

ALL THAT HEAVENLY GLORY: A RESPONSE TO DALE CANNON'S "A POLANYIAN-PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGION"

Jacob Sherman

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ABSTRACT

I want to thank Dale Cannon for initiating and continuing this conversation and for his important, careful, and insightful work in this paper as well as in his earlier volume, Six Ways of Being Religious (1996). Cannon calls his paper "A Polanyian-Participatory Approach to the Comparative Study of Religion," a title that may suggest the ambition of the paper. His paper is not just a study of this or that figure but presents something of an intervention in a series of debates within religious studies about the proper way to conduct comparative work, if in fact any such proper comparativism exists. In order, then, to engage with Cannon's paper, I begin this response by offering a few words in part I about the scholarly debate over the very possibility of the comparative religion model as the context for Cannon's Polanyian intervention. Then, in part II, I consider some of the constructive aspects of Cannon's proposal itself, noting particularly how it responds to the problems identified in part I by shifting attention from static categories of comparison to dynamic ways of being. Finally, in part III, I prod the model a bit to see whether and how well it fulfills its promises.



I. Context: The Comparative Approach in Religious Studies

Although it was long considered the distinctive activity of religious studies scholars, in recent decades the very possibility—to say nothing of the desirability—of a comparative approach to the study of religion has often been controversial. During the last two decades of the twentieth century, a series of sophisticated critiques of the comparativist method seemed to have thrown the entire project into jeopardy. At the heart

of these various cases against the propriety of comparative religion lie three general charges: first, that the comparativist approach tends to elide differences and that this suppression of differences too easily becomes complicit in the perpetuation of certain hegemonic forms of political and cultural power; second, that the putative neutrality of the comparativist's stance often hides the covert theological and metaphysical commitments of the scholar, whether these commitments involve particular adherence to this or that explicit tradition or more general commitments, for example, to a secular sacred; and third, that the comparativist approach is insufficiently rigorous, that its pretensions to "scientificity" (to borrow a word from Foucault) are undone by its failure to provide rules capable of governing the production of comparisons. Jonathan Z. Smith's now famous essay, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," argued that the comparativist's method was essentially something like magic, a method based on a kind of homeopathic logic and a trust in the preternatural power of resemblance and similarity that is finally more impressionistic than methodical (Smith 1982). The challenges that Smith and others raised largely carried the day, more than Smith might have wished, and much of the best work in contemporary religious studies now involves the self-consciously non-comparative approaches associated with "area studies."

Nevertheless, there are reasons to think that comparativism, while perhaps down, ought hardly to be counted out. We might, for example, point to the proliferation of new research into religion from the perspective of the so-called "hard sciences." Works in the cognitive science of religion, on the one hand, or the various studies that fall under the rubric of neurotheology, on the other, all point to a kind of renewed comparativism anchoring commonality in the similar functioning and structures of human bodies and brains.¹ In this way, comparativism gains a new lease on life by doubling down on its claim to scientificity. From the other side of the academy, however, a movement that we might call the "new comparativism" has sought to revive the project by wagering instead on the humanistic aspect of the comparative enterprise. Influenced by the postmodern critiques that flourished during the last decades of the twentieth century, these scholars insist that the comparative project ought to be seen as a kind of poetic—yes, even somewhat magical—enterprise and that this characterization of the project need not disqualify it. In *A Magic Still Dwells*, an important collection for this new comparativism in religious studies, the editors Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray respond directly to the challenges Smith had earlier proposed: "We reclaim the term 'magic' to endorse and to extend [Smith's] claim that comparison is an indeterminate scholarly procedure that is best undertaken as an intellectually creative enterprise, not as a science but as an art—an imaginative and critical act of mediation and redescription in the service of knowledge" (Patton and Ray 2000, 4). Finally, instead of betting either on red or black, on this or that side of the academy's two cultures, some advocates of a new comparativism have instead suggested that the way forward lies in a return to theology. Accordingly, advocates of "comparative theology" have suggested that one might proceed both by comparing theologies and by doing theology via comparison (Clooney 2010). Here, the issue of selection and systematicity is answered by limiting one's comparison to the varying theologies and ways of doing theology operative in different communities and traditions.

II. Cannon's Intervention: Comparison and the Turn to Polanyian Common Sense

This brief history of the embattled but lively field of comparative approaches to the study of religion is warranted, for it is as an intervention in this context that the importance of Cannon's paper, and his previous work in *Six Ways* (Cannon 1996), becomes especially evident. I take Cannon's central methodological claim in the first half of the paper to be that religious studies must develop modes of inquiry proper to the tacit

component of all human, but especially religious, knowledge. That we regularly know more than we can tell is particularly evident in human *religious practice*, and this fact becomes the loose Polanyian thread on which Cannon pulls in order to reveal his ten insights into the comparative study of religion. Each of these insights seems to issue, if not logically at least suggestively, in the next until Cannon arrives at the final three insights that present a methodological re-description of the comparativist's task. These last three insights include the call for a disciplined approach to empathetic indwelling that will yield a renewed phenomenology of religion; a commitment to studying the realm of religious common sense, that is, the realm of agreement about religious life, practice, and other penultimate matters that stretches across cultures and traditions; and finally, an account of this realm of religious common sense as producing distinguishable, intelligible ways of being religious—six ways, in point of fact.

It is essential to notice that the typological framework of six ways of being religious is arrived at only after the rigorous interrogation of how human knowledge and practices work. In other words, there is no arbitrary magic involved in selecting these six ways for comparison as opposed to some others, for these six ways are borne of careful attention to the nature of human beings themselves and to the generic features involved in the human activity of producing knowledge. In this way, Cannon effectively threads the needle between the two dominant approaches to a renewed comparativism. Rather than betting either on the epistemic superiority of cognitive and sociobiological claims of the hard sciences or on the imaginative, poetic constructivist capacities of the new humanities, Cannon's approach roots comparativism in a philosophically sophisticated account of the human being and her capacities, while simultaneously recognizing that these capacities must always be actualized within the extraordinary differences of one's cultural, historic, and religious inheritance.

The commonsense ways of being religious are correlates of our common humanity—they provide, as Cannon felicitously notes, the forum of common sense-making and therefore the conditions for the possibility of making statements of universal intent. This realm of common sense is the realm of potential empathy; it is articulated by the breadth and limit of our capacity to resonate with one another. We should not mistake this for mere hermeneutics, for the realm of common sense is much larger than the realm of texts. Resonance with one another is achieved not only through our minds but with our bodies and souls as well. Drawing on Polanyi, though one could imagine that other commonsense philosophers like Reid and Peirce might also have much to contribute, Cannon's account of this realm includes a story about how persons are disciplined or formed through apprenticeship and tradition. All of this is rooted in the capacities that we share by virtue of our shared human bodies and proclivities, and in this way there is a certain resemblance between Cannon's comparativism and the comparative work that roots itself in the hard sciences.

Crucially, however, none of Cannon's commonsense powers can be essentialized, for they are, considered in themselves, mere abstractions. By virtue of their generality, the commonsense practices—the ways of being religious—that Cannon highlights belong to no one tradition. There is within each of them a kind of patience for being, a necessary incompleteness that equips them for the possibility of being multiply realized across and through cultural boundaries. On their own, however, they are nothing; they must be participatively enacted. What they point us to, therefore, are not aspects of various traditions that are *substantially* the same but rather to activities in diverse traditions that are, as Raimon Panikkar has put it, homeomorphically equivalent (1999). Two elements within diverse systems are homeomorphic equivalents when “each of them stands for something that performs an equivalent function within their respective systems.” Two homeomorphically equivalent terms are not related through a third thing but rather “play equivalent roles” or

“occupy homologous places” within the respective traditions to which they belong (Panikkar 1999, 17 and 33). Homeomorphic equivalence is thus something that can be discerned but never adequately defined—all of which points towards that tremendous realm of what we know but cannot say, that which we must perform rather than merely declare.

To put it another way, the six ways of being religious point us towards functional equivalences but not towards substantive identities. They are ways in which we can act—generically patterned but coherent relational strategies for addressing the sorts of questions regularly labeled religious. The great benefit of this, I believe, is that it allows us a framework or rather a machinery through which we can make both similarities and differences appear. We may justifiably expect to find similarities in the way diverse traditions approach matters, similarities that may subsequently become part of a general philosophical anthropology of religion. These generic functional similarities in turn allow a means of regulating our comparisons so that we genuinely compare like with like rather than engaging in the impressionistic, anarchic mode of comparison critiqued by scholars such as Jonathan Z. Smith. In comparing like with like—the way of devotion in Pure Land Buddhism, for example, with evangelical conversion-centered piety, or the way of sacred rite as evidenced in the Tea Ceremony of Rinzai Zen traditions and the Eucharistic practice of Orthodox Christians—one opens the door for perceiving similarities but even more for perceiving genuine, constructive differences between traditions. Now, however, because differences are situated within the realm of participatory religious common sense, these differences can be spoken about rather than appearing as the religious conversation stoppers that they might otherwise become. Remarkably, then, Cannon’s approach may yield both a critical advantage for scholarly study and a model for producing and sustaining inter-religious dialogue, two tasks to which comparativism has often aspired but less regularly managed to hold together.

III. Testing the Model: The Way of Reasoned Inquiry or Participatory Apophaticism

I said above that Cannon’s model *may* yield these critical and practical advantages. In order to do more than promise, Cannon attempts to demonstrate the success of his model by focusing on how one of the six ways of being religious—the way of reasoned inquiry—might be applied to a comparative study of Buddhism and Christianity. For those unfamiliar with the book on which Cannon’s paper is based, let me plug it here: one of the most valuable aspects of Cannon’s book lies in the series of case studies he presents to test out his model. Each of them engages substantively and incredibly concisely with representatives from throughout the broad traditions of Buddhism and Christianity. Invariably and impressively, each of Cannon’s studies tends to yield new insight into the traditions and figures that he engages, which I am inclined to take as providing strong *prima facie* evidence for the viability of his model.

I think this is apparent in the way Cannon engages with Nagasena and Saint Anselm. What strikes me immediately is the way that setting Nagasena and Anselm’s achievements within the model of religious common sense immediately directs Cannon to pay attention to aspects of their texts that are regularly overlooked. Rather than focusing on the “explicit products” of their exercises—i.e., their conclusions set in propositional form—Cannon chooses to focus less on claims about the ontological argument or the insubstantiality of the soul and more on the way these arguments serve to comport their participants *vis-à-vis* what they take to be ultimate reality. As Cannon insists, the conclusions of the arguments or the “explicit products of the Way of Reasoned Inquiry are important for this way of being religious, and have the meaning that they have for it, only when interpreted in the context of the ongoing tacit practice where

they have their home” (Cannon 2024, 129). Cannon’s description of their reasoning practices presents both as forms of what we might call participatory apophaticism. Both Anselm and Nagesena deploy reason in a communal and traditioned context for the purpose of bursting asunder the conceptual cages that domesticate ultimate reality and thus expose themselves to its thrall. There is more than a little resemblance here to Wittgensteinian philosophical *therapeia* but also to Bergson’s account of open religion, the important recent work of Pierre Hadot on ancient philosophy, Denys Turner on the medieval mystics, and many others as well.

Cannon’s attention to the subtlety and force of his figures’ arguments is impressive. For example, Cannon avoids the error of so many Anselmians when he rightly marks an important distinction in Anselm’s text. “Both nibbāna and God,” writes Cannon, “are not ‘the greatest’ on the scale, which would simply be the topmost point on the scale. Rather is the scale a pointer to infinite greatness, infinite goodness, infinite perfection” (2024, 15 insert new TAD page 136). This points to an aspect of the *Proslogion* that many Anselm scholars—and most of the philosophers who have engaged his text—have been extremely slow to recognize. For many of Anselm’s readers, the entire argument turns around Anselm’s “definition” of God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” However, this cannot be the centerpiece of Anselm’s work because this formula is abandoned in chapters fourteen and fifteen when Anselm comes to the crucial realization that God is greater than that than which nothing greater can be conceived: “Lord, not only are You that than which a greater cannot be thought, but You are also something greater than can be thought.”² In other words, Anselm comes to realize that God is greater than that than which nothing greater can be conceived. How do we make sense of this? I have argued previously that the unity of the *Proslogion* only reveals itself when we understand it as a performative text motivated by what we might call the adorative vector of thought.³ Anselm understands that the relationship of thought to God is an ecstatic relationship that can only be expressed by indicating a precise trajectory rather than a stable conclusion. Because God is greater than that which nothing greater can be thought, our reasoning at best can trace only a kind of asymptotic vector that launches us towards God but never secures God’s arrival in the form of a concept. Much more could be said about Anselm’s remarkable text, but what I am concerned to point out here is simply that Cannon’s method has allowed him to discern a normally quite neglected aspect of this masterpiece. His method, in other words, apparently does real work for the interpreter on the ground. This is no small achievement.

A good respondent should do more than celebrate, however, so I want to conclude by pointing to a certain hesitation I have with Cannon’s treatment of Nagesena and Anselm. Rather than seeing this worry of mine as a direct consequence of Cannon’s method, I see it more as indicating areas in which the method might be pressed towards even greater consistency and rigor. So it is that I mark my concern here in the hope of prodding the sort of further attention and refinement through which progress is sometimes made.

What worries me is this: for all of the insight that Cannon achieves into his two figures, I am still concerned that his comparative reading of them may render them too similar. I did not expect this to be the case. I expected that in a comparison of two figures engaged in similar forms of religious common sense, their differences might become more apparent, but I am concerned that the opposite may in fact have occurred. I understand that Cannon notes the similarities between the *Milindapañha* and the *Proslogion* in order, perhaps, to show the shared aspects of Nagesena and Anselm’s respective commonsense practices, but this seems to me somewhat wrongheaded. If the ways of being religious are to be conceived, as Cannon suggests, more like “tool[s] or probe[s], [that] extend one’s reach into regions otherwise not accessible,”

(Cannon 2024, 125) then surely our attention should be on the transcendent, dilating world thus disclosed rather than on the commonalities of our tools. I cannot help but remember here my first viewing of *Enter the Dragon* when I was around thirteen. Bruce Lee slaps a student's finger and instructs him, "It is like a finger pointing at the moon. Do not concentrate on the finger or you will miss all of the heavenly glory!" Everything depends on which way the finger is pointing, the heavenly glory to which it orients our sight. We point the tool in a certain direction, but, like symbols, the meaning for which we employ it manifests only as the focal integration of the complex particulars that we tacitly indwell. I believe it was C. S. Lewis who somewhere remarked that the similarities scholars find between religions is rather like the similarities participants might mark when taking a sea voyage. The experience of those aboard two ships leaving their berths will likely be very similar, even though one sails for Alaska and the other the Galapagos!

Perhaps I could put it this way: although Cannon suggests some resemblances, I am not convinced that the events involved in realizing *anatman* on the one hand and the *imago Dei* on the other are identical (which, to be fair, Cannon never claims) or even analogous. I have no doubt that the processes by which these events are elicited are homeomorphically equivalent, but the functional equivalence of such processes of formation may yield very different results. Here, I think, Cannon's own method might have suggested a bit more caution. Rather than focusing on the tantalizing prospect of the ultimate realities that Anselm and Nagasena claim to have disclosed—that is, either *nibbana* or God—one might linger a bit longer in the realm of the penultimate. What are the characteristics of the *imago Dei* that Anselm is led to realize; what characteristics can be predicated (even paradoxically) of Nagasena's non-self? In other words, if the six ways of being religious are rooted in ways of acting and being disciplined as human beings, ought we not to expect that their primary artisanal product will lie in the formation of particular types of human beings? What kind of selves are formed through these texts and practices? How do they differ? Does it not matter that one aims to produce lives conformed to the pattern of a particular historical man (Christ as the concrete universal) while the other aims at something more metaphysically austere?

Both Anselm and Nagasena follow the path of reasoned inquiry through to a series of arguments that they believe have universal intent. This makes them fit for comparison, but Cannon also notes the differences in their "tone." One might read this difference in tone as rooted in different ways of performing reasoned inquiry. Arguably, for Nagasena, the way of reasoned inquiry is more straightforwardly apophatic, rooted in a somewhat more resolute practice of negation. For Anselm, by contrast, who knew Augustine but not yet Pseudo-Dionysius, the way of reason is apophatic only by virtue of its radical affirmation. This may account for the *Proslogion's* exuberance or impassioned quality, as compared to the *Milindapañha's* cooler mode of presentation. I am not suggesting that we oppose these two models for the formation of the self as if one were right and the other wrong. Rather, the point is to shed light on the different processes and products of formation—what Foucault (1986) called *les pratiques de soi*—and only then to ask what these different modes of formation allow one to see.

There is every reason to believe that insight into ultimacy is governed by accessibility conditions, some of which may not depend on us at all but rather on the spinning of Fortuna's wheel, the complexities of karma that transcend individual biographies, or the dispensations of grace, but some of these accessibility conditions will certainly involve what a particular kind of self may or may not be able to perceive. The question of ultimacy can therefore be addressed in many ways—it can be evaluated politically, philosophically, theologically, etc.—but to the extent that the question of ultimacy is adjudicated by appeal to the religious experience (a religious experience that is always the experience of a particular kind of self), it seems to me

that it must be qualified by the prior question of how and in what way the selves capable of such experience are formed. This would involve attending even more fully than Cannon has done in this paper to the complex, particular set of practices that fill out the patience for being in the generic way of reasoned inquiry. I can imagine a Polanyian comparison of Anselm and Nagasena that would detail the bodily, psychosemantic, and spiritual regimens of their respective monastic communities and would relate these regimens to the particular genres they employed in their writings. The *Milindapañha* is written as a third person dialogue, for example, while the *Proslogion* is written in the first person form of prayerful reasoning. These differences surely encode both different models of and models for their respective communities of practice. Selves formed according to one tradition may pick out particularly subtle aspects of reality that might remain opaque to selves formed in a different tradition, but only a thick description of the practices of formation can unveil these differences.

The tools for such a thicker account are largely present already in Cannon's programmatic vision, but I am not sure they are entirely actualized as yet. The promise of Cannon's Polanyian approach to comparative religion both for producing critical insight and interreligious understanding is great, and I raise these gentle concerns only in the hope of further refining and clarifying how this model might best be engaged, strengthened, and set to further use.

Endnotes

¹On the cognitive science of religion, see Justin L. Barrett (2011), *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology: From Human Mind to Divine Minds*; Luther H. Martin (2010), "Religion and Cognition," in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John R. Hinnells (London; New York: Routledge); Scott Atran (2002), *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion, Evolution and Cognition* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press). For an introduction to the neurotheological approach, see Andrew B. Newberg and Ebooks Corporation (2010), "Principles of Neurotheology," in *Ashgate Science and Religion Series* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.).

²Anselm, *Proslogion* §14.

³Cf. Sherman (2014), *Partakers of the Divine: Contemplation and the Practice of Philosophy*.

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