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Polemical Comparisons in Discourses of Religious Diversity

Conceptual Remarks and Reflexive Perspectives

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ABSTRACT Using comparisons to disparage others is a technique we all know from everyday life. In discourses of religious diversity, such polemical comparisons also play a prominent role in the making and unmaking of inter- and intra-religious boundaries and hierarchies. Linking polemical comparisons to more general methodological questions, this conceptual piece provides an analytical framework for the different case studies to follow. It takes up the call for a "double hermeneutics" in addressing comparing both as historical and everyday practice and scholarly method. By adopting a reflexive perspective, the analysis of polemical comparisons is situated at the interstices between emic and etic perspectives on the religious field. I briefly outline the current state of debate on comparisons in general and in religious studies in particular and situate polemical comparisons within these debates. I then move on to provide a typology of polemical comparisons, proposing some basic terms and perspectives for studying such comparisons in different constellations.

KEYWORDS Comparison, polemics, postcolonial scholarship, comparative religion, history of religion, religious diversity, conceptual history

Introduction

Denigrating and disparaging someone by means of comparison is a technique we are all familiar with from everyday life: "You eat like a pig" or "run like a girl." In public discourse, too, polemical comparisons serve to put opponents beyond the pale and play with scandalisation to gain attention and horrify (and at the same time entertain) the general public.[1] Most promi- [1]

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[1] On the problems of defining "polemics" in historical and trans-cultural perspective, see Steckel (2018). I follow her suggestion to take a pragmatic view, combining an approach sensitive to contemporary semantics with a functional definition; see also n. 25 and 44. Related is the concept of "invective" or "invectivity," which centres on disparagement and humiliation; see Ellerbrock et al. (2017) and Schwerhoff (2020, 11–12) for a definition.

nently, this phenomenon can be observed when references to the Third Reich and National Socialism are instrumentalised for political agendas and provocative *Gegenwartsdiagnosen* (*diagnoses of the present*).[2]

Although counterintuitive at first glance, the phenomenon of polemical comparisons can be linked to the recent reappraisal of comparison in scholarly discourse. Over the last two decades, comparisons have re-surfaced both as a method and a promising subject of study in various disciplines, precisely because they lead beyond the much too simple dichotomies of "Self" and "Other."[3] As William Mitchell has put it: "Comparison, then, is never just finding similarities, identities, or equivalences, nor is it just finding differences. It is the dialectic between similarity and difference, the process of finding differences between things that appear to be similar, and of finding similarities between things that appear to be different…" (Mitchell 1996, 321). Viewed from such an angle, comparisons are intimately linked to processes of categorisation and the negotiation of cultural hierarchies. [2]

Precisely these observations hold true also and especially for "polemical comparisons," that is, comparisons aiming at the denigration and degradation of someone or something. Such comparisons often obtain their polemical edge by explicitly violating usual categories and standards of comparability. They point out similarities in items conventionally understood to be different or compare things commonly deemed incomparable, likening humans to animals, comparing boys to girls, "heathens" to "believers" or—as prominent Reformation-era polemics have it—"Papists" to "Turks" (see, e.g., Kaufmann 2008).[4] [3]

Polemical comparisons are situated at the fringes of what is or used to be 'sayable,' and deliberately so. As they transcend rules and standards of comparison and reinforce them at the same time, they provide insights into the very making of categories and cultural hierarchies. They render visible otherwise implicit expectations and may even contribute to the construction of the very taboos or prohibitions they ostentatiously attempt to break (Webber 2011, 6).[5] [4]

This special issue sets out to explore polemical comparisons in discourses of religious diversity. In such discourses, comparing plays an important role: in relating different religious groups to each other but also in negotiating hierarchies and differences within these groups and in demarcating their very boundaries. Often drawing on distinctions such as pu- [5]

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[2] For insightful studies of such comparisons see Webber (2011) and Weinert (2018). For an ongoing debate, see, e.g., Birte Förster's poignant statements in "1933 und das Erstarken der AfD: Was lehrt uns die Weimarer Republik? Birte Förster im Gespräch mit René Aguigah" (interview Deutschlandfunk, Diskurs, 22.12.2019, https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/1933-und-das-erstarken-der-afd-was-lehrt-uns-die-weimarer.4000.de.html, accessed April 6, 2020). For "illicit" or "illegitimate comparisons" in general see Lutz, Missfelder, and Renz (2006).

[3] See, amongst many others, Patton and Ray (2000b, esp. 17–19), Felski and Friedman (2013a), Epple and Erhart (2015a), and Walker Bynum (2020). This point is also raised in current debates about similarity: "Die kulturtheoretische Bedeutung von Ähnlichkeit zeigt sich dort, wo der Dualismus von Identität und Alterität die Begriffsbildung erschwert… Ähnlichkeiten nicht nur zu erkennen, sondern auch plausibel und überzeugend zu beschreiben, wird für kulturtheoretische Reflexionen im Zeitalter des 'Post-Postkolonialismus' unabdingbar sein" ("The significance of similarity in cultural theory becomes evident where the dualism of identity and alterity impedes conceptualization… In the age of 'Post-Postcolonialism,' it will be indispensable for all reflections within cultural theory to not only recognise similarities but also to describe them in a plausible and convincing manner."); Kimmich (2017, 140–41). See also Bhatti et al. (2011, 235): "Gibt es statt eines Denkens in Differenzen auch einen Bereich des 'Sowohl als Auch'…?" ("Is there also space to think in terms of 'both/and' instead of 'either/or'?").

[4] Cavarzere posits a defamiliarising function of such "intolerant comparisons" (as he calls them), especially in the early Reformation (2015, 387–88, 406). For further references and the genealogy of such comparisons, see Brauner and Steckel (2020).

[5] Weinert emphasises that violating rules of "political correctness" by advancing a "Nazi comparison" frequently aims at exposing a violation of norms in the first place (Weinert 2018, 15).

rity/impurity and human/non-human, polemical comparisons are linked to basic categories in ordering the social world.[6]

Given the double role of comparison as a mundane, everyday activity as well as a scholarly method, its study calls for a reflexive perspective or a "double hermeneutics."[7] In religious studies, comparative thinking and the effects of comparative practices have been subjects of intense debate for several decades now. In particular, the very emergence of comparative religion as a field of study has been linked to debates about the notion of "religion" itself.[8] More recently, the debate has advanced to envisaging scholarly comparative practices beyond postcolonial and postmodern critique, not least through a serious engagement with the methodology of comparison.[9] Some scholars, albeit in different contexts, have even suggested that such a new reflexive "comparatism" may lead to "post-postmodern" or "post-postcolonial" approaches.[10] [6]

Taking up this call for a reflexive perspective on comparison, the present special issue also uses the study of polemical comparisons to address the legacy of comparing in religious studies and the history of religion, not least regarding its inherent Occidentalism.[11] It juxtaposes non-modern and non-Western case studies and includes contributions from ancient, medieval, and early modern history as well as Jewish, Islamic, and Buddhist studies, ranging from late Antiquity to the nineteenth century. By combining different case studies and a *longue durée* perspective, we thus embark on a comparative venture ourselves. Yet we do so in the sense of the entangled comparing of "fragments," as Peter van der Veer has put it, rather than in terms of discrete units such as societies or civilisations (see van der Veer 2016, 9–11 and 25– [7]

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[6] To give just one example, see Freidenreich (2011) for an illuminating study on the role of food in the processes of in- and exclusion in Christian, Muslim, and Jewish discourse, and Freidenreich (2018) for a concise reflection on the role of comparison both in the discourses examined and as a methodological tool.

[7] Heintz (2016, 306) points to the relationship between the methodologically controlled comparisons of the observers and comparisons of the observed and to the necessity of reflecting this relationship in terms of a "double hermeneutics" of comparing. In a similar vein, Smith calls for "a double contextualization" of both the examples studied and the "reception-history" these examples passed through in the "second-order scholarly tradition" (2000, 239). See also van der Veer (2016, 29): "Comparison is thus not a relatively simple juxtaposition of two or more different societies but a complex reflection on the network of concepts that underlie our study of society as well as the formation of those societies themselves. It is always a double act of reflection."

[8] In religious studies, the debate about comparison is, as Stausberg (2011, 21–22) argues, "part of a renegotiation of the identity and the legacy of the discipline." Amongst others, this is exemplified by Masuzawa's monograph on "The Invention of World Religions" (2005) and the controversial discussion that followed its publication. According to Masuzawa, the formation of the discourse on world religions is a prime example of how comparing, othering, and the naturalisation of highly selective classifications are intertwined. For different reactions to her contribution, see the special issue of *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 20,2 (*Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 2008).

[9] See, for instance, Holdrege (2000, 2018) and Freiberger (2018, 2019). Positioning his work beyond postmodernist and postcolonial critiques, Freiberger (2019, 196) asserts that these critiques "have helped to sharpen our methodological awareness, but they do not have the potential to call comparison into question in a fundamental way." He calls for a "serious, comprehensive, and productive debate on the methodology of comparison" which he considers long overdue (2018, 12).

[10] See n. 21 and 22.

[11] The reflexive approach we take here thus relates to Krech's plea to consider the interferences between object-language and academic meta-language, approaching the religious field from the perspective of both boundary work and analytical conceptualisation: "…scientific comparison should be related to religious comparison […] and this is the reason why I suggest starting comparative research with a focus on the forms of religious contact in which different religious entities observe each other as an inner-religious way of comparison" (2015, 42).

27).[12] This venture operates less through explicit comparative methodology on the level of the respective individual contributions; rather, a "comparative space" emerges on the level of the special issue as a whole, with the common interest in a certain problem, a shared 'toolbox,' and a common set of questions as connecting features.[13] These lines of inquiry pursued by the different case studies will be introduced here.

In the following, I will briefly review the current state of debate on comparisons in general and in the history of religion and religious studies in particular. These sections seek to point out broader developments and highlight connections between different disciplinary discussions, without making any claim of completeness. Situating polemical comparisons within the ongoing conversation about comparison in general, I will discuss how their study can contribute to our better understanding of comparison and religion, respectively. I will then proceed to provide a short typology of polemical comparisons. The aim here is to propose some basic terms and perspectives for studying comparisons in different constellations rather than to establish a strict and exclusive definition. As the examples given stem from my own research experience, they are mainly taken from the context of Christian polemics. Although I am aware of the possible normative implications, I would like to emphasise that these examples serve to illustrate more general points, not as models themselves.[14] [8]

Linking polemical comparisons to more general methodological questions, this introductory chapter provides an analytical framework for the different case studies to follow. The overall introduction to the special issue, to be published upon completion of the stacked publication, offers an overview of the articles and some reflections on the "comparative space" which emerges from the assembled case studies. [9]

Debating Comparison across the Disciplines

In scholarly debates, comparisons sometimes also feature as a means of polemics but, above all, they have become a prominent *subject of polemics* themselves. Their controversial nature is inextricably connected to their earlier fame as the scientific method *par excellence*: since the eighteenth century, comparison has played a central role in the formation and self-understanding of the modern sciences (see e.g. Eggers 2011; Richter 2000). The age of modernity has even been described as the *Zeitalter der Vergleichung*, the "age of comparing" (Nietzsche 1954, 464–65).[15] In a slightly different yet related way, comparison has been hailed as the very method ("Königsweg") to establish objectivity and truth in the social science turn in [10] the humanities after the Second World War.[16] More recently, a renewed debate on comparison has been brought about by the ascent of discourses of globalisation and global history.[17]

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[12] Van der Veer (2016, 27) stresses that "[t]he move from fragment to larger insight is a conceptual and theoretical one and not a form of generalization. It does not come from mere observation but is theory-laden."

[13] The idea of comparing problems or constellations instead of closed units has been a pertinent feature of the more recent attempts at reviving comparison as scholarly method. See e.g. Walker Bynum (2014); Höfert (2008) and n. 20 below.

[14] See Masuzawa (2005, 23) on the influential albeit often implicit assumption of Christianity being "uniquely universal." See also Mignolo (2013, 104): "Overall, the major implicit motivation behind comparative methodology […] was to consolidate Europe, in the line of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment as the epistemic center of the world."

[15] On the longer history of comparison and critique, see Grave (2015, 134–39), Yengoyan (2006), and Freiberger (2019, ch. 2). Candea (2019, 14–15) emphasises the continuity of comparison's critique in anthropology, often forgotten in favour of claims to innovation.

However, comparison has a much longer history and has equally been accompanied by critical reflection from early on. For example, as Anthony Grafton has recently reminded us, both the scholarly usage of comparison and its critique reaches back to well beyond the Enlightenment and even well beyond the fifteenth-century humanists studied by Grafton himself (2018, esp. 18–21; see also Miller 2001b). [11]

The last decades seem to mark a special moment in this long history of comparison and critique: not only have critical voices grown in number, the debate has also taken on a more fundamental character. Most importantly, postcolonial scholarship has set out to reveal the power politics and epistemic violence behind the seemingly neutral act of comparing. Here, the comparative method serves as a paradigm to call out the structural Eurocentrism inherent in the very epistemology of modern science and scholarship (see e.g. Spivak 2009; Mignolo 2013).[18] The debate about comparison thus mirrors, one could argue, the dialectics of the Enlightenment itself. [12]

This fundamental critique presents a serious challenge for those fields and disciplines which have traditionally founded their identities on comparative methods, namely religious studies and comparative religion, anthropology, and comparative literature. In response, these fields have also produced some of the most elaborate reasonings on both the dangers and the value of comparison.[19] However, the debate is not limited to these disciplines but is genuinely a transdisciplinary one, with similar issues surfacing in history, the social sciences, law, and several other fields. [13]

Still, comparison has survived—despite numerous calls to do away with it. What is more, it has not only survived as an inevitable everyday activity but has also been reinvigorated as a scholarly practice. This new "comparatism" does not use comparison as a method for classificatory work but, as Natalie Melas and others have emphasised, is instead interested in "the comparative as a space or a transversal relationality" (Melas 2013, 653).[20] Interestingly, the practice of comparing has gained quite a prominent place in more recent attempts to rethink possibilities for decentering and provincialising epistemologies, developed precisely from postcolonial and poststructuralist viewpoints.[21] For some, it even promises to lead to [14]

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[16] For influential pleas for comparative history, see Kaelble (1999) and Tilly (1984); for a comment taking up the more recent challenges of *histoire croisée* and *entangled history*, see Kocka (2003). In the German context, the comparative method is often connected to the so-called *Bielefelder Schule*, which advocated a "Historische Sozialwissenschaft" ("Historical Social Sciences") against a more traditional political history still dominant in the field during the 1960s and 1970s. For historicising assessments and reflections on the respective methodologies, see Welskopp (1995) and the contributions in Arndt, Häberlen, and Reinecke (2011).

[17] For an overview of the current state of the debate, see Parthasarathi (2013); see also Osterhammel (2011, esp. ch. 1 and 2), Davis (2011), and Lieberman (2003–2009) for an intriguing recent example of doing comparative global history.

[18] For an overview of the more recent debate, see also Felski and Friedman (2013b).

[19] Due to the great abundance of literature on the subject, only a few select titles can be mentioned here, with the selection bias all mine: For religious studies, see Smith (1990). Bubloz (2006, 10–14) has emphasised different national traditions within religious studies discourse. For anthropology, see e.g. van der Veer (2016) and Candea (2019). For historiography in general and the *Bielefelder Schule* in particular, see Kocka (2003) and Welskopp (1995).

[20] See also van der Veer (2016) for a similar argument.

[21] This debate feeds into many different contexts and can be traced in different fields. For some of the more recent and comprehensive contributions, see Patton and Ray (2000a); Felski and Friedman (2013a); Epple and Erhart (2015b); Bhatti and Kimmich (2015); Kimmich (2017); Gagné, Goldhill, and Lloyd (2018); Freiberger (2019).

"post-postmodern" or "post-postcolonial" approaches (Holdrege 2000, 87, 2018, 2; Kimmich 2017, 140–41). Comparing, as the argument goes, can lend itself to the reflexive and relational turn both in ontology and epistemology, devising an "ethics of comparison" and implementing a "politics of recognition."[22]

Both the critique and re-evaluation of comparing are concerned with the interplay between power and knowledge. The dialectical relationship between power and knowledge is, as Gayatri Spivak, Walter Mignolo, William Mitchell, and others have stressed, central to all acts of comparing (Mitchell 1996; Spivak 2009; Mignolo 2013). However, it can encompass affirmative and critical, oppressive and emancipatory dimensions—and this is probably also what has contributed to the survival of comparison.[23] In one of the most insightful contributions to the debate, Matei Candea has suggested that "good comparisons tend to give us more than we aimed for." He proposes: "Whatever your ends might be, craft comparisons which are robust and intricate enough to *object* to them…" Good comparisons, according to Candea, are "Comparisons that Resist"—not least their authors' aims and objectives (Candea 2019, 15 and 353, capitalization in original, CB). [15]

The study of polemical comparisons, we argue, can contribute to this ongoing debate in two main respects: *Firstly*, a more comprehensive analysis of the dialectics of knowledge and power in comparing also necessitates a more comprehensive typology of comparisons. So far, the debate about comparisons has mainly focused on scientific methods and scholarly practices or on reflexive usages of comparison, as lately suggested under the heading of "comparatism."[24] Hence, studying polemical comparisons may serve as a counterbalancing perspective: as they are often set in more mundane but above all very diverse contexts, including such comparisons in the analysis can further our understanding of the *various* ways in which comparing relates to orders of knowledge and practices of categorisation. This, however, does not mean that polemical comparisons do not occur in scholarly discourses—on the contrary, scholarly polemics is a phenomenon in its own right, not least pointing to the shifting meanings of "polemics" in the transition from early modern to modern times.[25] [16]

Secondly, a focus on polemical comparisons addresses questions of social function and seeks to explore specific communicative constellations rather than tracing assumptions of anthropological essentials or identifying universal patterns. Such a focus, we hope, helps to create a "comparative space" beyond the tradition of modern Western scholarship which has dominated much of the respective debates so far. [17]

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[22] On the shift from an "ontology of essence" to a "relational ontology," see Mignolo (2013, esp. 112–117), next to Melas (2013). A connection between comparison and the "politics of recognition" is pointed out prominently by Radhakrishnan (2013, 21–22 and 32), who asserts that postcolonial comparison might open up "an affirmative potential for fusion and hybridity." In a similar vein, Bruce Lincoln (2018) calls for "weak comparisons" in religious studies, in contrast to the traditional "grand" ones. He defines "weak comparisons" with reference to the small number of *comparata* they involve and their balanced attention to both similarities and differences, and to the respective contexts. Lincoln, too, calls for an ethical attitude, granting "equal dignity and intelligence to all parties considered" (2018, 26–27). See also Patton/Ray (2000b, esp. 14–15 and 17–18) and van der Veer (2016, 47–48).

[23] See the contributions in New Literary History 40 (2009), above all Spivak (2009) and Radhakrishnan (2013).

[24] See Gagné (2018, 1): "Comparatism is reflexive comparison. All societies make comparisons; but comparatism includes a reflection on the process of comparison, a recognition of the ordering of knowledge that comparison entails." See Grave (2015, 135) on the dominance of scientific or scholarly comparisons.

[25] Besides Steckel (2018), see above all Bremer and Spoerhase (2011). Indeed, the opposition of "polemics" and "scientific" or "scholarly methods" is a comparatively recent historical phenomenon. In theology, in particular, "polemics" was part and parcel of the discipline well into the earlier twentieth century; see e.g. Gierl (1997). On polemics in the religious field in general, see Hettema and van der Kooij (2004).

To put it bluntly: so far and for good reason, scholarship has mostly sought to reveal the intricate power effects of knowledge practices. Given the dialectical relationship between knowledge and power, however, we suggest integrating the knowledge effects of power politics into the picture in order to provide a more comprehensive account. [18]

History of Religion, Discourses of Religious Diversity, and Practices of Comparison

In the field of religion and religious studies, comparisons surface both as a *tool* and as a *subject* of polemics. Indeed, the two dimensions have become intertwined in the field's ongoing debates about comparison, adding yet another layer to the complicated relationship between polemics and comparison. Just as in other disciplines decisively shaped by comparative methods, a substantial body of literature about the methodology of comparison in general has been produced, in this case with a particular focus on comparative religion.[26] The few existing studies that address polemical comparisons as a subject of study, albeit mostly in passing only, have emerged from this context.[27] They are part of ongoing attempts to assess the genealogy of the field in more complex, non-teleological ways. Such genealogies set out to challenge modern universalist notions of religion, questioning the persistent nexus between plurality and secularisation, growth of knowledge, and tolerance (Harrison 1990; Sheehan 2006; Masuzawa 2005; Mulsow 2012; Nongbri 2013; see also Levitin 2012). [19]

In this context, Peter Harrison and others have pointed out that the earliest comparative treatments of religions were inherently polemical ones, often connecting their appearance to the concurrent events of the Reformation and the "discovery" of the "New World" in particular. What emerges is a story about the challenges presented by religious diversity and of how constellations of diversity within and outside of Christianity became linked to each other after 1500.[28] Comparisons, as the story suggests, helped contain these challenges and bring about a new model of conceptualising "religions" in the plural—paving the way to secularisation through the backdoor, so to speak.[29] Interestingly, even when a critique of the comparative method is intended, polemical comparisons have mostly been relegated to the realm of an unsavoury 'pre-history.' This hints at an underlying normative concept of more 'neutral' scholarly and knowledge-oriented comparing. [20]

These studies in genealogy, which aim, in fact, at a genealogical critique, pertain to a broader move towards decolonising the discipline.[30] For a long time, this decolonising ven- [21]

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[26] To name just a few titles in chronological order: Borgeaud (1986); Smith (1990); Asad (1993, esp. Introduction and ch. 1); Patton and Ray (2000a); Mancini (2007); Bergunder (2016). For an overview, see Stausberg (2011).

[27] See above all Harrison (1990, 9): "Controversy and apologetic thus led to the comparison of 'religions', which in turn became the discipline of comparative religion. But more importantly, the rhetorical technique of paganopapism eroded the privileged status of Christian religion, for the continual assertion of fancied parallels between this and that creed of Christianity and types of heathenism led in time to the view that all forms of Christianity and types of heathenism had something in common with the other religions…" (see also Nongbri 2013, 92–94). There are, at least in the context of the Christian tradition, a few historical studies, too (see e.g. Cavarzere 2015; Kaufmann 2008; Brauner and Steckel 2020 for further references).

[28] Such is the underlying narrative in Harrison (1990, 7–8) and Bossy (1982) but also in some more recent accounts, e.g. Barbù (2016, 540).

[29] See e.g. Strousma (2010, esp. 1–3), with the statement: "This new knowledge of the diverse religions practiced around the world entailed the urgent need to redefine religion as a universal phenomenon, with a strong emphasis on ritual, rather than on beliefs" (3).

[30] An earlier though somewhat florid description can be found in Borgeaud (1986, 65): "Il y a donc, au départ de la destinée académique de notre objet, un léger parfum de laïcité, d'anticléricalisme parfois… discipline

ture has sought—and rightly so—to expose how the discipline's presumed universalism disguises a parochial Eurocentrism (Masuzawa 2005). However, in doing so, the focus remains above all on the European/Christian discourse and equips it with a heavy modernist bias: that is, 'European'/ 'Christian'/ 'the "West" ' once more become synonymous with modernity.[31] To be sure, stories like the above one linking comparison to the "discovery" of religious diversity within and beyond Christianity around 1500 are certainly no simple Whiggish narratives. Rather, they come with a refined critical attitude towards grand modernisation narratives tying secularisation to the growth of tolerance. Still, more often than not, these stories build on an opposition of the "Middle Ages," defined by the One universal and unified Church, and an "Early Modernity" with a diversified and diversifying religious landscape.[32] Such an opposition is, once again, a stock element of Western modernisation narratives that medievalists have proven wrong in manifold ways—with regard to inter-religious contacts but also to the diversity within Christianity, even within the Latin Church (Weltecke 2015; Steckel forthcoming; Pietsch and Steckel 2018; Jaspert 2013).

The potential danger of reifying that which one seeks to deconstruct and similar paradoxical effects not only present a problem for religious studies but also for postmodern and postcolonial debates in general. In this vein, some scholars have called for a critique not only of Orientalism and medievalism but also of Occidentalism (see e.g. Carrier 1995; Symes 2011; Asad 1993, 16–24)—and, indeed, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has so convincingly argued, we cannot have the one without the other, as the very mode of historical thinking itself needs to be questioned (Chakrabarty 2000, 2011). Entanglements with temporalities and other basic structures of historical thinking become most obvious in those polemical comparisons that draw on the well-known figure of temporalising difference (see Fabian 1983; Davis 2008).[33] Playing, more or less skilfully, the tune of medievalisation/orientalisation, this figure roams from the sinister realms of splatter movies (just think of the classic *Pulp Fiction* line "I'mma get medieval on ur ass") to the lofty heights of purportedly sophisticated broadsheet editori- [22]

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non confessionelle à vocation comparatiste, l'histoire des religions est aujourd'hui encore hantée par les fantômes qui circulèrent à sa naissance." ("Since the very beginning of our subject's academic fate, there is a faint scent of laicism, sometimes even of anticlericalism… being a non-confessional discipline with a comparatist vocation, the history of religions is still haunted today by the same ghosts which were around at its birth.")

[31] For a thought-provoking argument about the shifting temporal politics in the age of global modernity, see McClure (2015).

[32] For an example of the continuance of this simplistic dichotomy, see the otherwise inspiring study by Barbu (2016). After an extensive description of early Christian discourse of religious diversity, he leaps forward straight to the onset of Early Modernity around 1500: "The Christian discourse of idolatry was rekindled at the beginning of the early modern era, in the wake of the discoveries and the sudden (even brutal) renewed awareness of the world's religious diversity – both inside and outside the borders of Western Christendom" (Barbu 2016, 550). With the exception of two short quotations from Aquinas and Maimonides, the medieval period is missing, reduced to a "scholastic framework that had until then [that is, the onset of early Modernity; CB] defined the Western assessment of religion…" (Barbu 2016, 540). For a similar temporal gap and shortcut from late Antiquity to humanism, see Nongbri (2013, esp. ch. 5 and 6, on the question of a caesura pp. 85-86). In Nongbri's monograph, too, we find several shortcuts from late Antiquity to the fifteenth century, e.g. from Augustine to the Italian humanist Ficino (2013, 86–88). His remarks on conceptual history, though, include at least three medieval references, once more with Aquinas featuring prominently among them (2013, 32–33).

[33] Some scholars, though, have also hinted at possible appropriations of such figures from postcolonial perspectives. See, above all, Altschul and Davis (Altschul and Davis 2009, 12): "…the 'medieval' occupies a fraught, paradoxical role in postcolonial politics, and the concept of the Middle Ages is deeply embedded in the rhetoric of post-independence national struggles, with continuing repercussions today." Along similar lines, McClure (2015, 616) has brought up the idea of "multiple Middle Ages."

als.[34] In such, if you like, "chrono-polemical" comparisons, religion once more plays a central role; oftentimes, it functions as a marker of the "medieval" or the "pre-modern" as such (see e.g. Symes 2011, 719; Bauer 2019).[35]

In order to take the critique of Eurocentrism one step further, it seems highly important to move beyond the modern 'West'/Christianity and deviate from the usual chronology. Hence, this issue seeks out contexts of comparison beyond the tradition of modern science and scholarly discourses. The case studies assembled here are drawn from Christian and Islamic, Jewish and Buddhist history and range from late Antiquity to the nineteenth century. The broad and generally favourable response to our call for papers and the invitation to a conference in Bielefeld in 2018 may indeed serve as evidence for the efficacy of this venture for inter- and transdisciplinary exchange.[36] At the same time, the wider scope opened up here already provides a first challenge to Eurocentric periodisation—the watershed of 1492/1517, to take up only the most prominent date—cannot be presupposed as a caesura in Islamic, Ethiopian, or Buddhist history. In order to gain a de-centred or more "globalised" view, we also need to rethink usual chronologies and models of periodisation.[37] [23]

There are three important lines of inquiry with which the analysis of polemical comparison can contribute to the general debate on the history of religion and religious diversity. Firstly, as comparisons pertain to the interplay of similarities and differences, they rather naturally lend themselves to the study of diversity. Illuminating the diversity of distinctions and identities and their very making, this helps to broaden the focus beyond dyadic encounters, the study of which has hitherto dominated much of the literature on interreligious and cross-cultural contact (see Steckel 2018, 3–4). The study of polemical encounters is not set apart from the study of entanglements—on the contrary, entanglements also stem from and feed into polemics, and at least one article in this issue makes a case for what one may call 'entangled polemics.' [24]

Secondly, the study of polemical comparisons can serve as a valuable tool when examining the genealogy of "religion" beyond the paradigm of *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history) and, at least in part, beyond the usual focus on scholarly discourse in a narrow sense.[38] As comparisons are tied both to explicit norms and implicit rules of categorisation, they allow us to gain insights into negotiations of "the religious" beyond explicit concepts and definitions. They [25] help us explore broader vocabularies used to describe religious phenomena, also including colloquial terms and figures of speech. By considering the descriptive categories employed to compare persons, practices, and beliefs, one can assess "operative" understandings of religion, based on implicit categories of similarity rather than explicit sophisticated theories.

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[34] On "temporalising" comparisons in general and their ambivalent usage in Enlightenment discourse and beyond, see Steinmetz (2015, 120–28). For a most recent example of such "chrono-polemical" comparison, one can point to an editorial on the COVID-19 crisis featured on the very title page of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: Reinhard Müller, Kampf gegen das Coronavirus: Nicht zurück ins Mittelalter, in: FAZ, 31.03.2020, https://www.faz.net/einspruch/kampf-gegen-das-coronavirus-tracking-ist-grundsaetzlich-erlaubt-16705081.html, accessed April 8, 2020. Marius Meinhof has collected several examples of orientalising discourse pertaining to this crisis, singling out what he calls "colonial temporality"; see Marius Meinhof, Othering the Virus, 21.03.2020, https://discoversociety.org/2020/03/21/othering-the-virus/, accessed April 8, 2020.

[35] Scheer (2017, 181–82 and 184–187) points out that such temporalising usages can also work with regard to concepts of "culture."

[36] See the conference report by Andra Alexiu and Sita Steckel, Behaving Like Heathens? Polemical Comparisons and Discourses of Religious Diversity across the Cultures, 29.11.2018–01.12.2018, Bielefeld, in: H-Soz-Kult, 22.05.2019, https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-8283, accessed April 9, 2020.

[37] See e.g. Davis and Puett (2015), Strathern (2018), and the contributions in Maissen, Mittler, and Monnet (2019), in particular the essay by Sanjay Subrahamanyam, Region, Nation, World: Remarks on Scale and the Problem of Periodisation (2019). For a short overview of new and old models of periodisation in current global history debates, see Osterhammel (2006) and Brauner (2019).

[38] In the context of historicising religion, the problems of *Begriffsgeschichte* have been outlined from different viewpoints and by scholars as different as Ernst Feil (1986, esp. 161-162, 199 and 274–275), Peter Biller (1985), Christine Caldwell Ames (2012), and Dorothea Weltecke (2015).

Taking up an interreligious and cross-cultural perspective, it actually becomes necessary for us to move beyond a *Begriffsgeschichte* approach in the strict sense and employ a more open understanding of a history of concepts. Such a history of concepts attentive to translations and the creative potential of "misunderstandings" can help further the study of entanglements and global connections.[39] Remarkably, it is from the context of religious polemics that early hints at an entangled conceptual history emerge: Reinhold Glei, Stefan Reichmuth, and Matthias Tischler, for instance, have suggested that the ascent of the term *lex* in descriptions of both Christian orders and non-Christian beliefs can be connected to its prominent usage in the *Corpus Toletanum* as a translation of the Arabic term *din* (see Glei and Reichmuth 2012; Tischler 2014; Wiegers 2013, 485–88).[40] [26]

Thirdly, the study of polemical comparisons can also contribute to the dismantling of longstanding narratives still influential in the field, that is, above all, of secularisation narratives with their much criticised yet persistent connection between knowledge and tolerance (see e.g. Hunter 2017; Pohlig et al. 2008; Gabriel, Gärtner, and Pollack 2014). By taking up a praxeological perspective, we can not only reappraise the chronology and "content" of change but also reconsider the very mode of change itself. Given their peculiar positionality, polemical comparisons draw attention to unintended consequences and dynamics of escalation but also to 'normalising' effects of repeated breaches of norms and standards. [27]

The Armoury of Comparison: Toolbox and Typology

As in the case of religion and other complex phenomena, we seem to know a polemical comparison when we see it, but rarely care to (or are able to) give a definition in a strict sense. Indeed, terminological rigour seems rather out of place in accounting for a phenomenon so intimately connected to the contestation of categories and cultural hierarchies and thus tied to the dynamics of specific communicative situations. This section outlines different ways in which comparison can work as a *tool of polemics and attain disparaging functions*. Do such comparisons always stress unexpected similarities, as some prominent examples would suggest, or can they also operate through the attestation of difference? Are certain comparisons polemical *per se* or does their function change depending on the context they are used in? [28]

For a tentative response and first typology, it is necessary to take a look at the workings of comparison in general. We tend to think about comparisons mostly in terms of their 'outcome,' that is, the assertion of differences and/or similarities between at least two elements (*comparata*). However, as praxeological approaches have convincingly shown, we also need to study the very act of comparing itself (esp. Grave 2015). This becomes all the more obvious when dealing with polemical comparisons, set to disparage and denigrate someone or something. [29]

Take the simple question of what to compare: the very choice of *comparata* is meaning- [30]

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[39] For some suggestions of how to do *Begriffsgeschichte,* or *conceptual history*, in a global history framework, see Pernau and Sachsenmeier (2016); see also Fleisch and Stephens (2018). For some reflection on both historical and scholarly approaches towards "misunderstandings," see Brauner (2017a).

[40] See also Krech (2015, 63–68) for methodological reflections on the comparative semantics of the religious field.

ful itself—though often hardly visible and performed as a matter of course. But it is precisely the routinisation of choice and the invisibility of selectiveness that contributes to the reifying effects of comparing. For instance, when "global comparisons" ("world rankings" etc.) nearly inevitably seem to require inter-national comparisons and hence nation-states as *comparata*, such comparing implicitly reinforces methodological nationalism.[41] Similarly, Monique Scheer has argued that essentialising notions of "culture" and "religion" can be reinforced through comparisons, especially if these draw on silent assumptions rather than on explicitly defined frameworks (Scheer 2017, 188–89).

In the case of polemical comparisons, the choice of *comparata* can even be constitutive of their respective polemical edge in the first place.[42] Here, choosing *comparata* is no matter of course but rather violates usual routines of comparing, bringing together elements which are not usually related to each other. All too familiar examples of this type of polemical comparison can be identified: from the scandalising 'Nazi comparison' to the vast variety of human/animal comparisons that are thriving till this very day, not least in newspaper caricatures. These polemics work through a dialectical relation to the 'usual' rules and standards of comparison. This is particularly evident when they are linked to explicit statements of incomparability, outright prohibitions of comparing, or assumptions of singularity.[43] [31]

In most cases, however, an 'unusual' choice of *comparata* is not enough to make a polemical comparison. To take up the *locus classicus*: it has oftentimes been asserted that, contrary to the old saying, oranges can indeed be compared to apples—indeed, if we mean to produce "new and destabilizing knowledges," R. Radhakrishnan (2013, 16) asserts, "then apples and oranges do need to be compared, audaciously and precariously."[44] Still, we would hardly qualify such fruit comparisons, as audacious as they might be, as polemical *per se*—unless they were set to disparage the value of either apples or oranges (or both). [32]

The function of disparagement is the most decisive characteristic of polemical comparisons. Disparagement and denigration are social actions (even beyond the author's intention), tied to communicative settings and contexts and varying in time and space. Polemical comparisons thus cannot be analysed in isolation; their context and situatedness is decisive in determining their potential polemical character in the first place. [33]

Besides, comparative polemics can also develop routines and rules of their own—just like in the examples given in the introduction, which represent widespread techniques of disparagement. There is inevitable tension between such routines of polemics and 'official' or 'legitimate' discourse, but at the same time they bring about a certain institutionalisation and [34] normalisation, although still located at the boundaries of what is 'sayable.'[45] Yet inflationary usage of certain figures can gradually diminish their polemical edge. Given that polemics thrive on raising attention through the unexpected or unusual, the emergence of polemical *topoi* is intrinsically and somewhat paradoxically connected to patterns of escalation. Such a dynamic seems to have been at work, for example, when an eighteenth-century polemicist deliberately chose to compare Calvinist theology to human sacrifice in Aztec Mexico instead of adding yet another comparison between Calvinists and the "Turks" to the time-honoured tradition of Calvinoturcism, as I have argued elsewhere (Brauner and Steckel 2020, 80–81).

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[41] For the connection between methodological nationalism and comparison, see e.g. Albert et al. (2019, e.g. 21–22 and 26–27), and Marjanen (2009). For the complex yet mostly invisible operation of selecting *comparata* and *tertia* in scholarly contexts, see Freiberger (2018, 8–9).

[42] See also Steckel (2018, 12–13), who discusses this phenomenon as a basic form of polemics under the heading of "disparaging categorization."

[43] For an example of such a case, see below and the more extensive discussion in Brauner (2017b, 222–23 and 215). Steinmetz (2015, 89) has pointed out that all statements of incomparability bear a fundamentally paradoxical character as they logically presuppose at least an attempt at comparing in the first place in order to establish incomparability.

[44] Not least, such proverbial instances of comparing presumably incomparable things feature prominently in several scholarly titles: See Lincoln (2018) and Lutz, Missfelder, and Renz (2006). Whereas Lincoln (2018, ch. 1) uses an etymological approach to demonstrate the many-faceted meanings of "fruit" as an overarching category, the latter draw attention to the aesthetic license claimed, for instance, by literature and poetry in employing "illicit" or "illegitimate" comparisons (2018, 9).

Although context is decisive, a closer look at the elements and structures of polemical comparisons is nonetheless important. Next to the *comparata*, comparisons operate through *tertia comparationis*, that is, the aspects or "criterions" employed to compare certain elements and detect similarities and/or differences between them. The choice of such *tertia* also plays an important role in constituting polemical comparisons. When "heathens" and "true believers" are compared to each other in terms of piety, for instance, a category is applied to a group usually situated far beyond the realm of piety and knowledge of the true God. In this vein, a French missionary in the early eighteenth century commented on African religious practices with a Christian readership in mind: "They maintain a belief in these fetishes which is not common and a fidelity in observing what they have promised them which ought to put bad Christians to shame" (Loyer 1714, 245).[46] Such comparisons are addressed, above all, to the respective "true believers," that is, usually the religious group the speaker belongs to, in order to admonish them to improve their behaviour (according to the speaker's standards, of course).[47] [35]

A 'steamroller' version of this technique can be identified in statements such as "Calvinists are as bad as Turks" and "pious heathens do better than bad Christians." It is this 'steamroller' version, too, that Ludwig Wittgenstein employs when he writes about a prominent scholar of comparative religion: "Frazer is far more savage [English term in the German original; CB] than the majority of his savages…" (Wittgenstein 2012, 36).[48] In these cases, the *tertium* itself is a normative one to drive home the message and usually directly relates to persons and their (moral or intellectual) qualities—"good"/"bad," "pious"/"sinful," "savage"/"civilised." Following Severin Koster's suggestion to distinguish between an "invective" as direct personal attack and "polemics" as a potentially content-related mode of aggressive speech acts, such comparisons would clearly fall into the "invective" camp.[49] [36]

Nonetheless, even those comparisons limited to a normative *tertium* can lead to implicit concepts and functional understandings of religious practice, for instance, when specific practices of piety are parallelised. Thus, when the missionary mentioned above asserts that the African heathens are more pious than bad Christians, he also provides some detail on how these heathens outperform "lazy" Christians: they would honour their "fétiches" ("fetishes") in a "cult relating to God who is their creator, just in much the same fashion that we ourselves honour [37] the images or relics in the true Religion, beyond comparison" (Loyer 1714, 250).[50] Not only is the paradox of comparing the incomparable made explicit here, once again emphasising the very act of comparing itself; we also gain a short glimpse of a pragmatic or "working" concept of religion beyond the question of truth and also beyond explicit terminology (see Platvoet 2004).

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[45] So far, such 'poetics of slandering' have mostly been discussed with regard to scholarly polemics: see esp. the results of the DFG-Netzwerk "Gelehrte Polemik" as documented in Bremer and Spoerhase (2011, and 2015; particularly the editors' introduction Spoerhase and Bremer 2011; see also Braungart 1992).

[46] Translation by the author; French original: "Ils ont une foi pour ces fétiches qui n'est pas commune, & une exactitude dans l'observance de ce qu'ils leur ont promis qui devroit faire rougir les mauvais Chrétiens."

[47] Some medieval examples of such "admonishing comparisons" are discussed in Brauner and Steckel (2020, 63–66).

[48] Translation by the author; German original: "Frazer ist viel mehr savage, als die meisten seiner savages…".

[49] For a proposal to distinguish between "polemics" (content-related) and "invective" (attack *ad personam*) as complementary modes of communication, see Koster (2011).

At this point, it seems important to clarify the relation between comparability, similarity, and equality. Both in scholarly and popular discourse, "comparing" is frequently mixed up with "likening" or "equating."[51] But comparing, in fact, is about similarities as well as differences. It does presuppose comparability in the *tertia* chosen, but comparability does not necessarily imply "equality" or "equivalence" (or even "identity").[52] Neither comparability nor incomparability should be interpreted in essential terms as an immutable quality; on the contrary, both are socially ascribed and thus also variable with regard to time and context. [38]

The need to distinguish between comparability, similarity, and equality appears particularly clearly in those polemical comparisons that gain their polemical edge less from the choice of *comparata* or *tertia* than the resulting 'outcome,' exposing differences where similarity was to be expected and vice versa. [39]

For an illustration of the 'unexpected' difference type, we can turn to a historical example again: in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Roman Church, and above all the Pope himself, were subject to attacks of visual polemics from various groups. One might think about the *Passional Christi et Antichristi* here, emerging from Cranach's workshop in various editions from 1521 onwards, but also of earlier antithetical depictions of Pope and Christ from Hussite contexts.[53] Such visual polemics achieved their disparaging function by exposing differences where one would or should expect similarity or equivalence (but, of course, not equality or identity!): leafing through the *Passional* or the respective images of the Hussite *Jena Codex*, the beholder discovers that the Pope is not the *vicarius Christi* that he ought to be, but reveals himself as the antitype of Christ, and thus the Antichrist.[54] [40]

In polemical comparisons operating through the exposure of differences, the relation of *comparata* is usually an asymmetrical one: An archetype or model is linked to a copy or imitation – or Christ to his *vicarius* on earth. Thus, this type of polemical comparison is tied not only to comparability and standards of comparison but also to normative expectations of equivalence, with the respective *tertia* serving as criteria for judging the value or appropriateness of the 'copy.' Such asymmetrical forms of comparisons are by no means uncommon but rather represent a standard procedure in valuating, for instance, the quality of goods against certain standards. However, we would hardly think of the classification of an orange as 'fac- [41]

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[50] Translation by author. French original: "…culte relatif à Dieu, qui en est le Createur, comme nous honorons les Images ou les Reliques, sans comparaison, dans la veritable Religion."

[51] To give just one example from a topically relevant context: In his otherwise instructive study about the notion *Lex Mahometi*, Matthias Tischler (2014, 527–28) states that a comparison of Torah, Qu'ran, and the Bible is *per se* nothing less than a theological error ("theologische[r] Irrtum"). In the following and in terms of an explanation of this statement, he himself actually compares the three books, emphasising the differences between them. From this, it clearly emerges that Tischler understands "comparison" as alluding to the establishment of similarities. Although he is by no means alone in applying such a lopsided notion of "comparison," it is remarkable how he bases his statement on a fixed norm of in/comparability.

[52] For a concise analysis of the relation between comparability, identity, and in/commensurability, see Kuhn (1982). See also von Sass (2011).

[53] For an instructive analysis of antithetical motifs and rhetorical traditions in Reformation polemics, see Hoffmann (1978). For the *Passional* and the Hussite *codices*, see e.g. Groll (1990), Dejeumont (2008), and Bartlovà (2018).

[54] In the context of historicising practices of comparison, this example has also been mentioned by Steinmetz (2015, 107–8).

tory seconds' as polemical—hence, once again, the social and communicative context proves to be decisive.

The given examples share one peculiar feature: they do not confront the beholder with the 'outcome' of the comparison but rather make them perform the comparison themselves; being confronted with a highly selective juxtaposition of images, their comparative reading must necessarily result in an observation of difference.[55] As it seemingly allows the beholder to 'see for themselves,' concealing the preceding selection process, such a technique can unfold 'objectifying' effects and authority. It is not limited to visual media but also used as a textual device, for instance in pamphlets and broadsheets such as Reinier Telle's *Tafereel, Begrijpende cortelijck het groot ende merckelijck verschil datter is tusschen de Leere der H. Schriftuere ende der Gereformeerde Kercken aen de eene, ende der Contra-Remonstranten aen d'ander zijde* ("Table briefly demonstrating the great and remarkable difference between the teachings of the Holy Scripture and of the Reformed Church, on the one hand, and those of the Counter-Remonstrants, on the other," 1616). Set in two columns, Telle's *Tafereel* presents excerpts from Scripture and canonical authors of the Calvinist Reformed traditions, on the one hand, and teachings of the Counter-Remonstrants, on the other, thus exposing the latter's deviation from authority and truth. The pamphlet's title already hints at a traditional scholastic genre: the *tabula*, which operates through contrasting quotations of authorities (Telle 1616).[56] [42]

Polemical comparisons can also refer to observations of unexpected similarity, as the example of "running like a girl" demonstrates. Although gender differences are a ubiquitous, seemingly even inevitable element in all kinds of social distinctions, no one would doubt that boys and girls can be compared in terms of certain categories (human beings, young age etc.). Nor is physical activity completely unexpected with either boys or girls—at least today. It would be worth an investigation of its own to what extent polemical comparisons tend to take up those differences and stereotypes which are present and widespread in a certain context but have begun to feel outdated, thus once again placing such comparisons at the fringes of what is 'sayable.' [43]

Thus, polemical comparisons operating on the level of the 'outcome' can work through the attestation of both unexpected similarities and differences. The expectations they draw on are explicit and normative expectations, thus the disparagement in question is, above all, an exposure of alleged deviance. [44]

A specific yet prominent type of polemical comparison not only identifies similarities but seeks to uncover causal or "genetic" connections. In discourses of religious diversity, such genetic comparisons are particularly prominent when questions of heresy and orthodoxy are concerned. It has even been suggested that the "heretic is comparison" (Iricinschi and Zellentin 2008, 19).[57] Heresiological comparisons usually take on a transhistorical character as [45] they link contemporary groups or sets of beliefs to older heresies or even "arch heretics," tracing their origins as far back into the past as possible. Combining heresiological comparisons with popular images of genealogy and kinship, a seventeenth-century broadsheet entitled *Arbor Haereseon*, for example, not only shows the Pope and Muhammad side by side but literally depicts them as growing out of the Devil's back, connected through a long and unbroken line of heresies.[58] The *Arbor Haereseon* thus visualises the very *successio haereticorum*, construed as a counter-image to the *successio apostolica*. As much as earthly decision-making is involved in determining boundaries between heresy and orthodoxy in the first place, as intimately does the very identification of heretical and orthodox positions become connected to such inherently comparative narratives of origin (Steckel 2011).[59] Indeed, heresiological discourses can serve as prime examples of the "inseparable interrelation of the concepts of dynamics and stability," so important to the understanding of religious traditions (see Stünkel 2017).

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[55] For a more thorough discussion of visual practices of comparisons, not least in the formation of art history as a discipline, see the work of the sub-project C01 "Bild-Vergleiche. Formen, Funktionen und Grenzen des Vergleichens von Bildern" in Bielefeld's SFB 1288, led by Johannes Grave and Britta Hochkirchen (https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/sfb1288/projekte/c01.html, accessed May 3, 2020). In this special issue, Alexander Kästner's contribution on Reformation-era invectives will discuss the complex relation between visual and textual polemics in more detail.

[56] Beside this 'broadsheet' edition, Telle also published his contrasting comparisons in a small booklet with the same title (see Knuttel no. 2301 and no. 2301a). On medieval techniques of contrasting quotations and contradictory authorities, see Weijers (2013, esp. 79–82 and 302–304). Weijers (2013, ch. 10) also undertakes an interesting attempt at transcultural comparison between Latin Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and other traditions of scholarly debate and discussion.

[57] See also Cameron (2003) and Berzon (2016). On the transformations of heresiological discourse in medieval and early modern Europe, see Hunter, Laursen, and Nederman (2005), Backus, Büttgen, and Pouderon

As the example of the *Arbor Haereseon* demonstrates, heresiological discourse can inspire renewed discussions of how comparison and identification relate to each other. In this discourse, comparing is set to uncover pre-existing relations and traditions—or even "Old Nick" himself.[60] Hence, heresiological comparisons may be connected to the prominent and rather intricate debate about the presumed transition from analogy to comparison with the ascent of modernity. Not least through the influential writings of Michel Foucault, "pre-modern" (or "pre-classical") comparisons have found themselves confined to a paradigm of "similarity."[61] There is much to be said about this hypothesis and much has been said already. In the context of this short introduction, I will only highlight one general point in response, namely the necessity to distinguish between emic and etic concepts of comparison. From the perspective of late medieval and early modern Europe, it is certainly true that "*Vergleichung*," *comparatio* etc. more often than not aimed at the assertion of similarity and even identity between the *comparata*—thus, it is not by chance that in the given context, comparisons explicitly described as such often operate through models of kinship and sometimes even employ images of genealogy in the literal sense. Still, these findings do not preclude the possibility that "pre-modern" actors did not also discern differences or even both similarities and differences by comparing people and other phenomena.[62] [46]

Altogether, polemical comparisons seem to operate both through the assertion of differ- [47]

(2012), and Mercier and Rosé (2017). Smith (1990, 24–25) has also pointed out that the comparisons in Protestant attacks on "Pagano-Papism" are meant to expose not 'mere' similarity but "persistence and identity."

[58] Anon., Arbor Haereseon, undated (ca. 1560), woodcut, 39.2 x 32.7 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. RP-P-OB-78.838, http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.442616, accessed May 3, 2020. For the late medieval concepts of kinship connected to such visualisations, see Teuscher (2018); on kinship as a cultural and historical phenomenon and practice in general, see Johnson et al. (2013).

[59] See also Schäufele (2006), who discusses the heretical genealogies in the context of overall models of tradition and continuity in medieval church history. He identifies constructions "of negative heretical continuities and genealogies [...], which aim at delegitimizing the present enemy by demonstrating his correspondence with earlier, already condemned heresies from the past" ("negativer, häretischer Kontinuitäten und Genealogien [...], die drauf hinauslaufen, den gegenwärtigen Gegner durch den Nachweis seiner Übereinstimmung mit bereits verurteilten Häresien der Vergangenheit ins Unrecht zu setzen") as a technique of "universalising and orthodox anti-heresy polemics" ("großkirchlichen Ketzerpolemik") (2006, 42).

[60] On this point, see Brauner and Steckel (2020, 69–70 with n107).

[61] See Foucault (1966) for the historical narrative; for a critique of Foucault's narrative, see e.g. Kimmich (2017, 55–62). For a methodological discussion of connected and distant comparisons, see Bloch (1928).

[62] See Steinmetz (2015), who also comments on the problem of translation (esp. 90–91). Within Latin rhetorical traditions, there was a rather elaborate terminology for such figures of speech; for an overview, see Schenk and Krause (2001).

ences and similarities, while also drawing on different ways of conceptualising relations between the *comparata* in question. In a related manner, Caroline Walker Bynum has argued that the study of "dissimilar similarities" at the heart of medieval concepts of likeness can contribute to the re-thinking of scholarly approaches to comparison in general and contemporary ideas of likeness in particular (2020, esp. 42–43, 51 and 56).

Heresiological comparisons can also partake in processes of entanglement, as the contribution of Mónica Colominas Aparicio (2020) shows. She analyses two fifteenth-century Mudejar treatises drawing on both Christian and Jewish polemics and vocabularies of heresy, thereby also opening up an overarching comparative perspective on a highly complex religious situation. Just in line with the reflexive approach proposed here, Aparicio takes the situatedness of the "entangled polemics" she studies as a reminder to raise our awareness of the challenges of translating between different scholarly discourses and traditions.[63] [48]

In the context of heresy, disparagement can have widely diverging consequences for all parties involved. Thus, heresiological comparisons should make us think about the notion of polemics itself and, in a broader sense, the relation between language and violence (see also Schwerhoff 2020, 16–18). Even if the semantic structure of the respective comparisons employed is the same or similar, we need to distinguish between a scholarly treatise against heresy and the actions of an inquisitor (in a Christian context)—as it does make a difference whether or not disparagement results in suffering torture and burning at the stake. Still, scholarly feuds, inquisitorial practices, or "infra-judicial" punishment in the concerned community are certainly connected to each other and may even reinforce each other in turn. Thus, careful attention to the respective social and communicative contexts is necessary here, not least in order also to render transitions from one setting to another visible in the first place. Not least, comparisons or suggestive juxtapositions can serve as a strategy of encoding otherwise 'unsayable' critique without raising the suspicion of heresy or heterodoxy.[64] Henry of Ghent, for instance, compares *lex Mahometi*, *lex Moysi* and *lex Christi* but also aims at contemporary debates within the Latin Church, namely, the struggles between the Papal court and the Mendicant friars, as Sita Steckel has convincingly demonstrated. The connection is achieved by employing a *tertium* unusual in the context of such a three-tiered comparison but central to the ongoing Mendicant Controversy (whether discussion of the *lex* in question is allowed or not), probably building on earlier comparisons between the Pope and Muhammad, however circulating in oral or informal contexts rather than in written form (Steckel 2014, 76–78). [49]

This typology can certainly be refined and expanded; equally, readers may wish for further examples and more historical depth. Since this introduction is intended as a framework for an interdisciplinary discussion, however, it seems appropriate to keep both typology and illustrating examples rather simple. In any case, the preceding sketch already demonstrates how intimately polemical comparisons are tied to orders of knowledge, standards of classification, and norms of (in)comparability. This relationship, however, is a tense one—as the comparisons gain their polemical edge by violating, in however slight a manner and with whatever conservative purpose, these very standards and norms. Drawing on such norms, routines of categorisation, and established regimes of comparability, they dynamise and transcend them [50] at the same time. In this way, they provide insights into the making of such regimes and orders of knowledge.

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[63] For a comparative approach, see Caldwell Ames (2015, esp. 15–27 on the methodological challenges of comparison); see also Shogimen (2020) for an attempt to conceptualise "heresy" as a "religious phenomenon" beyond the Christian tradition. He argues that "heresy serves usefully as a category of analysis to highlight and examine 'religion' in a broad sense, or what Emile Durkheim called 'religious phenomena' " (2020, 3).

[64] Smith (1990, 43–44) also emphasises that by the early twentieth century, the religions of late Antiquity had become "code-words for Roman Catholicism," with some scholars using the disguise of seemingly innocent discussions of chronology and similar matters to attack their confessional opponent.

Setting polemical comparisons in their broad communicative context reinforces precisely this point, as the very structure of polemical exchanges often proves to be dynamical and dynamising: the potentially never-ending interplay between proposition and refutation tends to produce growing bodies of "evidence." Equally, a logic of escalation can contribute to shifts of *comparata.* [51]

Of particular interest are those cases in which a polemical comparison is carried on and sets into motion further acts of comparing beyond its 'original' disparaging function. Thereby, some polemical comparisons can even 'involuntarily' perform what Candea has singled out as the central characteristic of "good comparisons," that is, transcend authorial intentions and strategies. Such unintended effects reinforce well-established insights about the "death of the author," but above all speak to the inherent "microdynamics" and the ambivalence of comparing as such.[65] [52]

Given their location at the contested boundaries of comparability, polemical comparisons appear particularly prone to such dynamics. This is all the more obvious when the allegedly denigrating character of a comparison itself becomes the subject of debate.[66] [53]

Not least, we can observe how comparisons surface in different contexts. Such instances of de- and re-contextualisation demonstrate once again that there is nothing like a polemical comparison *per se*. On the contrary, communicative and semantic contexts are decisive not only in producing polemical comparisons but also in muting their polemical edge. This is the case, for instance, when comparisons of the admonishing type mentioned above—"these heathens are more pious than you bad Christians"—are employed by a third party, in this case the French Enlightenment scholar Charles de Brosses, to discuss the relation between the Catholic Church in general and his newly invented "Fétichisme" as an evolutionary stage in the development of religion (de Brosses 1760, 23–24; see Brauner 2015, 534). A similar and probably more famous example is the fate which José de Acosta's account of Native American religious practices endured at Protestant hands. As has frequently been noted, Acosta's take on Native American religion was a thoroughly comparative one, not least building on the common notion of paganism as either a distorted counter-image of the True Church created by the Devil or the remaining traces of an original Revelation before the Flood (see e.g. Pagden 1986, ch. 7; Grafton 2005, 166–88; MacCormack 1995; Miller 2001a, esp. 187–189). The comparisons Acosta employed to highlight parallels between the practices (sometimes also the doctrines) of the Roman Church and the Mexican "heathens" were all too enticing for Protestant beholders not to draw their own comparisons: theirs, however, did not compare the two in terms of original and distorted copy or half-forgotten remnant but gained a polemical edge by putting Catholic mass on a level with Mexican human sacrifice.[67] [54]

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[65] For the "microdynamics" of comparing, see Grave (2015, 143–44).

[66] See Webber (2011, 13–17) for a discussion of the notorious PETA advertising campaigns that linked consumption of meat and industrialised meat production to the Holocaust ("Der Holocaust auf deinem Teller"/"the Holocaust on your plate"). As several lawsuits were filed against this campaign, different courts in Austria and Germany had to judge the very matters discussed here from a legal point of view, for instance deciding whether "comparing the Holocaust to the situation of animal in industrial livestock farming [is] insulting or demeaning to humans." Their rulings on how juxtaposing, comparing, and equating relate to each other demonstrate that such questions can take on eminent political character.

[67] See Brauner and Steckel (2020, 75–81) for an example of polemical recycling of Acosta's comparisons in the context of intra-Protestant debates. For other Protestant readings of Acosta's, see Dürr (2020) and Cavarzere (2015), who juxtaposes an early Protestant and a Catholic approach to comparison (namely, Bullinger and Las Casas).

Coda: Reflexive Perspective and Double Hermeneutics

By adopting a reflexive perspective, as proposed here, the analysis of polemical comparisons is situated at the interstices between emic and etic perspectives on the religious field. It can thus act as a bridge between object-language and scholarly meta-language, as Krech (2015) has phrased it. In practice, this means that all contributors study a specific historical case of polemical comparisons in discourses of religious diversity. At the same time, they are called upon to reflect how these phenomena can be linked to the debate about comparisons as a scholarly method but also to practices of labelling groups as well as beliefs and usages of "religion" in their respective discipline.[68] [55]

Pursuing such a "double hermeneutics," reflecting both on historical practices of comparison and practices of comparing in our own scholarly work, we also address what Radhakrishnan has termed the "perennially double conscious" exercise of comparison: to "act as though the comparison is being made in an ideal world and at the same time deconstruct such an idealist ethic in the name of lived reality and its constitutive imbalances" (Radhakrishnan 2013, 21). In this sense, comparisons do make a difference. [56]

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[68] To a certain extent, this seems in line with what Kocka has called the "paradigmatic" function of comparison: "In this respect, comparison helps to distance oneself a bit from the 'one's own history.' *Verfremdung* is the German word. In the light of observable alternatives one's own development loses the self-evidence it may have had before. One discovers the case with which one is most familiar as just one possibility among others. Frequently historians are relatively concentrated on the history of their country or region. Because of this, comparison can have a de-provincializing, a liberating, an eye-opening effect, atmosphere and style of the profession. This is a contribution of comparison that should not be underestimated, even today" (2003, 41). Although Kocka (2003, 43–44) takes a partisan viewpoint here, his suggestion that comparative approaches necessarily reflect on their own selectiveness whereas entangled approaches sometimes tend to fall prey to dreams of a *histoire totale* seems still worth consideration.

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