

Chapter 15. Postmodernism and the Comparative Method

by Robert A. Segal¹

Abstract. There are currently four positions on the comparative method in the study of myth.

At one extreme lies the postmodern position, which spurns comparison altogether. In light of the postmodernist focus on the unique, the eccentric, the exotic, the marginal, the neglected, and the excluded, the 'modernist' concern with the general is anathema. The assumptions here are that the comparative method seeks only similarities, that similarities deny differences, that similarities take the items compared out of context, that similarity means identity, that similarities are invariably superficial, and that similarities are ineluctably invidious.

The second position, less radical and much older, allows for comparisons, but on only a regional or local rather than worldwide scale. The comparisons permitted are called 'controlled' comparisons. This kind of comparativism regularly takes place among, for example, Indo-Europeanists.

A third, more recent position allows anew for universal comparisons, but only when differences as well as similarities are sought. This position, which dubs itself the 'new comparativism,' assumes that older comparativism – though not, as with the first two positions, comparison per se – seeks only similarities, that similarities exclusively are invariably superficial, and that similarities exclusively are unavoidably invidious.

The fourth and final position is that of 'old comparativism,' or what used to be called simply 'The Comparative Method.' Here comparisons are universal, and the quest can, though not must, be for sheer similarities. The exemplar of old comparativism is J. G. Frazer. Old, or traditional, comparativism would spurn the criticisms of the other three positions. The criticisms, it would be said, do not apply even to Frazer.

Elsewhere I have defended the comparative method against the assumptions made by controlled comparativists and by new comparativists: that the only proper similarities are regional rather than universal (controlled comparativism) and that differences are more important than similarities (new comparativism). I have enlisted the grand case of William Robertson Smith both to show that regional comparisons are not at odds with universal ones and to show that the quest for similarities is not at odds with the quest for differences. I have argued that Smith is entitled to give equal weight to similarities and differences.

Now I want to defend the comparative method against the much stronger assumption made by postmodernists: that the quest for similarities is in itself objectionable. I have previously enlisted J. G. Frazer in defense of old comparativism against controlled comparativism and new comparativism. Now I want to enlist him anew in defense of old comparativism against postmodernism. I will be arguing that Frazer is entitled to seek similarities exclusively and to give no weight to differences. I will be asserting postmodern objections to the quest for sheer similarities evince a misunderstanding about the nature of knowledge.

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In the study of myth and of religion there are four main positions on the comparative method:

- Postmodernism
- Controlled Comparativism
- New Comparativism, and
- Old Comparativism

I will first introduce these individual positions serially, then discuss them in their mutual relationships, comparing and evaluating them.

Postmodernism (1)

At one extreme lies the postmodern position, which spurns comparison altogether. In light of the postmodernist focus on the unique, the eccentric, the exotic, the marginal, the neglected, and the excluded, the ‘modernist’ concern with the general is anathema. The assumptions here are that the comparative method seeks only similarities, that similarities deny differences, that similarities take the items compared out of context, that similarity means identity, that similarities are invariably superficial, and that similarities are ineluctably invidious. To quote Pauline Marie Rosenau, who distinguishes between tamer, ‘affirmative’ postmodernists and bolder, ‘skeptical’ ones:

Post-modernists believe that representation encourages generalization, and in so doing it focuses on identity and fails to appreciate the importance of difference.... The very act of comparing, in an effort to uncover similarities and differences, is a meaningless activity because post-modern epistemology holds it impossible ever to define adequately the elements to be contrasted or likened. The skeptical postmodernists’ reservations about the possibility of generalizing and their emphasis on difference ... form the basis of rejecting the comparative method. If, as they conclude, everything is unique, then the comparative method is invalid in its attempts to search for and explain similarities and differences while holding certain dimensions constant (assuming a degree of sameness in other variables). The affirmative post-modernists, as well, question the linguistic representation upon which any comparative statements are necessarily based (Rosenau 1991: 97, 105-106).

Here the comparative method is assumed to be used for finding only similarities and is therefore objectionable.

By contrast, postmodernist Mark Taylor acknowledges that comparison can serve to find differences as well as similarities. Furthermore, he considers the quest for sheer differences to be no less one-sided than the quest for sheer similarities:

While always involving an interplay between sameness and difference, the activity of comparison can have as its goal either the reduction of differences to identity or the establishment of differences that have little or nothing in common. When carried to extremes, the former approach leads to a monistic perennial philosophy according to which all religions are purported

[sic] to express the same truth differently, while the latter issues in a dualistic heresiological model in which true religion is privileged over and set against false religions (Taylor 1998: 14).

But the middle ground that Taylor then proposes is in fact the one-sided quest for sheer differences:

The challenge of effective comparison is to find a mean between these extremes that allows interpreters to understand differences without erasing them.... [I]t is necessary to develop comparative analyses that do not presuppose universal principles or reinscribe ahistorical essences. Whether or not it is possible to realize such a comparativist program, many critics schooled in poststructuralism insist that the very effort to establish similarities where there appear to be differences is, in the last analysis, intellectually misleading ... (Taylor 1998: 14-15).

In other words, would-be similarities cover up irreducible differences. While Taylor, unlike Rosenau's postmodernists, is prepared to use the term 'comparative method' for the quest for differences only, he, too, objects to the method exactly insofar as it seeks similarities.

Moreover, Taylor's objection is based on political as well as intellectual grounds: 'When reason is obsessed with unity, they argue, it tends to become as hegemonic as political and economic orders constructed to regulate whatever does not fit into or agree with governing structures' (Taylor 1998: 15). The distinctiveness of the 'other' overrun by the focus on similarities is imperialistic.

Although often spurned by other postmodernists for not going far enough, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz is the key postmodern anti-comparativist. Hailing from the social sciences, Geertz bases his opposition to the comparative method on a broader opposition to an *explanatory* approach to culture, of which myth and religion are parts. To be sure, he does not, like conventional postmodernists, equate 'explanatory' with 'scientific.' Rather, he pits *explanatory* social science against *interpretive* social science, which he espouses. By an interpretive approach to culture, Geertz means many things, but among them is the primacy of the particular over the general, or of differences over similarities. By an explanatory approach to culture he means the primacy of the general over the particular.

Geertz opposes generalizations on multiple grounds. They are inaccurate and tendentious. They are somehow inseparable from the particulars that yield them and, when separated, prove to be banal or empty:

'Theoretical formulations [*i.e.*, generalizations] hover so low over the [particularistic] interpretations they govern that they don't make much sense or hold much interest apart from them. ... [S]tated independently of their [particularistic] applications, they seem either commonplace or vacant' (Geertz 1973: 25).

Above all for Geertz, generalizations miss the distinctiveness of the particulars they amass:

Within the bloated categories of regime description, Feudalism or Colonialism, Late Capitalism or The World System, Neo-Monarchy or Parliamentary Militarism, there is a resident suchness, deep Moroccanity, inner Indonesianness, struggling to get out. Such a conception of things is usually called nationalism. That is certainly not wrong, but, another bloated cate-

gory, grouping the ungroupable and blurring distinctions internally felt, it is less definite than it seems. Every quiddity has its own form of suchness, and no one who comes to Morocco or Indonesia to find out what goes on there is likely to confuse them with each other or to be satisfied with elevated banalities about common humanity or a universal need for self-expression (Geertz 1995: 23).

It is in the particular and not in the general that the significance of any cultural phenomenon lies:

[T]he notion that the essence of what it means to be human is most clearly revealed in those features of human culture that are universal rather than in those that are distinctive to this people or that is a prejudice we are not necessarily obliged to share. Is it in grasping such general facts – that man has everywhere some sort of ‘religion’ – or in grasping the richness of this religious phenomenon or that – Balinese trance or Indian ritualism, Aztec human sacrifice or Zuni rain-dancing – that we grasp him? Is the fact that ‘marriage’ is universal (if it is) as penetrating a comment on what we are as the facts concerning Himalayan polyandry, or those fantastic Australian marriage rules, or the elaborate bride-price systems of Bantu Africa? (Geertz 1973: 43).

Geertz never makes clear what the proper place of generalization is. At his most exasperated, he rejects generalizations altogether, even though he himself employs them even here, in contrasting one case of *marriage* to another. More often, he limits generalizations to identifying the categories under which particulars fall. Still other times, he allows generalizations to determine the ‘cause’ but not the ‘meaning’ of particulars. In any event his opposition to generalizations means his opposition to the comparative method.²

Controlled Comparativism (2)

The second position, less radical and much older, allows for comparisons, but on only a regional or local rather than worldwide scale. The comparisons permitted are called ‘controlled’ comparisons (see Eggan 1954: 754). This kind of comparativism is regularly carried out by, for example, Indo-Europeanists. Among scholars of the ancient Near East, ancient Israel is regularly compared with ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia – but not with some place in Asia. And even though biblicist S. H. Hooke is prepared to use the term ‘primitive’ to characterize the stage of civilization in the circumscribed area of Egypt and Mesopotamia, he objects to the use of the term for any universal human stage:

Now the expression ‘primitive man’ is almost as vague as the phrase ‘the man in the street’.... The only kind of behaviour or mentality which we can recognize as ‘primitive’ in the strict sense is such as can be shown to lie historically at the fountain-head of a civilization. The earliest civilizations known to us are those of Egypt and Mesopotamia, and the earliest evidence which we can gather concerning the beliefs and practices there prevalent constitutes for us what is ‘primitive’ in the historical [rather than evaluative] sense (Hooke 1933: 1-2).

² On Geertz’s interpretivism, including his fluctuating position on generalizations, see Segal 1992: 77-101, 1999, and 2003.

Again the assumption here is that the comparative method identifies only similarities. In contrast to postmodernism, controlled comparativism allows for narrow comparisons, but only because they presuppose the *distinctiveness* – the uniqueness, the incomparability – of the area or element *within which* the cases being compared lie. Hooke attributes the kindred beliefs and practices in the ancient Near East to circumstances that would seemingly be, or have been, worldwide, yet the ‘myth and ritual pattern’ that he works out is nevertheless confined to the ancient Near East:

When we examine these early modes of behaviour we find that their originators were not occupied with general questions concerning the world but with certain practical and pressing problems of daily life. There were the main problems of securing the means of subsistence, to keep the sun and moon doing their duty, to ensure the regular flooding of the Nile, to maintain the bodily vigour of the king who was the embodiment of the prosperity of the community.... In order to meet these needs the early inhabitants of Egypt and Mesopotamia developed a set of customary actions directed towards a definite end. Thus the coronation of the king, both in Egypt and Babylon, consisted of a regular pattern of actions, of things prescribed to be done, whose purpose was to fit the king completely to be the source of the well-being of the community. This is the sense in which we shall use the term ‘ritual’.... Moreover, we find that these early ritual patterns consisted not only of things done but of things said.... In general the spoken part of a ritual consists of a description of what is being done, it is the story which the ritual enacts. This is the sense in which the term ‘myth’ is used in our discussion (Hooke 1933: 2-3).

There is a double irony in Hooke’s procedure. First, the source of his regional pattern is J. G. Frazer’s theory of ‘primitive’ religion worldwide.³ To keep his comparativism regional, Hooke simply attributes similarities within the area to physical proximity and thereby to diffusion rather, than, like Frazer, to independent invention. Once, but only once, the distinctiveness of the ancient Near East is presupposed can similarities within it safely be sought. Second, even the most circumscribed comparisons never fend off particularistic critics. Some critics of Hooke asserted that Egypt and Mesopotamia were distinct from each other.⁴ William Foxwell Albright and his followers asserted, even more forcefully, that Israel was distinct from both. Regional comparativism was thus used to highlight the *differences* between Israel and its ‘pagan’ neighbors. Books with titles like *The Old Testament Against Its Environment*, by a student of Albright’s, say it all.⁵

³ Hooke, limiting himself to Frazer’s later, intellectualist, anti-ritualist view of ‘primitives’ and of myth, sets his own view against Frazer’s. But in fact Hooke’s whole myth and ritual pattern comes from earlier, ritualist Frazer. On Hooke’s actual beholdenness to Frazer, see Segal 1998: 5-7, 83.

⁴ Egyptologist Henri Frankfort stresses the differences between Egypt and Mesopotamia: ‘It is now, I hope, also evident that the similarities between Egypt and Mesopotamia are by no means more important than their differences’ (Frankfort 1951: 17). See also Frankfort 1948.

⁵ Among those responding to Hooke, Sigmund Mowinckel argues for a weaker case of Hooke’s pattern in Israel: see Mowinckel 1962; 1954: ch. 3. William Foxwell Albright differentiates Israelite monotheism from the conceptions of god in all surrounding cultures, including the worship of Akhenaten, and attributes the distinctively Israelite conception to the genius of Moses: see Albright 1957 [1946]: 249-72. To ensure the avoidance of theological miscegenation, Albright rejects evolution as the source of Israelite monotheism. In so doing, he reinforces the linkage between old comparativism and evolution. G. Ernest Wright puts forcefully his Albright-inspired rejection of, at once, old comparativism and

New Comparativism (3)

A third, more recent position allows anew for universal comparisons, but only when differences as well as similarities are sought. This position, which dubs itself the ‘new comparativism,’ assumes that older comparativism – though not, as with the first two positions, comparison per se – seeks only similarities, that similarities exclusively are invariably superficial, and that similarities are unavoidably invidious. To quote William Paden, one of the better-known new comparativists:

One of the most serious criticisms of the older comparativisms was that they obliterated local meanings and contexts.... If it is similarity which makes a comparative analysis possible, ... it is difference which makes it interesting. A central purpose of comparison should be to *expose* the diversity of the variant objects it compares (Paden 1996: 8-9).

The new comparativism does not merely permit the quest for differences but demands it. And clearly, difference is the point of comparison.

Doubtless the most engaging practitioner of new comparativism was Ninian Smart, but he himself never used the term and was temperamentally too irenic to push for any dogmatic commitment to the method. Rather, his own delight in spotting both unexpected similarities and stalwart differences among religions evinces new comparativism at its best.

The most celebrated advocate of ‘new comparativism,’ is Jonathan Z. Smith, though he does not use the term either. Against ‘old comparativism,’ likewise not a term used by him, he asserts that similarity is not identity, that difference therefore remains, and that, as for Paden, difference is the point of comparison:

It is axiomatic that comparison is never a matter of identity. Comparison requires the acceptance of difference as the grounds of its being interesting, and a methodological manipulation of that difference to achieve some stated cognitive end. The questions of comparison are questions of judgment with respect to difference: What differences are to be maintained in the interest of comparative inquiry? What differences can be defensibly relaxed and relativized in light of the intellectual tasks at hand? (Smith 1987: 13-14).

Against postmodernism, Smith asserts that the quest for uniqueness is as vain as the opposite: the search for identity. By nature, uniqueness precludes comparison:

Uniqueness denies the possibility of comparison and taxonomy; [by contrast,] the individual [*i.e.*, the particular] requires comparative and classificatory endeavors. Uniqueness prevents science and cognition; the individual invites the same. To put this another way, absolute difference is not a category for thought but one that denies the possibility of thought (Smith

evolution: ‘The purpose of the lectures is to examine and lay emphasis upon those central elements of Biblical faith which are so unique and *sui generis* that they cannot have developed by any natural evolutionary process from the pagan world in which they appeared.... It is the contention of this monograph that the faith of Israel even in its earliest and basic forms is so utterly different from that of the contemporary polytheisms that one simply cannot explain it fully by evolutionary or environmental categories’ (Wright 1950: 7). Undeniably, for Frazer comparativism is tied to evolution, but old comparativism per se is not, so that old comparativism cannot be facilely rejected, as it often is, on the grounds that some practitioners of it assume evolution: see Segal 2001: 346-347.

1987: 34-35).

For Smith, new comparativism, unlike old, avoids identity by seeking differences as well as similarities. Unlike postmodernism, new comparativism avoids uniqueness by seeking similarities as well as differences.

Old Comparativism (4)

The fourth and final position in religious studies today is that of ‘old comparativism,’ or what used to be called simply ‘The Comparative Method.’ Here comparisons are universal, and the quest can, though need not, be for sheer similarities. The exemplar of old comparativism is J. G. Frazer. Old, or traditional, comparativism would dismiss the criticisms of the other three positions. The criticisms, it would be said, do not apply even to Frazer, let alone to old comparativism itself. This fourth, stalwart position has few defenders in the contemporary study of myth and of religion.⁶ I am not displeased to number myself among them.

Hoariness of the positions

Apart from the persuasiveness of the four positions, none of them is new. Old comparativism is truly old, going back at least to Aristotle. Postmodernism is as old as ancient Greek skepticism. In the fifth century BC Herodotus employed the equivalent of new comparativism to find differences – differences between his fellow Greeks and the often eccentric and exotic ‘other.’ True, he was hopelessly politically incorrect and presumed that Greeks alone were civilized and that all others, especially Persians, were barbarian, but it was the differences that he nevertheless sought. Furthermore, he did not simply note the differences but accounted for them: the superiority of Greek, or at least Athenian, culture stemmed from its democratic form of government, whereas the inferiority of its nemesis, Persia, stemmed from its tyranny.

Somewhat closer to our time, new comparativism was practiced magisterially more than a century ago by William Robertson Smith. In his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889) Smith compared ancient Semitic religion with ‘primitive’ religion to show at once the similarities and the differences. Where the younger, if still old-style, comparativist Frazer sought to show only the similarities between primitive religion and Christianity, new-style comparativist Smith sought to show the differences as well. He wanted to show how far Christianity, which in its ancient, pre-Christian, Semitic form was primitive-like, had advanced beyond its primitive roots.

⁶ Howard Eilberg-Schwartz seeks to revive the comparison of ancient Judaism with ‘primitive’ religions. Yet the brand of comparativism that he proposes amounts to new comparativism, albeit with as much emphasis on similarities as on differences. See Eilberg-Schwartz 1990.

And he, too, accounted for the differences – by a mix of internal and external factors. Contrary to some new comparativists, the new comparativism in religious studies did not arise merely a few decades ago in reaction to Mircea Eliade's presumably old-style comparativism.

Defending the Comparative method

Elsewhere I have defended the comparative method against the assumptions made by controlled comparativists and by new comparativists: that the only proper similarities are regional *rather than* universal (controlled comparativism) and that differences are *more important than* similarities (new comparativism). I have enlisted the grand case of William Robertson Smith both to show that regional comparisons (Semitic religions) do not preclude universal ones (primitive religions) and to show that the quest for differences (Semitic versus Aryan religion) does not undercut the quest for similarities (between Semitic and Aryan religions as well as among primitive religions) (see Segal 2001: 363-72).

Now I want to defend the comparative method against the much stronger assumption made by postmodernists: that the quest for similarities is in itself objectionable. I have previously enlisted J. G. Frazer in defense of old comparativism against controlled comparativism and new comparativism (see Segal 2001: 359-62). Now I want to enlist him anew in defense of old comparativism and against postmodernism.

Postmodern objections to the Comparative Method

From a postmodern viewpoint, the quest for similarities sought by old comparativism is objectionable because the quest:

- (1) denies differences
- (2) confuses similarity with identity
- (3) generalizes too broadly
- (4) generalizes prematurely
- (5) takes phenomena out of context
- (6) generalizes at all.

All of these objections are in fact misconceptions, either about comparison or about knowledge itself.⁷

⁷ The following section is a revised version of Segal 2001: 348-358.

(1) Denying differences

First, to compare phenomena is simply to match them up. It is scarcely to dictate what will be found. It is therefore scarcely to dictate finding only similarities. Indeed, to compare phenomena is *necessarily* to find differences as well as similarities. Even if one were *seeking* only similarities, one would know that one had found them all only at the point at which no further differences could be converted into similarities. Consequently, one can as readily use the comparative method to find differences as use it to find similarities. Geertz himself compares Indonesia with Morocco to illuminate the differences between them:

The dissimilarities of Morocco and Indonesia do not separate them into absolute types, the sociological equivalent of natural kinds; they reflect back and forth upon one another, mutually framing, reciprocally clarifying. Or so they seem to do for me. I learned more about Indonesia when, shaken by the disturbances of the mid-sixties, I decided it the better part of valor to work in Morocco, than I would have had I gone back then directly to Indonesia. And I learned more about Morocco when, after things had settled down again in the seventies, I returned, not without trepidation, to Indonesia, than I would have by confining myself, as beginning to find my feet in another civilization, I was tempted to do, thenceforth to North Africa (Geertz 1995: 28).⁸

The comparative method can thus be used by those who seek differences – postmodernists and new comparativists – as well as by those who seek similarities – controlled comparativists and old comparativists.

(2) Confusing similarity with identity

Second, it is a logical truism that any two entities, however much alike, are still distinct. Therefore the comparison of phenomena can never yield identity, only similarity. Even to seek only similarities is not to eliminate differences. Conversely, to seek only differences – a typically defensive reaction by those fearful of comparison – is not to eradicate similarities. The options are neither wholesale identity nor total uniqueness but only further similarities or further differences.

But to argue that the comparative method can be used to find either differences or similarities or even both is not to argue that the method *must* be used to find both – as if the quest for either alone were improper. It is against the assumption that the method not merely can but need be used to find differences – whether differences as well as similarities (new comparativism) or differences in place of similarities (postmodernism)–that I am arguing.

Those who seek sheer similarities not only cannot but do not deny the fact of differences. They deny the *importance* of differences. To counter vaunted similarities with sheer differences is, then, to miss the point. To argue from the *fact* of differences, which are never denied, to the *importance* of them is to beg the question: why *are* differences more significant than similarities? The argument in favor of similarities – that similarities are weightier than differences – may be question-begging, but

⁸ See also Geertz 1968.

so is the argument in favor of differences – that differences are deeper than similarities. What ‘privileges’ difference, as Derrida would put it, is the assumption, which requires defending, that difference is deeper than similarity. Contrary to Geertz, the question whether the universality of marriage is ‘as penetrating a comment on what we are as the facts concerning Himalayan polyandry, or those fantastic Australian marriage rules, or the elaborate bride-price systems of Bantu Africa’ is not rhetorical. In any case the comparative method itself establishes only the fact, not the importance, of either similarities or differences.

(3) Generalizing too broadly

Third, any two phenomena are comparable. Comparisons are useful or useless, not right or wrong, not too broad or too narrow. It is fallacious to assert, for example, that earliest Christianity is always comparable only with other religions of late antiquity and never with primitive religions. Controlled comparativism rests on this fallacy. (The premise that comparison yields only similarities is also fallacious.) The *point* of a comparison determines the proper scale. Christianity can be compared with any other religion, with all other religions, or with nonreligious movements. If one wants to understand why people X practice animal sacrifice, a comparison with a people who do not practice it would ordinarily, though not invariably, be too broad. But a comparison with any other people who practice it would likely not be.

(4) Generalizing prematurely

Fourth, comparisons are always considered provisional, not conclusive. Comparisons are subject to correction or abandonment, as new facts arise. The failure of existing generalizations is scarcely an argument against generalizations per se. Moreover, one will never be able to identify all the cases of animal sacrifice or to accumulate all the information about all of those cases. How would one even know if one had? It is a rudimentary fallacy of explanation – the so-called Baconian, or inductivist, fallacy – to oppose drawing conclusions until all the knowable facts are ‘in.’ Because generalizations are recognized as tentative, the comparative method does not generalize prematurely. If it did, then even noncomparativist conclusions about people X alone would also be premature, for here, too, all the knowable facts are never ‘in.’ And the facts do not include causes, which are inferred.

(5) Taking phenomena out of context

Fifth, proper comparisons do not take phenomena out of context. The attentiveness to differences by new comparativists and the restriction of comparisons to contiguous regions by controlled comparativists are meant to be antidotes to the disregard of context. But in actuality proper comparisons not only do not but cannot take phenomena out of their contexts. To be able to compare the offering of animal sacrifices by peo-

ple X with the offering of the same by people Y, one had better be sure that both peoples do indeed kill animals and offer them to their gods to win their gods' favor. From where but the context can this information be secured?

Frazer, who is routinely castigated for supposedly tearing cases out of context, himself emphasizes the centrality of context:

The [anthropological] method is neither more nor less than induction And the first condition of a sound induction is exact observation. What we want, therefore, in this branch of science is, first and foremost, full, true, and precise accounts of savage and barbarous peoples based on personal observation. Such accounts are best given by men who have lived for many years among the peoples, have won their confidence, and can converse with them familiarly in their native language ... (Frazer 1922: 588).

Sounding just like his *critics*, Frazer declares that

'Hardly anything impairs the value of observations of a particular people so much as the interpolation of comparisons with other peoples ... ' (Frazer 1922: 590).

Worried that comparison prior to observation will contaminate the observation, Frazer insists that

'Every observer of a savage or barbarous people should describe it as if no other people existed on the face of the earth'

– that is, in its particularity. Frazer permits the observer to be a comparativist as well, but only if the activities are kept separate:

The business of comparison is not for him [*i.e.*, the observer], at least not for him in the capacity of observer; if he desires to draw comparisons with other peoples, as he is of course at liberty to do, he should keep his comparisons strictly apart from his observations: mixture of the two is, if not absolutely fatal, at least a great impediment to the utility of both (Frazer 1922: 590).

Far, then, from comparing phenomena severed from their contexts, the comparative method compares phenomena *in* their contexts. How, then, can old comparativists be guilty of having 'obliterated local meanings and contexts,' to quote again new comparativist Paden?

What might seem to be taking phenomena out of context is in fact mere selectiveness. Insofar as the object of comparison is animal sacrifices, much else about the peoples compared will properly be ignored as irrelevant – and not 'obliterated' though relevant. Even an analysis of the animal sacrifices of people X alone will ignore many aspects of their lives that have no bearing on the topic of hand. The difference between the selectiveness of a generalist and that of a particularist is only one of degree. The broader the scale of a comparison, the more selective the elements compared will be in order to encompass all cases. But selection is not obliteration. If one is comparing animal sacrifices worldwide, one will disregard the differences between one form of animal sacrifice and another. But to select only common elements from all the cases is not to ignore the context, which is still indispensable for determining the existence of animal sacrifice in each case.

(6) Generalizing at all

Sixth and most of all, comparison is not merely permissible but indispensable. To understand any phenomenon, however specific, is to identify it and to account for it. To identify something is to place it in a category, and to account for it is to account for the category of which it is a member. Both procedures are thus inescapably comparativist.⁹

Suppose one wants to know why people X – just people X – practice animal sacrifice, and suppose one ascertains from people X that they offer animal sacrifices to their gods because they believe that sacrifices will win their gods' favor. One then claims that people X offer animal sacrifices for this reason. But presupposed in the claim that people X offer animal sacrifices because they believe that they will thereby win their gods' favor is the claim that other peoples who believe that their gods' favor can be won through animal sacrifices will also offer them. Otherwise why would people X offer them? To propose the belief as a sufficient explanation of people X's offering animal sacrifices is to presuppose a generalization, however obvious, about other peoples: that they are prepared to give up valuable possessions to their gods because they believe that it pays to do so. This generalization about the practical, vested motivation of other peoples alone accounts for the behavior of people X in particular.¹⁰

Take the case of the French Revolution. Suppose one claims, on the basis of an intensive study of the French urban poor, that the urban poor revolted because the price of bread kept rising. Built into this claim, even if offered only about the French case, is the generalized claim that whenever the price of bread rises, people will revolt. Otherwise what explains why the French revolted? Because they were French? That answer is circular. Because they were hungry? But then one is explaining the French Revolution in particular by appeal to the generalization, however self-evident, that when people are hungry enough, they will revolt. If one replies that by no means all peoples revolt when the price of bread or of food generally rises, then the purported explanation of even the French case is inadequate, for something more than the rising price of bread must have been the cause in that case if the rising price is not sufficient to spur revolt every time. Whatever else is added – hatred of the monarchy, despair over the prospect of reform, agitation by the press – constitutes a sufficient explanation of the French Revolution only if it also constitutes a sufficient explanation of every other revolution. If these same circumstances do not produce revolution

⁹ On the connection between categorization and explanation see Mayr and Ashlock 1991: 124-125; Hempel 1965: 453-457. A most helpful example of the connection between the two is that of medical diagnosis, which is cited by not only Hempel and others but also Geertz, who, however, ironically invokes it as a would-be illustration of sheer categorization – one of the ways he tries to distinguish interpretation from explanation: see Geertz 1973: 26-27.

¹⁰ The *locus classicus* of this view of explanation is Popper 1959: section 12. The *locus classicus* of the view that the explanation of human events is of the particular is Collingwood 1946. For decades, the generalist Hempel and the particularist William Dray debated. For references, see Segal 2001: 355 n. 28.

every time, then they inadequately account for revolution any time.

Apply this argument to animal sacrifice. Suppose, again, one claims, on the basis of a meticulous study of people X, that they sacrifice animals to their gods because they believe that they will thereby win their gods' favor. Built into this claim about people X is the generalization that whenever people believe they can win their gods' favor by animal sacrifices, they will do so. If one replies that not all peoples who believe that their gods' favor can be won by animal sacrifice proceed to practice it, then the explanation is inadequate even for people X. For something else must be at work to account for why people X proceed with the sacrifices when other peoples who share the belief in the efficacy of animal sacrifice do not. What must be added can range from, say, the desperation of people X to win their gods' favor to the inexpensiveness of their sacrifices. Whatever else suffices to account for the case of people X does so only if it also suffices to account for the sacrifices of other peoples in the same circumstances as well.

Several anticipated objections can readily be met. It might be argued that other peoples offer animal sacrifices for different reasons. Suppose a study of people Y reveals that they offer animal sacrifices out of duty rather than out of a calculated pay-off. But that discovery is no argument against the proposed explanation for people X, for the claim made about them is intended to provide only a sufficient, not also a necessary, explanation. The claim is not that the *only* reason for animal sacrifice is the calculation that it pays but that *whenever* the calculation exists, there will be animal sacrifices. Most explanations of human behavior and even of physical events are intended to be at best merely sufficient, not necessary, ones.¹¹ Ordinarily, there are too many possible causes of the same behavior to be able to stipulate which are necessary ones. People may revolt for many reasons. They need not be famished to do so.¹²

Conversely, it might be argued that even would-be sufficient generalizations invariably fail to suffice. Suppose a study of people Z discloses that they, like people X, believe that animal sacrifices will win their gods' favor, are desperate to gain that favor, and can readily afford the sacrifices. Yet suppose that even so, they, in contrast to people X, do not make the sacrifices. Obviously, the explanation of people X thereby proves insufficient and must be supplemented to account for their own proceeding to make sacrifices. But suppose, further, that no matter how many additions are made, the explanation still fails to account for the difference between people X's behavior and people Z's. The proper conclusion to be drawn is not that the reasons for people X's behavior are mysterious but that the reasons are so numerous or so complex that no other people will likely share them all. Most explanations of human be-

¹¹ To be sure, some explanations of human behavior claim to be only necessary. Emile Durkheim's sociology of religion is so much more extreme than Max Weber's because Durkheim claims to be providing sufficient as well as necessary causes of religion, where Weber claims to be providing only necessary ones. David Hume maintained that explanations must be necessary as well as sufficient.

¹² Anthropologist Franz Boas' objection to the comparative method is exactly that, according to him, it presumes to provide necessary as well as sufficient causes. Boas insists that the same effects often stem from different causes, so that no one cause is necessary. See Boas 1896.

havior and even of physical events are intended as less than sufficient ones.¹³ Most often, they are offered as merely probabilistic.¹⁴ The claim is that whenever the conditions named occur, the behavior will likely, not inevitably, occur, and the degree of likelihood can even be less than 50%. No matter how famished people are, not all and maybe not even most will revolt.

Finally, it might be argued that even necessary and sufficient generalizations are irrelevant because the behavior itself is unique. Suppose that only people X offer animal sacrifices. Or suppose that only people X offer sacrifices of a particular animal, one found only in their locale. But the uniqueness of their case is merely a historical contingency. The explanation offered for their unique case would still have to hold, even if as less than a sufficient explanation, for any other people in the same circumstances who also offered animal sacrifices, of any kind or of a specific kind. The comparative method is often confused with the assumption of universals – as if it stands committed to similarities not merely across any cultures but across *all* cultures. In actuality, the method requires the *search* for multiple instances of a phenomenon but allows for the *discovery* of even just one. Still, if the explanation given of people X would not apply to any other people in kindred conditions who did offer these sacrifices, the explanation fails to explain even the sole case to date of people X.

In short, the way to understand people X is not merely by myopically studying them more and more. It is also by studying other peoples as well. One cannot, in postmodern fashion, ignore other peoples and focus only on people X. One cannot say blithely that one cares only about people X or, like Geertz, that the differences between people X and other peoples are more profound than the similarities. Even if one is interested only in the particular, similarities are indispensable, both in categorizing, for example, the French Revolution as a revolution and in accounting for it. Geertz himself employs similarities even in the effort to articulate the distinctiveness of the cultures he has studied. Without such favorite categories as culture, ethos, world view, ritual, social change, ideology, revolution, nationalism, politics, person, art, and law, he would be rendered speechless.

The comparative method amounts to more than the juxtaposition of phenomena. It means the identification of a common category for those phenomena. That identification spurs either the *application* or the *discovery* of a common explanation of that category. While the comparative method can be used to find differences as

¹³ As Ernest Nagel writes, ‘The search for explanations is directed to the ideal of ascertaining the necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of phenomena. This ideal is rarely achieved, however, and even in the best-developed natural sciences it is often an open question whether the conditions mentioned in an explanation are indeed sufficient’ (Nagel 1952: 167).

¹⁴ As philosopher of science Wesley C. Salmon writes of modern physics, ‘Some first-rate physicists are presently working to find a deterministic theory to replace the current quantum mechanics, one by which it will be possible to explain what now seems irreducibly statistical by means of ‘hidden variables’ that cannot occur in the present theory. No one can say for sure whether they will succeed; any new theory, deterministic or indeterministic, has to stand the test of experiment. The current quantum theory does show, however, that the world may be fundamentally and irremediably indeterministic, for according to the best currently available knowledge, it is’ (Salmon 1971: 321).

well as similarities, the method itself seeks similarities and finds differences only where the similarities cease. Put another way, new comparativists must be old comparativists as well. And postmodernists must be comparativists, too.

Frazer's Old Comparativism

In his *Folk-lore in the Old Testament* (1918), J. G. Frazer seeks to show the primitive character of a seemingly advanced culture:

Despite the high moral and religious development of the ancient Hebrews, there is no reason to suppose that they formed an exception to this general law. They, too, had probably passed through a stage of barbarism and even of savagery; and this probability, based on the analogy of other races, is confirmed by an examination of their literature, which contains many references to beliefs and practices that can hardly be explained except on the supposition that they are rudimentary survivals from a far lower level of culture. It is to the illustration and explanation of a few such relics of ruder times, as they are preserved like fossils in the Old Testament, that I have addressed myself in the present work.... The instrument for the detection of savagery under civilization is the comparative method ... (Frazer 1918: I, vii-viii).

Frazer's procedure is to note some odd belief, practice, or incident in the Bible that the Bible itself fails to explain. He then turns to comparable cases around the world, makes sense of them, and applies that 'solution' to the biblical case. Only the similarities, not the differences, between Israelite and primitive religion faze him. Because the similarities are with primitive religion, Israelite religion is reduced to a primitive religion and, even more, to the yet earlier practice of magic.

For example, Frazer is struck by the Israelite fear of a census in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21, which recounts 2 Samuel. While on other occasions the census is not feared, in 2 Samuel God is said to be angry with Israel beforehand and orders King David to conduct a census in retaliation. Not only God but also David and his general Joab know that harm will thereby befall Israel. Joab objects to his king's order but is overruled. No sooner is the census completed than David himself regrets the deed and asks God, who had instructed him to undertake the census, for forgiveness for having undertaken it! God offers David three forms of punishment, and David chooses one: three days of plague, which kills 70,000 Israelites. A true Hobson's choice! To quote 2 Samuel 24.1-15:

Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, 'Go, count the people of Israel and Judah.' So the king said to Joab and the commanders of the army, who were with him, 'Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and take a census of the people, so that I may know how many there are.'... So Joab and the commanders of the army went out from the presence of the king to take a census of the people of Israel.... But afterward, David was stricken to the heart because he had numbered the people. David said to the Lord, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O Lord, I pray you, take away the guilt of your servant; for I have done very foolishly.' When David rose in the morning, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, 'Go and say to David: Thus says the Lord: Three things I offer you; choose one of them, and I will do it to you.' So Gad came to David and told him; he asked him, 'Shall three years

of famine come to you on your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days' pestilence in your land? Now consider, and decide what answer I shall return to the one who sent me.' Then David said to Gad, 'I am in great distress; let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into human hands.' So the Lord sent a pestilence on Israel from that morning until the appointed time; and seventy thousand of the people died, from Dan to Beer-sheba.

David then performs a triple penance, and God ends the plague. In the version of the incident in Chronicles it is Satan, not God, who prods David into taking the census. God there merely punishes Israel for the census and does not initiate it.

Incontestably, Frazer skirts many aspects of the event: why is either God or Satan angry with Israel; why does God or Satan resort to the census as the way of getting back at Israel; why does David, knowing better, nevertheless carry out the census; why does God offer David a choice of punishments; and why does David choose the punishment that he does? But Frazer does not claim to be answering these questions and so cannot be faulted for failing to answer them. He claims to be answering only one central question: why is the census feared? He cites case after case in which primitive and peasant peoples fear that counting something will lead to the loss of it:

The objection which Jehovah, or rather the Jews, entertained to the taking of a census appears to be simply a particular case of the general aversion which many ignorant people feel to allowing themselves, their cattle, or their possessions to be counted. This curious superstition – for such it is – seems to be common among the black races of Africa. For example, among the Bakongo, of the Lower Congo, 'it is considered extremely unlucky for a woman to count her children one, two, three, and so on, for the evil spirits will hear and take some of them away by death. The people themselves do not like to be counted; for they fear that counting will draw to them the attention of the evil spirits, and as a result of the counting some of them will soon die.'... Similar superstitions are to be found in Europe and in our own country to this day.... On the whole we may assume, with a fair degree of probability, that the objection which the Jews in King David's time felt to the taking of a census rested on no firmer foundation than sheer superstition, which may have been confirmed by an outbreak of plague immediately after the numbering of the people (Frazer 1918: II, 557-63).

In other words, the superstition rests on the commission of the *post hoc, propter hoc* fallacy.

In the Bible itself counting is *sinful*: it incurs divine wrath. In Frazer's primitive examples it is *unlucky*: it automatically sets off malevolent forces. By Frazer's distinction, the effect of counting is magical, not religious, so that what in the Bible is manifestly a religious objection is for Frazer a magical one. God becomes a mechanical force unleashed by the counting rather than the agent of the plague. He is like a genie released from a bottle.

Lamentably, Frazer never specifies how counting subjects its victims to harm. Most likely, knowing the number of a group is akin to knowing its name, which is equivalent to possessing a portion of it, which by Frazer's second law of magic is equivalent to possessing it all. Whoever learns the census total thereby controls the subject and can inflict harm on it by doing something to the name, which in magic is regarded as tangible. God does not initiate the counting. It is not clear who does. Nor is it clear who the magician is.

There is nothing objectionable in Frazer's version of the comparative method.

He is not claiming that the Israelite case is identical with the other ones, only similar. Rather than denying any differences, he is simply interested in the similarities. Rather than taking either the Israelite case or the parallel ones out of their contexts, he first establishes them *as* cases of fear of a census. He then invokes the magical fear of counting as the common explanation of the cases. He offers his analysis ‘with a fair degree of probability,’ not with certainty. He is able to make sense of the Israelite case because he is able to make sense of so many similar cases. The Israelite census was likely feared for magical reasons because elsewhere censuses have been feared for magical reasons.

Frazer’s use of the comparative method doubtless seems extreme because his analysis of the Davidic case does not merely commit him to a generalization but is itself the application of the generalization. This distinction is, however, false. Suppose Frazer were explicating the Davidic case internally. He would still be explicating it on the basis of a tacit generalization. His argument that the Israelites opposed censuses because they believed that counting unleashed malevolent forces would still rest on the generalization that whenever people believe that a census will unleash malevolent forces, they will fear it. Frazer would simply already have reached that generalization before studying the Israelite case. In truth, Frazer *has* reached that conclusion before opening the Bible. In presenting himself as initially puzzled, he is being rhetorical. He is presenting himself as an innocent, even devout reader of the Bible who cannot make sense of the story internally and must therefore turn to parallel cases to do so. But even if he were genuinely puzzled, he would not be exceeding the limits of the comparative method by enlisting it to explicate a particular case as well as to justify the explication by appeal to the generalization. At the same time the generalization must fit the Israelite case, and one can maintain that by Frazer’s own distinction, the case seems to be less magical than religious, for the fear is more of God’s decision to punish than of the unleashing of a mechanical force.¹⁵

The issue, however, is not whether Frazer’s analysis is persuasive. The issue is whether he is entitled to analyze the Israelite case cross-culturally – *i.e.*, comparatively. I claim that he is and that he is guilty of none of the charges made against old comparativists by controlled comparativists, by new comparativists, or above all by postmoderns. If even he, the epitome of old comparativism, stands innocent of any abuse of the comparative method, then who, pray tell, is guilty?

¹⁵ In his comments on my paper, Professor Dupré (2008) notes that Frazer’s characterization of these activities as ‘savage and barbarian’ is hardly compatible with Frazer’s insistence on untainted observation. To quote Frazer again, ‘What we want, therefore, in this branch of science is, first and foremost, full, true, and precise accounts of savage and barbarous peoples based on personal observation.’ But Frazer is asking his informants to be sheer observers and is not barring himself, as comparativist interpreter, from making judgments. Even if those judgments are based on Frazer’s commitment to evolution, old comparativism itself is separable from any commitment to evolution by practitioners.

The superiority of Old Comparativism

In his most helpful comments on my paper, the present version of which incorporates some of them, Wilhelm Dupré concludes by advocating the use of all four varieties of comparativism. For him, controlled comparativism, new comparativism, and post-modernism as well as old comparativism all offer ‘complementary traits which are likely to improve the comparativist program if we integrate them in their complementarity’ (Dupré 2008: 3). Dupré assumes that I am advocating the same, but I am actually less ecumenical than he. While my paper is intended to defend old comparativism against misconceptions, I myself think that it renders the three alternatives useless. Controlled comparativism refuses to go beyond the region even though it uses universal, hence old comparativist, categories like myth, ritual, religion, gods, and kingship. New comparativism declares, without argument, that differences as well as similarities must be sought and that differences count even more. But the sole way to find differences, whatever their status, is through old comparativism. Differences are differences only within categories, which means only within similarities. One cannot bypass similarities and get to differences. Postmodernism pronounces differences the only goal. But postmodernism, no less than new comparativism, is beholden to its nemesis to attain its end. Who, then, needs postmodernism or new comparativism or controlled comparativism when one has old comparativism?

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