'GOD(S)' AS A COMPARATIVE CATEGORY

STEVEN ENGLER & MARK Q. GARDINER

I denne artikkelen diskuterer vi hva slags meningsinnhold et komplekst konsept som "gud" kan ha, og setter søkelys på risikoen ved at andre konsepter assosiert med "gud" i én kulturell sammenheng blir uaktsomt overført til bruk i andre. Den sentrale posisjonen til "gud" i vestlige og kristne kontekster gjør denne risikoen spesielt påtrengende, og på bakgrunn av dette argumenterer vi for at termen bare kan bli hensiktsmessig anvendt som et komparativt konsept innenfor snevert definerte kontekster.

Håkon Tandberg raises an important question when he asks, 'Is the fire a god, in Parsi Zoroastrian ritual?' (Tandberg 2012).[1] More than clarifying the status of one element of one religion, he calls into question the value of 'god(s)' (and 'goddess[es]') as a comparative category in the academic study of religion. (We will refer to 'god' to make the point, but this broader set of terms should be kept in mind.) We might ask further whether other categories and concepts should be interrogated in the same light: do concepts such as deity, soul, sacrifice, salvation, heaven and others warrant similar critiques? Taking a closer look at 'god' as a comparative category can cast some valuable light on these matters.

The core issue is how might we weigh the risks and benefits of using certain first-order (insider religious or emic) terms as second-order (scholarly comparative or etic) terms. This question needs to be answered on a case-by-case basis: the risks and benefits – above all confusion and clarity – vary from term to term and context to context. In the case of 'god(s)', the down-side outweighs the up-: the term is best avoided as a broad category in the comparative study of religion.[2]

We are not just arguing against the viability of 'god(s)' as a cross-cultural, pan-historical concept. It hardly warrants arguing that the categories and concepts used in the human and social sciences cannot aspire to such absolute application. It is a false dichotomy to insist that *either* 'god(s)' is a narrowly circumscribed insider category (e.g., rife with Christian presuppositions) *or* it can serve to describe relevantly similar phenomena in all possible 'religious' contexts. As always, the theoretical and methodological meat of the matter lies in the messy ground between these extremes of particular and universal. By way of making an initial foray into this no-gods-land, we will highlight two distinct problems with the word 'god' as a comparative category. The first arises from contingent and historical matters-of-fact, whereas the second is a result of improper attention being paid to the nature of meaning in general and of the meaning of 'god' in particular. These two sources are related, but we will only here hint at their connection. The full argument would require more in-depth theorizing that we will leave for another time and place.

Problem 1: semantic baggage. In English-language usage, 'god' is associated most frequently with the Christian God. From this statistical fact emerges a conceptual and normative bias with the insider's usage spilling over into the scholarly texts and discourses of the study of religion. A good example is the one chapter on 'God' in the series of 'companions' and 'handbooks' to the study of religion that has been published over the last fifteen years. The discussion in that isolated chapter is almost entirely limited to the Christian concept:

> Other terms, such as the "holy," the "sacred," "divinity," the "supernatural," the "mystical," and so on, have been proposed as articulating what is at the heart of all religion, and thus as best denoting the proper object of religions. None of these common nouns, however can or does contain either the comprehensiveness or the specificity of meaning to which the proper name "God" adverts, with its positing of an ultimate point of reference in terms of which all realities must be understood, and its claim that all aspects of human life therefore…should be oriented in terms of this reference point. (Fiorenza and Kaufman 1998: 154)

Of course, the distinction between 'God' as proper name and 'god' as common noun is implicit here, though this also serves to highlight our point. Whether or not etymologically accurate, the proper name is taken by most speakers of English to be predominant while the common noun is seen as derivative, just as the classical Greek term διός (dios) elides with θεός (theós) with both appearing to be derived from the proper name Ζεύς (Zeus). In other words, most English speakers tend first to be exposed to the Christian connotation of 'God' and subsequently understand 'god' in a derivative, usually deviant or deficient, sense. Conceptually associated with 'God' but lacking in 'god' is a sense of necessary existence and perfection, but as a derivative concept many of the other monotheistic associations – principally a sense of ultimacy or absolute transcendence – tend to be misleadingly preserved in contexts involving 'god'. The near syntactic identity of 'God' and 'god' encourages this tendency, and without some sort of universally recognized special quotation marks or other syntactic devices for distinguishing between them, the danger of association-transfer is significant.

The problem of semantic baggage is a relative one: some first-order terms will bring more associations than others when they are taken up by scholars as second-order terms, and some scholars will be more sensitive to the dangers of illicit transfer than others. Nonetheless, where a term is as central and distinctive as 'god' is in the Christian context, and where the preponderance of theorizing in religious studies has been anchored in Western (and largely Christian) traditions (as argued, for example, by Vásquez [2011]), the weight of that usage is sufficient to count against our using the term as a general comparative category. 'God' is more trouble than it is worth because of the difficulty in firewalling the term against its most common monotheistic meanings. In their article on 'God,' Fiorenza and Kaufman effectively grant this point: after discussing the biblical 'strand of meaning', they note that 'the word "God" itself, as employed today, inevitably carries traces of all this complex weight of meaning' (1998: 141).

The problematic transference of association from 'God' to 'god' is also replicated in the use of the same type – 'god' – in different contex-

tual tokens. For example, Hollywood (e.g. *Thor*, *The Mummy*, *Clash/Wrath of the Titans*) capitalizes on a common association of 'god' in much Western mythology with anthropomorphism (hence Liam Neeson can portray Zeus without much CGI) and anthroporationality (deliberative will or intentional agency). That these facets of the characters do not need to be explained to the transcultural audiences is telling. Applying 'god' to contexts not connected to the western monotheistic canon raises more than a mere worry of unwarranted transference of association.

It is easy to distinguish further and deeper senses of this first problem, e.g., historical or post-colonial critiques that see 'god' as carrying pre-modern or western presuppositions of more specific sorts. We trust that readers can rehearse the trajectory of such arguments. The basic problem remains the same: the term 'God,' and by transference of association 'god,' have semantic inertia that brings with them predominant associations in a manner that distorts the attempt to engage in historical and cross-cultural research. For example, as David Chidester (1996) notes for the case of South Africa, many Europeans did not see 'religion' in the beliefs and practices of colonized peoples because they failed to find something that corresponded to their Christian preconceptions of the meaning of 'God,' whereas, at the same time, others insisted that these people must have religion. The basis of the latter view was that – as Dutch traveler, Johan Nieuhof, put it – 'according to the unanimous opinion of all theologians, no folk in the world is so barbarous that it does not honour some Godhead, be it true or false' (cited in Chidester 1996: 39). This is more than a case of Europeans filtering their understanding of other cultures through their own presuppositions. Both sides of this debate – those who saw religion among certain groups and those who did not – tended to share a particular sense of what it was they were looking for in 'god.' As signified by Nieuhof's use of the term 'Godhead,' the issue was not whether the sense of ultimacy was appropriate but whether ultimacy was present in some supernatural being postulated by the culture. Both sides of the debate took an overly narrow meaning of 'god' for granted.

It might be thought that the problem of semantic baggage will arise only amongst those untutored in the academy – i.e., that scholars develop habits of caution that inoculate them against this problem. We are skeptical of such optimism. We see the same potential problem – albeit more subtle in form – even within communities of scholarly usage. It is perhaps not surprising that the chapter on 'God' in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* is biased toward Christian usage, given that it was written by Roman Catholic theologian Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and Protestant theologian Gordan D. Kaufman. But that very point underlines a corollary to the problem of semantic baggage. The academic study of religion both includes various sub-disciplines (e.g. textual hermeneutics and study of ritual) and is pursued by various super-disciplines (e.g. sociology and psychology). Like it or not, 'theological' discourses appear in the same books, journals and conferences as do 'religious studies' discourses, more narrowly defined. Given the value, at least in certain contexts and circumstances, of emphasizing rather than eliding such sub- and super-disciplinary distinctions, we should choose our technical vocabulary in a way that allows us to distinguish the respective theoretical and methodological agendas.

Our pessimism about the academy successfully policing itself is based more fundamentally on what the term 'god' is being asked to do. It is expected to do double duty as a specific marker of monotheistic ultimacy and as a more generic comparative term for some sub-set of supernatural beings. No single term can do both of these things. This is not a failing in our academic training, but rather is a consequence of what sort of meaning words can have and what implications this has for their usage. This leads to the second problem.

Problem 2: semantic indeterminacy. The term 'god' is a complex term, especially when used as a broad comparative category. It reflects a variety of other concepts that might or might not be associated in a given case. In our discussion of problem 1, we highlighted ultimacy, anthropomorphism, and anthroporationality, but a host of others appear on reflection: e.g., absolute, all-encompassing, compassionate, controller, creator, divine, animal-spirit, embodied, disembodied, incorpo-

real, energy, essential, eternal, extraterrestrial, father, mother, formlessness, genderless, good, evil, grace, hidden, holy, immortal, immutable, incarnate, ineffable, infinite, in-relation, beyond-relation, intelligence, judge, lawgiver, mind, mystery, nature, omnibenevolent, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, one, necessary existence, possessing, posthuman, transhuman, punisher, ruler, sacred, self-revealing, set apart, divinely simple, trans-historical, spirit, supernatural or transhuman power and knowledge, supreme being, transcendent, immanent, transpersonal, personal, impersonal, trinity, true self, unknowable, revealed, unmoved mover, vengeful, whole, willful, worshiped, wrathful, etc. The fact that so many terms on such a list resonate with Christian conceptions is a further illustration of the problem of semantic baggage.

The word 'god' itself does not specify, at least not a-contextually or trans-contextually, whether such an entity is good or evil, gendered or genderless, hidden or revealed, personal or impersonal, etc. Any use of the term, then, must be supplemented by additional, more specific, contextually associated terms in order to clarify its meaning. Why? Because the meaning of 'god' – indeed of any complex term or concept that has comparative aspirations – is not given by analytic relations to these other associated concepts. By this we mean that the term 'god' is not defined as the entity that satisfies the conjunction of these other terms. They do not specify the essence of god(s), if 'essence' (another complex term!) is understood as logically strict, necessary and sufficient conditions. They are not predicates that are somehow, in Kantian fashion, contained in the subject-expression 'god(s)'.

This is clear, for one reason, because many of the terms in the list are incompatible with each other and so cannot coherently be bundled into necessary and sufficient conditions. More significantly, though, such a conception of the meaning of complex terms would preclude their being successfully used in comparative ways. That is, terms displaying any deviation from the 'defining' set would have to be regarded as literally different concepts; yet, numerous perfectly sound and rigorous inquiries have shown there to be such 'deviant' but otherwise perfectly good uses of comparative terms. If we were to define 'god' in

analytic or essentialist terms, its use as a comparative concept in religious studies would be ruled out of bounds by linguistic fiat: not because it would not be useful, but because it could not be comparative. An essentialist definition of 'god' would tie it rigidly to whatever list of concepts were said to characterize it, and this would undermine its comparative use: i.e., it could not be extended to encompass other elements not on that list. Of course, there is a sense in which the term could be comparative under these conditions: it could simply be forced to apply in cross-historical and cross-cultural contexts. However, this would require that one particular set of network associations be taken as canonical or privileged or definitional. This would elevate the problem of semantic baggage to the level of ethno-lingo-centrism.

The more palatable view, theoretically and methodologically, is to recognize that the meaning of distinct uses of 'god(s)' is best understood in terms of specific networks of associated concepts that fully reveal themselves only in concrete contexts of usage. No single network of associations is found across all contexts. This 'network association' conception of meaning – or what has come to be called 'semantic holism' – offers a more nuanced way of making sense of the danger of semantic baggage, and it underlines that specific historical facts about the hegemony of Christian and western associations make this semantic possibility an actual threat to the comparative project of the study of religion.[3]

It is important to note that the problem is not that 'god(s)' is ambiguous or ambivalent – i.e., that it simply means different things in different contexts. 'God' does not have multiple meanings in the way that 'bank,' 'crop,' or 'pitch' do. Rather, the comparative researcher will discover substantial overlap in the associated networks between any two contexts of usage despite the fact that no two networks will be identical. Some semantic holists – e.g. W.V. Quine and Donald Davidson (e.g. Quine [1960] and Davidson [1985]) – have described this consequence of meaning as semantic indeterminacy. For terms that have this type of semantic complexity, because no specific network will have semantic privilege, no single determinate meaning can be assigned to them. But this does not mean that they are meaningless, or that their meaning is

arbitrary, or that their meaning is strictly relative to particular contexts. The guaranteed overlap of subsets of associations will preclude these views. Indeed, it is this overlap that makes it possible for such terms to be used in non-incommensurable, and hence comparative, ways. To give a trivial example, distinct meanings of 'grain' are clear from associations with other words in the following two phrases: 'cut against the grain' and 'harvest the grain.'

To summarize, our point is not that 'god(s)' cannot be used comparatively but that the term's disadvantages outweigh its advantages for broad comparative work in the study of religion. It certainly can be useful in more limited comparative contexts. After all, 'God' works for Christian theologians of both apophatic and kataphatic stripes. In this case, however, the core commitment to the ultimacy of God offers a delimiting characteristic that keeps the semantic domain sufficiently narrow for scholarly comparison, even across a range of relevant variations. However, in the case of the broader cross-cultural comparative use of 'god', the various uses that scholars could be expected to lump together have only very general characteristics in common: e.g., supernatural being or culturally postulated superhuman agent. So why not just use those more general terms? The semantic domain of 'god' is simply too broad to be of much comparative value. The Christian use of 'God' (as the Muslim use of 'Allah') works because it leaves open certain issues, but within a relatively constrained field of meaning. The broad comparative used of 'god' is too open. Too much is left to specify. As a result, it is best to drop the term 'god' in comparative discussion and to move directly to the more specific concepts that characterize cases in comparative studies.

To give a concrete example of this problem, we can turn to early twentieth-century French Indologist Sylvain Lévi who, according to Ivan Strenski,

> showed how Vedic and Brahmanic sacrifice assumed that ritual itself actually produced the gods. This meant, first of all, that the *definition* of religion could be separated from a belief in the existence or even the idea of God. Sylvain Lévi says that the *nature* of the religion revealed in the *Brâh-*

manas is constituted by sacrificial ritual. Thus sacrifice "is God and God *par excellence*" (Strenski 1996: 33 [text and note], original emphasis).[4]

'God' here is equated with 'the nature of the religion.' This is so general that the term 'god' itself does no useful work, apart from, perhaps, an implicit othering of Christian conceptions of the term. It is either so general that it might as well be dropped or, if we credit the latter motivation, it constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of the cross-cultural use of the term.

There is an additional aspect of semantic indeterminacy that further limits the usefulness of 'god' with respect to available definitional and consequently translational choices. Not only will the networks differ from context to context, there will be overwhelming practical difficulties in delimiting even a single network. Given that the meaning of a complex term is given in relation to elements of the associated network, in cases where each of those associated nodes is also complex, then their meaning will be given by a further extension of the network, and the same holds for all such complex nodes in the extension. This raises the methodological difficulty of completing a network for even a single context of use, i.e. of usefully providing a definition relative even to one particular context. 'God' is especially prone to this problem. For example, The *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* (*HCDR*) defines 'God, Goddess' as 'common term for the supreme deity'; 'god' as 'common term for a male deity'; and 'goddess' as 'common term for a female deity' (Smith 1995: 389). It defines 'deity' as 'general term for a god or goddess; in modern Indo-European languages, a synonym for god' (Smith 1995: 310). This tight circle avoids begging the question of the general meaning of 'god' only in the subtle shift from 'common term' to 'general term.'

On the one hand, 'deity' is perhaps more useful than 'god' as a general category in that it may have less semantic baggage. It thus also perhaps avoids the problem of communities of scholarly usage to a greater, if not total, extent. In addition, the fact that it is such a close synonym for 'god' raises the question of why one would use a different term at all, and this difference is easily interpreted precisely as the move toward

a less Christian-specific term. That is, 'deity' may be, in practical terms, a way of saying 'god as a more general term.' Minimally, its use is preferable for that reason. On the other hand, 'deity' remains just as complex and hence semantically indeterminate a term as 'god.'

More usefully, the *HCDR*'s entry for 'God, Goddess' includes the following reference: 'See also term question,' (Smith 1995: 389). This draws our attention to the issue of translation. The 'term question' was a nineteenth-century Protestant theological debate over the relation between 'God' and two terms from Confucian thought: 'Shang-ti' and 'T'ien.' 'God' is an English word used in English-language discussions of religion (leaving aside Dutch). Given the overwhelming probability of differing associated networks we cannot take for granted that the meanings of the following words are the same: allah, batara, bóg, boh, Bože, bůh, deus, dieu, dio, dievs, dios, бог, got, gott, gud, hyjni, isten, Jumala, θεός, zeu. This applies even more so with terms such as Shang-ti', deva/dewa, orixá, kisemanito, Waaq or Jaumirawo. Consequently, any attempt to inter-translate them should be regarded with deep skepticism.

In one sense, this is an unavoidable problem with any appropriation of first-order terms for use as second-order terms. 'Sacrifice' in English and French and 'sacrifício' in Portuguese all diverge in meaning due, for example, to distinct nineteenth-century Western-European discourses around individual responsibilities to the nation and to the late-twentieth century emergence of neo-Pentecostal discourses on tithing in Brazil. In this light, we might consider using 'god' tentatively, awaiting confirmation that the usages in different languages – and in distinct historical and cultural contexts – conform to our hypothesis of a relatively stable core of meaning.

This is not what we advocate. Given the problem of semantic indeterminacy noted above, the meaning of 'god' – even across English-only contexts – does not serve as a stable basis for translation. On the hypothesis that comparable terms in other languages are equally indeterminate, the attempt to use 'god' as a comparative category reduces to a futile attempt to match up some indeterminate sub-set of one broad bundle of meanings to some indeterminate sub-set of another.

More fundamentally, we need to move past a facile and spurious conception of translation as a one-to-one mapping between the elements of two distinct languages (see Engler and Gardiner, forthcoming). One potential solution would be to analyze terms like 'god' in family-resemblance terms, though in ways more complex than Wittgenstein's original notion envisioned (Wittgenstein [1953]). This would provide a way to conceptualize the problem of semantic baggage: monotheistic conceptions of 'god' constitute a workably constrained family; broad comparative uses of 'god' constitute an unworkably extended family.

NOTES
1. During a recent visit to Bergen, one of the authors (Steven Engler) was able to sit down with Håkon Tandberg and Knut Melvær, the editors of this special issue, to discuss these questions in greater depth. He thanks them for stimulating his thinking on these matters, and for pointing out the Ketola and Pyysiäinen chapter.
2. Kimmo Ketola and Ilkka Pyysiäinen (1999) analyzed 'the concept of "God" as a category in comparative religion.' They argue that 'such concepts as "tabu", "sacred", totemism", etc. have all been lifted from religious contexts and have already been quite carefully problematized and thus made into etic categories for comparative use. Only "god" is still used without any well formed criteria for its operationalisation' (1999: 208). They concluded that the term 'god' cannot escape from its 'implicit Judeo-Christian assumptions' in order to become a properly 'scientific' term. We go beyond Ketola and Pyysiäinen in more fully assessing the nature of this problem, in noting correlated problems, and, more fundamentally, in bringing out the semantic dimensions of these issues.
3. For a brief discussion of semantic holism and its implication for the study of religion see Engler and Gardiner 2010.
4. Citing Sylvain Lévi, *La Doctrine du sacrifice dans les brahmanas*, Paris: Lerous, 1898.

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we argue that, despite the fact that the term 'god' may be used effectively as a comparative concept in the study of religion within narrowly circumscribed contexts, the risks of doing so as a broad cross-cultural category outweigh any possible benefits. We advance an account of the kind of meaning that complex concepts, like 'god', have.

This account guarantees a risk that certain further concepts that are associated with 'god' in some cultural contexts will be illicitly transferred to its use in others. The centrality of 'god' in western and Christian contexts makes this risk particularly acute, to the point of not being worth the trouble.