

Article

Implications of Micro-Scale Comparisons for the Study of Entangled Religious Traditions: Reflecting on the Comparative Method in the Study of the Dynamics of Christian-Muslim Relations at a Shared Sacred Site

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Abstract: This article applies the comparative methodology proposed by Oliver Freiberger to a case study on Christian-Muslim relations at a shared sacred site in Antakya (formerly Antioch), which belongs to Hatay, the southernmost city of Turkey. Specifically, this case study deals with the veneration of the Muslim saint Habib-i Neccar in the center of the old city of Antakya. Besides discussing some general questions pertaining to the methodical procedure used in the case study, this contribution demonstrates that Freiberger's comparative methodology is useful and that its application leads to new insights. In refining the methodical toolkit for comparative research, this article will attempt to enhance the proposed model by introducing a set of analytical concepts. To further illuminate the findings of the case study, 'mimesis' and 'fractal dynamics' will be introduced as analytical concepts suitable for studying the dynamics of interreligious relations and for enhancing the methodical design for future comparative research.

Keywords: Christian-Muslim relations; Turkey; saint veneration; shared sacred sites; mimesis; fractal dynamics; interreligious studies; ritual studies

1. Introduction: Methodological Tenets of Comparative Research

A prevailing suspicion about the comparative method persists in the study of religion, deriving from its uncritical uses in the early history of anthropology and the academic study of religion (Asad 2003). One major objection against the comparative method in research on religion is that the empirical contours of historical and ethnographic case studies were neglected for the sake of making general and comprehensive claims about diverse sets of cultural or religious traditions, practices, or beliefs (Carter 2004). Despite various attempts to refine the comparative method by supporting or rejecting the methodical framework utilized—in what can be summarized as 'the phenomenology of religion'—comparison must be reconsidered as an integral research method in studying religion historically, ethnographically, and cross-culturally (Smith 1982, 1990; Poole 1986; Paden 1996, 2004; Sharma 2005).

In this context, Oliver Freiberger who has worked on the comparative method must be credited for revisiting the main issues in how religions, and their ideas and traditions, can be compared in a methodically sound procedure (Freiberger 2010, 2016). To utilize his proposal for comparative research on the grounds of empirical research procedures would imply that findings of comparative research must be based on observed evidence and generate first-hand knowledge within an analytical framework following a clear methodical procedure (see also Yengoyan 2006; Roscoe 2009). As Freiberger suggested, cases selected for comparison, the comparands, must demonstrate a certain

ratio of similarities and differences justifying comparative research based on them. It also means comparative research must generate reliable insights and a testable hypothesis by identifying factors explaining recurrent patterns of similarity and differences in the respective comparands (see also [Smith 1971](#); [Poole 1986](#)). Within these parameters, comparative research is most effective when based on well-designed and manageable case studies conducted for comparison (see [Freidenreich 2004](#); [Porta 2008](#)). Moreover, comparative research must identify common empirical ground, and account for robust analytical frameworks within which concepts and categories are used for analyzing and comparing respective case studies (see [Martin 2000](#); [Jensen 2001](#); [Paden 2004](#)).

According to the latest attempt by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, one key question is whether and how comparison can be described as a method after all; namely, how far it presupposes such methods as empirical data collection and analysis, and, therefore, meets general requirements of methods in empirical research on religion ([Stausberg 2013](#); [Stausberg and Engler 2013](#)). It would be consistent with this framework to take the comparative method as a “second-order method” as Freiburger succinctly argued. In this context, similar methodical questions could be raised about whether and how any form of quantitative data collection, and subsequent statistical analysis, are considered a method in the sense as proposed by Stausberg and Engler, if such analysis is also based on comparison and correlation of collected data and therefore of a second order ([Ragin and Zaret 1983](#); [Ember 1991](#); [Mace 1994](#)). If the comparative method is a second-order method, the question arises whether and how this attempt conceptualizing the comparative method presupposes the problem of using a map-territory metaphor—or analogy—and might become subject to similar criticisms as the phenomenological method or any form of topology or taxonomy in the study of religion that requires conceptual hierarchies in the representation of religion ([Smith 1982](#); [Poole 1986](#); [Jensen 2001](#); [Freiberger 2016](#)). Questions of this kind, however, are not the concern of this contribution and would be subject to a different inquiry.

2. The Need for Comparative Method in Studying the Dynamics of Christian-Muslim Relations

In what follows, I will discuss the comparative methodology that Freiburger outlined in the introduction to this special issue. I will address how this applies to my case study on Habib-i Neccar, a local saint venerated among Christians and Muslims. The study I am using was conducted at two sites in Antakya (formerly Antioch), which belongs to Hatay, the southernmost city of Turkey, near the Syrian border and the Mediterranean Sea ([Kreinath 2017](#)). Not intended as an in-depth comparative study on the history of Christian and Muslim traditions, my study of Habib-i Neccar started out as an ethnographic account of Christian-Muslim interaction at the shared sacred sites and was part of a broader research project on the dynamics of interreligious relationships in Hatay. Multiple factors were involved in the development of this study that let me propose a more comprehensive approach to the question of comparative research as encountered in the case study referred to above.

In the early stages of my project on cultures of interreligiosity in Hatay, my interlocutors directed me to visit Habib-i Neccar mosque, which did not look like an exemplary model for a shared sacred site, since I only met Muslims at the saint’s tomb in a well-guarded sanctuary in a crypt underneath the mosque. Even though I recognized tombs with name plaque indicating traditions of Christian saints at the mosque—namely those of John and Paul (Turk.: Yuhanna ve Pavlus) and those of John and Jonah (Turk.: Yuhanna ve Yunus) directly underneath on the same plaque—I did not pay sufficient attention to what I considered an interesting oddity without discovering its direct relevance for the future direction of my research on the culture of interreligiosity. My interlocutors shared with me that the Yasin Surah was the Quranic template for legends attributed to Habib-i Neccar, after whom the sites of veneration are officially named and who is venerated as a martyr at these sites, despite that none of the names of Christian and Muslim saints as referenced at the tombs in the mosque can be found in the respective story in the Qur’an (Q.: 36:13–29). Though the imam of the mosque indicated the Quranic text of the Yasin Surah is commonly viewed as the reference point for the figure of Habib-i Neccar, he called this interpretation into question on scholarly grounds. Since the primary design

of my research project was intended to be ethnographic, I discarded the relevance of these saints, their tombs and legends, and the local interpretation of the Quranic text. I dismissed such indexical information as a bulky detail and considered it, perhaps most suitable, for a footnote.

Parallel to studying veneration rituals at pilgrimage sites and the scriptural interpretations of the saint, both conducted through participant observation and semi-structured interviews as standard methods of ethnographic research, I started discovering the similarities and differences based on oral accounts collected among local Christians and Muslims. Only later, after carefully reading the Quranic version of the first martyrs and related sources as identified by members of the Muslim community, I started tracing common themes and motives in the oral history of this shared sacred site, but wondered how the history of Christian and Muslim traditions in this region would tie into my research project. The ethnographic information collected up to that point became historically relevant only after I found some clear evidence that indicated an overlap and convergence of these traditions. This discovery formed a point of reference to compare and contrast local legends and traditions as represented in Quranic text and the history of its interpretation, and to read them concerning the remaining Christian accounts of the respective saint and site. After my discovery of missing links between my oral ethnographic records and written historical sources, I developed a multi-sited comparative approach to study the dynamics of Christian and Muslim relations as reflected through traditions of saint veneration (Kreinath 2017). I used ‘controlled comparison’, a method that helped me analyze local traditions of shared sacred sites with a documented history.

Identifying common themes and motives within and across the Christian and Muslim legends of the saint and the sites of his veneration, I determined the common features of the legends. Subsequently, I compared the scenes and protagonists given in the legendary accounts with the location and architecture of the sites of veneration and the tombs of the saints as identified in Christian and Muslim sources, namely of those saints as identified in the local tradition of Antakya as John, Paul, and Jonah and as Sham’un al-Safa and Habib-i Neccar respectively. The Yasin Surah of the Qur’an narrates the story of the first martyr in Islam (Q.: 36:13–29), and alludes to the first Christians and their version of the first martyrdom in Antioch, though none of the Muslim accounts seem to directly resemble the Biblical version of the Acts commonly known among Christians as Peter, Barnabas, and Paul, the first missionaries in Antioch (Acts: 11:22–26). The Quranic template—as further elaborated in local legends and attributed to Antakya and Habib-i Neccar—only remotely resembles the Christian accounts of the respective site commonly attributed to John the Baptist and the legends they associate with the introduction of Christianity to Antioch (Busse 2000).

Conversely, the rituals of saint veneration I witnessed Christians and Muslims conducting at the main site—the Habib-i Neccar mosque in the Old Town of Antakya—appeared so similar they could barely be distinguished (Kreinath 2017, pp. 290–93). Only after having decided to extend my study by systematically including textual sources from the Biblical and Quranic canon, and their interpretation through folkloric legends to contextualize my ethnographic material, I extended my research agenda considerably by including the main canonical sources and their interpretation into what had become a comparative analysis, a procedure not common for research in social and cultural anthropology. I further realized it would still not be sufficient to simply integrate Biblical and Quranic exegesis into the scope of my research. Instead, a methodical basis for a comparative analysis that accounts for the different layers of saint veneration I discovered at that site required me to extend the scope of my data even further. After having made this decision, I systematically started to search for first-hand descriptions pilgrims and travelers gave about the site, its architecture, and the saint veneration rituals practiced among Christians and Muslims in Antakya (Kreinath 2017, pp. 282–86). I substantially expanded the type of material but used only those reports of pilgrims and travelers that clearly indicated some first-hand records of the respective site and saint as witnessed through the sensual perception. I also considered apocryphal and legendary accounts as part of Christian folklore and the interpretations of the Yasin Surah by Muslim scholars. After having discovered further clues in multiple sources to common threads in the Christian and Muslim accounts, the comparison of these

sources significantly helped clarify the similarities and differences of Christian and Muslim traditions related to the saint and site. Only at this stage, I could see my research to become comparative.

The systematic inclusion of first-hand records of local Muslims and Christians to the interpretation of Biblical and Quranic sources, along with the identification of reliable information in the accounts of pilgrims and travelers, allowed me to stay within the paradigm of anthropological research. One methodical outcome of my study was that I found ways to determine how I can use legends and travel reports as sources to reconstruct an enduring history of rituals of saint veneration and traditions of shared sacred sites unidentifiable through analysis of either Christian or Muslim sources or ethnographic accounts. Coincidentally, this research project challenged me to develop a methodical procedure, allowing for the comparison of different Christian and Muslim accounts of a saint and the sites of his veneration by using different sources and data that explicate the dynamics of interreligious relations throughout the ages (Kreinath 2016, 2017, pp. 275–78). Aside from these findings, which would not have surfaced without the use of the comparative method, the challenge was to combine different methods to support the analysis and use of ethnographic, historical, and philological sources in a research project straddling various academic disciplines. In this regard, my research clearly followed what Freiburger described as the illuminative mode of comparison as subsequently discussed.

3. In Search of a Conceptual Framework for Comparative Analysis

The comparative research on the veneration of Habib-i Neccar was also designed as a test case to develop a methodical framework for a subsequent study on the veneration of Elijah, St. George, and Hızır as those saints and prophets of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim tradition, which were blended and venerated by Christians and Muslims at the same shared sacred sites under different names (Kreinath 2015). With this purpose, I explored possibilities of developing a template for comparative research by focusing on Habib-i Neccar that appeared easier to focus on one saint and one place where the saint is venerated (see also Kreinath 2016). The individual cases in studying rituals of saint veneration at shared sacred sites—as indicators for the dynamics of Christian-Muslim relations—were considerably different, but the methodical issues in comparing Christian and Muslim accounts in an ethnographic and historical perspective seemed similar. One advantage was that Habib-i Neccar is exclusively venerated in Antakya and the legend attached to the saint and his site is only concurrent to that vicinity. I identified similarities and differences in the Christian and Muslim traditions by asking the following questions:

1. What can the comparison of rituals among Christians and Muslims expose about the veneration of a saint and the shared history of the sacred sites of his veneration?
2. What can the comparison of Christian and Muslim accounts of the saint and site disclose about the history of Muslim-Christian relations in Antakya?
3. What do texts and legends of a saint, identified with a single sacred site reveal about the Muslim and Christian accounts of the origins of Christianity in Antakya?

Most relevant for refocusing my ethnographic study to account for historical records was the fact that some of my interlocutors directed me to study texts and legends, by indicating that local traditions of saint veneration might be traced through such sources (Kreinath 2014, 2015). Acknowledging the local knowledge of my interlocutors in their interpretations of Biblical or Quranic accounts, I used legends about the saint and the respective veneration sites as valid sources for my comparative approach. Analyzing the different accounts helped substantially broaden the scope of my research to include historical records of the site along with orally transmitted legends as a basis for analyzing my ethnographic data. With different levels of comparison applied to my data, it became possible to trace Christian and Muslim interaction on multiple layers, namely to determine when the site was under Christian and Muslim administration, what this site was called among Christians, and what kind of rituals of saint veneration were performed at the site throughout the different ages. Focusing on different media of representation as sources of information also facilitated the comparison of different

accounts across religious traditions and historical periods, cross-checking first-hand observations with textually or orally transmitted legends of the saint and site, or analysis of written records of the site and respective rituals of saint veneration among Christians and Muslims (Kreinath 2017, pp. 280–93).

The comparison conducted in my case study included multiple layers of analysis and can provide a viable framework to discuss the possibilities and limitations of the comparative method as proposed by Freiburger. On the one hand, only a sufficient reconstruction of the respective Christian and Muslim traditions allowed comparison, which was conducted in what is called the ‘illuminative mode’ of comparison (Sharma 2005). In this regard, my comparison was limited and can only be considered indirectly as contributing to the validity of the model. Conversely, comparison of these traditions helped reconstruct the history of this site and the saint venerated there. The comparison of different traditions served to decipher similarities and differences in Christian and Muslim accounts of the respective saint and to recognize their continuous interaction at these sites of veneration (Kreinath 2017, pp. 294–96). The different accounts of the sites and the saint cannot indicate a continuous interaction with one another. Nevertheless, Christian and Muslim traditions of saint and site cannot be viewed as independent from one another either. My case study, therefore, contributes to the discussion of refining the comparative method. My approach to compare Christian and Muslim traditions of saint veneration in Antakya does not only contribute to research on the Christian-Muslim interaction as reflected in local historical records, but also to studies on the dynamics of cohabitation of Christian and Muslim communities as they relate to the shared sacred sites and rituals of saint veneration (Kreinath 2014, 2015). Due to the dynamics of interreligious relations and the changing forms of Christian-Muslim interaction, the comparative analysis of different time periods was necessary to identify continuities and discontinuities in how Christian and Muslim practices relate to one another and how they become similar or different.

Despite the singularity of the saint and site of veneration, its representation in local religious traditions requires comparative analysis. On this basis, I compared Christian and Muslim forms of saint veneration and accounted for the different forms of interreligious relations established through rituals performed at two sacred sites dedicated to Habib-i Neccar. My comparison utilized historical and ethnographic methods of data collection, as outlined above. Identifying similarities and differences in religious practices among Christian and Muslim devotees, the *tertium comparationis* was not established on a macro-level of comparison requiring meta-linguistic categories, but rather on a micro-level of comparison focused on the analysis of empirical data (Porta 2008; Freiburger 2010). The *tertium comparationis* in my case study was based on empirical field research with identifiable objects or observable actions. Dealing with the dynamics of interreligious relations on a micro-scale, I specifically focused on comparing different practices, perceptions, and representations, as I perceived them all integrally related to one saint and the two sites where he is venerated. Besides, the comparison undertaken in the case study aimed at integrating anthropology and history of religion by relating the findings of ethnographic and historiographic research (see also Detienne 2002). The comparative method as employed in my case study was defined by the circumstantial conditions of my research. I, therefore, consider my use of juxtaposition as a methodical procedure remaining implicit in my mode of presentation.

On the methodical level of research procedure, the juxtaposition was integral. However, if such juxtaposition would have been made only in general terms, it would have been easy to jeopardize my research by essentializing the differences between Christian and Muslim versions without accounting for entangled local traditions. I, therefore, concentrated on finding out how perceptions of Muslims and Christians can contribute to reconstructing the local history of the respective site, without them being essentially identical or different. This focus on the methodical challenges generated insights into the historiography and ethnography of the site of saint veneration that would not have been possible otherwise (Kreinath 2017, pp. 296–97). Though Christian and Muslim accounts can be considered as different layers inflected by persistence of local traditions and adjusted dynamics of interreligious relations, differences, and similarities of Christian and Muslim traditions must be compared based

on a *tertium comparationis* that my findings had to be compared with, or related back to, the various first-hand accounts of the respective sites of veneration. This had implications for how the comparative method was utilized and how the mode, scope, and scale of comparison could subsequently be conceptualized. Based on these considerations, some revisions and refinements of the comparative method seem to be desirable.

Although confined to local religious traditions of shared sacred sites and rituals of saint veneration in Antakya, the comparative method was integral to my case study and its results demonstrate the similarities in the Christians and Muslim accounts of the veneration of Habib-i Neccar. Based on the evidence provided so far, the comparison *is* methodical because it followed a specific set of procedures and generated a set of empirical data. Recognizing compartmentation of structural elements for comparison, the methodical procedure outlined specific steps in the process of comparison. The steps Freiburger developed in the elaboration of Jonathan Z. Smith (1971, 1982, 1990) can, therefore, be applied to the study of the veneration of Habib-i Neccar in Antakya. Freiburger lists selection, description, juxtaposition, re-description, rectification and theory formation as constitutive elements of the comparative method. These steps are distinguished analytically, and ordered sequentially, even though they appear and reoccur repeatedly at various stages of the comparative process, as my research on comparing different traditions of saint veneration among Christians and Muslims confirmed. This, however, implies that the order in which research results are presented does not necessarily represent the actual process of comparison.

4. Reconsidering Redescription and Rectification through Juxtaposition and Concept Formation

In discussing modes of comparison, it is important to consider how comparative research is related to available empirical data. As Freiburger stated, a comparison is either symmetrical or asymmetrical depending on different degrees to which equivalent empirical data are available or used for comparison. Comparative research requires a *tertium comparationis* and species that are equivalent, i.e., comparable in their features. In this regard, comparative research makes use of similar methodical steps as any other form of empirical research—namely selection, description, analysis, and interpretation of data—and as any other historical or ethnographic research in the study of religion (Scheffer and Niewöhner 2010; Sørensen 2010).

The comparative method, as I would argue, makes similarities and differences in the data set *explicit* through selection, description, and analysis while leading to different levels of abstraction and analysis. However, any methodical procedure clearly requires comparison in the same way as the selection of data requires a comparison of the respective data in light of the research question, even though the comparison may remain *implicit* (Herzfeld 2001; Handelman 2006). This means description implicates comparison as terms and concepts, used for description, must fit the main features of the data being described; analysis thus requires comparison as similarities and differences are integral to the main features of the data. Therefore, what Freiburger described as “second-order method” presupposes that different data sets are distinct, yet similar to the first-order data. Comparison, therefore, includes comparands and a *tertium comparationis*, constituting a triangular relationship—or constellation—that can take many forms based on the similarities and differences involved in the distinction of the respective comparands (Kreinath 2004, 2017, pp. 271–78).

One aspect of comparison as a research method is the formation of concepts, hypotheses, and theories. Freiburger distinguished different steps in the actual procedure, namely what a scholar is doing when comparing empirical data of religious phenomena on different scales; this leads to continuous rectification of analytical concepts and formation of working hypotheses integral to the comparative endeavor from beginning to end. Discovery of patterns of similarity and difference in the analysis of data sets, testing of initial hypotheses, and articulation of empirical research results, are aspects of the comparative research equally accounted for in historical and ethnographic research. Even the method of controlled comparison along with its redescription of data and rectification of concepts are devices assuring that hypotheses are empirically tested and proven on a case-to-case

basis. In practice, the comparative method is neither purely inductive nor deductive; it is always a combination as comparison works only as a conjunction of both. However, the starting point for comparison, the specific research interest, and the agenda behind it may make a difference.

The use of abduction as a comparative method—proposed by Charles S. Peirce—proves helpful in overcoming the dualistic and oppositional view of classifying research methods merely as inductive and deductive methods (Burks 1946; Gell 1998). In some ways, describing the method of controlled comparison as abduction, in Peirce's semiotic terms, would allow accounting for the formation of hypotheses—and generation of new knowledge based on these hypotheses—and their application through collection and selection of new data. This aspect in the formation of testable hypotheses and development of analytical concepts are aspects Freiberger did not explicitly address in the process of comparison, but it became relevant during my research.

The comparative method, as my case study indicated, requires multiple and recursive levels of analysis. Juxtaposition requires the discovery and inference of recurrent patterns based on the identification of similarities and differences of the comparands regarding the *tertium comparationis*. Freiberger suggested this procedure when he described the comparative study as entailing components of redescription and leading to rectification and concept formation. The product and process of comparison, however, may look quite different. The presentation of comparative research in its published result often prepares the data so they fit parameters of the comparative study and the standards of academic research. In methodical terms, however, the steps presented in a published comparative study are different from those made in the process of comparative research. In the actual practice of comparison as part of an ongoing research process, these steps are obviously intertwined. The process is continuous, disruptive, unpredictable, and multiple times applied recursively. However, the presentation of results follows procedures and standards of academic writing and scholarly discourse, implicating the respective logic of research design common to that discourse or discipline to which the comparative study aims to contribute.

To assess the reliability and excellence of comparative research is a matter of methodical procedure and site selection. The ethnographic and historical findings of my case in the end were selected based on their relevance for the reconstruction of the history of the respective site. Instead of comparing saint veneration among Christians and Muslims in general, my objective was to identify and elaborate on the dynamics in changing similarities and continuities of saint veneration as they relate to a single sacred site in the center of Antakya. The comparison was multi-sited nevertheless, as not only oral accounts and textual sources were accessed, analyzed, and compared but these were also related to actual architectural features, archaeological relics, and studied in relation to actual ritual practices. The application of the comparative method helped me identify and utilize different types of data sets. The scope of my approach was certainly local, but trans-historical, as it traced veneration of the saint across time and traced descriptions of the site through times in history. The comparison of the different reports also reflected upon the differences in oral and written accounts and identified times when the site, dedicated to Habib-i Neccar, was under either Muslim or Christian rule of Antakya. It also inquired whether and how the changes in political rule affected processes of adaptation transforming the site from a church into a mosque and vice versa (Kreinath 2017, pp. 282–86).

Veneration of Habib-i Neccar blends Christian and Muslim cultures of saint veneration, while at the same time indicates distinct differences specific to the Christian and Muslim forms of saint veneration. Because the co-emergence of Christian and Muslim forms of saint veneration can only be deciphered in a long-term historical study, the cross-cultural comparison was paired and coordinated with the trans-historical comparison considering both similarities and differences. This allowed the analysis of how the different religions and cultures interact with one another as co-emerging in the same region and context.

Specific similarities and differences in various reports of the site and veneration of the saint could be identified through a comparative approach. Despite the changing political rule of Antakya throughout centuries, the comparison of various Christian and Muslim accounts depicting the unique

features of the Habib-i Neccar site allowed me to determine the identity of the site with a common heritage in the Christian and Muslim tradition. Knowing the local geography and actual location of the sacred site facilitated a contextual reading of the texts by taking into consideration local features providing further insights into the history of the site. Furthermore, the triangulation of religious practice, discourse, and imagination made it possible to compare ethnographic findings, through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, with textual accounts of the site and its meaning and significance for pilgrims and travelers.

5. Concept Formation and Taxonomy in Comparative Research

A limitation of my case study consisted in the fact that I did not define or further refine my use of the term 'saint.' Even though it would not sufficiently represent practices of Islamic traditions of visiting tombs in folk Islam, I decided to use this term to describe the local traditions of visitation and veneration. This allowed me to account for the fact that my comparison of the respective data indicated that the Islamic tradition at the respective place derived from Christian traditions as my case study demonstrated. Working on local Muslim traditions of saint veneration ethnographically or historically and trying to identify how they relate to Christian sites and traditions implies recognizing that the academic use of concepts needs to be adjusted to the kind of religious practices that can be found at the given places. Besides, the veneration of a saint (Turk.: *aziz*; Arab.: *pir* or *wali*) and visiting a tomb (Turk.: *ziyaret*; Arab.: *ziyarah*) is not universally accepted in the Islamic tradition, even though local variations of Islamic belief and practice would justify speaking of the veneration of saints in Islam (Gilsenan 1973; el-Zein 1977). Although terminological subtleties as they apply to Habib-i Neccar and the Christian and Muslim uses of these terms need further explication if the goal is to compare saint veneration in Christianity and Islam, this does not apply in the same way to the case study as it is taken as a point of departure for comparative purposes and methodical generalizations.

My attempt was to determine what the veneration of Habib-i Neccar among Christians and Muslims reveals about the history of the site. It was for the sake of coherence that I decided to use the term 'saint' for my comparative research knowing that I would have to accept vagueness of terminological ambiguities and imprecisions. Besides, the Islamic term used for Habib-i Neccar has no equivalence in the Christian tradition, and it does not make sense to emphasize this difference in the context of my comparative study. In this regard, the differentiation between taxonomic and illuminative modes of comparison is meaningful. For a comparison in a taxonomic mode, the explication of such general similarities and differences in Christian and Muslim forms of saint veneration would be appropriate and necessary. For a comparison in the illuminative modes as proposed in my study, the equal treatment of general forms of Christian and Muslim saint veneration is not very meaningful as the objective is to discover continuities and discontinuities in the local traditions of saint veneration at a location, where the traditions of saint veneration in Christianity emerged.

My case study certainly required the comparative method, but it did not aim to appropriate general concepts like that of the 'saint.' It was simply not the objective of this study to generalize the findings beyond the specific frame and focus of my research because no data other than those related to the history of the field site were considered. Nevertheless, I argue that the study was comparative and contributed to the refinement of descriptive terms like those of 'saint veneration' or 'shared sacred site' as it provided findings and empirical data that could be used for the further research, but the refinement of general concepts was not the primary aim of my study.

Instead, the similarities and differences discovered by comparing different layers of Muslim and Christian approaches by using descriptive concepts were focused on the question, 'how can ethnographic and historiographic data be compared to give reliable information on local traditions of saint veneration shared among members of different religious communities?' The methodical orientation toward the discovery of empirical data through comparative research can be described as the illuminative mode of comparison, even though Christian and Muslim accounts were equally taken into consideration. Therefore, the mode of comparison in my case could be best described as

reciprocal illuminative. In the end, this mode of comparison justified the heuristic use of the term 'saint' and my use of descriptive concepts, like 'saint veneration' or 'shared sacred site,' to reflect on the similarities and differences in the Christian and Muslim traditions of venerating the main martyr and saint of Antakya.

In comparative research, it is important to shift away from a monothetic classification and toward a polythetic classification (Needham 1975; Handelman 2006). A monothetic taxonomy presupposes a conceptual framework with an implicit hierarchy and usually requires clear features or criteria to distinguish the species based on an exclusive set of criteria, often only based on one defining feature. By contrast, a polythetic taxonomy is a classificatory schema that works in comparative research with approximate features or criteria to account for the fuzzy and often overlapping qualities of the data sets under consideration. Yet both taxonomies are hierarchical and usually follow the terminology of the language used in the discursive contexts and linguistic conventions or preferred in scholarly discourses (Asad 2003). This is to acknowledge that concepts have their semantic field and analytical value, and it is important to identify the possibilities and limits of concepts in demarcating the similarities and differences in the respective data sets (Smith 1971). In this regard, it is important to establish analytical concepts to mark the difference in the quality and identity of a given data set.

The potential of analytical concepts and distinctions they imply for comparative research can best be demonstrated when applied to specific case studies. Even the identification of minimal changes or differences requires the comparative analysis of different datasets. No comparison can obviously elaborate all aspects of the similarities and differences of the comparands involved and often focuses only on those features that are relevant to the research question. Although local terminologies and taxonomies cannot be maintained in their complexity in comparative analysis, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of analytical models themselves by explicating a scale of comparison in the study of folk models (Atran 1998; Sperber 1998). To enhance the comparative method, it is important to distinguish different scales of comparison and compare within and across scales, namely between genus and species. This helps assuring correct application of genus to species insofar as genus is serving as an analytical concept and the species as the cases for analysis and comparison (Herzfeld 2001; Handelman 2006).

While the genealogical comparison is indispensable for historical scholarship generally, this applies to my case study considering the long-term research of saint veneration at the sites where Habib-i Neccar is venerated. While different texts and sources are compared to identify the continuities and discontinuities in the ideas, motives, and legends, the comparative research on Habib-i Neccar served as an example of an entangled history, which demonstrates the complementarity of religious practices in an interreligious context with the co-emergence of related religious traditions. The study of Habib-i Neccar veneration demanded analysis of the mutual interdependencies of local traditions. Aside from the relative independence, interaction and mutual perception of Christian and Muslim traditions are key in determining mutual interdependence of the practices of saint veneration in Antakya.

Besides comparing historical and ethnographic aspects in the dynamics of religious relationships among Christians and Muslims in an illuminative mode, matters of taxonomy are important in relation to distinctions between different layers of analysis. The general approach to taxonomy though was that of polythetic classification, which helped to account for fuzzy transitions in processes of transformation. Polythetic classification also allowed the inclusion of Muslim practices of visiting the tomb of Habib-i Neccar as a form of saint veneration. The concept of the 'saint' was used for comparing the different layers or modalities through which Muslims and Christians approach the shared sacred site, namely in form of representations, perceptions, and imaginations. The analytical concepts that can be used to distinguish and describe these different layers are those of 'mimesis' and 'fractal dynamics.' By employing these concepts, I want to return to my case study where I compared the representations, perceptions, and imaginations that Christians and Muslims have concerning the shared sacred site or the types of relationships they maintain with this site.

6. Mimesis and Fractal Dynamics as Analytical Concepts for the Comparative Research

To justify the use of mixed methods in the analysis of different types of historical and ethnographic data, while maintaining a research agenda within the disciplines of social and cultural anthropology and the study of religion, I used the aesthetics of religion as a methodical approach to integrate the different use of the senses as reflected in the various data sets to establish a method of comparison accounting for the changing dynamics in Christian-Muslim relations. I utilized aesthetics because it allowed me to use different methods of comparison in such a way that I could take the sensual perception as the key to connect and correlate the different data sets (Trau and Wilke 2015; Grieser and Johnston 2017). Comparison within and across the different dimensions of religious beliefs and practices allowed me to decipher patterns of similarity and difference in the various historical and ethnographic accounts of the sacred site and saint veneration. I introduced the semiotic concept of mimesis as a triadic configuration: something or someone is like something or someone, for someone. This concept facilitated the integration of the different types of methods and data into a coherent methodical procedure for comparative analysis (Kreinath 2016).

With its triadic relationship, mimesis served as an analytical concept, identifying different layers of the comparands that are made similar and different. The differentiation into representation, imitation, and simulation aimed to address dynamics in the transformation of relationships in the configuration between texts, traditions, sites, saints, and veneration rituals (Kreinath 2017, pp. 275–78). This differentiation helped to correlate religious practices, discourses, and imaginations to study how they can be compared based on sensual perception. Through distinguishing different layers within mimesis as the process of making or becoming like something or someone else, my approach to using the comparative method helped better account for similarities and differences in the Muslim and Christian practice of saint veneration in Antakya.

With a focus on different configurations or clusters, the ethnographic and historical data could be correlated and studied as part of broader contexts of enduring Muslim-Christian relations consisting of smaller elements and components. In this context, I compared my own first-hand data of the site with the descriptions given in travel accounts and those of pilgrims and discovered that the site of Habib-i Neccar mosque in modern-day Antakya was formerly one of the main churches in Antioch. Besides, I compared the descriptions of ritual practices performed at the sites of saint veneration with those that I could observe by participant observation. Furthermore, I cross-checked what Muslims and Christians told me about the history of the site with the written reports I could find on the respective site and saint in the Muslim and Christian traditions. The comparison of these different sources allowed me to decipher continuities and discontinuities in the Muslim and Christian traditions that were not accounted for previously.

In studying the dynamics of interreligious relations in Antakya in its ethnographic, textual, and historical dimensions, it was important to identify different scales of comparison. Discovery of recursive patterns of similarity and difference led me to consider further the concept of 'fractals.' The notion of the fractal is derived from Benoît B. Mandelbrot, who defined it as the replication of patterns of similarity on different scales. The concept was developed based on analysis of irregular, but recursive, patterns in fluctuation of cotton prices (Mandelbrot 1982, 1990). It is integral to measure, describe, and analyze the dynamics of change and occurrence of similar patterns on different scales. Here, I also followed suggestions made to interpret temporal dynamics of recurrent patterns in fractals in terms of mimesis (Wagner 1991; Gell 1998), which I defined as processes of becoming or being made similar on different scales. Even though the general concept of the fractal has been widely adopted in various fields of research, the potential of this concept to explain everything, and to overcome forms of binary thinking in science and the humanities, is probably overrated (Mosko and Damon 2005; Handelman 2007). Although the concept of the fractal is often depicted in a figure replicating recursive patterns on multiple scales, common representation of fractals in geometric forms is misleading as it does not fully account for temporal dimensions of the dynamics the model is designed to insinuate, namely representing dynamics of recursive patterns. It is, therefore, not

sufficient to model the comparison according to geometric features, by only searching for replicated similarities and differences on various scales of analysis to construct a universalistic ontological model (Schmidt-Leukel 2017).

In the context of the study of veneration of Habib-i Neccar in Antakya, the fractal serves as an analytical concept studying dynamics of transformation processes by correlating different layers differentiated within the concept of mimesis (see also Gell 1998). The concept of mimesis stressed the contexts and relationships in which Christians and Muslims interact with one another and with a saint and site they historically share. It was used to account for the mutual responses of Christians and Muslims to ritual traditions at shared sacred sites. To study the ways in which Christian and Muslim traditions of saint veneration change at shared sacred sites more thoroughly, the concepts of mimesis and fractal must be further refined and expanded to include what I called 'fractal dynamics' (Kreinath 2012). The theoretical concept of fractal dynamics accounts for the possibilities of how Muslims and Christians can react to one another. It allows elaborating different layers in Muslim-Christian relations by emphasizing human intentionality, social interaction, and decision-making processes in comparison with phenomena integral to religious belief, practice, and imagination in Christian and Muslim traditions (Kreinath 2015, 2016). It thus serves as a model that aims to interpret the similarities and differences in religious beliefs and practices as dynamic configurations in relationships. It helps analyzing the transformations taking place in the interaction between Muslims and Christians. Identifying the zones of contact and interaction, processes of someone or something becoming and being made like someone or something else can be identified in religious discourse and practice.

The similarities and differences in the Muslim and Christian accounts of the first martyr in Antioch or the resemblances of ritual postures, gestures, and movements performed at the sites of saint veneration cannot be explained without considering the ongoing interaction of Muslims and Christians at the respective site (Kreinath 2017, pp. 290–93). Although the site of veneration and the core elements of the legend and ritual may virtually remain the same, the local interpretation of the respective beliefs and practices may differ as they are often identified in the Muslim and Christian contexts of interpretation that shape the perception of the saint and site (Kreinath 2017, pp. 294–96). Although it might not be possible to trace the Christian-Muslim interactions at the site of Habib-i Neccar in detail, it is important to refine the conceptual tools of comparative research on interreligious relations. The concept of fractal dynamics, therefore, seems to be most suitable as it allows the qualification of the dynamics of change and possibilities of failure in human social interaction (Kreinath 2012).

Mimesis and fractal dynamics are powerful analytical concepts to compare different transformative processes in which legends are enacted in ritual practice, ritual practices are perceived and interpreted, and how specific religious discourses impact and institute specific practices and vice versa. It relates to ways in which Christians respond to Muslim practices or Muslims respond to Christian practices at the respective sites of saint veneration. Mimesis directly accounts for temporal dynamics in the configuration of similarities and differences as they emerge in and through the interaction of Muslims and Christians at a sacred site.

7. Conclusions

This article discussed the comparative methodology as presented by Freiburger by facilitating it for the re-evaluation of a case study that allowed testing of its applicability. Though very useful to account for the general features of comparative research, one of the findings was that instead of determining the right scale for comparison, it is necessary to establish analytical concepts that allow for analyzing the similarities and differences of religious traditions on different scales, as exemplified by mimesis and fractal dynamics. The approach to comparative research presented in this article focused on how religious practices and discourses could be studied in the ways in which they become similar or different depending on the given contexts and forms of interreligious relations as they relate to one shared sacred site. Concerning my case study, I argued that comparison of religious beliefs

and practices, and identification of their specific relationships in Christian and Muslim traditions can help specify similarities and differences between Christian and Muslim communities and illuminate how they interact. My aim was to demonstrate how legends, places, and rituals can be compared by determining the ways in which they become, or are made, similar to religious traditions. I identified configurations among different types of objects—including texts and their relationships to rituals or saints and their relationships to sites—with the aim to analyze them as embedded in dynamic webs of relationships. This also showed how the comparison of Christian and Muslim legends can be used in historical and ethnographic research to gain new insights and provide some new empirical evidence into specific dynamics of Christian-Muslim relationships, including their continuities and discontinuities in the perception and veneration of a saint.

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