



Editorial Foreword

Difference, Reflexivity, and the Making of Comparison: Introducing *Dissertia Research Reviews*

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Comparative, cross-regional, and cross-cultural inquiry has become indispensable for any discipline seeking to understand culture and society beyond the narrow horizons of single traditions or nation-states. As scholars increasingly acknowledge the limitations of WEIRD-centered knowledge production (Henrich et al. 2010), and as the social sciences respond to a growing demand to extend research data collection beyond such Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic populations, the systematic widening of empirical and conceptual frames across diverse social worlds has produced more robust theories of human meaning, practice, and social order (Broesch et al. 2020). Cross-cultural research in the social sciences demonstrates that extending inquiry across heterogeneous settings enhances the external validity of theory, sharpens sensitivity to power asymmetries, and improves our ability to interpret how communities negotiate mobility, inequality, and contested identities (McCaffree 2024, in an interview with Alan Fiske). In many domains of social sciences, symbolic and practice-oriented approaches, especially as rooted in Clifford Geertz's insight that societies are organized by context-specific "webs of meaning," show that sustained comparisons across multiple locales can illuminate how global processes are locally appropriated and transformed. A scholarly platform committed to comparative and cross-regional studies therefore becomes a necessary site for staging exhaustive, ethically attuned analyses of an interconnected yet asymmetrical world.

Within this broader horizon, the study of religion offers one of the most sophisticated laboratories for comparative thinking. Comparison here is not the search for timeless essences but, following Jonathan Z. Smith, a disciplined, reflexive scholarly operation that constructs its own categories and alignments rather than "discovering" ready-made religions awaiting juxtaposition (Smith 1990). As Smith and Robert A. Segal both emphasize, the analytic power of comparison lies in holding similarity and difference in

productive tension. It is “axiomatic,” Smith writes, “that comparison is never a matter of identity,” for its very interest depends on “the acceptance of difference as the grounds of its being interesting” (Smith 1987). The strongest comparative work therefore avoids both the old comparativism’s quest for universal sameness and postmodernism’s dismissal of comparison as inherently reductive. Instead, it seeks similarities and differences, recognizing that heuristic commonalities make comparison possible while significant divergences make it meaningful. Segal argues that comparison serves not to erase differences but to illuminate them: while every comparative inquiry must begin by noting certain resemblances, its real value lies in uncovering the distinctive contours that set each case apart. The intellectual force of comparison, he suggests, emerges precisely from the divergence that becomes visible through this process, even as shared features provide the initial scaffolding for analysis (Segal 2005). Viewed in this way, comparative religion becomes a disciplined practice of constructing deliberate juxtapositions through which recurrent patterns come into focus, categorical assumptions are tested, and the cultural and historical particularity of religious phenomena can be discerned with greater precision. Comparison in this context is a creative, deliberate scholarly craft that generates new knowledge and new relationships between bodies of knowledge, while always remaining a partial, interpretive construction rather than a direct representation of lived religious experience (McClymond 2018).

It is therefore symbolically fitting that the inaugural issue of *Dissertia Research Reviews* (DRR–HASS) is devoted to Comparative Religion. With this first volume (Vol. 1, No. 1, November 2025), we do not merely introduce a new journal: we invite our readers into a particular line of scholarship, i.e. comparative, dialogical, and critically reflexive, attentive to voices and locations often marginal to dominant academic conversations. *Dissertia Research Reviews* is conceived as a platform for publishing extended abstracts, essays, reviews, data and discussion papers, as well as dissertation summaries from diverse disciplines and languages. We aim to render visible the intellectual labor of graduate researchers and early-career scholars, especially those working outside the Euro-Atlantic centers of research and knowledge production. This Special Issue on Comparative Religion thus inaugurates our commitment to a globally attentive, methodologically rigorous, and epistemically inclusive vision of the study of society, culture, and religion, across disciplines in Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences.

The contributions in this issue collectively demonstrate how the study of religion today unfolds across a wide spectrum of themes, ranging from cosmology, metaphysics, and theology to gender, interreligious encounter, cultural policy, and spirituality, each

employing distinct theoretical frameworks and methodological strategies. This diversity of questions and approaches is precisely what renders comparison indispensable: by tracing both similarities and differences across traditions, contexts, and intellectual trajectories, comparative inquiry reveals how religious meaning is shaped through complex entanglements of culture, history, and power. The issue's cross-regional focus, particularly its grounding in Iranian, Turkish, and wider West Asian scholarly contexts, further underscores the importance of listening to local cultures of understanding religion and spirituality – as contexts that are often underrepresented in global academic conversations yet vital for expanding our conceptual horizons. Together, these studies exemplify how a reflexive, multi-voiced comparative practice can illuminate the richness and plurality of religious life today. It is our hope that this Special Issue on Comparative Religion will be the first of many steps in that direction.

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