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## The Journal of Religion

LINCOLN, BRUCE. *Apples and Oranges: Explorations In, On, and With Comparison*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. xii+335 pp. \$105.00 (cloth); \$35.00 (paper).

This book defies ordinary genre classifications of academic monographs. It is not a comprehensive treatment of one particular problem or an extended exploration of one particular argument, nor is it simply a collection of previously published essays. As Bruce Lincoln explains, the book “does not claim to be comprehensive or systematic. Rather, it reflects my decades-long engagement with the problem” of comparative practice (3). While six of thirteen chapters were published previously (one in French), seven are new. The first section has three chapters with “general observations” on comparison; all other chapters discuss comparative cases.

Formatted in an original way, the introductory chapter is a scholarly meditation on the comparability of apples and oranges that is interspersed, typographically distinguished, with biographical notes on Lincoln’s concern with comparison from his earliest interest in the study of religion to his current thinking. The two narratives are in conversation with each other until they merge, at the end, into a programmatic statement about problematic and productive ways of comparison. Here Lincoln introduces “weak comparison,” a practice that is explained in greater detail and contrasted with “strong” or “grand comparison” in the following two chapters. He identifies three types of “grand comparison”: the universalizing (claiming to reveal universal patterns), the genetic (claiming to reveal a genetic relation with a remote past), and the diffusionist (claiming to show transmission of traits across different cultures and time), all of which appear problematic. Lincoln prefers comparisons “of weaker and more modest sorts” (27), but since these are “weak” only when juxtaposed against the former types, the attribute may be misleading. Clearly, what Lincoln calls “weak” comparisons are studies that he deems strong—analytically, methodologically, and ethically. They are “inquiries that are modest in scope, but intensive in scrutiny, treating a small number of examples in depth and detail, setting each in its full and proper context” (11). It may be asked if modesty should also extend to contextualization, which, it seems, can never be “fully” comprehensive. Furthermore, identifying a comparand and delineating it within its context makes a certain degree of decontextualization inevitable.

The chapters in the second section discuss “recent attempts at grand comparison” and demonstrate the problems of such approaches. The first is Carlo Ginzburg’s claim, based on his comparison of witchcraft cases in Europe and Asia, that “shamanism” spread (diffused) from Central Asia to all over Europe. The second is Michael Witzel’s (genetic) attempt to trace back the myths of mankind to two sources and geographical regions. A closer look at the consulted sources shows that these conclusions are unproductive and misleading at best and essentializing and distorting at worst.

The remaining nine chapters present individual case studies that productively employ “weak comparison.” The first set includes homological/relational comparisons whose scope is contextual. The comparands in these studies are (historically, culturally, linguistically) related to each other, and they are situated in one context, namely that of the ancient Scythians and Greeks. By contrast, the second set includes analogical comparisons whose scope is cross-cultural and trans-historical. Here the comparands are situated in different cultural and temporal contexts and historically unrelated: the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* and medieval Zoroastrian texts; medieval Scandinavia and early twentieth-century Nigeria; anarchists and fascists during the Spanish Civil War and the actors in the Lakota uprising of 1890; Herodotus and origin myths of the Acoma Pueblo Indians.

All these individual studies forcefully demonstrate the analytical strength of Lincoln’s approach. Let me add a few more observations about his methodology. Dissatisfied with “grand” approaches, he champions, first and foremost, comparison at a micro

level. While the scale of those “grand” comparisons is certainly conducive to drawing essentializing and universalizing conclusions, it seems that it is primarily those conclusions that make the studies problematic—conclusions that micro comparisons, merely by virtue of their scale, are not immune to either. Exposing and rejecting the acts of essentializing and universalizing rather than certain scale levels seems more useful. Second, unlike postcolonialist critics who feel that the use of Western categories inevitably distorts non-Western cultures, Lincoln embraces analogical, cross-cultural comparison and demonstrates its analytical strength. Even more, he is critical of a type of comparison that those scholars prefer, namely one that seeks to trace diffusion or “genetic” dependencies. I would contend that homological (or genealogical) comparisons that trace, for example, the adaptation of Western concepts (like “religion”) in non-Western cultures or other transcultural flows can be productive too, as long as they abstain from making essentializing or universalizing claims. Third, taking a closer look at the comparands and the *tertium comparationis*, one notices that most of Lincoln’s comparands are narratives that may broadly be classified as “myths.” Clearly, his “weak comparison” could be productively used on other comparands too, such as doctrinal tenets, religious artwork, monastic law, architecture, ascetic practice, etc. The *tertium comparationis*, the common aspect with regard to which he compares, is often related to power struggles and social and economic (in)equality. Clearly, other *tertia* could be studied on that micro level as well. Finally, in his studies Lincoln employs both an illuminative mode (by which one comparand illuminates the other) and a taxonomic mode (by which identified analogies enrich our understanding of phenomena and processes that are not unique to one context). Although Lincoln is rarely explicit about it, his studies in the latter mode make important contributions to theorizing categories such as envy/greed, apocalyptic visions (progressive and recursive), egalitarianism, and hierarchy.

While it is important to recognize that other scale levels, scopes, types of comparands, and *tertia* can yield productive and responsible results too, Lincoln’s comparative approach surely works extremely well. Thoroughly researched, elegantly written, concisely discussing the main argument in the text and the evidence in (extensive and substantial) notes, each comparative chapter is an exemplary study. Every self-identifying scholar of religion, no matter their field of interest, will be intrigued by these fascinating and instructive studies (which, along the way, also strengthen one’s familiarity with the ancient Scythians, the Acoma Pueblo, Herodotus, the Lakota Ghost dance, and much more). They impressively demonstrate what comparison is able to do.

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