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Inter-religious Relations as a New Foundation for Comparative Religion

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Abstract

This article argues that the problems that comparative religion encountered in the 1980s and onward did not arise from the comparative project as such, but rather from the fact that comparative religion was founded on an analytical strategy that relied on defining religion. In order to overcome these problems and critique of Jonathan Z. Smith, Talal Asad and others, it is proposed that the comparative study of religion could be re-established on the basis of a different analytical strategy and more specifically on the basis of a relational perspective, in which the crucial point of departure is the finding that religions in many periods and cultural settings seem to constitute themselves in relation to at least one significant other religion. In periods and cultural settings, where religions relate to each other, we do in fact have a commonality between all religions, namely the inter-religious relation. This relation can ensure that we are not comparing things that have nothing in common. If the inter-religious relation is the point of departure, the comparative study of religion can be transformed in such a way that it is not overturned by the social constructionism or post-modernism of J.Z. Smith, Talal Asad and others.

Keywords
Theory, Comparative religion, Relational study of religion

I. Introduction

This article is an attempt to establish a new foundation for comparative religion in the wake of the critique thereof from the 1980s and onwards (Smith 1982, Asad 1983, Fitzgerald 1997). The central point of the article is to suggest a relational perspective and a new analytical strategy in the study of religions, and argue that the comparative study of religions consequently can be re-established on a new basis. If it is acknowledged that religions relate to other religions, we do in fact have something that is common to all religions, namely the inter-religious relation. This relation can ensure that we are not comparing things that have nothing in common. If the inter-religious relation is the point of
departure, the comparative study of religions can be transformed in such a way that it is not overturned by the social constructionism or post-modernism of J.Z. Smith, Talal Asad, and others (Smith 1982a, Asad 1983).

The article does not deal with religion as a universal category but with religions and religious groups in periods and cultural settings in which the dominant organization of the religious group is constituted vis-à-vis at least one other religion. Jan Assmann thus claims that this happened with the emergence of what he calls the mosaic distinction (Assmann 1996, Assmann 1997). One could also here use Karl Jaspers' notion of Axial Age, which suggests a general and more or less simultaneous transformation in the culture of the ancient imperial civilizations (Jaspers 1953). Likewise Jack Goody argued that the emergence of universalistic religions was a consequence of the advent of writing (Goody 1986). Without going into the debate concerning exactly where and when this transformation happened, I will contend that universalist distinctions between religions have been dominant in Europe, the US and possibly beyond, at least since the rise of Christianity. In this particular cultural context, I will follow Jan Assmann and argue that inter-religious distinctions have been a social fact (Assmann 1996). I further suggest that this inter-religious relation can be used as the basis of an analytical strategy in which scholars abstain from defining religion and instead initiate the analysis with a mapping of groups that constitute themselves vis-à-vis other groups. In other words, the article posits that religious actors are perfectly able to recognize another religion (for instance as a competitor) when they encounter one and that a

1 The extension of the reach of the dominance of the inter-religious universal distinction will have to be determined by further research by scholars who are specialists in for instance Buddhist and Islamic studies.
comparative study of religions can use this as a basis for comparison and thereby avoid comparing apples and oranges.

II. The Destruction of the Classic Foundation of Comparative Religion

In the 19th and for most of the 20th centuries, comparative religion laid a crucial part of the foundation of the academic study of religion (Sharpe 1986, Stuckrad 2014). Comparative religion did however encounter a crisis when it came under heavy fire in the 1980s and onwards (Smith 1982b, Asad 1993). Smith famously argued that:

If we have understood the archeological and textual record correctly, man has had his entire history in which to imagine deities and modes of interaction with them. But man, more precisely western man, has had only the last few centuries in which to imagine religion. It is this act of second order, reflective imagination which must be the central preoccupation of any student of religion. That is to say, while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena ... that might be characterized ... as religious - there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy (Smith 1982b: xi).

Smith thus claimed that there are data, which show that man through history has been religious but also that religion solely is a scholarly construction. Even though Smith throughout his academic career worked within the field of comparative religion, his writings can be perceived as an attack on the foundation of the comparative project in the article "In Comparison a Magic Dwells":

We must conclude this exercise in our own academic history in a most unsatisfactory manner. Each of the modes of comparison has been found problematic. Each new proposal has been found to be a variant of an older mode. ... There is nothing easier than the making
of patterns; from planaria to babies, it is done with little apparent difficulty. But the "how" and the "why" and, above all, the "so what" remain most refractory. ... So we are left with the question, "How am I to apply what the one thing shows me to the case of two things?"

The possibility of the study of religion depends on its answer (Smith 1982a, 35).

It should be mentioned that Smith republished this article in an anthology devoted to comparative religion and that he therefore himself presumably did not regard his own writing as an attack on the foundation of comparative religion but perhaps rather as stimulating a necessary discussion (Smith 2000).

The following year, Talal Asad, who argued that religion was a discursive product of power structures of historically and culturally specific societies, further compounded the troubles of comparative religion (Asad 1983). According to Asad, academic disciplines of religion seemed to lose any possibility of defining religion and thus delimiting their field of study.

Taken together, Smith and Asad expanded a social constructivist approach to include comparative religion as an exemplar of social construction. By claiming that comparative religion was either a product of scholarly imagination (Smith) or Western domination (Asad), the result of these two publications and not least their reception was that the legitimacy of the comparative project itself was questioned (Lincoln 2006). The critique resulted in several responses and attempts to reformulate and overcome the critique (Sand 1999, Schjødt 1999, Patton 2000, Patton and Ray 2000, Carter 2004, Freidenreich 2004, Jensen 2004, Martin 2004, Urban 2004). Despite these initial attempts, the discussion now largely seems to have faded out. Many scholars seem to have turned to either area studies, discourse analysis, or cognitive studies of religion. It should be stressed that the contribution from these studies is welcome, as they in many ways have expanded the horizons of the study of religion. However, comparative religion is an indispensable part of the academic study of religion.
III. The Construction of Religions

In contrast to Smith's argument that religion is invented and created by the scholar and that
“religion has no existence apart from the academy” (Smith 1982b: xi), I would like to draw
attention to the fact that academic scholarly discourse is not the only discourse that has a notion of
religion. One other such discourse is inevitably religious discourse itself, as well as for instance the
European state discourses on religion predating the emergence of comparative religion (Reeh 2013,
Reeh 2016).

As Smith readily acknowledges in the quotation above, humans have imagined deities and
modes of interaction with them, as for instance Exodus 20:3 which states: “Thou shalt have no other
gods before me.” Exodus and the Hebrew Bible are much more than a mere imagining of deities
and modes of interaction with them. Smith's approach thus misses a crucial point, namely that
Exodus speaks not only of deities but also of the deities of the other(s). In 1996, the German
Egyptologist Jan Assmann realized the importance of what he called the mosaic distinction:

The distinction [the mosaic distinction] ... is the one between true and false in religion: a
distinction that underlies the more specific ones between Jews and Gentiles, Christians and
pagans, Muslims and unbelievers. Once this distinction is drawn, there is no end of
reentries or subdistinctions. We start with Christians and pagans and end up with Catholics
and Protestants, Calvinists and Lutherans, Socinians and Latitudinarians, and a thousand
similar denominations and subdenominations (Assmann 1996, 48)

The Hebrew Bible is in other words engaged in constructing a universalist distinction through
which the text observes the others (i.e. Canaanites, Hittites, Babylonians, Egyptians and others),
distinguishes itself from the others, and compares itself with the others. It should be noted that the
Hebrew Bible refers to other groups of people as groups and not individuals although individuals
are also mentioned. This text is in other words establishing a distinction or a boundary between groups and thus constructing the Jewish People as a group. Further, such boundary-drawing is not limited to distinctions between religions but may occur within a religion itself. Over time, such internal divisions can increase to the point where it might be more analytically fruitful to speak of two distinct religions. Once this constitutive and universalist distinction (i.e. the mosaic distinction) is drawn and a relation between two groups thereby is established, a historical and dynamic relation between religions can unfold. In history this relation between religions can range from violent competition to peaceful cooperation. Throughout Christian history, for instance, the many controversies over the exact formulation of the Creed since the First Council of Nicæa in 325 have been a long series of struggles over just such distinctions, in which some positions were excluded while others were authorized. Furthermore, such inter-religious distinctions are not limited to Western religions, but can for instance be seen in the Buddhist critique of Brahmanism in India as well as the inter-religious critiques between Daoism, Buddhism, Confucianism as well as between Shia, Sunni, Alevi, Ahmadiya, etc. (Bronkhorst 2011, Kohn 2000, Xing 2016, Schmidtke 2016).

In regard to Smith's statement that religion solely is the scholar's construction, one could add that critical components of the vocabulary of comparative religion, namely ritual, myth, sacrifice, initiation, orthodoxy, and many others, were not invented by scholars of religion. Rather, these notions have been part of the ordinary vocabulary since Herodotus and thus again from well before the existence of any scientific study of religion (Herodotus 2013).

The conclusion can only be that these central notions of comparative religion are not the invention of the scholar, as Smith claims, but rather of the religions themselves. Smith does however qualify his claim by stressing that only scholars of religion exercise what he calls a second-order imagination of religion. Unfortunately, it is not clear exactly what Smith understands by the words “second order” let alone “second-order imagination”. Let us assume that he meant
something along the lines of second-order observation (i.e. the observation of other's observation) or interpretation (the interpretation of the interpretation of others): in which case there are plenty of data for religion, including uses of the term ‘religion’ itself with regard to the interpretations of others. Second-order imagination, for instance, can, be seen in the opening statements of the Augsburg Confession:

As your Imperial Majesty has summoned a Diet of the Empire here at Augsburg to deliberate concerning measures against the Turk, that most atrocious, hereditary, and ancient enemy of the Christian name and religion, in what way, namely, effectually to withstand his furor and assaults by strong and lasting military provision; and then also concerning dissensions in the matter of our holy religion and Christian faith, that in this matter of religion the opinions and judgments of the parties might be heard in each other’s presence; and considered and weighed among ourselves in mutual charity, leniency, and kindness, in order that, after the removal and correction of such things as have been treated and understood in a different manner in the writings on either side, these matters may be settled and brought back to one simple truth and Christian concord, that for the future one pure and true religion may be embraced and maintained by us, that as we all are under one Christ and do battle under Him, so we may be able also to live in unity and concord in the one Christian Church (Melanchthon 2011, 1). (For a more detailed argument see (Reeh 2016: 42-ff))

2 Invictissime Imperator, Caesar Auguste, Domine clementissime. Cum V.C.M. indixerit conventum Imperii Augustæ, ut deliberetur de auxiliis contra Turcam, atrocissimum, hæreditarium atque veterem Christiani nominis ac religionis hostem, quomodo illius scilicet furori et conatibus durabili et perpetuo belli apparatus resisi positi; deinde et de dissensionibus in causa nostræ sanctæ religionis et Christianæ fidei, et ut in hac causa religionis partium opiniones ac sententiae inter sese
It should of course be noted firstly that the original text uses the Latin word *religio* and secondly and more important in our context that the text contains reflections on "the opinions and judgments of the parties." The text in other words does reflect a second order observation. However, the argument does not stand or fall with whether or not there are second-order observations to be found. If we are to base a relational comparative religion on the inter-religious relation, it is enough to establish that they do in fact relate to each other, even if this inter-religious observation is only of the first order. Scholars of religion are, in other words, not the only ones to have a notion of a religion. The finding that religious groups themselves are engaged in a project of inter-religious comparison further explains the continuity between religious discourse and the scholarly discourse on it. This can be seen from the fact that the important figures in the early period of comparative religion pursued their study from a theological or religious background, as did for instance Chantepie de la Saussaye, Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, and many others.

In sum, I argue that inter-religious comparison is not a preserve of the scholar of religion in the ivory tower. The notion of religion, including the basic categories of myth, ritual, sacrifice and so on, have been created through processes of first- and second-order inter-religious comparison. As in the case of ethnography and anthropology, it is only through comparison that a discourse of culture or religion becomes possible.

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*in caritate, lenitate et mansuetudine mutua audiantur coram, intelligantur et ponderentur, ut illis, quæ utrinque in Scripturis secus tractata aut intellecta sunt, sepositis et correctis, res illæ ad unam simplicem veritatem et Christianam concordiam componantur et reducantur; ut de cætero a nobis una, sincera et vera religio colatur et servetur*
IV. The Scientific Process

The year after Jonathan Z. Smith claimed that religion solely was the creation of the scholar, Talal Asad published a thorough critique of Clifford Geertz' famous definition of religion and in conclusion he said

In other words, let us ask: how does power create religion? To ask this question is to seek an answer in terms of the social disciplines and social forces which come together at particular historical moments, to make particular religious discourses, practices and spaces possible. What requires systematic investigation therefore are the ways in which, in each society, social disciplines produce and authorise knowledges, the ways in which selves are required to respond to those knowledges, the ways in which knowledges are accumulated and distributed. Universal definitions of religion hinder such investigations because and to the extent that they aim at identifying essences when we should be trying to explore concrete sets of historical relations and processes (Asad 1983, 252).

Asad thus critiqued the very foundation of defining religion. Asad may be said to have complemented Smith, and taken together their arguments were widely accepted. The result was that comparing and defining religion became a questionable enterprise to say the least.

With regards to defining religion, I will say that Asad and others were correct in their critique hereof. In the following, I will argue that defining religion is not the only possibility for establishing a foundation for comparative religion. Before we get to that, it might be useful to consider the process through which a definition is established:
In other words, the researcher collects and identifies a number of examples and from this, he or she establishes a definition that can be used to guide research as well as judge whether or not a phenomenon is a religion or not according to the definition. Assuming that the definition of religion is established as outlined above, we may say that the researcher plays an active but unclear role in this process through determining what is relevant for selection, etc. In other words, Jonathan Z. Smith’s claim that there is no data for religion and that religion solely is the product of the scholar’s imagination might be correct if a definition is used to establish, determine, and guide the field of study, since it is the scholar who defines and thus creates religion. In addition, it also follows that comparison becomes a problematic enterprise because of the scholar’s role in the process is unaccounted for and since there is no guarantee that the scholar is not comparing apples and oranges.

Concerning Talal Asad’s claim that there cannot be a universal definition of religion this may of course also be said to be correct, since it again is the scholar who based on his own culturally specific discursive environment establishes a definition that will never be able to work adequately in different discursive settings. One may also say that such an approach is problematic, because of the inevitable circularity between the scholar’s prejudice and preconceptions (as Hans
Georg Gadamer would frame it) and the definition, since the risk is that the scholar simply through this process reproduces the prejudice and preconceptions that he or she initially brings to the study of religion (Gadamer 1975). The definition is in other words not able to correct initial prejudice and preconceptions, which it should be according to Gadamer's description of the hermeneutic process (Gadamer 1975). Following this, I will argue that this is why this approach only has led to endless discussions between scholars of religion with regard to how to define religion.

Based on the outlined model of how a definition of religion is established and its crucial role in comparative religion, I will thus argue that Smith and Asad together destroyed the very foundation of comparative religion, even though Smith himself probably attempted to salvage the comparative project.

In the remains of the paper, I will argue in favour of another approach, namely one that is not based on a definition of religion. The basic argument is that religions, as in the above quoted Augsburg Confession, do in fact relate themselves to each other through a universalist inter-religious distinction and that religious groups can be described as a specific type of what Norbert Elias calls a survival unit (Assmann 1996). In other words, religions recognize each other as significant others and they relate to - and distinguish themselves from each other. Another way of putting it could also be to say that religious groups are part of a specific field in Bourdieu's sense of the word, in which religious groups (and not individuals) compete, position themselves, etc. (Bourdieu 1991). Such an approach would then be a more common scientific approach, since the scientific endeavor would be to describe a social phenomenon (the field of religions) in the best possible way:
Here, the scientific observer would depart from the relation between the groups that relate to each other. This would have a number of consequences. Firstly, the fact that religions relate to each other ensures that we are observing, describing, and comparing something that in fact has something in common, namely the inter-religious relation. Secondly, this approach will enable more focus on the inter-religious dynamic (which unfortunately is highly relevant in our present). Thirdly, such an approach will enable a comparative study of religions to become a more normal humanistic science, since the aim is the best possible analysis of an object of a field consisting of those entities who relate to each other. Some of these entities we already know as religions and some of which might prefer to go under another name such as Spirituality, albeit relating to and distinguishing itself from, for instance, religion. If for instance spiritual groups relate to and constitute themselves vis-à-vis, for instance, religion (claiming to be spiritual and not religious, dogmatic, etc.), we can argue that they none-the-less should be included in the field of religions, since they relate and constitute themselves vis-à-vis other entities that we already know as religions. Viewed through the lens of Hans Georg Gadamer, such an approach would enable scholars to be able to correct their initial prejudice and preconceptions (in Gadamer's sense of the words) with regards to which entities are in fact participating and constituting themselves vis-à-vis other entities in this specific field.
(Gadamer 1975). Fourthly, such an approach might create unexpected results if one departs not from ordinary religions but from groups that might be said to constitute themselves differently and perhaps try to contest the dominant model of religious organization from, for instance, a Buddhist and Islamic point of view. Islamic groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir or the Islamic state might thus be said to have at least attempted to constitute themselves both as a Caliphate (i.e. a state) and a religion, and consequently to contest the Western model for societal organization.

V. A Relational Approach to the Study of Religions

In what follows, I would like to develop the approach outlined above, its potential for a new foundation in comparative religion as well as in religious studies more generally. At the outset, I would like to stress that even though the following may look quite similar to a definition, I will however argue that it is not. The principal reason for this is that I am not trying to define what I mean by the word religion, and I am not afterwards judging whether a phenomenon is a religion according to the definition. Instead, I am trying to describe and analyse a set of inter-related social groups, some of which we already know as religions and some of which we might not, since they for instance may prefer to go under another name, such as spirituality. I will argue that these groups exist in real social life as outlined in figure 2.

Hitherto, I have thus posited that religions are the expression of a culturally contingent distinction that has been developed over the course of history and which is now present more or less across the globe. Here one might infer that Talal Asad's argument would apply also to this procedure, since the religions in one country need not refer to the religions in for instance another country. I will however counter that precisely because many modern religions such as various Christian Churches, Church of the Latter Day Saints, Scientology as well as a host of Islamic

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3 I am deeply indebted to editor Steven Ramey and the reviewers for pressing me to strengthen and clarify this point.
movements are transnational organisations, one may say that even though there are many religious organisations that do not have a cross-national outreach, there are many who do. Religions can therefore be analysed in the here suggested manner across the space in which inter-religious distinctions are prevalent and through which religions refer to other religions. Setting the history, spread and development of this now dominant distinction aside (which would need much more research), the inter-religious relation at present seems to be a condition for religious organization in religions or religious groups, which now is a global phenomenon.

This does however not amount to much more than saying that religions are at present organized and refer to other religions and that we can take advantage of this fact in our analysis. In the following, in order to advance a relational approach to the study of religion; I will embark on an attempt towards a qualitative description of the inter-religious relation and the field of religions. It should be emphasised that the following attempt at a description of the field of religions has been based on observations from mainly Europe and the US. As mentioned above, the field of religions might turn out to be different in other cultural settings (for instance, in Islamic and Buddhist countries) and may perhaps even warrant a different terminology than the field of religions if it should turn out that the groups that relate to each other here do so over different distinctions that are better described by other words than the Western notion of religion.

As already mentioned, one point of departure is Jan Assmann’s notion of the mosaic distinction or the inter-religious universalist distinction. I will also suggest that a key to a new understanding of religion could be Norbert Elias’ notion of the survival unit, the renewed philosophical interest in collective intentionality and subjectivity (i.e. social ontology), as well as the Copenhagen ethnological school headed by Thomas Højrup (Elias 1978, Searle 1995, Højrup 2003).

For the sake of brevity, I shall here limit myself to Elias’ notion of the survival unit, introduced to describe the state as a relational entity that is always to be analysed and understood as situated in an environment of other states (Elias 1978, Elias 1980). His work is currently stirring renewed interest in sociology (Emirbayer 1997, Dépelteau and Landini 2013, Kaspersen 2013). Here it should be noted that a vital part of Elias’ survival unit is that it creates a collective ‘we’ among its members:
... the extended ‘I-and-We’ consciousness, which hitherto has always seemed indispensable in binding together not only small tribes but large social units like nation-states encompassing many millions of people. People’s attachment to such large social units is often as intense as their attachment to a person they love. The individual who has formed such a bond will be as deeply affected when the social unit to which he is devoted is conquered or destroyed, debased or humiliated, as when a beloved person dies (Elias 1978: 137).

This extended ‘I-and-We’ consciousness may seem to be a reformulation of Durkheim’s collective conscience. However, it is necessary to realize that while Durkheim’s collective conscience and society arise out of solidarity between its members, as if humans had an inherent tendency towards fusion into social units, Elias’ extended ‘I-and-We’ consciousness arise out of the relation to the other, which may be seen as a necessary part in holding the unit together. In order to constitute a group including its boundaries, you need something beyond the group (i.e. a non-group). In Elias’ thinking, the presence and pressure of the other is necessary if the unit is to hold together (Kaspersen 2008, Kaspersen 2013).

If we now turn to the study of religion, I will suggest that the notion of the survival unit can be used to understand religions, since they also constitute themselves in relation to each other and they also seek to survive (Elias 1978) or persist as Roy Rappaport would call it (Rappaport 1999). In other words, I suggest that religions can be analysed as religious survival units. In some cultural contexts, the survival unit (i.e., the state) has accepted the existence of religious survival units (i.e., when there has been some degree of religious freedom). These religious survival units can be seen as constituted through a negation of what they are not, which could also be called the relation to the significant other religion(s).
Religions however do not usually try to defend sovereignty over physical territory, as states have done throughout history. If one takes a look at actual religions in a Western cultural context, I would suggest that it seems that religions seek to uphold a plausible life-world (or their claim to the ultimate truth) in the environment in which they are situated (Berger 1969). Such a plausible life-world will in most cases include an attempt to uphold membership/participants - if not the religion will die out. I therefore propose that religions can be analysed as religious survival units, which are embedded in an environment of what might be called significant other religions. As in the case of states, religions also can relate to each other peacefully or aggressively, and there is nothing that rules out neither cooperation nor religious war. This will depend on the situation (i.e., the relation to the significant other religion(s)) as well as their interests as a collective group.

Religions, since the rise of the inter-religious universalist distinction, can thus be regarded as religious survival units that inherently relate to other religious survival units. Here I thus draw an analytical distinction between a religion and religious practice. Pre-modern religions (i.e. religions before the rise of what Jan Assmann calls the mosaic distinction) are not covered by the approach suggested here and can perhaps better be described as religious practice, whereas modern religions are different since they constitute themselves as a social ‘we’ vis-à-vis other religions. The expansion of especially Christianity can thus also be understood as the expansion of a global religious field in which premodern religious practice was forced to adapt or succumb to a new environment. These religious survival units are constituted through the drawing of boundaries (inter-religious universalist distinctions) between themselves and the significant other religion(s). Through these processes of boundary drawing, I further suggest that the religious survival units constitute a collective “we” that can be observed in religious texts, practices, and so on, as is also the case in Elias’ description of the state (Elias 1978). Examples of the inter-religious dynamic relation are legion, but to mention just a few, one may say that the Torah draws a distinction
between itself and the religions of the Canaanites, Egyptians, Hittites, and the rest. The New Testament distinguishes itself from the religion of the Pharisaic Jews, Samaritans, and Romans; the Qur’an distinguishes itself from the religion/errors of the other People of the Book and the infidels, and so on. The process may also be found in India, where Buddhism evolved over conflicts with Vedic Brahmanism (Omvedt 2003: 71). Processes of fission may thus be initiated through internal tensions within a religious group and can develop into the creation of a new religious group that is distinct from its group of origin. In other words, I argue that religions constitute themselves through distinctions or boundary drawing between themselves and the religious significant other. The establishment of a social “we” requires something that is outside this “we” or “us”, namely a “them” or a “they”. I further suggest that this “we” is constituted in a speech act in which the distinction between “us” and “them” is created. The social “we” is thus compared and distinguished from what I call the significant other. In passing, it might be worth noticing that such a “we” would be regarded as a social entity according to Max Weber:

Action is social in so far as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual (or individuals), it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course (Weber 1964: 88).

Further, we may say that a religious survival unit must reproduce itself or hold its own if it is to survive, in the same way that a state also must survive, in an environment of significant other religions. This social or religious “we” can be found throughout human’s religious life and can be observed all over the world in the myriad of symbolic markers that are used to set members of different religious collectives apart.

VI. Towards a Comparative Study of Mutually Subversive Narratives and Practices

Concerning Ultimate Origin, Present, and Future
Religions in a universalist context can in other words be analysed as religious survival units predicated on a universalist distinction that include a division of world into truth - falsehood, good - evil as well as us - them. The distinction thus allows a constitution of the religious group as a group and allows or perhaps compels the religious survival unit to hold its own also in terms of meaning or of its claim to the ultimate truth.

Here, I suggest that it would be fruitful to continue the outline with the term “a plausible life-world” and thus to return to a Husserl-inspired terminology (Schutz 1967, Berger 1969, Geertz 1973). Plausible life-worlds may often be mutually subversive. If the religious survival unit cannot establish and uphold a plausible life-world, it is likely that the religion will lose out to other and more able competitors that have constructed a more plausible life-world that is able to succeed in the given historical environment.

At this point, it is not out of place to remark that other formulations might have been adopted, such as notions of the transcendent, the notion of God, or the notion of transempirical beings (Tylor 1871, Geertz 1999, Luhmann 2013). In order to establish a broader and hopefully a less culturally specific approach I have however chosen to focus on religion as a plausible ultimate life-world as constructed through practices that uphold that life-world in its present historical context. Here again, I will stress that this is not a definition but an attempt to describe the present field of religions in the most analytically fruitful manner. In other words, if someone comes up with a better description it should immediately be adopted, since the aim of the present exercise is the best possible description of the inter-religious relation and thus the field of religions.

If we further want to understand why religions relate to each other, I have elsewhere suggested that

A religion ... should be analysed as a religious survival unit that is centred around discourses and practices dealing with truth, and in particular truth regarding origin, present and future, while at the same time relating to and most often denying competing discourses and practices (Reeh 2013, 275).
The principal reason for adopting this and not the transcendent, the sacred or other terms is that ultimate origin, present and future is a less culturally specific horizon and thus may be useful on a more general level. If this formulation should be found to be an unsatisfactory description of the field of religions it can of course be modified. In order to summarize; the crucial and primary point here is that religions relate to each other and that we can use this inter-religious relation in an analysis of the dynamics of the field in which they operate. The description of religions as units struggling over the ultimate truth regarding origin, present, and future is secondary in regard to the primary point (i.e. that religions relate to other religions) and should be changed if a better description can be arrived at.

Further, myth becomes a discourse or narrative that establishes plausible connections between the ultimate origin, the present, and the future. The category of myth can further be broken down into categories of myths of creation, eschatological myths, myths that explain the social order, and the rest. The study of myth can in this way start from how such a Nomos or a plausible life-world is constructed in the historical context in which the religious group has to sustain itself (Schutz 1967, Berger 1969).

Ritual can be analysed as practices regarding ultimate origin, present, and future. Most often however, ritual will be practices that seek to interfere between the present and the future. This approach to ritual can be further developed into different types of ritual, as has been done within the classic studies of it.

On the basis of the notion of religion established largely through comparative studies of it, the present approach seeks to emphasize that the construction of religious meaning, and thus the existence of the religious life-world, must be seen in the context of its significant religious others as well as in the more general historical and cultural context. In this way, the history of religions may be seen as an open-ended historical process in which the fittest religions have been able to survive,
whereas religions that have not been able to survive have been extinguished through the process of history. At this point it might be prudent to add that even though I do indeed suggest that this approach can be developed as a general approach to the study of modern religions, the approach does allow for regional variation (i.e. that the internal characterization in for instance Europe may be different from India).

VII. On the Distinction Between Different Types of Social Groups

Hitherto, I have only mentioned two types of social groups, namely religions and states. In humankind’s social life, there are of course many different types of social groups. An analysis of these could follow the same approach as the one suggested here with regards to religious groups. In other words, and as a general analytical principle, collective entities can be said to partake in the same field if they constitute themselves vis-à-vis other social groups or by observing who has a primary reference to whom. National identities often refer to other national identities and can thus for instance be analysed as interrelated collective constructions that are constituted vis-à-vis other entities (Reeh 2009, Reeh 2011). The same goes for regional and local identities etc.

Through a focus on who constitutes themselves in relation to whom, we are not dependent on whether or not some groups in the field explicitly deny to be a religion or not. Many spiritual groups, for instance, claim to be spiritual but not religious, let alone a religion (Cotter 2015). By simply observing which entities participate in the field of religions and by refraining from defining religion, scholars can be freed from the endless argument over whether or not a group is a religion.

The general approach outlined above can thus be reframed as a study of inter-related social groups. At this point, we need to address two problems. Firstly, as it is well known, the notion of religion is of Western origin (Asad 1983, Kippenberg 2001) and may be said to have dominated not only the scholarly discourse on religion but also the formation of the religions themselves (Beyer
Nothing does however inhibit an analysis of a field of social groups (whatever one may choose to call them) in other cultural contexts. Although I am not a specialist in Islam, it seems to be the case that at least some Islamic movements are struggling with the Western concept of religion, which for instance is visible when it is claimed that Islam is a complete "way of life" and not just a religion (Beyer 1998). Here, one could simply initiate a parallel relational analysis of the existing social groups and whom they relate themselves to.

Secondly, a problem arises if there are groups that relate to what we in the analysis would find to be different types of social groups. This is for instance visible in Dabiq, the propaganda magazine of the Islamic State (henceforth IS):

O Ummah of Islam, indeed the world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present. The camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of kufr (disbelief) and hypocrisy – the camp of the Muslims and the mujahidin everywhere, and the camp of the jews, the crusaders, their allies, and with them the rest of the nations and religions of kufr, all being led by America and Russia, and being mobilized by the jews (Ruiter 2015).

Islamic State's magazine Dabiq thus from these brief excerpts attempt to constitute itself both as the true Ummah, and thus both as a state and the true faith. IS may thus be said to constitute itself vis-à-vis the other camp of kufr but does also in the same text mention other states (America and Russia) as well as other religions (Jews):

Rather, Islam is a holistic religion that is to be approached from all sides, and defended from all sides. If any aspect of it is abandoned or ignored, the Shaytān and his soldiers will quickly fill the vacuum (Ruiter 2015).

Firstly, IS is here engaging themselves in more than one social field (i.e. vis-à-vis states and religions). How such engagement in more than one field plays out would probably be a very
interesting field of study. Secondly, IS is waging a war not only against the "camp of the kufr" but attempting to override the Western categories of state and religion (i.e. a dedifferentiation of these two categories). This past point should therefore serve as warning against conceiving of the dominant Western categories of thought and organisation as set in stone as these categories potentially could be subject to historical change. In addition, one could also initiate the analysis from an Islamic perspective and begin the analysis with whom the Islamic groups relate themselves to, which might lead to unexpected results.

VIII. Inter-religious Comparison through Mimicry and Competition

If then a religion is analysed as a religious survival unit that seeks to survive in an environment of competitors, one of the most significant shifts in perspective would be that religious meaning is not constructed in itself or in isolation from other religions. On the contrary, the creation of religious meaning should be analysed in the context of the significant other religions. By the same token it becomes possible to shed new light on the spread of religious ideas, and thus also on the debate between the 19th century theories of pan-babylonism and diffusionism mentioned by Jonathan Z. Smith (Smith 1982a). Without entering into that debate, I would suggest that there are (at least) two different processes that result from inter-religious comparison, which are relevant for the spread of religious ideas.

The first process can be observed for instance in the Theosophical Society and its eclectic search for the ultimate truth in gnostic hermetic writings, the kabbalah, occult philosophy, and sundry other places. In that learning process, the group simply sought to learn from what Madame Blavatsky perceived to be her spiritual predecessors (Hammer 2004). As such, it is a quite straightforward example of learning from other religions. Other examples could be drawn from, for instance, the adoption or imitation of an idea such as baby psalm singing, or the revival of discarded
religious practices such as pilgrimage, meditation, and the lighting of candles, which have recently become popular in at least the Nordic Churches, even though those Churches are Protestant, and we would therefore expect a rejection of at least pilgrimage. These cases may again be seen as examples of inter-religious learning, copying and mimicking, and perhaps even as religious fashions that may be analysed following Pierre Bourdieu's classic work, in which he maintains that fashion and acquired taste are a product of the struggle for different forms of capital in the social field (Bourdieu 1984).

The second process is not as simple as the first, since it arises out of the competition or the struggle between religions. Traces of this process can be found in many instances throughout the history of religion. One might for instance mention the many similarities between Norse mythology and Christianity, such as the Hávamál, in which Odin hanged himself in the tree Yggdrasil for nine days and stabbed himself with a spear in order to gain secret knowledge and power over the world. Another example might be the iconoclasms in the Byzantine Empire, which occurred only after the rise of Islam in the area (Codoner 2014: 423). A third example could be the spread of the idea of eternal life, which has become almost a sine qua non among present-day religions. It would seem that the idea of eternal life is so extremely attractive that its appeal has forced almost all modern religions to either adopt it or succumb in the struggle for survival.

**IX. Avoiding a Definition of Religion?**

The claim that scholars should avoid the notion of religion has been set forth many times from Cantwell-Smith to Brent Nongbri's recent book in which he argues against the use of the term religion as such, since it carries a truck-load of Christian Protestant baggage (Smith 1963, Nongbri 2013). Instead, Nongbri suggested that scholars use emic or indigenous notions, such as ancestral traditions (Nongbri 2013). On the one hand Nongbri has a point with regards to religious practices
in cultural contexts outside the realm of inter-religious universalist distinctions or what Jan Assmann calls primary religions (Assmann 1997, 2010). It is quite plausible that such religious practices might better analysed and described from other perspectives than that of a religion, as Nongbri suggests (Nongbri 2013). On the other hand, I do not think Nongbri's critique is fruitful with regards to religions after the emergence of what I have called the religious survival unit or the historically successful mosaic distinction, first in Judaism, then in Christianity, Islam, and so forth. The reason is that these religious survival units exist as a bundle of collective groups that relate to each other either in local, regional or global settings. Whether we call them religions or something else might just be to exchange the Christian Protestant baggage with something else that most likely will be equally distorting. What matters is that scholars do not depart from a specific implicit or explicit model of religion as exemplary. What scholars of religion instead could attempt is to depart from the relation between the collective constructed entities in the field of religions in a particular historical setting. Here, I will limit myself to two examples that it would be fruitful to analyse as part of the field of religions (but again this is not a definition) in most of the contemporary Western World. These examples are of course chosen to provoke a bit and stimulate discussion. Such an approach of the present field of religions would include an analysis of organised Atheism as, for instance, the various Humanist Societies that have been established in many Western countries, as well as he Flying Spaghetti Monster Church and organized Spiritual groups. The main reason for this is, of course, that these groups have constituted themselves around negating their significant other religion (i.e. Christianity). Through their negation of another religion, such groups are partakers in struggle within what I above called the field of religions, in which religious survival units struggle to survive.

Here, some scholars might first infer that Humanism cannot be analysed as part of the field of religion because Humanism isn't a religion because of the absence of a transcendent element. My
counter question would then be; how do you know that a part-taker in the field of religions needs to have such a transcendent element? The reason why scholars of religion have included the transcendent in definitions of religions is due to the specific Western religious history in which the religions themselves have sought to delimit the term religion in ways according to their interests, power, etc. With regards to the Flying Spaghetti Monster Church, it might be argued that it is not a religion because it is a joke. Again, a counter question would be; how do you know that religion has to be serious and that it cannot at least partly be a joke? Again, the answer is that such a definition is established through observations of the religious tradition, which by and large most often haven't been ironic. However, why shouldn't religion be able to change and become ironic if the general culture becomes more ironic? We should in other words be wary of being too backward-looking.

Both these examples point to the inherent problems in defining religion, which has so long dogged the academic study of religion, as it has been argued before (Geertz 1999). In short, the use of definitions of religion as an analytical strategy are in my view responsible for serious problems in regard to the scientific foundation of comparative religion after the writings of Talal Asad, J.Z. Smith, and Timothy Fitzgerald, among others (Asad 1983, Fitzgerald 1997, Smith 1990). Smith and Asad were thus correct in arguing that religion was the scholar’s construction (Smith) and that a universal definition of religion was impossible or meaningless (Asad) but as I have tried to show, this need not be a problem, since we can adopt a more normal scientific approach in which we do not rely on a definition. Instead of relying on a definition, we can simply attempt to describe and analyse a set of collective groups that relate to each other. Some of these groups we already know as religions; some of them we don't. Here scholars should keep an open mind and simply observe which groups are partaking in this field, and if a group constitutes itself vis-à-vis other groups (some of which we already know as religion), they should be included in the analysis.
X. Concluding Remarks

The principal argument put forward in this article is that comparative studies of religions are a necessity, since it is through comparison that scholars have constituted religion as a scientific object. Without the scientific study of it, our knowledge of religion would come from religious discourse itself, which is unsatisfactory in a democratic secular state. The present article further argues that some of the worst problems that comparative religion encountered in the 1980s and afterwards might not lie with the study itself but rather in the inherent problems that arises from defining religion. If scholars avoid defining religion and instead focus on an observable fact, namely that all post mosaic religions relate to and distinguish themselves from their significant other(s), then the guns levelled at comparative religion by scholars such as Jonathan Z. Smith, Talal Asad, and Timothy Fitzgerald are silenced (Smith 1982a, Smith 1982b, Smith 1990, Asad 1983, Asad 1993, Fitzgerald 1997). We can in other words let the religions define themselves by observing their participation in the field of religions.

I thus argue that religions in the post mosaic realm should be studied and understood as relational phenomena embedded in and constituted through inter-religious relations. The consequence of such a position is that it follows that all religions, increasingly since the emergence of the mosaic distinction (which seems to coincide with the axial age), have come to be inter-related in a global religious field, as described by Peter Beyer (Beyer 1998a). Although I do not suppose that all religions throughout history are related, a substantial number of religions are related through what I call an inter-religious struggle for survival with and among significant others. The point here is that if religions increasingly with the improvement of communication technology have become inter-related first in local, then in regional clusters, and now in a global field of religions, it is now the case that any one of them can come into contact with any other and be forced to uphold its claim to the ultimate truth in the presence of other claims to that truth. Moreover, if religions are thus
related, we can overcome the most problematic challenges from scholars such as Jonathan Z. Smith and Talal Assad who have problematized the very basis of the comparative study of religion (Smith 1982a, Asad 1993). In short, one could say that by using a definition, the scholar of religion established him- or herself as a judge who could decide what was to count as religion and what was not. The present approach does not make such an attempt. Instead, I argue that the aim should be to establish the best possible analysis of dynamic processes in the field of religions.

On the basis of this new perspective, I would like briefly to suggest a short outline of a new possible research agenda for the comparative study of religion without discarding the endeavours of our academic predecessors. One prominent new horizon is comparisons between well-known religions, new religious forms as well as non-religions, since at least some non-religions, such as organized Humanism, are participants in the contest within the modern field of religions (Reeh 2013b). In addition to these questions, a relational comparative study of religion should also be concerned with three complex research questions. Firstly, how religious survival units seek to uphold their plausible life-worlds and in particular their truth claims regarding the ultimate origin, present and future in an environment consisting of significant other religious survival units as well as in the wider historical context. Secondly, how religious survival units influence each other either through mutual struggle or through mimicry as mentioned above. Thirdly, how the collective and the individual have been interlinked with regard to religion throughout history. These studies would touch upon such subjects as power, authority, and subjectivity.

Farther down the road, this approach could be combined with recent neo-evolutionary cognitive approaches (Sperber 1996, Boyer 2001, Geertz 2010, Sørensen 2005). Hitherto these approaches have to my knowledge exclusively focused on the brain of the individual as the essential component that determines what survives through history and what does not. The present approach offers an evolutionary and comparative approach that supplements those studies with a social
selective mechanism, namely the construction of a plausible life-world that the group is able to uphold in an environment of other religious survival units and the larger historical context. This was already to some extent suggested by Jonathan Z. Smith:

The evolutionary approach, which factors in the dynamics of change and persistence over time in response to adaptation to a given environment, has produced useful theory and comparisons in the biological sciences. I know of nothing in principle that would prevent fruitful application to the human sciences as well. However, what is usually known as the evolutionary approach within the human sciences, related inextricably to what the late nineteenth century termed “The Comparative Method,” is not fruitful... (Smith 1982a, 24).

Hopefully, J.Z. Smith would have found that the approach put forward above does precisely that, since the notion of the religious survival unit is able to situate the religious group in a context of other religious groups.

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