

The Intercultural Value of the Study of Religions

Intellectual Output 2, Unit II



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Version No.	Author, institution	Date/Last Update
2	<i>Giovanni Lapis, Ca' Foscari University of Venice</i> <i>Tim Jensen, University of Southern Denmark</i>	<i>08/04/2018</i>

PREMISE

For ease of discussion, in this reading we will take for granted that Christianity is 'our' indigenous frame of reference when students hear about religions. But SORAPS PROJECT is well aware that present and future students may well have different indigenous frames of reference.

WHY THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS AS AN INTERCULTURAL ENTERPRISE?

The history of the study of religions can be read as the history of different approaches to the so-called "Other", especially what was not Christianity, Europe, or Modernity.

The discovery of the New World, especially after Columbus's voyages, had an enormous impact: it led to a lot of new material about a lot of new or hitherto unknown peoples, cultures and religions. Before, this knowledge had not been accessible. It caused some disturbance in the old world, where a majority still believed that the biblical story of creation and Adam and Eve was historically true, and where the true religion, of course, was Christianity.

Edward Burnett Taylor (1832-1917), is considered the first anthropologist as he was the first to have included what later came to be studied by anthropologists, namely the so-called indigenous people, at the time of Taylor usually termed "savages" in his definition of 'culture'. However, Taylor argued, such "savage people" with their "primitive religions" constitute the earlier stage of one single line of evolution, whose final and highest stage is modern Protestant Christianity, especially in a philosophical-ethical form.

Later, as well as contemporary reflections on religion have been nurtured from the results of post-Taylorian ethnology and anthropology which focused, first of all, on extra-European cultures often located in former colonies. One of the most important results is the awareness - which can be considered as the base of a serious intercultural engagement-that our categories and value hierarchy are not universally valid. They are context-bound.

Let us think about so-called belief in spirits and magic: for European mainstream culture, it constituted 'superstition' rather than 'faith' and 'religion' and was to be avoided. It was not religion, because 'true' religion was constituted by belief and faith in a single god.

Is not possible to understand and/or evaluate other religions using categories (like 'superstition') inextricably linked to Western religious history. This can only lead - and indeed has led - people to see and treat other religions as alien, incomprehensible, or even, inferior.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Speaking of intercultural communication, we can find two extreme positions to the question: “Can people from diverse cultures understand each other, communicate?”.

1) Different cultures are 'essentially' different, and thus they cannot communicate and understand each other.

History offers numerous examples of how far from reality it is to think about “cultures” as entities and essences, impermeable 'blocks', unable to even think about and communicate with the 'other'. On the contrary we see plenty of situations in which people from different cultures and societies communicated, mixed and developed as something new - with or without resorting to power or coercion. Without conceiving the possibility of communication and dialogue, it is impossible to think about the history of exchange and hybridization among e.g. the various civilizations of the Mediterranean Area, or the spreading and adaptation of e.g. Buddhism in Asian cultures. Noteworthy also, is the now more than a century old interest in Asian religions in the modern and Western world.

More information on:

- [The three monotheistic traditions in Medieval Spain and Sicily](#)
- [Diffusion of Buddhism in Asia](#)
- [Buddhism and Modernity](#)
- [Daoism and the other religious traditions of China](#)
- [Modern and contemporary Hinduism](#)
- [Christians worldwide](#)
- [Muslim minorities in Western Europe](#)
(esp. source 3: "Halal" marriage)
- [Religions and urban space in the context of super-diverse European cities](#)
(esp. source 3a: “The house of one project for Berlin: a church, synagogue and mosque in the same building)

A more localized example revealing of how communication and understanding often cross the boundaries of otherness, especially through translation: during World War II British and American cryptologists could not only translate Japanese messages, but could do so even when they were written in a code explicitly designed to confuse Japan’s enemies. So at least sometimes one can understand the "other", even if the other tries to impede it.

2) Different cultures have in reality the same root, so understanding and dialogue between people is not only possible, but it can - if conducted in the right way - even lead to total agreement.

This position cannot explain the profound difference and feeling of estrangement most people experience when they meet (in person or through media) other people from other cultures; but there is a second, even more impelling problem: affirming that we are all the same, is a tricky issue because if we share an alleged “same root”, who of 'us' then knows “this root” the best and who of 'us' can then decide who we “truly” are? Recall the question on so-called 'superstition'. If it is decided that it is alien to “true” religion, then it leads to the unpleasantly hegemonic conclusion that superstitious believers ought to be outside “religion”, or they need to abandon their superstitions to be classified as “truly” religious.

To look only for similarities or even identical entities can be misleading. To affirm that the Buddha is like the 'God' of monotheist religions, does not do justice to the different, yet interesting ways in which Buddhists articulate their view of postulated supramundane dimension. And, most important, it does not allow to us understand properly, without being puzzled, the other and different religions/cultures. Even the gods of monotheist religions (Jahve, God, Allah) cannot - from the point of view of the study of religions- be seen as identical gods.

More information on:

- [Essentialism, negative and positive prototypes, stereotypes and prejudices](#)
 - See 2.1.
- ['Religion' and 'religions': typical, prototypical and stereotypical notions](#)
 - See 2.2.

STUDY OF RELIGIONS AS INTERCULTURAL PRACTICE

The study of religions can represent a third way to deal with the above-mentioned dilemmas. There are not ready-to-use solutions and lots of issues need to be problematized. But this is an advantage, because problematization makes us think that reality is much more complicated than stereotypes and prejudices and can further lead to self-reflection and self-discovery.

The study of religions, in fact, offers a **pluralistic**, **comparative** and **critical approach** well fitted for intercultural practice.

Pluralistic means that the study of religions basically studies *all* religions. This also involves the assumption that all religions (and their respective contextual cultures) are to be studied, engaged, and even criticized in the same way.

Analytical-critical means that the religions and the notion of religion are studied, interpreted and explained in their historical and cultural contexts. This means also taking a step back

from our spontaneous assumptions, insofar as they are based on our own and relative point of view, especially of what a religion is or should be. Here the study of religions can help in the recognition of the pervasive and blinding mechanism of "otherization" and in the decentralizing and de-familiarizing of our point of view, - also with respect to the diversity within our own religions and contexts. **In the end, this means to be ready to enlarge or even change our prejudices and assumptions. Basically, to widen our perspective and horizon.**

More information on:

- [History of the study of religion and approaches](#)

Comparative means that our conceptual framework is not characterized by, or based on, one single religion, but is the result of pluralistic, cross-cultural and comparative studies of several religions. This entails also that tools like concepts of 'religion', 'myth' or 'ritual' must always be conceived of as imperfect and preliminary analytical tools always to be refined and updated. Probably no scholar will have the final word on these issues.

More information on:

- [Comparative religion](#)

DIFFERENCES ARE MORE FRUITFUL THAN SIMILARITIES

The theme of comparison opens new reflections: in an intercultural perspective, it should be noted that comparison must not be implemented to seek primarily similarities, to not say identical entities, as we have seen the problem and danger involved in assuming fundamental identity between different religions and cultures. On the contrary, to focus on differences can be more fruitful. Indeed, differences and feelings of otherness (something 'unfamiliar') are what foster incomprehension and can ultimately lead to fear and conflicts. Yet, it can also lead to the opposite. The study of religions can offer its aid to make more intelligible and understandable what apparently seems not. At the same time it can make what first seems very familiar, less familiar, e.g. specific notions and practices even within one's own religion.

Alongside the study of similarities between more 'pleasant' aspects of religions like religious festivals, religious diets and food, etc., **less 'pleasant' topics**, e.g. violence, war and various other not-so-nice phenomena also linked to religions should also be reflected upon. In this way an **attitude may be based on facts rather than ideals and good will.**

It is very useful to observe and discuss differences within our own socio-cultural and religious context, e.g. to demonstrate that individual and collective identities (i.e. being a Buddhist, a Christian, a Muslim) are not fixed entities but constitute mix of dynamic elements, external socio-cultural conditions and individual stories.

More importantly such differences can lead us to ask: "Why do I feel in this way when I face this and that difference? And, consequently, maybe lead us to reflect on our own assumptions, what we have taken 'for granted'. For example, people in cultures with a Catholic majority may be likely to think that every religion must have at the apex of its organization, such as the Catholic kind of Christianity, a leading figure like the Pope.

Moreover: being immersed in the study of a different religion - let us say Daoism or Hinduism with a staggering number of deities - can lead us to look at our own tradition of reference with new eyes, and discover that worship of multiple divine beings – likely to be labeled as superstition - has occurred in our religious history (saints, angels, etc.), too.

More information on:

- [The "visit" to the saints](#)
- [Relics and pilgrimages](#)

Deepening the reason for labels like "superstition", might lead to interesting reflections on the issue of authority and political power in regard to religion. This means that, thanks to the encounter with "others", we can go deeper and have a conscious and self-critical approach to our own cultural history and thus become more aware of its nuances and inner diversities.