and that function as encompassing, paradigmatic symbols that incorporate and at the same time transcend the textuality of scripture.¹³ In discussing the category of canon in the history of religions, Jonathan Z. Smith has suggested that “canon is best seen as one form of a basic cultural process of limitation and of overcoming that limitation through ingenuity” (Smith 1982b, p. 52). He further suggests that the task of overcoming the limitation posed by a closed canon is “continually to extend the domain of the closed canon over everything that is known or everything that exists without altering the canon in the process” (Smith 1982b, p. 48). Both Veda and Torah conform to at least one aspect of Smith’s model in that each functions within its respective tradition as an encompassing symbol that is simultaneously delimited and potentially unlimited. At the center of each canon is a fixed corpus of texts, whether oral or written, that has been meticulously preserved in strictly unaltered form: the Vedic *mantras* collected in the *Saṃhitās* and the Sefer Torah (Pentateuch). At the same time the domains of both Veda and Torah have been extended through a variety of strategies so that each functions within its respective tradition as an open-ended, permeable category within which can be subsumed potentially all texts, teachings, and practices authorized by the religious elite.

In *Veda and Torah* I argue that one of the strategies by which the categories of Veda and Torah have been extended beyond their textual boundaries is through identification with the Word, which is itself at times represented as an encompassing category. This Word cannot be delimited to the written word, as the literal meaning of the term scripture as “a writing” might suggest, nor is it sufficient simply to expand the meaning of scripture to encompass its oral-aural dimensions as spoken word. The Word embodied in Veda and Torah is also represented as having a cosmological dimension, in which on one level it is depicted as a cosmic reality that is a living aspect of the divine, while on another level it is portrayed as the subtle plan or blueprint of creation containing the elements of the divine language through which the creator brings forth the manifold forms of the universe. Among the various dimensions of the category scripture, I focus my analysis of the *tertium comparationis* on the cosmological dimensions of Veda and Torah as embodiments of the Word that incorporate and at the same time explode the textual boundaries of scripture.

2.2. Organizational Design

At this point I would interject another operation into the comparative process outlined by Freiburger: determination of the *organizational design* of the comparative study. In *Veda and Torah* I deploy a method of comparative historical analysis and a corresponding organizational design that are intended to redress the problems found in earlier comparative studies of religion. Such studies, especially as exemplified in the structural phenomenological studies of scholars such as Gerardus van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade,¹⁴ are characterized by three types of interrelated problems: (1) *insufficient attention to differences*, in which they tend to focus on the common features and structural similarities among religious phenomena drawn from various religious traditions and consequently do not pay sufficient attention to the differences that give each tradition its unique character and integrity;

¹³ It is not within the scope of the present essay to enter into the scholarly debate concerning the meaning of the term “symbol.” In *Veda and Torah* I use the term in accordance with Paul Ricoeur’s characterization of a symbol as having a double intentionality. The first-order meaning is the primary, literal signification, which points beyond itself to a second-order meaning that functions as a potentially inexhaustible “surplus of signification.” Veda and Torah both function as a symbol in this sense, in that each has a primary signification as a delimited corpus of texts, which opens out to a second-order meaning that explodes these circumscribed limits and assimilates to itself a network of significations. For Ricoeur’s analysis of the nature and function of symbols, see in particular Ricoeur 1969, pp. 10–18; 1976, pp. 53–63.

¹⁴ See in particular (Eliade 1958, 1959, 1969; Leeuw 1967).

(2) *insufficient attention to the historical dimension*, in which, in their search for similarities and continuities, they are concerned primarily with synchronic structures and thus tend to disregard the diachronic or historical dimension of religious phenomena as dynamic, changing manifestations; and (3) *insufficient attention to context*, in which they fail to give adequate attention to the distinctive contours of each specific religious manifestation as shaped by the particular context—textual, historical, cultural, social, and/or religious—from which it emerges.

Through the method of comparative historical analysis that I deploy in *Veda and Torah* I address these problems by giving proper attention to differences as well as to similarities and to historical transformations as well as to structural continuities. This method involves three principal phases of analysis: (1) *tradition-specific analysis*, in which I analyze the symbol systems and practices associated with Veda and Torah independently, within the context of each scriptural tradition; (2) *comparative analysis*, in which I delineate both the structural similarities and the differences between these scriptural traditions' constructions of Veda and Torah; and (3) *cultural analysis*, in which I assess the broader theoretical implications of my comparative study with respect to—invoking Freiburger's terms—*redescribing* the categories of Veda and Torah, *rectifying* the category of scripture as an analytical category in the study of religion, and *theorizing* more broadly about the connections between constructions of scripture and models of religious tradition.

The fruits of this three-phase comparative analysis are reflected in the organizational design of *Veda and Torah*, which, in addition to the introduction and conclusion, is divided into three parts, which are concerned with the roles of Veda and Torah, respectively, in creation (Part 1), cognition or revelation (Part 2), and practice (Part 3), with each of the three parts comprising two chapters that provide a tradition-specific analysis of Veda and Torah separately followed by a comparative section. In the conclusion I engage in the cultural analysis phase of my study and assess the broader theoretical implications of my comparative inquiry. Freidenreich, in reflecting on my comparative study in his *Foreigners and Their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law* (2011), provides a delicious metaphor in which he compares the structure of my work to a wedding cake:

Holdrege, in her comparative study of Hindu and Jewish conceptions of scripture, addresses . . . critiques [of works of comparative religion] by interpreting Hindu and Jewish sources independently, turning to comparative analysis only after thorough contextual analysis and reserving consideration of the significance of her comparative findings until her conclusion. The structure of Holdrege's work resembles a wedding cake: layers of tradition-specific cake, one on top of the other, some comparative icing between them, more cake and more icing, and finally smiling figurines on top representing the relationship between Jewish and Hindu sources. (Freidenreich 2011, p. 16)

In his survey of various forms of comparison, Stausberg (Stausberg 2014) characterizes my comparative analysis of constructions of scripture in *Veda and Torah* and Freiburger's comparative study of discourses of asceticism in *Der Askese Diskurs in der Religionsgeschichte: Eine vergleichende Untersuchung brahmanischer und frühchristlicher Texte* (2009) as examples of "in-depth micro-studies" in that both are two-case comparative studies that "combine in-depth philological and historical knowledge with an interest in general categories and an awareness of methodological challenges" (Stausberg 2014, p. 30). Stausberg's characterization evokes the organizational design of my comparative study:

[B]oth works start with a category. . . . [Both] develop their research question, give an introduction to the sources and devote the most substantial part of their study to the analysis of their textual sources (separated by tradition) with regard to a set of themes related to their category, such as creation, cognition/revelation, and practice with regard to Veda and Torah (Holdrege). . . . In a final part, the findings from the sources are translated into a more specific and differentiated model of the respective category, which in turn links these studies to more general theoretical discussions in the field. (Stausberg 2014, p. 30)

2.3. Tradition-Specific Analysis (Description)

The tradition-specific phase of my comparative historical method corresponds to what Freiburger terms *description*, which he characterizes in his essay as “a historical-empirical description that situates the items in their respective socio-historical and discursive contexts” before comparing them. In *Veda and Torah* I call the tradition-specific phase of my analysis “history of interpretations” in that the analyses are undertaken within a diachronic framework and involve tracing the history of certain symbolic complexes associated with Veda and Torah through the core texts of each tradition’s formative development. The history with which I am concerned in this phase is not *Entstehungsgeschichte*, a history of origins and cause-effect relations, but rather *Wirkungsgeschichte*, a history of effects, understood as the tradition of successive interpretations of particular symbolic complexes in the core texts of the traditions.¹⁵

A useful model for the history of interpretations phase of my comparative historical method is stratigraphy in geology. Stratigraphy involves examining and classifying the properties of individual strata and cross-correlating the different strata in order to discern regular patterns and recurrences of species as well as changes in species from stratum to stratum. Similarly, this phase of my analysis is concerned with examining the symbolic complexes found in the core strata of texts in each tradition and cross-correlating the various strata in order to discern structural continuities as well as diachronic transformations from layer to layer.

The Hindu portion of the analysis entails unearthing the constructions of Veda in the core strata of the brahmanical tradition, beginning with the oldest layers of Vedic literature—Saṃhitās, Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas, and Upaniṣads—through the more recent layers of post-Vedic literature—Manu-Smṛti, Mahābhārata, Harivaṃśa, and selected Purāṇas—to the philosophical speculations of the Darśanas, with particular emphasis on Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā and Advaita Vedānta. The Judaic portion of the analysis similarly involves excavating the constructions of Torah in the earliest layers of pre-rabbinic speculation—wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, wisdom literature of the Apocrypha, and the Alexandrian Jewish philosophers Aristobulus and Philo—through the various strata of rabbinic literature—Mishnah, Tannaitic Midrashim, classical Amoraic Midrashim, Babylonian Talmud, and selected post-Talmudic Midrashim—to the speculations of certain medieval kabbalistic texts, with particular emphasis on the Zohar and the theosophical Kabbalah of thirteenth-century Spain.

2.4. Comparative Analysis (Juxtaposition)

In each of the three parts of *Veda and Torah*, after providing a tradition-specific analysis of Veda and Torah separately, I move to the comparative analysis phase in which I *juxtapose* the two comparands, to use Freiburger’s term. In this phase I am concerned not only with analyzing the structural similarities between the symbol systems and practices associated with Veda and Torah but also with delineating the significant differences that give each scriptural tradition its distinctive character. For example, my comparative analysis brings to light a multileveled model of scripture in which Veda and Torah are each represented as (1) the totality of the Word, which is the essence of the ultimate reality; (2) knowledge or wisdom, which is identified with the creator principle as the immediate source of creation; (3) divine language, which constitutes the archetypal plan or blueprint from which the creator structures the forms of creation; and (4) a concrete corpus of oral and/or written texts. At the same time my comparative analysis emphasizes significant points of divergence between the conceptions of language that underlie the symbol systems and practices associated with Veda and Torah, particularly with reference to (1) oral vs. written channels of language; (2) auditory vs. visual modes of perception; and (3) phonic vs. semantic dimensions of language.

¹⁵ In my study I invoke Gadamer (1975) use of the term *Wirkungsgeschichte* to describe the tradition of successive interpretations in the history of a text that implicitly influences each new interpretation of a text.

2.5. Cultural Analysis (Redescription, Rectification, and Theory Formation)

In the cultural analysis phase of my comparative historical method, I assess the broader theoretical implications of my comparative study, which involves, to use Freiburger's terms, *redescription* of the comparands, *rectification* of scholarly categories, and *theory formation*.

2.5.1. Redescription

In the cultural analysis phase of my study I engage in *redescription*, which Freiburger characterizes as "the act of describing a historical-empirical item once again in light of the insights gained from the juxtaposition with a different item." I redescribe the categories of Veda and Torah in order to illuminate the hitherto neglected dimensions of these multivalent symbol systems brought to light through the juxtaposition of these scriptural traditions. This bidirectional process of re-visioning has been aptly termed by Arvind Sharma (2005) "reciprocal illumination."

While there are significant differences among representations of Veda and Torah in the brahmanical tradition and the rabbinic and kabbalistic traditions, one of the fruits of my comparative re-visioning is bringing to light an important feature that is essential to our understanding of the authority and role of scripture in these traditions: Veda and Torah function in their respective traditions as symbols, and although textuality represents one facet of these multivalent symbols, they are not bound by this textual referent. Veda and Torah transcend their textual boundaries through becoming identified with the Word, which is itself represented as an encompassing category that functions on every level of reality. This Word may find its consummate expression in certain texts—the Vedic *mantras* or the Sefer Torah—but at the same time it remains a limitless, open-ended category within which can be incorporated potentially all texts, teachings, and practices authorized by the religious elite. The legitimating authority of Veda and Torah in their respective traditions can thus only be fully understood with reference to their function as symbols.

2.5.2. Rectification

The cultural analysis phase of my study not only involves redescription of the categories of Veda and Torah but also *rectification* of the analytical category of scripture as it has generally been conceptualized by scholars of religion. William Graham (1987) study of the oral aspects of scripture in the history of religions challenged scholars to stretch the boundaries of the concept beyond the limitations posed by the term "scripture" itself and its common equivalents such as "sacred writings" and "holy writ." In my study of Veda and Torah I argue that it is not sufficient simply to expand the concept to encompass the oral-aural dimensions of sacred texts. Rather, the category of scripture needs to be exploded and the very notion of textuality implicit in the concept reexamined. For in certain representations of Veda and Torah, as demonstrated in my study, scripture is depicted not simply as a textual phenomenon but as a cosmological principle that is inherent in the very structure of reality. The functional status of scripture within a particular religious community is to a certain extent shaped and informed by the community's conceptions of its cosmological status, and yet relatively little attention has been given to this important dimension of scripture.

2.5.3. Theory Formation

In the final phase of my cultural analysis I move beyond redescription of the comparands and rectification of scholarly categories to *theory formation* by theorizing more broadly about models of religious tradition and the ways in which particular constructions of scripture are embedded in particular constructions of religious tradition. In the conclusion of *Veda and Torah* I raise the question whether such representations of scripture as a multileveled cosmological principle are unique to Hindu and Jewish traditions, or whether we might expect to find comparable conceptions in other religious traditions as part of what Wilfred Cantwell Smith has termed the "almost common human propensity to scripturalize" (Smith 1989, p. 45). I argue that although other traditions may have

developed cosmological conceptions of scripture, the specific parallels highlighted in my study between Hindu constructions of Veda and Jewish constructions of Torah are not necessarily representative of a “universal” trend to cosmologize notions of language and scripture but are rather reflective of the more fundamental structural affinities shared by these particular traditions as species of the same genus of religious tradition: “embodied communities.” I argue more specifically that the distinctive constructions of scripture instantiated in Veda and Torah are rooted in an ethnocultural model of religious tradition that needs to be distinguished from the missionizing models of religious tradition that underlie Christian conceptions of the New Testament, Theravādin Buddhist notions of the Pāli canon, and Islamic conceptions of the Qur’ān.

In order to test my broader argument about the connections between constructions of scripture and models of religious tradition, I briefly consider the early formative period of the Christian and Buddhist traditions as species of the genus “missionizing traditions.” I analyze the strategies through which the early Christian community and the early Buddhist community disassociated themselves from the embodied categories of Jewish and brahmanical traditions, respectively, and constructed distinctive notions of tradition-identity and conceptions of scripture that reflect the missionizing projects through which these new communities sought to spread their teachings beyond the ethnic, linguistic, geographic, and cultural boundaries of a single constituency. I then turn to a brief examination of the early Islamic community, which provides a significant intermediary case in that, on the one hand, the community was missionizing in orientation from its inception, while, on the other hand, it maintained deep ties with the particular ethnocultural complex—the Arab people, language, and culture—out of which it arose. I substantiate my argument by showing that the intermediary nature of this missionizing-yet-partially-embodied community is reflected in the manner in which the early Islamic community constructed the category of scripture, as represented by the Qur’ān.

3. Hindu-Jewish Encounters: Ongoing Comparative Initiatives

In my concluding reflections I would like to turn from the questions of “why” and “how” to the question of “whither”: whither have my initial comparative forays in *Veda and Torah* led? My initial forays have born fruit in a number of ongoing comparative initiatives in which I have collaborated with colleagues in religious studies and other disciplines to map different forms of Hindu-Jewish encounters. One of the pioneering initiatives arose in the religious studies arena and has focused on comparative studies of Hindu and Jewish traditions. A second type of initiative developed around the same time in the arena of cross-cultural area studies and has focused on comparative studies of the cultures of South Asia and the Middle East. A third form of initiative emerged soon thereafter and narrowed the focus to explorations of the historical interactions and structural affinities between Indic and Judaic worlds within the broader context of South Asian and Middle Eastern cultures.¹⁶

With respect to comparative studies of Hindu and Jewish traditions, a pioneering volume in this area was the 1994 collection of essays edited by Hananya Goodman, *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism* (Goodman 1994), which represents one of the first serious efforts by a group of scholars of Judaica and South Asia to explore the historical connections and cross-cultural resonances between these religious traditions. Another major milestone was the formation in 1995 of the Comparative Studies in Hinduisms and Judaisms Consultation, which my colleague Paul Morris and I co-founded as an experimental program unit in the American Academy of Religion (AAR), the flagship professional organization of scholars of religion. The Consultation provided the basis for the establishment in 1998 of the Comparative Studies in Hinduisms and Judaisms Group as a regular program unit of the American Academy of Religion, which had as its mandate to bring together specialists in South Asia and Judaica to engage in a series of sustained reflections on topics within Hinduisms and Judaisms, with the intention of challenging scholars of

¹⁶ For an extended analysis of these comparative initiatives, see Holdrege 2018b.

religion to critically reassess the prevailing Protestant-based paradigms, reconstitute our analytical categories, and reconfigure our scholarly discourses to include a range of models and categories arising out of case studies of Hindu and Jewish traditions. The work of scholars in the AAR Comparative Studies in Hinduisms and Judaisms program units and other scholarly forums has found fruition in the establishment of a new subfield within religious studies dedicated to comparative studies of Hindu and Jewish traditions. This ongoing collaboration between scholars of South Asia and Judaica has inspired the publication of a number of important works. A significant milestone was the publication in 1999 of *Judaism and Asian Religions*, edited by Harold Kasimow, as a special issue of *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* (Kasimow 1999). Such wide-ranging collections are complemented by monographs and edited volumes that interrogate and reimagine important analytical categories in the study of religion through sustained comparative studies of Hindu and Jewish traditions—for example, scripture (Holdrege 1996), sacrifice (McClymond 2008), hospitality (Bornet 2010), food (Gross and Whitmore 2018), and law (Theodor and Greenberg 2018).¹⁷

The comparative study of Hindu and Jewish traditions as a subfield within religious studies has developed in close alliance with a second type of multidisciplinary initiative in the social sciences and humanities that seeks to foster a new form of *cross-cultural* area studies that goes beyond the traditional area studies approach and engages in comparative studies of the broader network of cultures in which Hindu and Jewish traditions are rooted: South Asia and the Middle East. A major milestone in this broader comparative project was the establishment in 1995, under the leadership of Gordon Newby, of the Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Studies (MESAS) at Emory University, which is one of the few institutions in the United States to offer an undergraduate degree in Middle Eastern and South Asian Studies. MESAS, as a multidisciplinary department, “approaches the study of the region integrally, focusing on historical, cultural, linguistic, and religious continuities from the Ancient Mediterranean and Indo-Pakistani sub-continent, through the Islamic period up to the present day” (MESAS: Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Studies 2017). In 2001 my colleagues and I at the University of California, Santa Barbara, inaugurated the Middle East and South Asia Comparative Studies Project in order to foster comparative studies of the longstanding and multifaceted connections between the cultures of the Middle East and South Asia without privileging Europe as a partner in the comparison. These multidisciplinary collaborations have generated a number of publications, including the *Encyclopedia of the Middle East and South Asia*, edited by Gordon Newby (Newby).

A third form of collaborative initiative is concerned with the more circumscribed project of mapping the connections between Indic and Judaic worlds within the broader network of South Asian and Middle Eastern cultures. A pivotal event was the inauguration in 1998 of the *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*, edited by Nathan Katz and Braj Sinha, as an interdisciplinary journal dedicated to “analyzing the affinities and interactions between Indic and Judaic civilizations from ancient through contemporary times” (Katz and Sinha 1998). The journal includes comparative studies of Jewish and Indian religious and philosophical traditions; historical studies of economic and sociocultural links between Jewish and Indian communities; ethnographic studies of Jewish communities in India and Indian Jewish communities in Israel; theoretical analyses of images of Jews and Jewish religious traditions in Indian literature and images of Indians and Indian religious traditions in Jewish literature; and studies of political and cultural connections between contemporary India and Israel. Building on the momentum of earlier initiatives, an international conference was convened at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies in 2002, which inspired the 2007 collection of essays *Indo-Judaic Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Nathan Katz, Ranabir Chakravarti, Braj Sinha, and Shalva Weil (Katz et al. 2007), all of whom have assumed central roles in the development of Indo-Judaic studies. This collection advanced the emerging field of Indo-Judaic studies in significant ways by providing the

¹⁷ See also Chatterjee 1997 for an illuminating analysis of a range of sociopolitical and religious issues addressed by modern Jewish and Hindu thinkers.

first single-volume multidisciplinary investigation of the economic, cultural, religious, and political connections between Indic and Judaic cultures from ancient times to the present day.

One of the important tasks that is shared by these ongoing comparative studies of Hindu and Jewish traditions, and of Indic and Judaic worlds more broadly, is to challenge scholars to critically interrogate the prevailing theories, models, and categories in the academy and to reconstitute our scholarly discourses to allow for a multiplicity of different imaginaries that do not privilege Western paradigms associated with the modernist project but are rather grounded in the indigenous idioms of the religions and cultures of South Asia and the Middle East. Comparative analysis is not only intrinsic to the process through which categories and models are constructed and applied, but it can also serve as an important corrective to the scholarly practices through which certain categories and models are privileged over others in the social sciences and humanities and in religious studies more specifically.

In conclusion, I have found it fruitful to reimagine my own comparative projects in light of the analytical framework presented by Freiburger for analyzing and implementing the comparative method in the study of religion. Freiburger's analytical framework has inspired me to reflect on the elements of my own comparative method in relation to the elements delineated in his model. Although, as Freiburger suggests, most comparativists may "intuitively" engage the "methodical components of comparison," his model provides an illuminating template that can serve as a guide for future comparative studies by explicitly identifying and defining the key components that are critical to a productive comparative inquiry: the goals of comparative analysis, the modes of comparison, the scope and scale of comparison, and the step-by-step operations involved in the comparative process.

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