

Article

# Against the Grain and Over the Line: Reflections on Comparative Methodology

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**Abstract:** This article distills theoretical arguments that I advance in *Foreigners and Their Food*, arguments relevant to a wide range of religious studies scholars. In addition, it makes the case for comparison as a method that sheds light not only on specific comparands and the class of data to which they belong but also on the very boundaries which the comparison transgresses. Through a comparison of Latin Christian and Shi‘i Islamic discourse about the impurity of religious foreigners, I illustrate methods by which religious authorities develop and transmit conceptions of foreigners. I then analyze this case study using Oliver Freiberger’s “Elements of a Comparative Methodology” while assessing the strengths and limitations of Freiberger’s methodical framework. I offer personal reflections on the process of conducting comparative scholarship, advice for those embarking on this demanding yet rewarding approach to the study of religion, and desiderata for further reflection on comparative methodology.

**Keywords:** Augustine; comparison; food; identity; impurity; al-Murtaḍā; scriptural exegesis

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In a conference paper assessing my book, *Foreigners and Their Food* (Freidenreich 2011a), Oliver Freiberger justly criticized me for being ‘too cautious’ in laying out the theoretical implications of my research into the use of food restrictions to construct otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic law. ‘What can scholars of religion who are experts on ancient India or modern China learn from this study?’, he asked. ‘[A comparative] taxonomy was created but has not been fully explicated. Or not yet! Maybe a journal article that outlines the theoretical conclusions is in preparation!?’ (Freiberger 2014). This, belatedly, is that article. I am grateful to Freiberger not only for the critique that inspired this work but also and especially for the valuable essay on comparative methodology which it engages.

This article begins by laying out a comparison between Latin Christian and Shi‘i Islamic discourse about the impurity of religious foreigners; this comparison appears in much briefer form in *Foreigners and Their Food* (Freidenreich 2011a, p. 167). I will use this example to outline the broader arguments I make in that book, with particular attention to their relevance for scholars of religion who do not focus primarily on Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Then, I will analyze the comparison itself in light of the elements of comparative methodology that Freiberger presents in the essay that this article accompanies. The article concludes with thoughts about how to further the scholarly conversation about methodological dimensions of comparative scholarship in the field of religious studies.

Note that the following discussion addresses three distinct types of impurity using the following terminology (Freidenreich 2010, pp. 12–19; 2011a, pp. 26–28):

- *Intrinsic impurity* is inherent in an object (e.g., carrion or pork) due to its very nature. Some religious authorities also regard certain people as intrinsically *impure*.
- *Circumstantial impurity* is caused by some form of contact with an intrinsically impure substance (e.g., eating carrion) or by the occurrence of certain natural, non-sinful events (e.g., licit sexual intercourse). Persons or objects that suffer this commonplace and generally removable form of impurity are *polluted*.

- *Offensive impurity* refers to the defilement generated by particularly sinful behavior (e.g., idolatry or illicit sexual intercourse). One who commits such a grave offense is *defiled*.

I created this typology of impurity by amalgamating the distinctions developed by academic scholars of the Hebrew Bible and ancient Judaism on the one hand and medieval scholars of Islamic law on the other (Klawans 2000; Gauvain 2005, pp. 341–43). This typology also proves useful for understanding Christian discourse about impurity, as I hope to demonstrate in passing below, and it might be of relevance to the analysis of impurity discourse in other traditions as well.

### 1. All Foods are Pure!

Augustine, the bishop of Hippo (d. 430), was deep into his literary debate with Faustus, a Manichean, over the proper interpretation of the Old and New Testaments. Among their many skirmishes, Augustine ridicules Manicheans for their refusal to eat meat while Faustus charges Christians with hypocrisy for their failure to adhere to biblical dietary laws. Augustine leans heavily in his treatise *Against Faustus* on a dictum in Paul's Letter to Titus: 'For the pure all things are pure, but for the impure and unbelieving nothing is pure; their minds and consciousness are defiled' (Tit. 1.15).<sup>1</sup> This verse performs double duty for Augustine: it justifies Christian consumption of all foodstuffs without distinction—for the pure, after all, everything is pure—and it explains why Manicheans claim that foods are impure. Manicheans, Augustine explains, are defiled on account of their offensive beliefs regarding the body of Christ (*Contra Faustum* 6.6). Elsewhere, Augustine adds that Paul derides as 'impure and unbelieving' those who wrongfully insist on continued adherence to dietary laws in the era of the new covenant, a position that the Manicheans exemplify (31.4).

Faustus, however, contests the very authority of Titus 1.15 by questioning its Pauline authenticity; in fact, historical critical scholars agree with Faustus that Titus is pseudo-Pauline. Faustus rests his argument against this verse on its incoherence with both Christian practice and other scriptural passages: 'If you think [Christianity] reckons nothing as impure, then you must first admit that there are no Christians among you. All of you, after all, regard as no small impurity carrion and sacrificial food, not to mention other examples' (*Contra Faustum* 31.2, (Augustine 1891, p. 758)). Faustus has in mind not only contemporary behavior but also Acts of the Apostles, which reports that apostles and elders gathered in Jerusalem—Paul among them—required all believers in Christ to abstain 'from what has been offered to idols, from blood, from that which was strangled, and from fornication' (Acts 15.29). This injunction, known as the Apostolic Decree, is a bedrock of early canon law (Freidenreich 2011a, pp. 94–96, 101–9).

These precedents notwithstanding, Augustine was unwilling to concede any place within Christianity for the impurity of foodstuffs: doing so would undermine his arguments against Manicheism. Nor, of course, was Augustine willing to question the Pauline authenticity of the Letter to Titus. He therefore explains away the Old Testament prohibition of carrion, repeated in a number of early Church councils, as nothing more than a sensible medical precaution: carrion is not impure, it is simply unhealthy. Augustine also fundamentally reinterprets the Apostolic Decree. Christians, he explains through an interpretation of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, must abstain from food known to have been offered to idols lest they defile themselves through willful association with demons (1 Cor. 10.20). Augustine insists, however, that there is nothing intrinsically impure about that food itself, which is why someone who does not know the food's sacrificial origins may safely consume it (10.25–28). Augustine, in other words, distinguishes between offensive and intrinsic impurity, as defined above, and he insists that the Apostolic Decree refers to the former alone.

Augustine also declares, without precedent, that the Apostolic Decree's prohibitions against blood and the meat of strangled animals are moot. These restrictions, he claims, were merely a temporary measure meant to facilitate interaction among the earliest Jewish and gentile believers in Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations in this article are by the author, prepared in consultation with the latest scholarly editions and translations.

Augustine adds that Christians have long since and for good reason ceased worrying about eating the meat of birds and rabbits whose blood was not drained. ‘If perhaps there are a few who still fear to touch these things, they are laughed at by the rest. Thus that statement of truth—“It is not what enters your mouth that defiles you, but rather what comes out of it” (Matt. 15.11)—has hold over all minds in this matter: [Christ] condemns the nature of no food that human society accepts but rather the sins that iniquity commits’ (*Contra Faustum* 32.13, (Augustine 1891, pp. 771–73)). Here again, Augustine interprets the New Testament as safeguarding against offensive defilement alone. Christianity, in short, reckons no foods polluted or impure; the teachings of Christ, Paul, and the apostles are thoroughly consistent; Manichean charges against Christians and their Bible are baseless; and the very inability of Manicheans to interpret scripture properly further demonstrates their willful folly.

Augustine’s interpretation of the Apostolic Decree’s references to blood and strangled meat, however, is illogical. The bishop does not, after all, regard the Decree’s prohibitions against eating food offered to idols or engaging in illicit sexual activity as temporary injunctions. These forbidden acts remain deeply defiling offenses, and the Apostolic Decree makes no distinction among its various prohibitions. Augustine’s reading of the Apostolic Decree would also have shocked bishops in the Eastern Roman Empire: they saw no conflict between Christ’s teachings and the Decree’s blood taboos, which retained their force in the various non-Latin Churches throughout the Middle Ages. Augustine’s predecessors in the Latin West also understood the Decree as forbidding Christians in all eras from consuming blood (Freidenreich 2011a, p. 95, n. 28, p. 104, n. 5).

Augustine’s unprecedented interpretation of the Apostolic Decree, inspired by his need to refute Manichean arguments, became normative within Latin Christendom and continues to shape Catholic, Protestant, and some academic understandings of this biblical text. The widespread acceptance of Augustine’s interpretation may stem in part from cultural dynamics within the Western Mediterranean region, where it seems that blood was already an accepted part of the Christian diet at the turn of the fifth century. Augustine’s personal authority surely helped, as did the neatness of the line he drew between Catholic and Manichean food practices. From an exegetical and normative perspective, of course, what makes Augustine’s against-the-grain reading of Acts so persuasive is his use of another passage from scripture—the words of Christ, no less—as a prooftext to clinch his argument. One could easily conclude, as many have done over the centuries, that Augustine offers no innovation at all.

## 2. Jewish and Christian Foods are Impure!

‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn, a leading Imāmī Shi‘i jurist known as al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 1044), surely never heard of Augustine of Hippo. He too, however, engaged in the Augustinian project that Paula Fredriksen aptly describes as ‘scriptural reclamation’ (Fredriksen 1996, p. 44), in this case a contest with Sunni authorities over the proper meaning of the Qur’an. Among the many statements whose distinctly Shi‘i interpretation al-Murtaḍā defends in his *Intiṣār* is, ‘the food of those who were given the Book is permitted to you’ (Q. 5.5). Al-Murtaḍā addresses this verse about Jewish and Christian food in two separate contexts; in both cases al-Murtaḍā, like Augustine, draws on scriptural prooftexts to demonstrate that the true meaning of the contested verse is not as it appears.

Sunnis consistently interpret Qur’an 5.5 as permitting Muslims to consume the meat of animals slaughtered by Jews and Christians, an interpretation supported by the fact that the previous verses also address permitted and forbidden meat (Freidenreich 2011a, pp. 138–56). Over the course of the ninth through eleventh centuries C.E., however, Shi‘i authorities increasingly challenged the validity of slaughter performed by non-Muslims (Freidenreich 2011a, pp. 158–62; 2011b, pp. 58–69). Al-Murtaḍā, drawing on earlier Shi‘i arguments, asserts that verse 5.5 cannot refer to meat because elsewhere the Qur’an declares ‘Do not eat [meat] from that over which the name of God has not been mentioned’ (Q. 6.121). Jewish and Christian butchers, al-Murtaḍā claims, do not typically invoke God’s name, and when they do ‘they actually invoke other than God, exalted be He, because they do not know God on account of their unbelief (*kufr*)’ (al-Murtaḍā 1985, p. 189). If Jews and Christians truly understood God, after all, they would follow the divine teachings revealed by Muḥammad and his descendants,

the Imams whose authority underpins Shi'ism. The *Intiṣār's* argument also contains a barely implicit critique of Sunnis, whom al-Murtaḍā chastises as 'perplexed' (al-Murtaḍā 1985, p. 188): if they truly understood the Qur'an and gave proper respect to the teachings of the Imams, they too would not allow Muslims to consume meat prepared by Jewish and Christian butchers.

Al-Murtaḍā also defends an even broader claim against Sunni critiques: 'all food touched by an unbeliever—a Jew, a Christian, or anyone else whose unbelief (*kufṛ*) has been established with clear evidence—is prohibited' (al-Murtaḍā 1985, p. 193). This prohibition, attested in traditions ascribed to various Shi'i Imams, is logically problematic: according to Islamic law, the circumstantial impurity that affects humans is not communicable to foodstuffs or anything else (Maghen 1999). Even al-Murtaḍā's teacher, Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Mufīd (d. 1022), implicitly rejects the notion that non-Muslims bear a communicable form of impurity. Al-Mufīd explains that Qur'an 5.5 refers not to meat but rather to foods like grains, bread, and dairy products, even though the moistness of dough and milk renders these foodstuffs susceptible to becoming polluted through contact with a communicable source of impurity. Al-Mufīd does express concern about the impurity of non-Muslim foodstuffs, but only because they might come in contact with intrinsically impure foods like pork and wine, not because non-Muslims touched them (Freidenreich 2011b, pp. 69–75).

Al-Murtaḍā, however, makes an argument that never occurred to his teacher or any other Shi'i authority. Citing the Qur'anic dictum, 'truly, the polytheists are impure' (Q. 9.28), al-Murtaḍā contends that all non-Muslims suffer a communicable form of intrinsic impurity (*najāsa*) unrelated to the circumstantial impurity (*ḥadath*) that sometimes afflicts Muslims (al-Murtaḍā 1985, p. 11).<sup>2</sup> Non-Muslims are impure for the same reason that their invocations of God are invalid: they embrace false beliefs (*kufṛ*). As for those Sunnis who object that Qur'an 5.5 permits food touched by Jews and Christians, al-Murtaḍā explains that this verse cannot refer to *all* Jewish and Christian foods—after all, the Qur'an surely does not permit consumption of their impure wine and pork. The verse must refer solely to pure foods such as grains; foodstuffs that remain dry and in their natural state are not susceptible to becoming polluted.

Al-Murtaḍā transforms a broadly permissive Qur'anic statement about the food of Jews and Christians into one that hardly permits anything at all: only 'grains and the like' (al-Murtaḍā 1985, p. 11). Imāmī and Zaydī Shi'is uniformly accepted his unprecedented understanding of Jewish and Christian impurity, to the point that academic scholars of Shi'ism mistakenly presumed that Shi'is had always held these beliefs about non-Muslims (Freidenreich 2011b, pp. 54–55). What makes al-Murtaḍā's against-the-grain (or, in this case, against-everything-but-the-grain) interpretation so compelling as an act of scriptural exegesis is the way in which it reframes earlier authoritative statements in a wholly original manner.

The linchpin to al-Murtaḍā's argument about Qur'an 5.5, of course, is his reading of verse 9.28. To the best of my knowledge, no earlier authority interprets this verse about polytheists as evidence for the impurity of Jews and Christians, let alone their foodstuffs (Freidenreich 2011b, pp. 76–77). Al-Murtaḍā also draws upon earlier Shi'i authorities, including traditions ascribed to various Imams, in his reference to 'grains and the like'. These authorities, like al-Mufīd, often use grain as an example of a non-meat foodstuff that Qur'an 5.5 permits. Al-Murtaḍā, however, redeploys this traditional example as a reference to foods that cannot contract impurity. He strategically overlooks the fact that his predecessors allow the consumption of Jewish and Christian foods susceptible to becoming polluted (Freidenreich 2011a, pp. 164–65), much as Augustine conveniently ignores his predecessors' uniform insistence that Christians may not consume blood.

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<sup>2</sup> Al-Murtaḍā implies that Muslims 'whose unbelief has been established with clear evidence', most likely an allusion to Sunnis actively hostile to the Shi'i minority, also suffer from intrinsic impurity; see (Kohlberg 1985).

### 3. How Scripture Evolves

Augustine and al-Murtaḍā are not the only religious authorities who seek to reconcile their own norms regarding food practices with scriptural texts whose evident meaning contradicts those norms. To cite briefly only one additional example (Freidenreich 2011a, pp. 60–62), Rabbi Shim'on bar Yoḥai (fl. mid-2nd c.) reportedly offered a rather unexpected interpretation of God's instruction that the Israelites offer to compensate the inhabitants of Seir for the food they would consume while traveling through that territory en route to the Promised Land. "What food you eat you shall obtain from them for money; similarly the water you drink you shall procure for money" (Deut. 2.6)—just as water has not been changed from its natural state, so too [eat only] food that has not been changed from its natural state' (Talmud Yerushalmi, Shabbat 1.4, 3c). Like al-Murtaḍā, Shim'on bar Yoḥai regards grains as permissible and bread as forbidden, albeit for reasons that have nothing to do with the purity status of these foodstuffs.

The presence of against-(everything-but-)the-grain interpretations within the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions alike provides further support for Wilfred Cantwell Smith's argument (Smith 1993) that the common denominator uniting all members of the literary genre we call scripture is the dialectical nature of the relationship between the text and its community of interpreters. As in any true relationship, influence is mutual: the text shapes the ideas of its interpreters while the interpreters in turn shape the meaning of the text. Key to this evolutionary process, however, is the insistence that no change has taken place at all. Religious authorities, as we have seen, support that claim by using scripture itself to justify their unprecedented interpretations.

Augustine and al-Murtaḍā radically redefine the meaning and normative implications of scriptural statements about food. Of broader significance, these exegetes do so by the same means. The elements of their interpretive technique, moreover, are common not only among Christians and Muslims but also among Jews and, I suspect, members of unrelated scriptural traditions as well. Augustine and al-Murtaḍā both begin from a culturally conditioned premise that scripture cannot mean what it appears to mean; because they are writing polemics against rival interpreters, both also have a strong motive for demonstrating that scripture in fact does not mean this. The Apostolic Decree could not possibly establish a permanent prohibition against consuming bloody foods because Christians in the Latin West eat such foods and because Paul declares all things to be pure (take that, Manicheans!). The Qur'an could not possibly permit all, or even most, Jewish and Christian foodstuffs because we know on the authority of Shi'i Imams that these non-Muslims and their foodstuffs are impure (take that, Sunnis!). Both exegetes appeal to commonly held knowledge within their respective communities—no (Latin) Christian worries about eating the meat of strangled birds, (Shi'i) authorities interpret Qur'an 5.5 as permitting grains—and both clinch their argument by means of a proof-text found elsewhere in scripture (Matt. 15.11, Q. 9.28). The end result is the reconciliation of scripture with the community's evolving presumptions, values, and practices, as well as the 'reclamation' of a contested text from 'heretics' who offer a contrary interpretation. The interpretation of Deuteronomy 2.6 ascribed to Shim'on bar Yoḥai similarly seeks to clinch an internal rabbinic argument regarding the permissibility of gentile foodstuffs, although in that case the contested scriptural statement comes from the Oral Torah, not the Hebrew Bible.

We can more clearly appreciate the dynamics that underpin the exegetical work of Augustine and al-Murtaḍā, as well as those that make their radical interpretations normative within Latin Christendom and Shi'i Islam, through the application of Peter Berger's theory of 'world-construction' (Berger 1967, pp. 3–19). Berger accounts for the seemingly contradictory fact 'that society is the product of man and that man is the product of society' (p. 3) by distinguishing among three moments in a dialectical process. These moments include the *internalization* of prior norms through education and enculturation, the *externalization*—i.e., reproduction—of those norms in sometimes modified form by enculturated community members, and the *objectivation* of these reproduced social norms as cultural givens powerful enough to shape the thought and behavior of future generations.

Augustine and al-Murtaḍā internalized not only the authority of scripture but also the cultural givens of their own communities, including communal ideas about food practices and about adherents of foreign religions. Thanks both to their personal authority and to the fact that their externalized interpretations resolve inconsistencies between scriptural and communal norms, these interpretations themselves become objectivated givens for subsequent generations. *Foreigners and Their Food* addresses numerous instances in which traditional texts and practices, when viewed through internalized cultural paradigms, take on new meanings that, once articulated in normative terms, externalize new ideas about the proper relationship between Us and Them. In some cases, however, these newly externalized ideas clash with previously objectivated givens within the religious community. This is why Shim'on bar Yoḥai's restrictive food norms had far less of an impact on Rabbinic Judaism than Augustine and al-Murtaḍā had on the food norms of Latin Christendom and Shi'i Islam. We can expect to find similar dynamics of cultural reproduction and development, along with similar roads not taken, in all longstanding religious traditions, including those that do not prioritize scriptural exegesis.

#### 4. All Food is Pure, but Jewish Food is Impure!

Our comparison of the against-the-grain interpretations offered by Augustine and al-Murtaḍā has thus far focused on the motives behind these innovative readings of scriptures, the technique used to disguise these innovations, and the reasons why these readings became normative within Latin Christendom and Shi'i Islam. We will now turn to similarities of a different kind: both al-Murtaḍā and Augustine formulate their arguments in polemic against those whom they regard as heretics, and both ascribe impurity to religious foreigners on account of the false beliefs held by those foreigners.

Al-Murtaḍā addresses the food of Jews, Christians, and other non-Muslims, but the addressees of the *Intiṣār* are Muslims: fellow Shi'is and rival Sunnis. Al-Murtaḍā critiques Sunnis for regarding Jews and Christians as similar to Muslims in their ability to invoke God properly and in their purity status. More fundamentally, he and fellow Shi'i authorities reject the Sunni claim that Jews and Christians are like Muslims with respect to their monotheism and their reverence for an authentic divine scripture. Al-Murtaḍā's ascription of intrinsic impurity to these non-Muslims, along with his assimilation of the Qur'an's People of Book with its polytheists, establishes that Jews and Christians are absolutely unlike Muslims (Freidenreich 2011a, p. 163).

Notice as well that al-Murtaḍā's ascription of impurity to these non-Muslims has real consequences for Muslims. Not only must Shi'is take care not to eat otherwise permissible food that Jews or Christians touch, but Sunnis who eat such food make manifest their failure to properly understand God's will. Al-Murtaḍā's rhetoric about the impurity of Jews and Christians seems designed primarily to disparage Sunnis and, more importantly, to bolster the faith of Shi'is in their community's distinctive understanding of Islam (Freidenreich 2011b, pp. 79–84).

Augustine's rhetoric involves fewer parties, as his ascription of impurity to Manicheans appears in the context of polemic directed against Manicheans themselves. That charge of impurity, moreover, has no practical consequences for anyone: Augustine does not call on fellow Christians to abstain from Manichean food on account of the fact that Manicheans regard it as impure. Although the logic of Augustine's rhetoric applies equally to contemporary Jews—they too insist on literal adherence to biblical dietary laws in the era of the new covenant (*Contra Faustum* 31.4)—Augustine does not pursue the implications of this fact. Subsequent authorities within the Latin West, however, do just that. Familiarity with the ways in which the Shi'i ascription of impurity to Jews affects Muslims enables us to recognize similar dynamics within medieval Christian discourse about the impurity of Jewish food.

From the late-fifth through mid-seventh centuries, bishops forbade Christians from eating with Jews at no fewer than six church councils held in the regions of Gaul (present-day France). Impurity rhetoric features prominently in many of these prohibitions. The Councils of Vannes and Agde justify their commensality ban on the grounds that Jews 'judge what we eat with permission of the Apostle to be impure', and the Councils of Epaone and Mâcon punish Christians who have 'become defiled' through their participation in meals with Jews (Freidenreich 2011a, pp. 114–17).

Gallic councils address Jewish food more often than any other issue associated with Jews. This frequency is especially striking because several of the councils that prohibit shared meals with Jews took place in regions for which there is no evidence of any contemporaneous Jewish presence. We saw in the *Intiṣār*, however, that the ascription of impurity to Jewish food can contribute to polemical rhetoric directed against rival members of one's own religious community who purportedly fail to properly understand scripture or the divine will. It may, therefore, be significant that canons about Jewish food appear primarily in the acts of church councils that mark the local ascendancy of 'Catholicism' over the heresy known as 'Arianism' (Freidenreich 2011a, p. 117). Unfortunately, surviving data about these councils is too sparse to test the hypothesis that Catholics used anti-Jewish rhetoric to obliquely critique their Arian rivals much as al-Murtaḍā uses such rhetoric to critique his Sunni rivals.

But wait—doesn't Augustine, on the authority of Paul, define Catholics as those who regard all foods as pure? Indeed, this very position is emphasized in the anti-commensality canons promulgated at the Councils of Vannes and Agde, while the language used by the bishops at Epaone and Mâcon echoes that of Titus 1.15. If for the pure all food is pure, why must Catholics make a point of avoiding 'impure' Jewish food? Because, as Shi'i authorities like al-Murtaḍā recognized, prohibitions of this nature forcefully establish the otherness and radical inferiority of the Jews, whereas a willingness to eat with Jews implies a significant degree of similarity between Us and Them. Agobard of Lyons (d. 840) also understood this logic. He made rhetoric about Jewish impurity and injunctions against Jewish food central to his efforts to marginalize Jews within Christian society (Freidenreich 2011a, pp. 124–26; more broadly, (Cohen 1999, pp. 123–45)).

The manner in which Al-Murtaḍā, Augustine, and Agobard alike employ rhetoric about impurity as a means of denigrating religious foreigners departs from Mary Douglas' classic definition of the impure as 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1966, p. 35). Quite the contrary, the assertions by these authorities that Jews, Manicheans, or non-Muslims are impure serve to put religious foreigners in their proper place within the idealized theological and social order. Impurity rhetoric does not simply describe the passive status of an object or group of people, it actively establishes that status. The impure, moreover, occupies an essential place within the social orders that our Latin Christian and Shi'i Islamic authorities envision, in part as a foil for defining those who are truly holy.

There is, however, an instructive difference between the places that Agobard and al-Murtaḍā assign to Jews by means of their impurity rhetoric. Agobard and his medieval Christian colleagues insist that Jews are the worst among all religious communities; Agobard explicitly contends, for example, that Jews are worse than heretics (Freidenreich 2011a, pp. 124–26). Al-Murtaḍā and fellow Shi'i authorities, in contrast, reserve their harshest rhetoric for Sunnis hostile to the Imams. Shi'is, *Foreigners and Their Food* demonstrates, regard Jews and Christians as 'Unlike Us', in contrast to Sunnis who regard these People of the Book as 'Like Us'. Christians, in contrast, define Jews as 'Anti-Us'. (Jews, meanwhile, define gentiles simply as 'Not Us'.) Each of these conceptions of religious foreigners reflects and reinforces a distinctive approach to thinking about self-identity: premodern Christians, for example, define themselves in terms of anti-Judaism (Nirenberg 2013). The very definition of Christianity as the polar opposite of Judaism necessitates rhetorical and legal measures, including the ascription of impurity to Jews and the establishment of prohibitions against eating with Jews or consuming Jewish food, that make this opposition apparent. Only by means of such objectivation, to return to Peter Berger's theory, do these externalized definitions of Christianity and Judaism become social givens that subsequent generations can readily internalize.

## 5. Recapitulation

Before turning to methodological reflection on the preceding comparison of Latin Christian and Shi'i Islamic sources, let me restate in brief the take-away messages of this comparison—and, more broadly, of *Foreigners and Their Food*—that I believe are relevant to scholars of religion who do not specialize in the study of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.

1. Religious authorities develop conceptions of foreigners that correspond to and advance the particular self-identities they promote for their own communities. As a result, these conceptions differ from one community to the next, such that the boundaries that religious communities construct around themselves are incongruent. Within all of the communities I study, however, restrictions on the food of foreigners play a significant role in the establishment of these boundaries and the ascription of identities to Us and to Them. Similar dynamics likely pertain within many other religious communities.
2. Impurity rhetoric can also play a crucial role in establishing the proper relationship between Us and Them. Such rhetoric does not merely mark foreigners as out of place but rather actively places select foreigners in an inferior position within the idealized theological and social hierarchy. Scholars of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam alike can better understand impurity rhetoric by distinguishing between circumstantial, offensive, and intrinsic impurity; these distinctions may also be relevant within other religious traditions.
3. The process by which conceptions of religious foreigners pass from one generation to the next can be understood by means of Peter Berger's theory of world-construction. This dialectical theory also helps to explain how religious authorities introduce changes into these conceptions and why certain innovations are more readily received than others.
4. Religious authorities often engage in scriptural exegesis to make the case that their departures from past precedent are in fact thoroughly traditional. This process typically hinges on the use of one scriptural passage to justify an innovative interpretation of another. The use of exegesis to mask innovation exemplifies and refines Wilfred Cantwell Smith's understanding of the dialectical relationship between scriptural texts and their interpretive communities.

A fifth core finding in *Foreigners and Their Food* is that many religious authorities in each of the traditions I study employ the scholastic mode of thinking (Cabezón 1998, pp. 4–6). The very nature of scholasticism shapes not only the contours of discourse about foreigners and their food but also the outcomes of this normative discourse. The texts we explored above, however, do not exemplify this dynamic.

## 6. Methodological Analysis: Goals and Modes of Comparison

When analyzing comparative studies methodologically, we must distinguish between two fundamentally distinct phases of the research process: the analysis of data and the presentation of findings. Each of these phases entails its own particular goals as well as its own constraints—language facility and word limits, to cite one example from each. Each phase, therefore, requires its own strategy for how to employ comparison most effectively. Although analysis precedes presentation both logically and chronologically from the author's perspective, the reader only encounters the finished product and therefore evaluates the presentation first and foremost. For that reason, the methodological reflections that follow similarly prioritize the role of comparison in the presentation of my research on foreigners and their food, with primary attention to the comparison that I laid out in the first half of this article. I will address in turn each of the elements that Freiburger identifies in the essay this article accompanies.

Comparative scholarship, in the strong sense of that term, strategically transgresses conventional boundaries in pursuit of greater knowledge and understanding. To be effective, scholarly comparison cannot ignore or blur the lines that distinguish categories from one another: the act of comparison depends on acknowledging such distinctions. Comparativists do not, however, allow these boundaries to constrain our scholarship. Instead, we intentionally bring together material from diverse categories, complementing the work of specialists whose analyses remain within lines we choose to straddle. Comparison has the potential to shed valuable light on specific data points as well as on the broader class of data to which comparands from diverse categories belong. No less importantly, comparison enables us to better understand the very categories and boundaries that we transgress.

The investigation of categories that we often take for granted is a primary objective of *Foreigners and Their Food*. The book demonstrates that Jews, Christians, and Muslims construct their collective self-identities, communal boundaries, and conceptions of religious foreigners in fundamentally distinctive ways. In addition, I seek to account for and to explain the significance of intellectual and discursive dynamics common to the three traditions I studied: scholasticism, impurity rhetoric, innovative interpretations of scripture, and the transmission and evolution of ideas across generations. Examining these dynamics within several religious traditions provides perspectives and insights that would not be available to a scholar who worked solely within a single tradition. At the methodological level, *Foreigners and Their Food* also seeks to demonstrate the viability and the value of comparative scholarship within the field of religious studies. Only the last of these goals, however, motivated my initial research. I could not anticipate at the outset what I would find in my comparative study of rules governing the food of religious foreigners—I merely had a strong intuitive sense that my data set would prove to be a rich one.

An additional and much more tactical goal underpins this article's comparison of Latin Christian and Shi'i Islamic sources. Writing for a broad audience of religious studies scholars with interest in methodological issues, I sought to create a case study through which I could illustrate as many of my book's core findings as possible while engaging all of Freiberger's methodological elements. My choice was further constrained by standards of professionalism: I did not consider reusing any case study to which I already devoted article-length treatment in another publication (Freidenreich 2010, 2012a, 2012b). These presentation-specific considerations have little to do with the merits of the Augustine–al-Murtaḍā comparison, but they played a crucial role nonetheless.

This comparison, like the broader study from which it originates, pursues both the goals of 'classification' and 'description', to use Freiberger's terms. It conforms most closely to the mode that Freiberger calls taxonomic, as it 'aims at forming or modifying meta-linguistic typologies, taxonomies, classifications, or categorizations and thus at theory-formation'. These goals, by their very nature, are only achievable through the analysis of similarities and differences across multiple religious traditions; the realization of these goals therefore requires comparative scholarship in the strong sense described above.

I also employ the illuminative mode of comparison in this article's comparative case study, as well as in the book. This mode appears most explicitly in Section 4 above, where I draw on the reader's new-found familiarity with al-Murtaḍā's impurity rhetoric to explain less transparent aspects of Latin Christian rhetoric. Note, however, that *Foreigners and Their Food* makes no reference to al-Murtaḍā in its presentation of the same Latin sources (Freidenreich 2011a, pp. 114–17, 123–26), for the simple reason that the book's unit on Christian sources precedes its unit on Islamic sources.

Although my analyses of both Latin Christian and Shi'i Islamic sources were inspired and informed by familiarity with the other sets of sources, the presentation of insights gleaned through these illuminative comparisons need not entail any act of comparison. This is because in illuminative comparisons 'the scholarly "action" takes place outside of the inter-religious space of comparison and is embedded firmly in one religious tradition or the other' (Freidenreich 2004, p. 91). The merits of my analysis of Latin Christian sources rest solely on my reading of those sources, and for that reason the decision to include or exclude reference to the Shi'i sources that informed my interpretation rests on compositional considerations alone. (For an article-length case study in illuminative comparison, see (Freidenreich 2012a).)

## 7. On Scales and Scopes of Comparison

I confess that I do not personally find Freiberger's focus on scales of comparison to be especially valuable. The comparison of Augustine's *Contra Faustum* and al-Murtaḍā's *al-Intiṣār* is clearly micro in scale, but is the scale the collection I assembled of fifth- through ninth-century Latin sources from various locations in present-day France micro or meso? If the latter, why should that designation invalidate the comparison I construct with the *Intiṣār*? Also, what scale best describes *Foreigners and*

*Their Food* itself? The book, after all, contains numerous micro-scale comparisons of sources produced over two thousand years (does that broad reach make it meso?), and these micro-comparisons point toward conclusions that are macro in their implications. Freiberger is certainly correct to emphasize the importance of selecting balanced comparands, but scale is not necessarily the most relevant factor in assessing the merits of a comparison; the examples he cites of flawed comparisons are problematic in many other ways as well.

Freiberger's discussion of scale is nonetheless helpful in its emphasis on the limits of the conclusions that one can responsibly draw from comparative scholarship in the taxonomic mode. I contend in my book, for example, that Christian authorities always distinguish Jews from other non-Christians and place Jews alone at the negative pole of their spectrum of humanity (in contrast to Shi'is, who group Jews with Christians and express greater negativity toward certain Sunnis). *Foreigners and Their Food*, however, only demonstrates that this pattern holds true within Christian discourse about foreign food restrictions. I have since demonstrated that this pattern also applies to a broader set of early medieval laws governing non-Christians (Freidenreich 2014). I have also discovered important exceptions to this generalization: cases in which Christians equate Muslims with Jews and even, on occasion, describe Muslims as the most anti-Christian of foreigners ((Freidenreich 2011c); see also my forthcoming work on rhetoric about 'Jewish' Muslims). The theories that result from taxonomic comparison, no matter their scale, are in fact hypotheses: plausible presumptions subject to verification or revision. I hope that other scholars of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam will test the applicability of my conclusions to their own data sets. I also hope that scholars of other religious traditions will assess the relevance within their own fields of the hypotheses I lay out in *Foreigners and Their Food*. In effect, I invite these scholars to use my work as a lens through which to construct their own illuminative comparisons.

I draw a different distinction between contextual and cross-cultural scopes of comparison than does Freiberger because of how I define comparative scholarship. Freiberger counts as comparative scholarship works of 'relational' comparison—those in which the comparands actually interact with one another—even as he emphasizes that this sort of comparison 'is omnipresent in all historical-empirical scholarship on religion'. If such comparison is omnipresent, however, then the label 'comparative scholarship' lacks utility as a reference to a specific genre of scholarship. It is, of course, crucial to analyze the ways in which texts and their authors relate to one another, a process that often attends to similarities and differences between the texts. That kind of analysis, comparative in the common sense of the term, takes place both in scholarship that remains within conventional boundaries and that which intentionally transgresses those borders.

I prefer Jonathan Z. Smith's narrower conception of comparative scholarship as an act that by definition presumes no real relationship between the comparands, notwithstanding the relationships that might in fact exist between them. In defining comparison as a form of analogical reasoning, Smith emphasizes that '[t]here is nothing "natural" about the enterprise of comparison. Similarity and difference are not "given." . . . [C]omparison, in its strongest form, brings differences together within the space of the scholar's mind for the scholar's own intellectual reasons' (Smith 1990, p. 51). The artificiality of the relationships that comparativists construct is irrelevant in cases of illuminative comparison, whose sole purpose is to generate hypotheses that the scholar then tests using other methodological tools. The inherently artificial nature of comparisons is, however, quite relevant to how we understand the categories, typologies, and classifications generated through the taxonomic mode: this fact reminds us that these conclusions are nothing more than scholarly constructs.

Some of the comparisons I construct in *Foreigners and Their Food* and related studies are contextual even as they adhere to Smith's definition of comparison. For example, I compare the ideas of scholars active within the shared Islamicate culture of the Near East without assuming a specific relationship among their works (Freidenreich 2012b). Other comparisons, like the one that appears in this article, are unambiguously cross-cultural. The fact that this example is also trans-historical has no bearing on how I constructed the comparison or on its value.

## 8. On the Non-Linear Nature of the Comparative Process

Freiberger offers a crisp and logically organized account of the methodical operations that constitute core components of the comparative process. Freiberger clearly states, and undoubtedly knows from personal experience, that the application of these operations is not nearly as linear or sequential as it appears in his essay. Lest a reader mistakenly presume otherwise, however, I will illustrate the non-linear nature of comparative scholarship by describing the process that ultimately yielded this article's case study.

Freiberger offers valuable comments regarding the importance and complexity of selection as a core operation of the comparative process; many prior studies of comparative method take this operation for granted (Mack 1996, p. 256). As noted above, the motivations for selecting Augustine's *Contra Faustum* and al-Murtaḍā's *al-Intiṣār* as the comparands in this article's case study were largely tactical in nature: I determined that the comparison of these works would enable me to illustrate the points I wanted to make without undue repetition of arguments that I have already made elsewhere. My initial discovery that these sources constitute mutually illuminating comparands, however, was serendipitous. Even so, this comparison did not emerge haphazardly: I made the strategic decision to compile and analyze a nearly comprehensive collection of premodern Jewish, Christian, and Islamic normative sources on the food of religious foreigners, with an eye toward exploring every insightful comparison I discovered. I then selected for inclusion in my dissertation, book, and related articles those sources and comparisons that I considered to yield the most valuable insights.

There were also, of course, stages to the selection process that long predate the dissertation research phase. The initial selection was to pursue graduate work on the comparative study of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic law, a choice I made several years before I stumbled upon what would ultimately become the topic of my dissertation research. That career choice was motivated in part by my interest in relationships among and attitudes toward members of distinct religious communities. The subsequent decision to focus my research on foreign food restrictions as a means of understanding these relationships and attitudes stems at least as much from my love of cooking and of sharing meals with diverse friends. Additional factors contributing to the selection of my research project include the fact that this topic was narrow enough to make a comprehensive study feasible and the sense that conclusions drawn from this data set would shed light on broader dynamics in interreligious relationships. Ultimately, however, I chose my *'tertium comparationis'* because it passed the cocktail party test: friends and acquaintances expressed far more interest in the question, 'Who aren't you supposed to eat with, and why?' than other research questions I considered. The advice I would offer to aspiring comparativists is to train deeply in your chosen religious traditions and then to find a question that excites both you and those whose opinion you respect.

Freiberger distinguishes between the operations of description, juxtaposition, and redescription. I recall as a graduate student being deeply impressed by the methodological neatness of Barbara Holdrege's *Veda and Torah* (Holdrege 1996), which does just that: it devotes separate chapters to Hindu and Jewish sources before juxtaposing and, ultimately, redescribing them. Even so, I found this approach to be unduly artificial for the presentation of my own findings. Burton Mack, drawing on the ideas of Jonathan Z. Smith, properly cautions that the 'redescription' that emerges from comparison must be grounded in the kind of careful, context-specific analysis known as 'thick description' (Mack 1996, pp. 256–58). This does not mean, however, that one must refrain from introducing insights derived from comparison until a later moment in one's presentation of findings. I prefer instead to integrate comparative insights wherever they might help my audience to better understand the material at hand. So, for example, I refer back to Augustine while introducing the ideas of al-Murtaḍā in Section 2 and, in Section 4, I use al-Murtaḍā's work to illuminate the ideas expressed by Agobard. My initial description of Augustine in Section 1 also draws upon a typology of impurity that stems from the taxonomic comparison of pre-Christian and non-Christian sources. In this case, I lay out a rectification of prior theories of impurity before even beginning to describe my sources, and I use that description to illustrate the value of this rectification (on which, see also (Freidenreich 2010)).

The presentation of findings from comparative research ought to reflect the most recent redescription of one's sources and the most recent rectification (or invention) of one's theoretical categories. This is true even if, for one reason or another, the comparativist chooses to initially describe some sources without reference to the role that comparison played in the process of interpreting them. Indeed, I sometimes present my findings without reference to comparison at all: my most detailed treatment of al-Murtaḍā's ideas about the impurity of non-Muslims, for example, makes no reference to Augustine (Freidenreich 2011b).

Within the research phase of the comparative process, I find that Freiburger's methodical operations function as an ongoing, multifactorial feedback loop. As I discover new material, I compare it to sources with which I am already familiar, illuminating each with the other. I frequently reinterpret sources I thought I already understood and test out new theories and arguments as I go. I can no longer recall whether I initially read al-Murtaḍā in light of Augustine or the reverse, nor does it matter: the comparison ultimately proved mutually enlightening, and in any case the outcomes of the comparative process do not depend on the sequence in which the underlying research takes place. Freiburger's delineation of the operations that comprise the comparative process is helpful not because it brings order to an inherently non-linear process but rather because it enables comparativists and their readers to tease apart the distinct elements of a process that can easily feel chaotic, purely intuitive, or simply magical.

## 9. Next Steps in Developing a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion

Jonathan Z. Smith memorably captured the methodological question that faces comparative scholarship: '*Is comparison an enterprise of magic or science?*' (Smith 1982, p. 22, emphasis original). In that essay, J. Z. Smith offers one of the two typologies that underpins Olver Freiburger's discussion of modes of comparison; my own initial foray into the field of comparative religion (Freidenreich 2004) offers the other. Freiburger improves on these works with his elegant distillation of the most promising modes of comparison as taxonomic and illuminative. Freiburger's terminology for the distinct operations that comprise the comparative process is also quite helpful. *Foreigners and Their Food* seeks to demonstrate that 'understanding sources from multiple traditions helps us understand the norms of any single tradition more clearly' (Freidenreich 2011a, p. xii). Freiburger provides the vocabulary to explain *how* this book's illuminative comparisons do so and, likewise, *how* its taxonomic comparisons yield the theoretical insights summarized above.

I am struck, however, by the brevity of Freiburger's discussion of the act of juxtaposition despite the fact that this is, as he observes, 'the most essential operation of a comparative study'. The present article also gives this operation short shrift. This crucial act remains, if not magical, then simply intuitive. There must, however, be patterns of best practice among comparativist scholars of religion that can be identified, just as prior scholarship identified best practices (and quite a few poor practices) with respect to modes of comparison. I would love to see Freiburger—or, perhaps, a budding comparativist—devote an entire article to analyzing the juxtapositions that appear in works of comparative religion published within the past decade or two. Which techniques do comparativists employ, and what are the merits and drawbacks of each? A study of juxtapositions within taxonomic comparisons would prove especially valuable, as the conclusions derived from this mode of comparison rest entirely on the similarities and differences identified through juxtaposition. Analysis of illuminative juxtapositions would also be useful to practitioners of this mode. A survey focusing on the methodology of comparative juxtaposition would, by necessity, focus primarily on the presentation phase of the research process, but it would likely shed light on effective techniques for juxtaposing comparands in the analysis phase as well.

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