SPECIAL SECTION

INTRODUCTION

Toward a Comparative Anthropology of Muslim and Christian Lived Religion

Daan Beekers

Abstract: This introduction proposes directions for a comparative anthropology of Muslim and Christian religion. While the anthropologies of Islam and Christianity flourish, comparative inquiries across religious boundaries have remained remarkably underdeveloped. As a result, parallels, overlaps, and situated differences between religious groups in today's pluralist environments are often disregarded. This piece sets out the aim of this special section to develop ethnographic comparison, not of religious traditions as such, but of the ways in which everyday religious lives take shape within a shared social space, whether local or national. Such comparative work has the potential to provide insights and reveal connections that would likely be overlooked in non-comparative accounts, and that invite a critical rethinking of conventional understandings of difference and particularity.

Keywords: anthropology of Christianity, anthropology of Islam, lived religion, Muslim-Christian comparison, pluralist world, particularity

The anthropology of religion has seen tremendous theoretical development in recent decades regarding such themes as conversion and ritual, ethics and morality, and materiality and mediation. At the same time, it has been characterized by a remarkable lack of comparative work across religious traditions. In the last 15 years or so, the anthropology of religion has branched into separate subfields, including, most notably, the anthropologies of Islam and Christianity. While these specialized subfields have stimulated a profusion of rich ethnographic studies on the dynamics *within* Muslim, Christian, and other religious collectives, they have also discouraged comparative inquiries *across* religious boundaries. This lack of comparative work has resulted in a disregard

of parallels, overlaps, and situated differences in the dynamics of lived religion (broadly understood here as the contextualized ways in which people experience, express, and enact religion in their everyday lives) among religious communities, especially those co-existing in the same geographical space.

Indeed, in our highly pluralist world, groups with diverse religious backgrounds tend to live side by side in rural, urban, or national spaces. More often than not, these shared socio-political spaces are marked by fervent discourses of cultural and religious difference, often accompanied by widespread notions of alleged religious alterity—especially of Islam in Euro-America, but also of other religions, including Christianity and ‘traditional religion’, in other contexts. By gaining insight into the potentially convergent dynamics of lived religion, comparative ethnographies of religion can offer a critical perspective on received notions of difference and particularity. This special section brings together scholars who are pioneering such comparative ethnographic work in various contexts in Europe and Africa—regions where most of the innovative cross-religious ethnographic work is being done.¹ Our focus is on Islam and Christianity, the two largest and most widely studied religions, but our argument about the potential of cross-religious ethnography extends to other religions. The short articles in this collection look at Muslim and Christian communities that co-exist in the same urban spaces, drawing out convergences and contrasts that may remain overlooked in non-comparative accounts of these groups.

The special section builds on an incipient recognition among anthropologists that long-standing boundaries between the study of separate religions need to be overcome. A number of anthropologists working in Africa, in particular, have put this issue on the agenda. In a paper published more than a decade ago, Brian Larkin and Birgit Meyer (2006: 286) made a case for Muslim-Christian comparison, arguing that evangelical Pentecostalism and reformist Islam in West Africa “share a great deal of common ground.” In recent years, several comparative studies of Muslims and Christians in African societies have emerged (Dilger 2013; Ibrahim 2017; Janson and Meyer 2016; Peel 2015). In studies set in Europe and the United States, too, a number of anthropologists and sociologists working ethnographically have taken on Muslim-Christian comparison (Beekers 2014; DeHanas 2016; Guhin 2016).

The comparative work set in Africa often gives much attention to inter-religious encounters in contexts where either Muslims or Christians—or both—constitute dominant social groups. Larkin (2014), for example, examines the use of loudspeakers on mosques and churches in urban Nigeria, pointing out that a practical cultivation of ‘inattention’ among both Muslims and Christians abates the prevalence of inter-religious conflict. The comparative ethnographies in Europe or the United States put more emphasis on the ways in which religious communities respond to a predominantly secular political and cultural realm, addressing, for instance, how actors in evangelical and Sunni high

schools in the US engage with evolution theory (Guhin 2016). This comparative literature, however, constitutes only a very small segment of the anthropology of religion, most of which focuses on single religions. The discipline still lacks a well-developed ethnographic field in which multiple religions are studied “within one analytical frame” (Janson and Meyer 2016: 615).

For an important part, this lack of comparative work results from a commonplace guardedness among anthropologists toward cross-cultural comparisons, ever since the discipline abandoned the large-scale comparative ambitions of its early days. Modern anthropology has been more concerned with cultural specificity than with making generalizations (Holy 1987: 8). Its characteristic cultural relativist approach has implied that ‘translation’ across cultures is generally understood to be inherently problematic (Bloch 1977). Recent anthropological concerns with the singularity and irreducibility of cultural and ontological worlds tend to advance notions of particularity—or even incommensurability—even further (cf. van der Veer 2016: 5).

For another part, the dearth of cross-religious comparison in anthropology is an effect of the organization of knowledge production in the study of religion. This area of inquiry has been characterized by historically grown specializations in distinct fields and subfields, such as religious studies and Islamic studies, the sociology of religion and minority studies, and the anthropologies of Islam and Christianity. Because each of these fields comes with its own academic community and theoretical debates, there has been little exchange between them (Beekers 2014: 79–82; DeHanas 2016: 195; Meyer 2016: 629; Peel 2015: 9, 105–112). Given their interdisciplinary nature, area studies may constitute an exception that offers more comparative analyses of religion (see, e.g., Hefner 2010). Yet in this field too, as the case of African studies shows, scholarship on separate religions is often conducted independently from one another (Janson and Meyer 2016).

A crucial development in the anthropology of religion has been the emergence of distinct anthropologies of Islam and Christianity, both of which have called renewed attention to theological traditions, normative frameworks, and the specificities of Islam and Christianity respectively. In the anthropology of Islam, this has given rise to a surge of studies on Islamic piety and discursive tradition in the wake of Talal Asad’s (1986, 1993) and Saba Mahmood’s (2005) seminal work. In the anthropology of Christianity, scholars like Joel Robbins (2003, 2004) and Webb Keane (2007) have inspired a body of work that gives attention to the culturally constitutive potential of Christianity, focusing particularly on experiences of discontinuity, conversion, and rupture.² The latter field has been explicitly defined as an ‘intra-religious’ comparative project, geared toward the systematic study of Christians and Christian configurations “in different parts of the world” (Robbins et al. 2014: 559).³

The consolidation of these subfields has not only moved the analytical lens away from inter-religious comparison; it has also, I argue, framed

anthropological debates about Islam and Christianity in largely—but not completely—separate directions. Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of approaches within both subfields, it can be observed that anthropologists of Islam have put much emphasis on the notion of religious tradition and the tensions between Islamic piety and ‘liberal-secular’ modernity. Anthropologists of Christianity, by contrast, have examined how Christian conversion effects discontinuities with local cultural practices and ideas, while linking its subjects to “the moral narrative of modernity” (Keane 2007: 47–55). Surely, these distinct analytical frameworks are connected to the divergent social and historical trajectories of the Muslim and Christian movements under study. However, as recent debates within both anthropological fields show, they only tell a part of the story. The focus on Islamic piety and tradition may come at the cost of overlooking the ways in which Muslims tend to participate in—and be co-determined by—multiple social dynamics and moral frameworks in the contemporary world (see, e.g., Schielke 2015), while the emphasis on discontinuity may neglect the ways in which Christian lives often continue to be shaped by long-existing local cultural norms (see, e.g., Chua 2012).

Aside from the comparative studies mentioned above, much of the existing work that examines Muslims and Christians in a single analytical framework focuses on their encounters and interactions (see, e.g., Bowman 2012; Chao 2017; Dulin 2017; Heo 2018; Nolte et al. 2017; Soares 2006).⁴ While building on this important and recently growing scholarship, this special section aims to push it in new directions by putting the question of comparison center stage. The contributions explore and reveal the distinct analytical potential of ethnographically comparing Muslim and Christian communities that co-exist in the same socio-political spaces but do not necessarily interact on a daily basis. Such work focuses not so much on events of inter-religious encounter; rather, it analyzes the religious lives of Christians and Muslims within one analytical framework, examining the similar or divergent ways in which they respond to shared social conditions.

A key strength of such comparative ethnography is its potential to provide insights and reveal connections that are likely to go unnoticed in non-comparative accounts (cf. Niewöhner and Scheffer 2010: 11). This pertains not only to identifying relations and convergences between the subjects compared but also to pinpointing situated particularities that only their close juxtaposition brings to the fore. This method of juxtaposition offers what Knorr Cetina (1999: 4) calls a “comparative optics,” through which patterns identified in one unit of comparison serve “as a sensor for identifying and mapping (equivalent, analog, conflicting) patterns in the other.” With respect to today’s religiously pluralist contexts, such comparative insights can offer critical perspectives on conventional ideas about the differences between religious groups and about the ways in which they relate to each other as well as to wider society.

Thus, in part, the contributions in this section reveal shared ground among the Christian and Muslim communities studied. Omar Kasmani and Dominik Mattes trace “affective continuities” in the Sufi and Pentecostal prayer gatherings in which they conducted fieldwork in Berlin. Their case shows that comparative fieldwork can be embarked upon not only by single fieldworkers but also through close collaboration between researchers, each of whom focuses on a single religious community. They describe deeply sensorial and affective techniques of connecting to the divine that are to a large extent shared in these Muslim and Christian settings. This overlapping affective labor, they argue, is related to the “common immediate environment” and the perceived moral threats emanating from this urban context. In my own contribution, I show that everyday struggles of religious commitment in a predominantly secular Dutch society are not exclusive to actively practicing Muslims, but are shared by their Christian counterparts. Both participate extensively in secular and fast-capitalist worlds that offer little support for the dedicated faith to which they aspire. This convergence between young Dutch Muslims and Christians points to the limitations of frameworks centering on integration or migration that, by treating Muslims as ‘outsiders’ or ‘newcomers’, keep these groups apart.

The articles in this section also help to explain the particularities of the religious communities under study by tracing—sometimes unexpected—differences. This can be illustrated by my contribution’s discussion of prevalent discourses that tend to frame (white) Christians as part of the Dutch nation and (post-migrant) Muslims as a migrant minority. In light of these discursive frameworks, it seems remarkable that my Christian interlocutors, as compared to the young Muslims, tend to more explicitly distinguish themselves from mainstream secular Dutch culture. Yet these self-representations can be understood as deliberate acts of dis/identification: whereas these young Christians seek to reaffirm their distinctiveness from secular culture, the young Muslims are more concerned with countering narratives that set them apart as ‘other’.

The social effects of such discourses on alterity illustrate the importance of taking unequal power relations into account in any comparative endeavor (Fox and Gingrich 2002: 19)—a point that is taken up head-on by Hansjörg Dilger in this collection. Dilger discusses how the public presence of Christian and Muslim actors in Tanzania has been co-determined by the efforts of (trans)national bodies to govern religious multiplicity. Muslim and Christian expressions in the public sphere, he shows, are shaped by inequalities and tensions that are connected to post-colonial histories of Christianity and Islam, transnational flows of resources, and limited state neutrality. The comparative study of Muslim and Christian lived religion, Dilger argues, has to address such “processes of power and inequality in an interconnected world.”

Each of the pieces collected here embarks on cross-religious comparison by identifying a common measure, or “mediating category” (Meyer 2016: 629):

a particular issue or problem that is explored across religious boundaries (cf. Hann 2007: 406; Meyer 2016: 630). In the contributions to this section, these mediating categories include affect, commitment, and governance. Our focus on how particular Christian and Muslim communities engage with these issues *under shared conditions* contributes to a well-matched and grounded comparison. The aim is not to compare religious traditions as such (Decosimo 2018), but to compare how everyday religious lives take shape within a shared social space, whether local or national. By looking at multiple religious traditions within a single context, this comparative approach offers a timely counterpoint to the analytical projects—represented in the anthropologies of Christianity and Islam—of studying a single religious tradition across different contexts.

The special section concludes with a reflection by Birgit Meyer, who responds to some of the main themes running through the contributions and highlights future directions for the comparative anthropology of Muslim and Christian lived religion. Taken together, this collection of short articles seeks to open up—and contribute to—a much-needed comparative inquiry into lived religion in today's pluralist world, which has the potential to provide a corrective to the bifurcated anthropological study of religion.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Hansjörg Dilger, David Kloos, and Joel Robbins for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this text. I would also like to thank Daniel Nilsson DeHanas for his contributions in the earlier stages of this project and acknowledge Birgit Meyer and the other team members of the “Religious Matters in an Entangled World” project for stimulating conversations on this subject. Thanks go to Shawn Kendrick for her diligent copyediting. My work on this special section has been supported by a Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh.

Daan Beekers is a Visiting Fellow at the Alwaleed Centre for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World, University of Edinburgh. His work focuses on pluralism, religious commitment, and religious heritage in Europe. He obtained his PhD in Social and Cultural Anthropology from the Vrije Universiteit (Amsterdam) in 2015 and conducted postdoctoral research at Utrecht University and the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities in Edinburgh. His publications include the co-edited volume *Straying from the Straight Path: How Senses of Failure Invigorate Lived Religion* (2018) and a forthcoming monograph on the precarious pursuit of faith among young Muslims and Christians in the Netherlands, to be published by Bloomsbury. E-mail: dt.beekers@gmail.com

Notes

1. Important cross-religious ethnographic work has also been conducted in other regions, including Southeast Asia (see, e.g., Chao 2017; Hefner 2010).
2. See Kloos and Beekers (2018) for a more detailed juxtaposition of the anthropologies of Islam and Christianity.
3. In terms of specialization in the anthropologies of Islam and Christianity, it is worth noting that some of the seminal studies in these fields have been conducted in contexts that are either overwhelmingly Muslim, like Pakistan (Marsden 2005), or overwhelmingly Christian, like Papua New Guinea (Robbins 2004) or Zimbabwe (Engelke 2007). Scholars working in such areas may not want to claim the authority to write about religions other than the one they are familiar with. Moreover, unlike scholars working in more religiously diverse contexts, their ethnographic fields will not necessarily have prompted them to address questions of inter-religious comparison.
4. See also the ongoing research project “Religious Matters in an Entangled World,” led by Birgit Meyer at Utrecht University (<https://www.religiousmatters.nl>), and the ERC-funded research project “Multi-Religious Encounters in Urban Settings,” conducted by Leslie Fesenmyer, Giulia Liberatore, and Ammara Maqsood (<https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/802226>). The latter have edited a forthcoming special issue of *Social Anthropology* devoted to anthropological research across ‘religious and ethnographic boundaries’ (Fesenmyer et al., forthcoming).

References

- Asad, Talal. 1986. *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*. Occasional Papers Series. Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University.
- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Beekers, Daan. 2014. “Pedagogies of Piety: Comparing Young Observant Muslims and Christians in the Netherlands.” *Culture and Religion* 15 (1): 72–99.
- Bloch, Maurice. 1977. “The Past and the Present in the Present.” *Man* (n.s.) 12 (2): 278–292.
- Bowman, Glenn, ed. 2012. *Sharing the Sacra: The Politics and Pragmatics of Intercommunal Relations around Holy Places*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Chao, En-Chieh. 2017. *Entangled Pieties: Muslim-Christian Relations and Gendered Sociality in Java, Indonesia*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chua, Liana. 2012. *The Christianity of Culture: Conversion, Ethnic Citizenship, and the Matter of Religion in Malaysian Borneo*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Decosimo, David. 2018. “For Big Comparison: Why the Arguments against Comparing Entire Religious Traditions Fail.” *Religion Compass* 12 (5–6): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12265>.

- DeHanas, Daniel Nilsson. 2016. *London Youth, Religion, and Politics: Engagement and Activism from Brixton to Brick Lane*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dilger, Hansjörg. 2013. "Religion and the Formation of an Urban Educational Market: Transnational Reform Processes and Social Inequalities in Christian and Muslim Schooling in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 43 (4): 451–479.
- Dulin, John. 2017. "Transvaluing ISIS in Orthodox Christian–Majority Ethiopia: On the Inhibition of Group Violence." *Current Anthropology* 58 (6): 785–804.
- Engelke, Matthew. 2007. *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fesenmyer, Leslie, Giulia Liberatore, and Ammara Maqsood. Forthcoming. "Introduction. Crossing Religious and Ethnographic Boundaries: The Case for Comparative Reflection." *Social Anthropology*.
- Fox, Richard G., and Andre Gingrich. 2002. "Introduction." In *Anthropology, by Comparison*, ed. Andre Gingrich and Richard G. Fox, 1–24. London: Routledge.
- Guhin, Jeffrey. 2016. "Why Worry about Evolution? Boundaries, Practices, and Moral Salience in Sunni and Evangelical High Schools." *Sociological Theory* 34 (2): 151–174.
- Hann, Chris. 2007. "The Anthropology of Christianity *per se*." *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 48 (3): 383–410.
- Hefner, Robert W. 2010. "Religious Resurgence in Contemporary Asia: Southeast Asian Perspectives on Capitalism, the State, and the New Piety." *Journal of Asian Studies* 69 (4): 1031–1047.
- Heo, Angie. 2018. *The Political Lives of Saints: Christian-Muslim Mediation in Egypt*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Holy, Ladislav. 1987. "Introduction. Description, Generalization and Comparison: Two Paradigms." In *Comparative Anthropology*, ed. Ladislav Holy, 1–21. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Ibrahim, Murtala. 2017. "Oral Transmission of the Sacred: Preaching in Christ Embassy and NASFAT in Abuja." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 47 (1): 108–131.
- Janson, Marloes, and Birgit Meyer. 2016. "Introduction: Towards a Framework for the Study of Christian-Muslim Encounters in Africa." *Africa* 86 (4): 615–619.
- Keane, Webb. 2007. *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kloos, David, and Daan Beekers. 2018. "Introduction: The Productive Potential of Moral Failure in Lived Islam and Christianity." In *Straying from the Straight Path: How Senses of Failure Invigorate Lived Religion*, ed. Daan Beekers and David Kloos, 1–19. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Knorr Cetina, Karin. 1999. *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Larkin, Brian. 2014. "Techniques of Inattention: The Mediality of Loudspeakers in Nigeria." *Anthropological Quarterly* 87 (4): 989–1015.
- Larkin, Brian, and Birgit Meyer. 2006. "Pentecostalism, Islam and Culture: New Religious Movements in West Africa." In *Themes in West Africa's History*, ed. Emmanuel Kwaku Akyeampong, 286–312. Oxford: James Currey.

- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Marsden, Magnus. 2005. *Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Meyer, Birgit. 2016. "Towards a Joint Framework for the Study of Christians and Muslims in Africa: Response to J. D. Y. Peel." *Africa* 86 (4): 628–632.
- Niewöhner, Jörg, and Thomas Scheffer. 2010. "Introduction. Thickening Comparison: On the Multiple Facets of Comparability." In *Thick Comparison: Reviving the Ethnographic Aspiration*, ed. Thomas Scheffer and Jörg Niewöhner, 1–15. Leiden: Brill.
- Nolte, Insa, Olukoya Ogen, and Rebecca Jones, eds. 2017. *Beyond Religious Tolerance: Muslim, Christian and Traditionalist Encounters in an African Town*. London: James Currey.
- Peel, J. D. Y. 2015. *Christianity, Islam, and Oriṣa Religion: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Robbins, Joel. 2003. "What Is a Christian? Notes toward an Anthropology of Christianity." *Religion* 33 (3): 191–199.
- Robbins, Joel. 2004. *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Robbins, Joel, Bambi B. Schieffelin, and Aparecida Vilaça. 2014. "Evangelical Conversion and the Transformation of the Self in Amazonia and Melanesia: Christianity and the Revival of Anthropological Comparison." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56 (3): 559–590.
- Schielke, Samuli. 2015. *Egypt in the Future Tense: Hope, Frustration, and Ambivalence before and after 2011*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Soares, Benjamin, ed. 2006. *Muslim-Christian Encounters in Africa*. Leiden: Brill.
- van der Veer, Peter. 2016. *The Value of Comparison*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.