The Rewards and Challenges of Working Comparatively in the Sociology of Religion

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Preliminaries
The following remarks about working comparatively in the sociology of religion are largely
drawn from experience – specifically from my participation in two moderately large
comparative projects based at Uppsala University, in Sweden. The details of each are
outlined below. A list of similar projects can be found in the Appendix. From this
experience, I draw the following conclusion: that working comparatively is the most
demanding form of research in which I have been involved, but it is also the most
rewarding. It is demanding in terms of the time, patience and the sheer effort that is
required if a team trained in a variety of institutions in several different countries is to fully
understand each stage of the research process, and to deliver the right information in the
right form at the right time; it is rewarding in terms of the new contacts, new teams, new
horizons, new ways of thinking and new research questions that are an inevitable part of
the agenda. The latter, I have no doubt, far out-weight the former. Above all, working
comparatively permits the researcher to see his or her own country in a new perspective:
no longer is the familiar necessarily the norm.

The two projects formed part of an ongoing programme of work at the Uppsala Religion and
Society Research Centre. Both were concerned with religion and welfare in Europe and
both deployed qualitative rather than quantitative methods. The first, Welfare and Religion
in a European Perspective (WREP), ran from 2003-06. Its goal was to analyse the role of the
historic (majority) churches as agents of welfare within the social economy of eight
European societies: Sweden, Norway, Finland, Germany, England, France, Italy and Greece.
It was financed by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation and was managed by the
Foundation Samariterhemmet in Uppsala. Twenty-five researchers were involved. In
addition to the core group in Uppsala, there were eight national teams, each of which had a
senior and ‘junior’ researcher (the latter was almost always a doctoral or post-doctoral
student). In terms of scope, it is important to note that the project encompassed all the
welfare regimes identified by Gøsta Esping-Andersen,¹ and almost all the Christian traditions present in West Europe² recognizing that welfare regimes and Christian traditions are closely interrelated. That said, Nordic finance led to a degree of Nordic dominance in the countries selected, at the expense of other interesting cases.

The second project followed on, running from 2006-09. This expanded the earlier work in two rather different ways: in addition to the eight West European countries already in the frame, the second piece of work included an additional German case and four post-communist countries: Latvia, Poland, Croatia and Romania. It also extended the work to cover a range of minorities, both religious and other. Thirty-five researchers took part. The project, Welfare and Values in Europe (WaVE), was premised on the notion that concepts such as ‘cultural identities’ and ‘values’ can best be understood by looking at the ways in which they are expressed and developed in practice. Accordingly, the project studied the interactions between different value systems as seen from the perspective of welfare. This led to a series of questions about which agencies offered what to whom, and for what reasons: the answers became critical markers of values in a given context. Or to put the same point in a different way, welfare became a prism through which to examine the core values of the society under review. WaVE was financed by the Framework 6 Programme of the European Commission and was managed by Uppsala University.

Full details of both projects, their methodologies and selected findings can be found on the website on the Uppsala’s Religion and Society Research Centre.³ It is important finally to mention one (indirect) outcome of these initiatives: they were a significant factor in the

¹ These are the social democratic model of northern Europe, the conservative model of continental Europe, and the liberal model found in Anglo-Saxon countries. See G. Esping-Andersen, The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism (Polity Press, 1990).

² That is Lutheran, Anglican, Catholic and Orthodox, but not (regrettably) Calvinist.

establishment in 2008 of a Centre of Excellence entitled ‘The Impact of Religion - Challenges for Society, Law and Democracy’. This is a ten year programme of research, involving more than forty scholars from six faculties at Uppsala University, concerned with the economic, social, political, legal and – above all – religious changes taking place in Sweden and the Nordic countries at the beginning of the 21st century. It is jointly funded by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) and Uppsala University.⁴

**Getting started**

Research projects and their personnel never exist in a vacuum. Indeed a huge amount of work takes place well before the project starts. Key is this respect is the need to identify not only the research *topic*, but the research *questions* that will underpin the subsequent enquiry. It is important, moreover, not to confuse the two: it is one thing to identify a topic; quite another to turn this into a series of questions that can be investigated empirically. Such a statement, of course, is not only true of comparative work, but is all the more important in this case in that a wide variety of scholars from different academic and intellectual situations need to agree ahead of time about the fundamental goals of their joint endeavours.

Equally important, and equally time-consuming, is the team-building. Finding eight (or more) partners in different European societies, or indeed beyond, takes both time and patience. One point, however, is crystal clear: personal acquaintance, or at the very least, personal recommendation, outweighs any other form of selection process. Comparative projects prosper when there is a high degree of mutual trust between the partners which evolves gradually. It is almost impossible to begin from scratch. Above all, it is necessary to enquire into the track records of prospective partners, asking whether they are likely to deliver what is required by the date that it is needed. The research process *as a whole* can be jeopardized if one of more partners fails to deliver.

Partners, however, are held together by a competent organization, at the head of which can be found a project leader, a key individual if ever there was one. Frequently, the same individual is responsible for the initial application for funding, recognizing that funding models vary markedly. **WREP** and **WaVE**, for example, were very different in terms of funding: the former was much more generously financed than the latter, which assumed a degree of matched funding from the universities in question. Quite apart from this, different university systems have different requirements and different support systems regarding many aspects of the research process (questions about overheads, contracts, auditing and support staff should never be taken for granted). Whatever the case, relatively large amounts of money are likely to be involved (necessarily, given the size of the enterprise), requiring careful scrutiny by the funding body, who will enquire closely about value for money. Certain funders (including the EU) may be particularly concerned about impact and the implications for policy. Matching the proposal – the research questions – to the interests of the funding body is a central to success in this respect.

**The research process**

Once underway, a comparative project can take many different forms. Clearly quantitative work is different from qualitative work – keeping in mind that my experience is limited to the latter. The following schema is not intended as typical – it is rather generic in the sense that it set out the barebones of a comparative project, in the language of the EU framework programmes.

The research process is divided into **workpackages (W/Ps)**. In the **WaVE** project, the following W/Ps were identified:

- **W/P1** State of the art – that is the work that exists so far
- **W/P2** Development of methodology
- **W/P3** Fieldwork – data collection
- **W/P4** Analysis of local data
- **W/P5** Comparative cross-country analysis
- **W/P6** Dissemination at local and national level
Each of these is built into a timeframe to ensure that the project unfolds in a timely fashion. Each moreover is overseen by a designated partner, with appropriate skills, who is responsible for the W/P in question as well as for their own case study. The security of the whole venture is paramount. Further examples of EU framework projects can be found in the Appendix. The W/Ps they have engendered can normally be found on the relevant website.

Inevitable challenges
The following list of ‘challenges’ is by no means exhaustive, but it raises a number of issues that are likely to arise in comparative work of a qualitative nature and exemplifies these from my experience in WREP and WaVE. The material is grouped under the following headings: analysis and comparison; language and dissemination; and inter-disciplinarity.

Analysis and comparison
Two points arise in this connection: the first concerns the tension between the rich, often very ‘particular’ data arising from each case study and the need to maintain sufficient common elements to pursue a convincing comparison; the second concerns the unit of comparison itself.

Regarding the former, WREP was relatively successful in terms of comparison in that the project included a series of common questions that framed the enquiry in each case study. It was also a more limited project. WaVE was more ambitious; it was also less successful in terms of comparison in that it gave more scope to the individual teams regarding the (very interesting) minorities that were selected for detailed enquiry in each case. The incorporation of the post-communist cases was also challenging in that their ‘story’ with regard to both religion and welfare in the post-war period was markedly different from the West European equivalent. The detailed comparative work remains to be done on this project, but the most likely outcome will be a series of ‘limited’ comparisons in which certain cases are selected with regard to certain variables (the presence of Islam or the
Roma for instance), rather than including all thirteen case studies every time. The four post-communist cases constitute a useful comparative frame in their own right.

Should the comparative unit necessarily be the nation state? Or to put the same point in a different way, are we subject (albeit implicitly) to a form of methodological nationalism? *WREP* and *WaVE* are once again interesting in this light, in that the focus of the enquiry in each case was a specific locality (an average-sized town) rather than the country per se. That said, both the historic churches and the welfare state in Europe are national projects (bearing in mind that the latter is in many ways a mirror image of the former) – meaning that the national framework is hard to avoid.\(^5\) It is also the ‘natural’ was of working for the EU – case studies emerge from the different member states (and indeed beyond). All that said, a key finding of both *WREP* and *WaVE* concerned the evidence of commonalities between the European towns under review in the enquiry. In many ways, this was greater than the commonalities between the national regimes – both religious and secular. It seems that towns of a certain size right across Europe have found ways of working (of caring for others) that reflect the *longue durée*, much of which pre-dates the nation state.

*Language and dissemination*

European comparative projects are necessarily multi-lingual, with a widely shared assumption that the working language will be English. The dissemination process, however, is likely to take place in a variety of contexts. Disseminating what, to whom, and in what language become therefore real questions, especially if the process incorporates engagement with and feedback from interviewees and users. In short at least some of the target audiences must be addressed in their own language – a point that is all the more important when it comes to policy implications.

That said, the ‘formal’ publications of most European projects will almost always appear in English (for better or worse). This places considerable responsibility on the native English-speakers in the team. Experience tells me that it is important to build in funding for the

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\(^5\) A research project on spirituality and well-being (as opposed to religion and welfare) would be very different in this respect, given that the institutional frameworks are less immediately relevant.
language checks that will be necessary at various stages in the project. Whenever possible the individual who does this should have a working knowledge of the field and its associated terminology.

A distinct, but related set of issues arises when it comes to finding equivalent terms in a variety of European languages. At one level this is a language or translation question – a very tricky one at times. The existence or non-existence of equivalent terms reveals, however, deeper issues, in the sense that the non-existence of a term in a particular language means more often than not, that the concept or organizational form described by that term does not exist in that country. The French term laïcité is a prime example. Broadly speaking, both the concept itself and the organisations which ensure its existence do not exist outside the French-speaking world. For this reason it is almost impossible to find a term equivalent to laïcité into most European languages.

The problem of equivalence was confronted more than once in WREP and WaVE, to the extent that time had to be devoted to it in research meetings. A solution emerged, in the sense that the ‘problem’ became in itself a research tool. If key words did not exist in one or more languages in the countries under review, it was important to ask why not. On more than one occasion this kind of questioning revealed how much can be taken for granted by an individual (including a skilled researcher), who is a native of the country in question. Only when the researcher was asked to explain the meaning of the term in more detail did the subtleties become clear. Appendix 2 in Volume 1 of the WREP material on ‘The benefits and problems of linguistic diversity in a comparative European project’ discusses this issue in more detail using examples from the work on welfare and religion.

Inter-disciplinarity
Comparative projects need not be inter-disciplinary projects, but they very often are. Projects that pertain to religion are particularly prone to be so, given that the study of religion is differently located in the academic communities of different European societies.

6 The term laïcité means the absence of religion in the public sphere – notably the state and the school system.
7 A notable exception is Turkey. The Turkish state was modelled on the French case and embodies the principle of laïcité. There is a word in Turkish for it: laiklik.
The kind of work that takes place in a Faculty of Theology in the Nordic countries, for example, takes place in a Faculty of Social Science elsewhere. It is also the case that renewed attention to religion in Europe in the current decade is leading to a series of interdisciplinary collaborations. WREP and WaVE drew together theologians, sociologists, social policy experts, political scientists and an economist. The new ‘Impact of Religion’ programme extends this collaboration to scholars of law, medicine and the hard sciences. Very similar issues arise to those outlined at the start of this paper: such collaborations are demanding but infinitely rewarding. New insights emerge but the potential for misunderstandings is considerable. For a start the assumptions made regarding the term ‘religion’ itself may be very different: what is, or is not, to be included? Different definitions of religion, moreover, very often imply very different theoretical insights and different methodological approaches. Talking at cross-purposes is, at times, almost inevitable.

The training element

WREP and WaVE were typical of many European (and indeed other) projects in that employed a variety of personnel. Specifically each case study brought together a ‘senior’ and ‘junior’ researcher with the express intention of training a new generation of researchers. Capacity building was central and very enjoyable element of both projects. Equally important was the atmosphere of mutual respect and learning integral to the research meetings – which revealed, at times frustratingly, the rather different professional codes of different European societies.

Learning on the job

Two more personal reflections conclude this outline. They can, however, be applied more generally. The first reflects my experience of working alongside French scholars. The second draws from my collaborations with American colleagues. Both, it must be said, have been extremely positive encounters.

Rather different philosophies of social science underpin the approaches of French and British social scientists – not least to the study of religion. Risking a certain amount of
generalization, the thinking of French scholars tends to be more abstract, reaching back to well-established principles and applying them to specific cases – the study of laïcité fits this pattern very clearly. Indeed the desire for a well-defined principle lies behind the notion of laïcité itself. Anglo-Saxon scholars, as indeed Anglo-Saxon politicians, are rather different: they look not so much for a principle as for a solution to a problem: an approach based largely on pragmatism. Interestingly the increasing recourse to the European Court of Human Rights to decide complex issues of equality is having an effect on British ways of thinking. No longer is ‘a traditional British compromise’ always acceptable as a solution in – say – the application of legislation pertaining to equalities. The case has to be decided one way or the other, according to the (principles of) law.

It is easy to slide into value judgements about which way of working is better or worse. That is not helpful. It is important not only to recognize the different approaches of different European societies, but to appreciate that both can be applied fairly and less fairly. The careful application of a principle leads to a sense of justice for all citizens; a less careful application of a principle can be rigid and distorting (the best becomes the enemy of the good). Pragmatic thinking can lead to optimal solutions to difficult issues. But problem solving, without due attention to guiding principles, can at times be subject to domination by those with a greater degree of power or influence at the expense of others.

My second example concerns the helpfulness or otherwise of the notion of ‘vicarious religion’. I have introduced this idea all over Europe (from the Nordic countries to the Balkans), and in virtually every situation it is not only understood by the audience in question but evokes a positive response, together with a host of examples from whatever context I am currently in. The fact that this happens repeatedly despite language differences and the need to work with an interpreter is noteworthy. Indeed the reactions of interpreters are interesting in themselves: at first somewhat baffled (this is not a common place term for most of them), they get the idea very quickly and find ways of expressing it in their own language. The response is invariably gratifying.

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In the United States, conversely, where the religious situation is very different, even an English-speaking audience finds it difficult to grasp this idea – quite clearly it does not resonate with American self-understanding. Indeed vicarious religion captures the contrast between the patterns of religion in Europe and the United States almost better than anything else – Bellah’s ‘civil religion’ is close, but it is not the same. The essential difference lies in the ‘on behalf of’ element in vicarious religion, which rests in turn on the legacy of the state church. Mentalities endure even when the institution has altered considerably. Once again this is not a question of better or worse, or of value-judgements; it offers, however, a good example of how working comparatively yields additional insights. And in this case, language is secondary to institutional legacy.

These reflections will hopefully have given some indicators of issues to reflect on in designing and conducting comparative projects. The website on which this paper is housed contains links to a number of major comparative research projects on religion, primarily funded by the European Union. Exploring the design and outputs of these is a useful resource as you continue to think about these issues, and will provide further insights into how other projects have sought to address them.