

How Should We Study Religion?

Questions of study or investigation are questions concerning methodology. Kessler discusses 4 main types of methodologies in his chapter.

1. Historical
2. Comparative
3. Social Scientific
4. Philosophical.

What I find useful out of this discussion is the differing aims or goals of each of these academic investigations. Kessler is correct when he claims that all four types of methodologies aim at description, interpretation, explanation, and evaluation of the subject matter of religion. With that said, the differences in these methodologies should be discussed further.

Historical investigations: The historian's task is to establish the facts in an effort to reconstruct "what really happened". The facts are selected from a vast array of possible sources. The historian selects the accounts or evidence that she deems appropriate and relevant, based on some principles of choice. The choice of relevant data will depend, in large part, on the kinds of questions the historian puts to the past. There may be some overlap here with other disciplines: for example: who wrote what, when, why, and whom? These overlap the domain of linguistics and literature. Other possible overlaps might include sociology, anthropology, economics, culture, or environmental factors. The historian calls on nontextual sources as well, such as archaeology, geography, etc. Modern historical science has helped the student of religion to distinguish historical occurrences from myths, legends, and tales, but also how religions have developed and how these traditions may differ from the earlier expressions of that religion.

Comparative investigations attempt to find commonalities between various religions with the goal of explaining religious phenomena. One must caution against overgeneralizations or sweeping generalizations. But, when used effectively, comparative investigations aim at uncovering the meaning behind religion by looking at how one religion uses, say, ritual for the vehicle of religious meaning, and how another religion uses the same thing for another form of religious meaning. Comparative investigations tend to be reductionist in nature. Meaning that the truth of the matter lies not in what one particular religion says or does, but in how religions use various techniques for expressing religious meaning.

Social Scientific investigations tend to be reductionist in another way. This tends to reduce religious meaning to the principles of the social science in question. The social scientific methodology might be useful as a critical tool, but one must be on guard against the tendency here to obscure the religious subject matter.

Philosophical investigations tend to examine the truth claims of the religion by various means. Some of which are the use of logic, hermeneutics, phenomenology, historical-literary method, etc.

Depending on the method the philosopher uses in the investigation, the types of questions will vary. What is important to realize in the philosophical approach is that not only are we attempting to understand the religious phenomena, but also be critical of the truth of the claims advanced. Kessler cautions the reader to be aware that philosophers will also attempt to see whether the claims of any religion are verifiable, that is, are they true.