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New Patterns for Comparative Religion: Passages to an Evolutionary Perspective

London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

264 pages, \$114.00/£ 85.00,

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An emeritus Professor at the University of Vermont, William Paden is a comparativist whose work on 'religious worlds' has been largely influential in the North American study of religions. The present book, part of a recently inaugurated series entitled "Scientific Studies of Religion" published by Bloomsbury, is composed of essays redacted between 1991 and 2013. Since much of the book's material has already been published in different venues, the present review will summarize some major points and discuss the interest students of religion will find in the collection.

The introduction (pp. 1-15) outlines a few shifts in Paden's intellectual trajectory. The first of these transitions expands the notion of 'world' (a theme in the center of a previous monograph, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion*¹) to that of an environment built by organisms to adapt to their surroundings. A second such transition concerns comparative patterns: here, categories serving as points of comparison are transitioned from cultural-level topics to human-level inclinations or behaviors. This turn, Paden explains, can work as an answer to the criticism expressed in the 1990s about comparative concepts related to the concept of 'religion' being too Euro-centric to be used in cross-cultural studies. Paden's third

1 Paden, William. 1988. *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press.

turn is the encounter with the so-called evolutionary and cognitive sciences of religion, in part focusing on phenomena of communicative signaling and in-group markers—phenomena, he stresses, that are present in all organisms, “whether fireflies or Popes” (p. 6).

The book’s three parts nicely elaborate these different turns, beginning with an exploration of resources offered by the discipline’s classical authors (“Rethinking and Redirecting Classical Resources”, pp. 19-92). This brings us back to debates of the 1990s between so-called non-reductionist (or ‘religionist’, ‘phenomenological’, ‘theological’) and reductionist views of religion, a debate that originated in the difficult task of negotiating Eliade’s cumbersome heritage at the end of the 20th century. Revisiting the Durkheimian legacy, Paden urges that the French sociologist not be read exclusively through the lens of a ‘reductionist’ author. Nuancing the opposition between Durkheim and Eliade, he notes that both share the concept of humans as participants in an endless series of mythically and ritually constructed worlds, the contents and contours of which are formed by cultural environments, and the dynamics of which are informed by the way sacred objects function for participants and impact their lives (p. 38). Paden redefines the notion of the ‘sacred’ to allude to an order constantly monitored by a religious world to preserve its integrity, opposing what he calls the “mana model of sacrality” (p. 46), i.e. sacrality as derived from a feeling of awe towards a mysterious supernatural force. This part closes with suggestive thoughts about the concept of ‘world’, considered as an apt and less narrow substitute for ‘ideology’.

The second part, “Some New Levels for Cross-Cultural Patterns” (pp. 95-159), opens with Paden’s classical piece on “Elements of a New Comparativism”, an essay first presented at a North American Association for the Study of Religion (1994) and reworked for publication in the edited

book *In Comparison A Magic Dwells* (2000).² As stated in the first version of this text, the goal is to demonstrate that “after Eliade and after the critique of the contextless character of classical comparativism”, there are ways to “recast the viability of cross-cultural analysis” (Paden 1996a, 5). Echoing J. Z. Smith, Paden argues that a new comparativism should be “a technique for discerning contextuality, particularity, difference”, should have reflexivity, be conceptually self-critical, and should involve a process of moving back and forth between the generic and particular levels (Paden 1996b, 41).

This is all wise advice and certainly justifies the claim that the kind of comparison Paden advocates is not just the same as those of L. H. Jordan, E. Durkheim or M. Mauss.

A major line is crossed with the next chapter on “Universals Revisited,” which conceives of comparative categories along a concept of “panhuman behaviors to which religious cultures add their differences of content” (p. 109). Here, Paden begins a transition from cultural notions to socio-biological ones and moves away from Smith’s conception of the *tertium comparationis* as a pure scholarly creation. Building on this, Paden calls for an “ethology of religion” (p. 133) which would compare various “worldmaking behaviors” (pp. 122-123). This second part closes with an overview of the issue of comparison in the study of religions, reviewing

2 Respectively Paden, William. 1996a. “Elements of a New Comparativism.” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1): 5-14 and Paden, William. 2000. “Elements of a New Comparativism.” In *In Comparison a Magic Dwells*, edited by K. Patton and B. Ray, 182-192. Berkeley: University of California Press. A special issue of *Method and Theory in the Study of Religions* summarized the results of the session. See in particular Wiebe, Donald. 1996. “Is the New Comparativism Really New?.” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1): 21-29, arguing that Paden’s conception of a non-essentialist comparative framework is not all that new, and Paden’s “response” in: Paden, William. 1996b. “A New Comparativism: Reply to the Panelists.” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1): 37-49.

classical criticisms and rebuilding a model on this new basis—still referring to Smith, despite the advocacy for a ‘stronger’ program.

In the third part, “Responses to Evolutionary Sciences” (pp. 163-234), Paden makes more explicit what he means by an ‘ethology of religion’ relating his views to evolutionary models such as those of W. Burkert or D. Dennett. He presents us with four levels of analysis: the importance of behavior as a response to environmental stimuli, the construction of social worlds, group-level constraints and social interaction with prestige-laden objects. With this, Paden wants to provide a new evolutionary and comparative framework for most classical topics in the study of religions, such as myth, ritual or sacred objects.

Well aware of the gap between socio-historical and socio-biological approaches, he attempts to reconcile both, attributing the role to “examine the culturally varying formulations of those behaviours-in-environments” to historians (p. 166). While unsure of whether most historians would make such a task theirs, one can also candidly ask about the heuristic value of species-wide behavioral and evolutionary patterns in this context. Do not contextual socio-historical factors (that might be ultimately derived from species-wide behaviors and institutions) have more explanatory analytical power than evolutionary considerations for studying, say, the thaumaturgic practices performed by one of the French kings explored in M. Bloch’s classical study? We will come back to this important issue in the conclusion.

In the last chapters, Paden describes a few possible bridges between Durkheim and evolutionary theory, referring, for example, to D. S. Wilson’s analysis of moral commitment as influencing group selection. A fundamental feature present in almost all social organisms, prestige attribution is presented as a basic process of religious frameworks, where it serves to distinguish (and thus naturalize) the specificity or dominant character of individuals, groups or objects. The final chapter is a plea for ‘evolutionizing’

the vocabulary of the study of religions, so as to add dimensions and points of comparison that serve as invitations for further research. A short epilogue (pp. 229-234) wraps up the reorientations delineated in the essays. The volume closes with a brief and somewhat incomplete (only a few thematic entries and missing page numbers for some existing entries) but nevertheless useful index (pp. 251-253).

In sum, this collection of articles reflects not only Paden's intellectual trajectory but also major tendencies in the field itself, with evolutionist perspectives gaining ground, but not occupying a central position, yet. As of today, there is still a gap between scholars applying evolutionary theory or cognitive science to religious phenomena, and others who privilege a cultural conception of religion, analyzing it with the more conventional tools of history or sociology. Paden does good work at building bridges between both sides, using comparison as a basic intellectual device common to these divergent approaches, even if it is not entirely clear whether the comparative process remains the same in the transition. While a socio-biological framework tends to ground the *tertium comparationis* in pan-human behavior and to analyze actual data as cultural instantiations of this behavior, a historico-cultural framework will more readily acknowledge the constructed character of its point of comparison and can provide more nuanced analyses. A direction that would be worth pursuing from there is developing a vocabulary of semi-empirical 'basic level categories' (as understood in cognitive linguistics): categories that are general enough to go beyond the idiosyncrasies of the particular ('subordinate level categories'), but not necessarily considered universal and hence out of reflexive reach ('superordinate level categories'). To refer to an example of W. James quoted by Paden (p. 102), it would be about finding middle ground between the crab's representation of itself and the scientific classification of the crab as a crustacean, recognizing that the scholarly study of religion

is itself a constructed enterprise and that the translation between universal biological behaviors and socio-historical data is not a straightforward one.³ The risk is, otherwise, to miss crucial points and end up with trivial results about such or such ritual serving to advantage a group A over a group B, for example, but overlooking the intricate mechanisms by which such a distinction is operationalized. Comparative works that are open to the revision of their categories—whether developed in a cultural or a behavioral framework—remain the best way to develop inductively such a vocabulary.

To test the various issues delineated in the book would require an extensive case study based on detailed source material, and this is perhaps the main regret to be expressed about the present work: an actual, full-scale case coming in addition to the theoretical essays would have been a precious addition to better gauge the strengths and the weaknesses of the proposed program, especially in the interface between socio-biological and socio-historical perspectives. In the end, one ought to underline that this collection of essays, even if not representing a single, standardized theory of religion, offers a remarkably coherent whole which includes suggestive propositions for moving the comparative study of religion forward and to integrate divergent approaches. Published by a well-distributed publisher, one hopes that this book will contribute to disseminate Paden's important works to a broader public, especially in Europe.

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3 Cf. Calame, Claude. 2003. "Le rite d'initiation tribale comme catégorie anthropologique (Van Gennep et Platon)." *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 220 (1): 5-62 for an analysis of the category of "initiation rite" as precisely one "basic level category".