

A cross-cultural religiology between reductionism and anti-reductionism

**Author:**Guicai Wang¹ **Affiliation:**¹School of Philosophy, Hangzhou City University, Hangzhou, China**Corresponding author:**

Guicai Wang, growth35@aliyun.com

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'Religion' has been subjected to two kinds of reduction: one from the various branches of religious studies, the other being the mutual 'reduction' among religions. We advocate a cross-cultural religiology and try to take a middle path between reductionism and anti-reductionism, responding to both kinds of reduction separately. As for the former reduction, we agree with a moderate reduction of religion by various religious disciplines on the one hand, and on the other hand, we propose to respect the religious whole as an integrate human activity, and try to learn to face and study religion with a holistic attitude and method. For the latter reduction, we propose three points to overcome the merely reductive cognitive approach in inter-religious understanding without falling into some kind of anti-intellectualism. Firstly, we insist that we should face the other religions with a pluralistic confidence without giving up understanding, and engage both 'dialogical dialogue' and 'dialectical dialogue' with other religions. Secondly, we advocate learning from the wisdom of Buddha, Confucius and Jesus, giving priority to practice, and being concerned about our most urgent life practice of the moment. Thirdly, we propose that cross-cultural research can be carried out thematically, which is exemplified with the author's cross-cultural research on 'the other shore'.

Contribution: In the field of religious studies, there is constant dispute between reductionism and anti-reductionism. This article tries to place cross-cultural religiology between reductionism and anti-reductionism, avoid the debate between the two, emphasise the integrity of religion as a whole human activity, and propose some practical and usable methods for cross-cultural religiology, hoping to have some inspiration for academic colleagues.

Keywords: cross-cultural religiology; reductionism; anti-reductionism; a middle path; a holistic method; inter-religious understanding; dialogical dialogue; dialectical dialogue; practice; the other shore.

Introduction

Compared with the subjects of sociology, anthropology and other humanistic disciplines, the subject of religiology is special: the former (i.e., society, human beings, etc.) is easy to be recognised as an objective object, however, the latter (i.e., religion) is not so. The reason for this is that 'religion' has been subjected to two kinds of 'reduction': Firstly, religion is being reduced to 'non-religion' in the most disciplines of religious studies. Those disciplines have adopted a reductionist attitude and method towards religion, believing that religion can be reduced to non-religious elements on the level of sociology, psychology, anthropology, culture... and then nothing is left that can be ascribed as 'religion itself'. Therefore, paradoxically, since the establishment of religiology as a discipline, there are actually various branches of religious studies, such as religious anthropology, religious sociology, religious psychology, and even religious culturology, but there is no real 'religiology'.

Secondly, religion is being reduced to 'non-religion' among religions: only ones' own religion is a true religion, and other 'religions' are not. Although this reduction has been hidden from view in public under the current public opinion guided by political correctness, which advocates pluralism, it is still deeply rooted and prevails within most religions.

Cross-cultural religiology does not endorse either of those two reductionist positions, but it does not fall into an outright anti-reductionism either. In other words, its position is between reductionism and anti-reductionism. Cross-cultural religiology chooses to take a middle path, which does not merely mean a kind of reconciliation between those two opposite positions, but an attempt to find a few suitable approaches according to the nature both of religion and human being. We want to advocate a kind of cross-cultural religiology between reductionism and

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anti-reductionism, and will respond separately to the two kinds of reduction made with religion.

Religion as a subject of study: What is irreducible?

As for religion as a subject of study, cross-cultural religiology admits that it is somewhat reducible, to a certain extent and from some certain perspectives. Indeed, we can and also need to view, analyse and explore lots of religious phenomena from the perspectives of sociology, psychology, anthropology, and may more. Therefore, we do not mean to deny the significance and value of various branches of religious studies. However, this reduction should not be pushed to the extreme. Any researcher should at least retain the last trace of humility in front of his or her subject: I am really unable to fully exhaust you!

Cross-cultural religiology tends to listen more closely to the voices of religious people themselves, to stand beneath them and understand them (to borrow a word puzzle played by Raimon Panikkar: to understand something means to stand under it). In this regard, cross-cultural religiology basically agrees with the contemporary religious scholars such as Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), W.C. Smith (1916–2000) and Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990), who voiced a non-reductionist understanding of religion.

Rudolf Otto led us to notice an ‘extra’ irrational element in the divine conception beyond the moral and rational elements, what he called the ‘numinous’. He emphasised that ‘there is no religion in which it does not live as the real innermost core, and without it no religion would be worthy of the name’ (Otto 1924:6).

Mircea Eliade (1958) strongly argued that:

[A] religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it – the element of the sacred. (p. xi)

W.C. Smith insisted that:

[T]he fragmentation of ‘disciplines’...was a bad thing: perhaps we have found that we can chop up our lives in this way, but what right does this give us so to treat the lives of others? (Sharp 2003:283)

He pointed out that:

[W]hat is needed, on the religious plane, is the ability to see the religious traditions from the inside – and that means, not alongside the other ‘factors’ in a man’s life, but over-arching them. (Smith 1964:51)

Nishitani Keiji also suggested that ‘the religious quest alone is the key to understanding it; there is no other way’

(Keiji 1983:2). And he interpreted the religious quest as ‘man’s search for true reality in a real way (that is, not theoretically and not in the form of concepts, as we do in ordinary knowledge and philosophical knowledge)’ (Keiji 1983:6).

However, somewhat different from some specific opinions of several of those predecessors about the irreducibility of religion, we do not tend to look for some irreducible element in religion, but rather to emphasise that religion as a whole, as a whole human activity, cannot be completely reduced. Religion as a whole needs to be respected. Religion as a whole corresponds to man¹ as a whole. The human religious activity as a whole is symbolic, not merely conceptual, and therefore cannot be completely reduced through conceptual work such as analysis and abstraction. In this regard, even the most radical critics of religion, such as Marx and Engels (2005), affirmed with sympathy:

It is only because the content of spontaneous religions is of human origin that it has some reason to be respected at some point; Only to realize that the roots of even the most absurd superstitions reflect the eternal nature of man... Only the awareness of this can make the history of religion... not be totally denied, nor be forgotten forever. (pp. 520–521)

Cross-cultural religiology focusses on religion as a whole, on the living symbols and symbolic activities of religions, and on the study of them, believing that these are the parts of religion as a subject of study that cannot be completely reduced. From this, one can also draw an extended conclusion: a real religiology is expected to be really established, and it is of great significance.

However, because cross-cultural religiology, as a real religiology, attempts to focus on religion as a whole, its approach must be different from that of the various branches of religious studies with a reductionist stance. In contrast to those disciplines, cross-cultural religiology requires a holistic approach. Raimon Panikkar, a prominent pioneer in the field of cross-cultural research, has long been aware of this, and we can share some of his relevant insights here:

- ‘The Whole requires a holistic approach’ (Panikkar 2010:227).
- ‘The Whole is not the totality’ (Panikkar 2010:51). We approach the Whole not by ‘looking for a “common denominator”’, ‘as if the Whole were what is common to all’. In fact, ‘this commonality can only be a formal concept abstracted from the immense variety of beings’ (Panikkar 2010:51).
- A holistic attempt is not a global one and not about offering a system (Panikkar 2010:55).
- ‘The holistic attempt tries to “reach” the Whole not by a dialectical synthesis, but by means of an immediate contact with the Whole, defying the dualistic subject/object epistemology’ (Panikkar 2010:48).

1.This article follows Raimon Panikkar’s use of ‘man’: he used the word ‘man’ to mean a man without distinction between men and women. He believed that referring to a person as a member of the human race reduced the dignity and uniqueness of the person. Therefore, he chose to use the word ‘man’ to mean a person with personal dignity and wholeness. The author agrees with him and adopts his usage.

- In fact, we do not see the Whole itself in which we are in; we see the Whole in the part, in the concrete. We see the Whole by opening ourselves up to an image, an icon that reflects the Whole (Panikkar 2010:47).
- Words in religions are not just concepts, but symbols. Because 'a symbol is symbol only for those who recognize it as a symbol' (Panikkar 2010:406), only when we participate in the symbol with goodwill and love, can we truly appreciate its meaning (cf. Panikkar 2020).

As can be seen, cross-cultural religiology takes a holistic stance and approach that is clearly distinct from the reductionist stance and approach of the various branches of religious studies. Thus, it is extremely challenging for religious researchers, and especially, as Raimon Panikkar has said, it demands 'purification of the heart' (Panikkar 2010:64). That is to say, we should prepare ourselves so that we may be prepared to face religions with a holistic attitude, and 'discover everything as a center and not as an isolated atom' (Panikkar 2010:64). It is only in this way that religions will show us their ultimate irreducibility and wholeness.

Inter-religious understanding: What is approachable?

As for the mutual 'reduction' among religions, cross-cultural religiology will point out, on the one hand, that this 'reduction', in a sense, is because of arrogance and ignorance about other's religion, and on the other hand, we also recognise that this 'reduction' is deeply rooted in our human epistemology, because every human knower tends to know things within his or her own cognitive framework. The question, therefore, is: how is it possible to break out of this merely reductive cognitive approach in inter-religious understanding without falling into some kind of anti-intellectualism? To this end, we try to offer a few constructive suggestions:

Firstly, to insist on facing other's religion with a pluralistic confidence without giving up understanding. A real pluralism is not encompassing multiple systems with a super-system, but a cosmic confidence that there are also important paths to be human in other religions and cultures, each as a valuable source for us to absorb. For this reason, we try to open our hearts to other's religion and to be as open and receptive as possible, obtain as much data about it as possible. This is a never-ending process that requires humility and openness. We can do this by learning about other's religion's past and present, reading its scriptures and their interpretive traditions, visiting its holy places, and even trying to experience its religious practices by ourselves. In this effort to understand other's religion, we must, on the one hand, be aware of our own possible prejudices about it, and on the other hand, not suppress our possible doubts and criticisms of it, but try to deal with them in our continuous dialogue with other's religion.

In Raimon Panikkar's words, we are here to participate in both 'dialogical dialogue' and 'dialectical dialogue' (cf. Panikkar 1999). Dialectical dialogue takes reason as the arbiter and accepts the dominance of the law of non-contradiction in our cognitive activity. In engaging in dialectical dialogue with other's religion, we try to gain its intellectual intelligibility and reasonable logic. But Panikkar reminds us that reason has its limits and should not go beyond its limits, and that we cannot frame reality by thinking. The dialogical dialogue is to acknowledge that being is 'bigger' than thinking, to see the encounter with other's religion as a personal, and integral encounter in which we do not merely understand other's religion by using reason and observing the principles of logic, but to try to with our own wholeness listen to our dialogue partner as a personal and whole being, as a non-objectifiable 'Thou', not as an objectifiable 'it'. We rely on the dynamics of reality itself, with as little manipulation as possible, and we rely on confidence, not just theory. Dialogical dialogue limits, complements, and transcends dialectical dialogue, promising to lead inter-religious dialogue to a sufficient depth, to make inter-religious understanding a process that is both faithful and creative.

Secondly, to give priority to practice, and to be concerned about our most urgent life practice of the moment. As Goethe's famous saying goes, 'Green is the tree of Life; gray is all theory', theory may be complex, difficult and be likely to lead one astray, but the practice of life needs our direct and present commitment. We believe that Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus can give us a wise reminder here, that is, we must keep focussing on practice and give priority to practice.

In his four Noble Truths, Buddha directs people to focus on 'contacts', or our physical and mental experiences, prompting us to solve the problem of suffering at the level of physical and mental experience itself. He refused to join the endless debate about the question 'pain is created by oneself or by another', which was so popular among many sects of his time. He pointed out that no matter what people believed, they would recognise the fact that 'in each case that (pleasure and pain) is conditioned by contact' (Bodhi 2000:561). That is to say, pain and pleasure occur at the physical and mental level and are produced in accordance with our physical and mental experiences. Therefore, he taught his disciples to pay attention to their present physical and mental experiences and to renounce their attachment to them at the level of experiences itself, thereby freeing their hearts and ultimately freeing themselves from their physical and mental sufferings.

Buddha also refused to be drawn into metaphysical debates, remaining silent on such metaphysical questions as 'the world is eternal or not eternal', 'the world is finite or infinite', 'the soul and the body are the same' or 'the soul is one thing and the body another' and 'after death a Tathāgata exists or does not exist'. He pointed out to his disciples that people's arguments on these issues are often out of attachment, which are not conducive to liberation and are harmful. On the

contrary, he hoped that his disciples would keep in silence as he did, and would not be entangled in metaphysical issues (cf. Bodhi 2000:1841–1843). Instead, he taught them to focus on observing the present suffering rising at the level of the present physical and mental experiences, and practice the way he taught to eliminate suffering.

Confucius also emphasised the priority of practice. It is said that he once remarked:

‘A young man, when at home, should be a good son; when out in the world, a good citizen. He should be circumspect and truthful. He should be in sympathy with all men, but intimate with men of moral character. If he has time and opportunity to spare, after the performance of those duties, he should then employ them in literary pursuits.’ (*The Analects*, chapter 1)

It is obvious that he put the practice of virtue before the study of culture.

Among Confucius’ disciples, Zixia was known early on for his erudition and liking-learning, but Confucius gradually made Zixia understand the need to ‘inquire with earnestness and reflect with self-application’ (*The Analects*, chapter 12). He went on to follow his teacher in saying the following:

‘A man who can love worthiness in man as he loves beauty in woman; who in his duties to his parents is ready to do his utmost, and in the service of his prince is ready to give up his life; who in intercourse with friends is found trustworthy in what he says, – such a man, although men may say of him that he is an uneducated man, I must consider him to be really an educated man.’ (*The Analects*, chapter 1)

Jesus equally emphasised practice when he pointed out that ‘not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven’. (Mt 7:21) Jesus’ teaching on love advocates that we act out our love right now in our neighbours who happen to come across us (see Lk 10:29–37).

If we focus on practice together with others, we will readily reduce many redundant and unnecessary theoretical disputes, and we can make our research serve practice and devote ourselves to the search for the truly meaningful ‘knowledge’ of practice.

Thirdly, to propose that cross-cultural research can be carried out thematically. In line with what was said earlier about the need of studying the symbols in various religions in cross-cultural religiology, and taking Raimon Panikkar’s suggestions, we propose that we can pick out lots of meaningful words or symbols one by one from the religions and carry out cross-cultural research thematically. Raimon Panikkar wrote on many words or symbols, such as Philosophy (see Panikkar 2000), Human Rights (see Panikkar 1995), Rhythm (see Panikkar 2010), Christ (see Panikkar 2016a), Dharma (see Panikkar 2016b), and many more. And we ourselves also have just done a cross-cultural, inter-religious study on the subject of ‘the Other Shore’ (see Sizhu 2023).

Unlike the thematic studies carried out by religious phenomenology, cross-cultural religiology does not assume ‘cultural universals’. We agree with Raimon Panikkar that there are no cultural universals, only human invariants. ‘Death and eating, speaking and sleeping, reasoning and believing are practiced and understood very differently in different cultural and anthropological constellations of meaning’ (Panikkar 2010:299). These human invariants are practised in different symbolic ways in different cultures. Thematic cross-cultural research allows us to avoid the reductionist/anti-reductionist debate and, with our concern for the most fascinating religious and cultural themes, to explore the most interesting and exciting parts of every religious tradition, to dig into the deep soil in which symbols grow, and thus to try to restore in our minds the whole of other’s religion.

Let’s take our cross-cultural research on the subject of ‘the other shore’ as an example. Firstly, we notice that going beyond ‘this shore’ (as the symbol of our human predicament in the world) and seeking ‘the other shore’ (as the symbol for the overcoming of our human predicament) can be said to be a human invariant: man will always be aware of his existential predicament, and aspire to transcend his finitude, long to overcome his morality, and pursue some kind of eternity and infinity. We therefore discover that each religious tradition has developed its own vision of the other shore and the way to reach it. And at the same time, in order to overcome the infinite distance caused by the qualitative difference between this shore and the other side, different religions have provided their own modes for connecting this and other shores.

The Jews long to live in the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, which God has promised them. They believe that the way to reach it is by keeping on their covenant with God, by relying on God’s guidance and revelation. And since the time of Moses, keeping the rules of the law has become the expression of covenant-keeping. The Jews rely on their God with faith, believing that only by the power of the Lord God could they cross from this shore to the other. As the Jewish connection between this shore and the other shore is believed to be made by the powerful doing of God, therefore we can call it the ‘faith mode’.

Christianity takes ‘the Kingdom of Heaven’ as the other shore. As how to get to it, Jesus’s teaching is to love God, to love one’s neighbour, to repent, and to transform one’s own life. Faith in God is particularly stressed. But later, Christianity gradually established a Christ-centred orthodox creed, taking Jesus Christ as the central object of belief, and explaining the attributes, status and functions of Jesus Christ from a theological perspective. In Christian theology, Jesus is emphasised as both a God and a man, and he is regarded as the mediator between God and man. Accordingly, the only way for people to arrive at the Kingdom of Heaven is through Jesus Christ. In Orthodox Christianity, the connection between this shore and the other shore depends on Jesus

Christ, who is the intermediary of the two, and he acts as the mediator to ensure the connection between the two ends. Therefore, the mode followed by Christianity can be called the 'mediator mode'.

The other shore that Hinduism envisions is a kind of liberation named as *Sacchidānanda*, also *sat-cit-ananda* (a triad of truth-wisdom-bliss), or a union with Brahma, the ultimate reality. It is believed that to realise the true Self within oneself is the way to the other shore, because Atman, the true self within man, is itself identical with the Great Brahma, itself eternal, omniscient, and blissful. In this sense, the liberation that man seeks is already inherent in this Brahmanic self. In order to make oneself realise his or her innermost self or Brahma, Hinduism teaches four yogas: jnana yoga, bhakti yoga, karma yoga, and raja yoga. Through practising at least one of those yogas, one can be freed from samsara and achieve liberation. We can call Hinduist mode for connecting this-other shores an 'inward-verification mode', that is, Hinduism believes that the other shore (liberation) is just within a person, and can be directly verified in one's inner depths.

Buddhism also takes liberation as the other shore, but early Buddhism tended to refer to liberation by the negative term 'nirvana', which literally means the extinguishing of the flame of suffering. In contrast to Hinduism's inward search for the true Self, Buddha took another approach. He advocated starting with the present physical and mental experiences known as the five aggregates (which include form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness) or the six contacts (eye-contact, ear-contact, nose-contact, tongue-contact, body-contact, intellect-contact), and observing the three characteristics of the experiences as they arise, that is, impermanence, suffering, and non-self, and in this way to get rid of one's attachment to his or her own physical and mental experiences, and achieve liberation from the suffering. Buddha did not resort to metaphysical systems or complex theories, but only tried to start working at the level of physical and mental experiences. The mode for connecting this-other-shores he followed can be called the 'extinction mode', in which the extinction of the attachment to physical and mental experiences leads to the extinction of suffering, and thus to the liberation.

Taking the other shore as the theme of cross-cultural research on these religions, we can find that 'pursuit of the other shore', a human invariant, is practised very differently in these different religions. These different ways are incommensurable and cannot be unified by some higher 'one'. However, as a matter of fact, we can also see that the same religion can move from one way to another, from one this-other-shores connecting mode to another. Take the Buddhist tradition for example. In its later development, on the one hand, has mostly moved towards an 'inward-verification mode' (e.g. the Mahayana schools that advocate man's self-realisation), and on the other hand, it has even been supplemented by a certain 'mediator mode' (such as Pure Land Buddhism). This is very

enlightening for us to understand the diversity and also the common ground of religions.

Of course, in keeping with our own position between reductionism and anti-reductionism, our thematic cross-cultural research, while committed to intellectual understanding, does not absolutize our understanding, but is willing to exercise self-restraint and remain open. We realise that our research is heuristic and open-ended. The possibility of openness lies in our sense of humility and constant dialogue with the other.

Conclusion

In the field of religious studies, there is a never-ending debate between the so-called reductionists and the anti-reductionists. We advocate cross-cultural religiology, hoping to avoid an oversimplification of religion by some kind of reductionism, and also resist the temptation of anti-intellectualism from some kind of anti-reductionism. We respect the integrity and ultimate irreducibility of all religions, and try to understand the integrity of each religion with our own integrity, insist on deep dialogue with other's religion, promote mutual cooperation and enrichment between different religions, and ultimately work together to achieve a new kind of human fullness that is so fortunately characteristic of our time.

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G.W. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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