Book Reviews

Philippe Bornet


The study of religion as a field distinct from the sorts of training and inquiry traditionally conducted in seminaries, yeshivas, madrasas, and monasteries is intrinsically comparative. The very category of religion as something spanning cultures and periods, along with most of the terminology and corresponding concepts employed in the field, implies that the various “parochial” phenomena that form the object of study share many features and follow patterns that are discernable only when viewed from the analytical distance of comparison. The founding figures of the field (notably, E. B. Tylor, J. G. Frazer, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Emile Durkheim, and Mircea Eliade) embraced this principle with gusto, taking an encyclopedic approach often aimed at providing a single, global explanation or rationale for religion in all its forms. From the middle of the twentieth century, a distaste for the overreaching or overhomogenizing excesses of such projects, along with the broader academic trend toward narrow specialization and an emphasis on the uniqueness of individual cultures, led to a widespread retreat from explicit comparison and indeed a good deal of skepticism for those who persisted with comparative studies.

The present volume, based on Philippe Bornet's doctoral dissertation at the University of Lausanne, provides a model of comparative study of religion based on several factors. First, the author brings a very high level of erudition not only in the scholarship on religion but in the relevant primary sources, which he handles with the philological rigor possible only for someone with an excellent command of both classical Hebrew and Sanskrit — in itself a rare qualification. Secondly, the comparison itself is superbly conceived. He has chosen just two traditions, traditions which, despite some surface differences (in their conception of the divine and on the question of image-worship), have some striking parallels despite being almost totally without
contact historically: Rabbinical Judaism and Brahmanical Dharma — Bornet wisely avoids speaking of “Hinduism,” a label that covers a much wider variety of traditions — have been described as primarily “national religions,” those self-consciously constitutive of a people and handed down as a heritage. Both traditions are built upon a foundation of priestly sacrificial rites, textual exegesis by professional teachers, and (most relevantly) a home-centered religious practice marked by elaborate ceremony. Thirdly, Bornet adopts a rigorous comparative analysis that attends to the individual comparanda within the context of the traditional discourses, practices, and larger social contexts in which they are embedded — “une comparaison discursive et contrastive, défaite de toute ambition essentialiste et mise au service d’objectifs spécifiques” (p. 254; italics original). This helps him avoid the weaknesses of the early comparativists, who blithely juxtaposed disembodied, decontextualized fragments deployed in the service of a theoretical telos.

Overt comparison is so uncommon in the field nowadays that Bornet takes the trouble to spell out his method in detail (chapter 1, “Introduction et méthodologie”). He begins by acknowledging that the Christian background of the field as it developed in the West remains a looming presence insofar as the terminology and concepts used in comparison mostly developed in the context of Christian churches and discourses, and, for a long time, comparison of religions meant comparison with Christianity. This, Bornet argues, is part of the reason to undertake a thoroughgoing comparison of two religions other than Christianity. The comparison, furthermore, is not intended to cover every aspect of the traditions but to focus on one distinctive feature that they seem to share: a heavy emphasis on hospitality.

Bornet begins with four hypotheses (pp. 13–14): (1) that hospitality rules enunciated in normative texts reveal aspects of the ideal world envisioned by their authors; (2) that the logic of exchange involved in hospitality aims at realizing the ideal social system of that envisioned world; (3) that hospitality, as a temporary social relationship, favors the integration of persons at the margins of the group; and (4) that to the extent that a religion is not highly institutionalized, there is more at stake in hospitality practices. With these issues in mind, he proceeds to an in-depth, nuanced study of the two traditions, each in its own context.

Each of the two middle chapters constitutes a free-standing analysis of hospitality traditions within Rabbinic Judaism and Brahmanical Dharmaśāstra, respectively, based on the surviving classical texts of the traditions. The structure of these chapters is adapted to the peculiarities of the two traditions and of the source-texts’ particular concerns, but Bornet is careful to call our attention to those factors that in the comparative analysis will figure as parallels.
or telling differences. In both cases, I found the presentation and analysis to be accurate and perceptive, as well as accessible to the non-specialist without resorting to oversimplification or imprecision. The Brahmanical discussion — my area of specialty — certainly makes use of the best and latest scholarship and asks perceptive questions of the material. To assist readers who are not expert in one or both of the traditions, the book concludes with a glossary and an index of cited passages for each tradition. (There is also a general bibliography and a general index.)

Chapter 4 reflects on the results of the comparison and draws some cautious conclusions. Bornet acknowledges that some factors that are prominent in one tradition are peripheral or have no parallel in the other, and hospitality per se, while important in both, is important in different ways. Two completely distinct cultural contexts will never perfectly mirror one another, and for this reason he wisely does not attempt to compare the hospitality norms point by point, which would miss the real point of the comparison.

However, he affirms that the sources disclosed a number striking affinities that extend to the social matrices that produced them (pp. 224–225): the central role of textual study; the elaboration of a complex legal system emphasizing the regulation of household rites (within which hospitality is mainly articulated); personal purity; relations with “others”; and promoting the learned elite as a model of piety and social practice that defines the broader tradition. Thus far, Bornet’s findings closely match those of my much more limited study (Lubin 2002).

Certain disparities stand out. Hospitality practices are not ritualized to the same extent in the two traditions, which he attributes to the fact that in the Brahmanical case the subject was more closely connected with the fire sacrifice. Meanwhile, the Rabbinic texts have much more to say about the place of outsiders in the hospitality relation. Differences in the way the primary source-texts are organized is also part of the problem facing the comparativist (p. 225). The Brahmanical tradition is emphatically inegalitarian, while the Rabbinic norms largely apply without hierarchical distinction.

He points out that the differences in hospitality rites mirror larger cultural patterns: the Jewish tradition emphasized commensality, while the Brahmanical guest (atithi) is marked as superior (p. 229). Bornet ponders the question of what cultural or historical factors may lie behind such differences. For example, he tentatively suggests (as one possibility; p. 231) that the Brahmanical tradition’s focus on brahmins as the paradigmatic recipients of hospitality may have been influenced by non-Brahmanical movements in the broader historical context. I think there is good reason to support this supposition: the early Dharmaśāstra texts were produced by Brahmin theorists.
to support their collective self-construction as household-based religious professionals on a par with Buddhist and Jainist mendicants, and the feeding of Brahmins was promoted as parallel to the alms-food given to monks in other traditions. This, anyway, is my reading of the evidence, and Bornet’s work on hospitality provides another valuable line of approach to this question. As for why the Rabbinic texts dwell on the role of the outsider, one might speculate that this focus reflects the distinctive feature of that tradition (unlike the Brahmanical one): the Rabbinic tradition developed in the context of exile and diaspora.

In his general conclusion (pp. 253–254), Bornet points to several lessons of this exercise in comparison: (1) He finds that his comparative study of hospitality “constituted a tool that can reveal the social dynamics within a particular group and in its relations with the ‘outside’” (my translation). (2) Constraints on hospitality discourage social relations inimical to the group identity being cultivated by the learned elite, whereas the modes of hospitality promoted are those congenial to constructing a lay “religious community.” Bornet aptly calls this “sort of proselytism within a given society” domestication, or _mise à demeure_ (p. 253).

The argument throughout is carefully, lucidly constructed, wary of the risks and limitations of the method and savvy in dealing with refractory sources. In this way he has succeeded in showing that this sort of deep-context comparison of practices embedded in discourses can indeed teach us something new about how religions and other cultural traditions work. Judaicists and Indianists both will learn from this fine volume, and not just about the “other” tradition. But I especially hope that many other scholars of religion, anthropology, and antiquity with find their way to this book since it has substantial lessons to teach about the comparative method, that is, about the study of religions and cultures (not just of a religion or a culture).

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**Reference**