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AAR

RESPONSES
AND REJOINDERS

Response to Peter Ochs’ “Comparative Religious Traditions”

Peter Ochs proposes a clever compromise to reconcile the conventional opposition of theology to comparison altogether with the conventional commitment of religious studies to comparison unbounded. He proposes that comparison be undertaken, but only between religions that have either sought to compare themselves with each other or may yet do so. As commendable as Ochs’ effort is, I think that comparison even between religions that are unaware of each other is wholly proper. The theological objections that Ochs strives to meet are, for me, unwarranted.

PETER OCHS CONTENTS THAT AT the heart of the “interminable debates” between theology and religious studies lies the opposition of theologians to comparison—better, to the kind of comparison practiced in religious studies. Theologians assume that comparisons in religious studies seek only similarities among religions and ignore differences, impose categories of comparison taken from outside the religions themselves, and explain reductively the similarities found. The procedure is intellectually colonialist. Theologians insist that religions be studied in the ways the religions study themselves. The result has usually been a reluctance to venture beyond one religion to another.

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As a clever way of overcoming this divide, Ochs proposes that only religions that have sought or may yet seek to compare themselves with others be selected. Comparison means dialogue. Seemingly, the groups compared need not have met—as long as the initiative rests with them and not with some third party such as a theorist of religion.

Ochs' own course on "Comparative Religious Traditions" is intended to exemplify proper comparison. The course asks "how each of two traditions characterizes the other" and seeks to "develop a vocabulary for comparison from out of the dialogue." If no dialogue has yet taken place, the options are "either to provide an environment for such a dialogue or to desist from comparison." Ochs' justification for desisting summarizes his overall position: "without a dialogue, what is the reason for comparison?"

While I commend Ochs' attempt to forge comparison, I see considerable reason for comparison without dialogue. For me, the ultimate questions are not *how* adherents see themselves and others but *why*, and not why adherents to religion X see themselves as they do but why adherents to all religions see themselves similarly. To answer both questions, "old-style" comparison is inescapable.

Take Ochs' example of Ghanaian and Korean Methodists. For the old-style comparativist no less than for the newfangled one, the starting point is Methodism as Ghanians and Koreans see it. The two groups constitute informants. Who would disregard what they disclose? How odd it would be if the old-style comparativist, intent on comparing Ghanaian with Korean Methodists, spurned learning from Ghanians and Koreans themselves.

Of course, a comparativist may misconstrue either group. But so may a specialist in either. Specialization offers no more of a safeguard against misconstrual than comparativism does. What counts is that the old-style comparativist *aims* to figure out what makes Ghanaian and Korean Methodists tick as fully as the specialist does. So worried is arch-comparativist J. G. Frazer that comparison before observation will contaminate observation that he 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 1931: 246). If the old-style comparativist were to misconstrue either Ghanaian or Korean Methodism, the comparison would be undone. I therefore refuse to concede that somehow the new comparativist is more attentive to Methodism for Ghanians or Koreans than the old-style one.

The difference between old and new comparativists is not the starting point but the end point. The old-style comparativist seeks to go beyond, not against, the new one to figure out not merely how Ghanians and Koreans construe themselves but also why. To do so, the old-style

comparativist refuses to take for granted that Ghanaian Methodists best know themselves. After all, the old-style comparativist knows not only what Ghanaian and Korean Methodists report but also what Methodists worldwide report and what adherents to religions other than Methodism report as well. More, the old-style comparativist knows what social scientists have discovered over the past hundred and fifty years: the anthropological, sociological, economic, and psychological factors that, unbeknownst to subjects, in fact account considerably for their ideas and practices. Ghanaian and Korean Methodists may turn out to be right about what makes them tick, just as patients may prove right about what is ailing them. But just as the fact that a patient has the ailment hardly makes the patient the authority on it, so the fact that Ghanians and Koreans have their religion hardly makes them the authority on it.

My objection is not that Ochs proceeds from dialogue to comparison but that he makes dialogue prerequisite to comparison. If I want to fathom Ghanaian Methodists, why can I not compare them with any other group I choose? As long as I can identify similarities between Ghanaian Methodists and adherents of religions of whom the Ghanians have never even heard, why dare I not compare them? The fact that the similarities fit other religions as well scarcely means that they thereby cease to fit Ghanaian Methodists. I am therefore not imposing anything alien on Ghanaian Methodists but on the contrary am discovering something about them—something that without comparison I, like the Ghanians themselves, might have missed. Comparativism and social science go hand in hand because the quest for similarities prompts the search for the causes of similarities, which the social sciences provide (Segal 2001).

I am not denying differences between Ghanaian Methodists and others. I am simply interested in the similarities. But if I were interested in differences, I would find them exactly by seeking similarities, for differences begin where similarities end. I am not denying the Ghanians' self-understanding. On the contrary, I am trying to account for it. Comparison and social science enable me to fathom Ghanaian Methodism far more deeply than new comparison, let alone theology, does. If my seeking to decipher others more fully than they decipher themselves is colonialist, I take the term as a commendation.

Ironically, Ochs' appeal to the procedure of pragmatists—looking behind the surface debate to “societal-behavioral crises”—is the kind of approach that I advocate and that he himself seemingly rejects as insufficiently beholden to participants.

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