

# INTRODUCTION

KIMBERLEY C. PATTON AND BENJAMIN C. RAY

Whither comparative religion in the postmodern age? The essays in this volume seek to break through the seemingly intractable division between postmodern scholars who reject the comparative endeavor and those who affirm it. In various ways, this volume seeks to demonstrate that a broader vision of religion, involving different scales of comparison for different purposes, is both justifiable and necessary.

Drawing from as wide a range of fields of expertise and vantage points as possible, *A Magic Still Dwells* brings together historians of religions who are outstanding in their respective areas of scholarship. Their essays take up a common set of questions that are reflected in their papers. They take seriously the postmodern critique, explain its impact on their own work, uphold or reject various premises, and in several cases demonstrate new comparative approaches.<sup>1</sup> Despite the rich range of difference in their grounds for and use of comparative method, they are united in the claim for the continuing necessity—and relevance—of the comparative study of religion.

Postmodernism represents a variegated critique of the Enlightenment humanism that undergirds modernism with its totalizing, rationalist gaze. The substantial and often well-founded charges brought against the comparative method are many: intellectual imperialism, universalism, theological foundationalism, and anti-contextualism. In particular, the work of Mircea Eliade, the late doyen of the history of religions, is held to be unredeemable, based as it is on the vision of a universal,

transcendent “sacred” refracted in the ritual and mythic behavior of a cross-cultural human archetype called *Homo religiosus*.

The standpoint of the comparativist was once privileged as a vantage-point of objective description, classification, and comparison of “other peoples” and their beliefs. The focus of deconstructive scrutiny “reveals” it instead, at worst, as a subjective mélange of culturally biased perceptions that cannot but distort or, at best, as an act of imaginative, associative “play.” The application of postmodern thought to analytical reflection on religious narrative or worldview is problematic at best. Postmodernism denounces order and ordering principles in favor of “otherness, difference, and excess,” and further wishes to “destroy the status quo in favor of the fluxus quo”;<sup>2</sup> the religious worldview is nothing if not global, universal, systemic, unequivocal, and symmetrical in its claims, “totalizing” in its metaphysics or anti-metaphysics. If we are to take the philosophical claims of postmodernism seriously, the possibility of describing religious systems with integrity or comparing them to one another is thus permanently compromised.

Once confined to poststructuralist, neo-Marxist thought and literary studies, the impact on the field of religion—as on all other fields in the humanities and social science—of a postmodern critique such as Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionism has been profound. Words appear no longer to be connected to the world but to be merely unrooted signifiers, shifting counters in the many language games we play. There is also the political charge implied by the work of a Lyotard or that of an Adorno: to compare is to abstract, and abstraction is construed as a political act aimed at domination and annihilation; cross-cultural comparison becomes intrinsically imperialistic, obliterating the cultural matrix from which it “lifts” the compared object.

Thus to compare religious traditions, particularly unhistorically related ones, or elements and phenomena within those traditions, is to attempt to control and ultimately to destroy them. Following this logic, scholarly integrity is only to be found in the self-reflexive study of the “other” that locates itself in the uniquely local and the particular. Whereas Enlightenment-nourished modernism confidently affirmed that “nothing human is foreign to me” and went about making the human intelligible, some postmodernists reverse the adage and affirm with equal confidence, “everything human is foreign to me,” and go about denying the intelligibility of the “other” and promoting cultural criticism and intellectual relativism. “There is no way definitely, surgically, to separate the factual from the allegorical in cultural accounts,” says anthropolo-

gist James Clifford; ethnography is only “a fantasy reality of a reality fantasy,” says his colleague Stephen Tyler.<sup>3</sup>

Responding to these recent developments, the field of the study of religion has undergone a profound change. With a few outstanding exceptions, comparative studies have virtually disappeared in graduate programs in favor of increasingly narrow “area studies” research into specific religious texts and communities. This represents a trend identified by Jonathan Z. Smith in 1995:

In a wholly understandable over-reaction against the well-meaning, endlessly tolerant amateurs who often comprised religion programs prior to the 1960s, a new set of standards was forged: competence in a particular religious tradition measured largely by the acquisition of philological expertise accompanied by an emergent ethic of particularity which suggested that any attempt at generalization violated the personhood of those studied. Lip service might be paid to more general issues, but only in the most introductory courses, never to be studied again.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the most cogent and eloquent challenge to the very possibility of responsible comparison came from Smith himself in his seminal 1982 essay, “In Comparison a Magic Dwells.” We reproduce his essay as the prologue to this collection because so many of our contributors acknowledge their indebtedness to it, especially its deconstructive attack upon previous comparative studies in anthropology and the history of religions. Smith’s essay argues that comparison in the human sciences has been problematic and unscientific and lacking in any specific rules. It contains a kind of “magic,” he asserts, like Frazer’s idea of homeopathic magic, “for, as practiced by scholarship, *comparison has been chiefly an affair of the recollection of similarity*. . . . The procedure is homeopathic. . . . The issue of difference has been all but forgotten.”<sup>5</sup> For Smith, the unfortunate “magic” of previous comparative studies lies in their resemblance to Frazer’s notion of primitive magic, the association of ideas by superficial similarity, thus confusing subjective relationships with objective ones. Smith finds wanting several types of comparison in the history of religions for their confused, impressionistic, and unscientific character.

Acknowledging the importance of this essay, we borrow Smith’s linkage between magic and comparison for the title of the present volume, *A Magic Still Dwells*. Recognizing that Smith used the term “magic” derogatorily, we do so, not as an act of defiance nor even one of irony, but rather to highlight a reenvisioned potential for comparative study. We reclaim the term “magic” to endorse and to extend his claim that

comparison is an indeterminate scholarly procedure that is best undertaken as an intellectually creative enterprise, not as a science but as an art—an imaginative and critical act of mediation and redescription in the service of knowledge. In keeping with this view, these essays offer an illuminating discussion of the scholarly “manipulation of difference,” to use Smith’s words, a playing across the “gap” of differences, for the purpose of gaining intellectual insight.

The present volume is divided into three parts. The essays in Part 1, “Comparative Religion: The State of the Field,” offer an overview of the current status of the comparative enterprise, with particular reference to the methodological challenges posed by postmodernism.

Inaugurating the volume, David White argues that postmodernism’s lessons have been absorbed, and that the “self-indulgent pursuit . . . of talking about ourselves talking about other people is one whose time has passed.” “We would do better,” White continues, “to do what we do, which is to attempt to make sense of other people’s religions,” despite the ultimately provisional, non-final nature of the effort. Responding to Jacques Derrida’s criticism of Western metaphysics as a kind of “Indo-European mythology,” White defends the modern field of Indo-European studies as consistently responsive to cultural difference, religious specificity, and historical change. White ends by invoking Jonathan Smith’s idea of the comparative enterprise as an imaginative act of mediation and redescription, concluding that Smith has “artfully shown us how we may take issue with our modernist forebears without embracing the rhetoric of certain of our postmodernist contemporaries.”

In “Contested Identities: The Study of Buddhism in the Postmodern World,” David Eckel eloquently remarks upon the “implosion,” like many of the “rational” housing projects of the 1970s, of the “grand old” projects of classification that typified modern phenomenologies of religion. He meditates on Jonathan Smith’s dismissal of comparative similarities as a kind of Frazerian-style “magic,” but, resonating with David White’s observations, rescues out of Smith’s *Imagining Religion* a new kind of comparison—a style of “imaginative and ironical juxtaposition” (e.g., the Jonestown mass suicide, a cargo cult in the New Hebrides, the Dionysia of Euripides’ *Bacchae*) as a way of stripping away illusions of “uniqueness” for each religious situation. Buddhist studies, Eckel shows, provides a superb exemplar of the debates within a particular field of religious studies, with recent attacks on notions of Buddhism as a monolith, a kind of totalizing narrative philosophy rather than a religion, that is unique in its utterly experiential orientation. Yet

just as Eckel redeems “comparison,” he also argues for a lexical rehabilitation of the much-maligned idea of “essence” in the pragmatic sense of what is “necessary” to any Buddhist community’s self-understanding and therefore to the work of the scholars who study it.

Noted mythographer Wendy Doniger’s essay vigorously reframes the recurrent issues of sameness and difference. She proposes that we salvage a broad comparativist agenda in the study of religion and myth, even when it means bringing into a single conversation “the genuinely different approaches that several cultures have made to similar (if not the same) human problems.” Acknowledging the reductionism of extreme universalism, she counters by outlining the ironic pitfalls of extreme nominalism: one can “essentialize” the contextualized “group” as one homogeneous mass, whose various individual members may view the same story quite differently. Doniger urges that, in order to sidestep these twin intractable dangers, we focus our vision on individual insight, or, as she puts it, “anchor our cross-cultural paradigms in an investigation of the unique insights of particular tellings of our cross-cultural themes, to focus on the individual and the human on both ends of the spectrum—one story, and then the human race—thus not so much ignoring the problematic cultural generalizations in the middle as leaping over them altogether.” Thus she avoids a “quasi-Jungian universalism” and posits a kind of “pointillism,” formed by the views of individual authors whose insights transcend their particular moment and “speak to us across space and time.” Doniger searches for these points “not merely in the bastions of the Western canon, but in the neglected byways of oral traditions and rejected heresies.” Thus we arrive at “a wider construction of cross-cultural inspiration.”

Part 2, “Case Studies: Critical Issues in the History of Religions,” offers in-depth case studies by different scholars working in various traditions within the history of religions. Each scholar demonstrates how her or his work has interacted with postmodernism, and how she or he has used a comparative approach as a valuable analytical tool in the development of specific cultural as well as cross-cultural categories.

Barbara Holdrege, known for her ambitious study, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture*,<sup>6</sup> asks with her colleague Charles Long, “What’s beyond the ‘post’ of the various intellectual movements that characterize themselves using this prefix?” Her emphatic answer is that there is a place “beyond the post” for the comparative study of religion, agreeing with Jonathan Smith that, in her words, comparison is itself a “constitutive aspect of human thought and

an inextricable component of our scholarly methods.” In her essay, Holdrege attempts to “redress” the comparative method by highlighting the problems that emerge from the work of the phenomenologists and their inadequate attention to differences, the diachronic dimension, and context. Using her own work as an example, Holdrege outlines a method of comparison that gives “proper attention to differences as well as to similarities and to diachronic transformations as well as to structural continuities.”

Building on the problematic of the illusion of “uniqueness” examined by Smith and underscored by Eckel, Holdrege argues that comparative analysis can claim a rightful place within the postmodern enterprise as “an important corrective to the strategies of domination through which we privilege certain categories and models over others in our academic discourse. . . . [It] can serve as a heuristic tool not only to establish taxonomies but also to critique and dismantle their tyrannies.”

Jonathan Herman, a scholar of Chinese religious traditions, plunges into possible new directions for the comparative study of mysticism. In his essay, “The Contextual Illusion: Comparative Mysticism and Postmodernism,” Herman chronicles a particular comparative project, namely, the unlikely juxtaposition of Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* and the ancient Taoist classic *Chuang Tzu*. Herman’s discussion of the ways in which *Chuang Tzu* influenced Buber’s work, and conversely, the latter’s dialogical principle, provides a valid lens through which one may creatively reapproach the original Chinese text. Herman suggests that the resonances between Chuang Tzu’s model of mystical fulfillment and that of Buber—which Maurice Friedman called “a mysticism of the concrete and the particular”—are so strong as to provide a single typology of mystical experience.

Herman also notes that “the fact that comparativists are frequently accused before the fact of dilettantism, perennialism, or relativism . . . demonstrates that there is a widespread presupposition that phenomena belonging to observably different contexts are self-evidently unrelated to one another.” Championing a comparative method that starts not with *a priori* assumptions about the nature of a category like mysticism, but instead grows organically out of a careful respect for particular contexts, Herman is willing to let such an investigation produce profound similarities as well as the differences so beloved of—and expected by—postmodern scholars.

Benjamin Ray takes up one of the popular claims of postmodern anthropology, cultural particularism, and examines its problems, and

recommends a solution. In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), several anthropologists offer the postmodern argument of cultural particularism—the view that different societies are culturally unique and hence fundamentally unknowable by outsiders and incomparable. Ray argues that in rejecting older-style ethnographic realism, postmodern anthropologists have mistakenly advocated their own brand of philosophical antirealism and cultural solipsism. They have taken the moral and political failings of older-style colonial anthropology as evidence of epistemological incompatibility between cultures, arguing that each constitutes a conceptually unique domain of thought and reality. Thus they believe they can only “represent” other cultures and never engage in issues of meaning and truth. While the difficulties and responsibilities of describing and interpreting other cultures will always remain, Ray offers the work of Edith Turner and Paul Stoller as examples of ways in which anthropologists and historians of religion can open up the realities of other religious worlds, while still engaging questions of meaning and truth. Ray concludes that comparative religion should have both an intellectual and a moral purpose. Its aim should be to advance the conversation of humankind, while building religious bridges and political relationships.

Like other contributors, legal scholar and religious historian Winifred Sullivan takes as her starting point Jonathan Z. Smith’s insistence in *Map Is Not Territory* that “[t]he process of comparison is a fundamental characteristic of human intelligence.”<sup>7</sup> She argues in “American Religion Is Naturally Comparative” that “the goal is to historicize morphology.” Unlike other contributors, Sullivan is trained primarily in Christianity and American religion. Whereas once “American Religion” was studied as the history of the Protestant Church in America, it is now “about everyone”: Native Americans, Spanish conquistadors, Franciscan missionaries, French trappers, and Jesuit priests. Implicitly acknowledging the postmodern charge that certain “metanarratives,” most notably ones of European origin, are by nature hegemonic, Sullivan shows how the “starting point” of the story makes all the difference: a Navajo or Iroquois rather than a Puritan framework gives the scholar a view of “early” American religion that comprises symbol and myth, one that sanctifies space, time, birth, or violence, rather than one that is only about “baptism, conversion, and the work of the spirit.” She remarks upon an issue related to the very problem that postmodernism has identified in the “history of religions school”: the fact that “American religion has been studied by historians while other religions have been

studied as reified ahistorical systems.” She lobbies for the inclusion of the religious traditions of America in the comparative study of religion, based, of course, on the richly variegated nature, the multicultural diaspora of American religious history. As Sullivan puts it, “American religion might be almost regarded . . . as a controlled experiment in comparative religion.”

Emerging as the primary cartographer of the kaleidoscopic contemporary American religious landscape, Diana Eck writes out of her own scholarly history as a “boundary-crosser, even a trespasser,” one who has repeatedly moved in her scholarly and religious life between the religious traditions of India to the field of Christian theology to the field of American religious history. Observing a “new geo-religious reality” in the United States and across the globe, wherein “there are mosques in the Bible Belt in Houston, just as there are churches in Muslim Pakistan,” Eck notes the tremendous changes in the religious map of the world that have been brought about by migration, cultural assimilation, and most importantly vast new opportunities for dialogue and religious exchange (Jews practicing Buddhist meditation; Christians reading the *Gita*; interfaith monastic exchanges; and so forth).

These new realities simultaneously bring with them urgent imperatives in the comparative study of religion. Eck calls into question whether the “hybrid” or converging forms such as American Buddhism should be so easily dismissed by scholars who cling to purist notions of classical traditions; perhaps instead the new paradigms are more historically typical than atypical. Just as postmodern thought represents reality as a non-fixed, unreifiable, and uncategorizable stream of events, so Eck urges us as scholars to consider the world’s religious traditions, not as fixed systems, “boxes” of texts and commentaries transmitted between generations, but rather as rivers, converging, recombining, perpetually in motion. She charts both the hardening and softening of boundaries in the “worldwide backlash of colonialism.” Recalling her own work in *Banaras: City of Light*,<sup>8</sup> in which she acknowledges using interpretive methods and a voice that “no Hindu” would have used, she argues that she has nevertheless articulated “an understanding of Hindu religious life that Hindus themselves would recognize.”

Herein, then, lies the paradox. As scholars, we do not have to be the “other” to speak to or even for the “other,” but we must ourselves first change. Ultimately, Eck calls for “dialogue as method” in the comparative study of religion. This approach draws both from postmodernism and from its critics, requiring mutuality and critical awareness, and es-



pecially interaction with the “other,” as she puts it, “in a way careful and sustained enough to be able to see, and even to articulate, the other’s point of view—both the others who are before us and the others whose multiple voices speak within us. Gradually we become bilingual or multilingual . . .”

The third and final major section of the volume, “A Revised Comparison: New Justifications for Comparative Study,” comprises synthetic essays. Resonating with and in some cases building on the previous essays, they argue for the possibility of a re-visioned comparative method. This “new comparative religion” grows out of cultural specificity and may or may not begin with the assumption of a shared ontology across the world’s religious traditions. It is receptive to using cross-cultural categories as an imaginative tool to enable us to begin to know each tradition more profoundly, and paradoxically, more on its own terms. In “Juggling Torches: Why We Still Need Comparative Religion,” Kimberley C. Patton challenges some of the underlying premises of postmodern thought as it is applied to the study of religion, and defends the comparative enterprise. She notes how a comparative approach was instrumental in her own research as she attempted to solve a “ritual paradox” in ancient Greek iconography. Patton rejects the postmodern concept that comparison by its nature abstracts and annihilates. In investigating its suspicion of organizing schemata, she points to its own reactive heritage in the aftermath of World War II, provoked as that conflict was by “grand plans” and “final solutions.” Turning to issues of ontology, she questions postmodernist constructions of religion as invariably and primarily a matter of “local” or “political” concerns, with metaphysical or theological issues serving only as a pretext. “If we maintain a relentlessly closed mind toward the claims of religious traditions that what they describe is real or true,” she asks, “how on earth can our descriptions of how they work, however ‘thick,’ be authentic?” Finally, using Robert Kiely’s recent discussion of Hildegard of Bingen as a focus, she problematizes the postmodern obsession with “marginalization” when it is applied to the religious text. Patton argues against the “surrender of the whole comparative enterprise just because it is hard to do it right.”

Like many postmodernists, but for utterly different reasons, Huston Smith deplores the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment. Particularly damaging, he argues, has been the secular developmentalist model of history that “wipes out religion’s key concepts, revelation and transcendence, with a stroke.” Even if we agree with Enlightenment atheism,

how can we pretend to “give our students the impression that our Enlightenment-vectored courses show them what religion objectively is?” Smith identifies what he calls two “half-truths” on the part of the detractors of comparative religion that have become false “truths.” First of all, “it is indeed the case that thinking is embedded in cultural-linguistic contexts and is affected by them, but to argue that those contexts are so insulated from one another that it is impossible to understand what goes on in them except from the inside is going too far.” Secondly, Smith is in agreement with Kimberley Patton about the significance of Jean-François Lyotard’s rejection of “the nostalgia for the whole and the one” on the grounds that, continuing to quote Lyotard, “the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take.” While conceding that “wholes can be misused and have been, and differences do have their place,” Smith reveals the absurdity of the postmodern notion that “wholes are bad because they produce terror” and that “differences, by contrast, are good and should be activated.” The revolt against wholes, Smith concludes, namely, “metaphysics, metanarratives, and pejoratively, totalism—has severely impacted the idea of Truth,” caricatured in Foucault and elsewhere as little more than a power play. Smith rejects the charge that “belief in absolute Truth lands one in dogmatism” and, redeeming the millions of adherents of the religions we study over and against their learned detractors, defends “the spiritual wholeness that can come from the sense of certainty.”

William Paden’s essay emphasizes the inevitability of comparativism, renouncing the notion that knowledge in our field (or any field) can advance without transcontextual concepts; “[L]ike it or not,” he writes, “we attend to the world not in terms of objects but in terms of categories. Wherever there is a theory, wherever there is a concept, there is a comparative program.” Anticipating Jonathan Smith’s notion in his “Epilogue” of the rectification of categories, Paden argues that we can always improve categories. Building on Nelson Goodman’s notion of “world-making,” Paden argues for the universality of the “forms” of world-making activities, including classifications, which render them comparable despite the uniqueness of culturally specific “contents.” He thoroughly outlines how a “reconstructed sense of comparativism” might look through the discussion of five factors or functions: its bilateral function as a window onto both similarities and differences; its heuristic nature as a resource for further investigation and discovery; its expanded idea of patterns; its stress on controlled, aspectual focus rather

than *in toto*, wholesale analysis of traditions; and finally its careful (and respectful) distinction between meanings seen by the comparativist and the believers themselves.

In her piece, “The Magic in Miniature,” Laurie Patton seeks to expose some of the assumptions that both comparative and postmodern (particularly deconstructionist) approaches unexpectedly share. In particular, she examines the uses of etymology in the work of Mircea Eliade, W. C. Smith, Jacques Derrida, and Mark Taylor. In all four works, etymology—the history of the use of particular words—remains a means by which these authors make their intellectual moves. Patton argues that this common intellectual engagement reveals an underlying, shared belief in the magical power of what a single word can “do” throughout time. After demonstrating these (for some, uncomfortable) continuities between comparative and postmodern approaches, she proposes that this common “faith” in the magical power of individual words in intellectual argument might be seen as parallel to faith in the magical power of the miniature in ritual, as recently discussed by Susan Stewart and Jonathan Smith.

A conversation with Lawrence Sullivan focuses on the implications for the field of recent neurophysiological research indicating that the intellectual act of comparison itself seems to be a kind of primeval ocular-cortical function. Sullivan suggests in this conversation that through the twin epistemological principles of pattern formation and the continual factoring of elements, human experience itself is inherently comparative. Hence, to exclude the study of religion from comparative method based on misguided, purist premises of cultural self-containment is to shut down methods that have been logically and uncontestedly available to disciplines as diverse as physiology and linguistics. Sullivan particularly emphasizes the contribution of perception itself: “It may be a mistake to think of inner consciousness and our world as entirely separate. . . . Notions of comparison can be drawn from aspects of the material universe such as the brain, where there is a promising possible convergence of the study of material structure, formation through time, and reflexive understanding of these processes of structure and development. Given what the comparative study of religious history can bring regarding human intention, imagination, and orientation, it can look forward to joining the effort.”

And what, finally, of Jonathan Smith, so crucial a player in these discussions? A respondent to the 1996 AAR Panel (see note 1 on p. 18), he reflects in the epilogue presented here on the significance of his early

essay, “In Comparison a Magic Dwells.” Smith softens his previously unequivocal assessment (and rejection) of the possibility of a valid comparative approach. Whereas in 1982 he wrote, “In no literature on comparison that I am familiar with has there been any presentation of rules for the production of comparisons; what few rules have been proposed pertain to their post facto evaluation,” in 1999 he offers the groundwork for such a set of rules. Drawing from the few successful cases in comparative anatomy, in linguistics, folklore, and archaeology, Smith observes three such preconditions by which “genealogical comparisons” might be accomplished in the study of religion: (1) the relationship to strong theoretical interests; (2) the wealth of the data available and the level of “micro-distinctions” between those data; (3) the consequent ability of the comparison to provide “rules of difference” (as well, presumably, as those of similarities). He then highlights four “moments” in a successful comparative enterprise: description, comparison, redescription, and rectification. At the same time, Smith insists that “the end of comparison cannot be the act of comparison itself,” but rather, “the aim . . . is the redescription of the exempla (each in light of the other) and a rectification of the academic categories in relation to which they have been imagined.”

It is important to recognize that the authors of these essays, unlike most of their theological predecessors in the comparative study of religion, were trained as area studies specialists. They take for granted the linguistic and historical skills and the varied cultural experiences of the area studies scholar. Their work is shaped by immersion in primary texts, by interdisciplinary conversation with area studies specialists, and by collaboration with members of other religious communities. In reference to the comparative study of myths, Wendy Doniger describes the area studies perspective this way: “The way to study them is to *study* them, learning the languages in which they were composed, finding all the other myths in the constellation of which they are a part, setting them in the context of the culture in which they were spawned—in short, trying to find out what they mean to the people who have created and sustained them, not what they mean to us.”<sup>9</sup> This remains the area specialist’s goal, even if it is imperfectly achieved. David Eckel emphasizes that the scholars of Buddhism have been trying to achieve this goal in recent years: “Buddhist scholars have been going through their own therapeutic struggle to shake off the remnants of the modernist dream—the totalizing narratives and the unified visions—to achieve a more ac-

curate understanding of the diversity and contradictions of their chosen object, the object that some, at least, still call by the name ‘Buddhism.’ ”

Like Eckel, the comparativists in this volume are connoisseurs of difference; indeed, they are connoisseurs of the postmodern condition itself in which modernist thinking is also strong. Concerning this scholarly environment, Eckel expresses a certain optimism: “In the complexity, eclecticism, and irony of this situation I find much cause for hope.” If the postmodern condition is marked by the process of decentering of the Eurocentric visions that were imposed upon the “other,” this is the environment in which our contributors have pursued their work. All have traveled “out there” and conducted their work in collaboration with “others,” and all have brought the “out there” into themselves and into their scholarship and reexamined their assumptions. Indeed, they recognize that in the late twentieth century, the “other” is no longer “out there” but also among us—we are all “other to one another,” as Diana Eck has put it. We teach in increasingly diverse classrooms, and engage in dialogue with a range of “others,” both jet-setting scholars and local believers.

As North American scholars trained after World War II, when area studies scholarship developed rapidly in the United States, our authors have long since abandoned the great modernist building in which they were schooled, to use David Eckel’s apt metaphor, with its totalizing and essentializing architecture. Now, like postcolonial citizens with multiple passports, historians of religions dwell alternately in the polyglot villages of area studies programs and in established religion departments in the secular university. Many of us share Eckel’s experience of finding that our old books containing the grand systems of comparative religion have gathered dust upon the shelves. Referring to one of the more important of these books, David White remarks that “a cursory re-reading of the 1959 *The History of Religions* leads . . . to the conclusion that the days of the history of religions metanarratives chronicled in that work are well behind us. Our thinking has changed, just as our world has changed since that time.”

Much of the postmodern critique, then, has long resonated within the discipline of the history of religions and led to a revisioned comparativism, but without undermining its old Enlightenment purpose of enlarging our understanding and commitment to a wider embrace of humanity. “I am unwilling to close the comparativist shop,” Doniger asserts, “just because it is being picketed by people whose views I

happen, by and large, to share.” Laurie Patton argues that in rejecting the static, generic comparisons of the past, postmodernism also urges moral engagement with the world, like the previous generation of comparative religionists. Having listened to the cultural particularists, Jonathan Herman proposes that “the best hope for rigorous comparative study is to work within the prevailing—and I believe, well-placed—concern for context, but to do so with the renewed methodological self-consciousness and a receptivity to the types of resonances that may indicate connections buried beneath the surface.” Thus our contributors show their indebtedness to the postmodern critique while retaining the older humanist goals.

While today’s historians of religions are not necessarily secular humanists, the contributors to this volume are all humanists in the general sense of their commitment to understanding the moral and spiritual condition of humanity in all its variety. They are also committed to the pragmatic, contested, and negotiated nature of the comparative enterprise. Unlike their predecessors, they do not see themselves as taking a God’s-eye point of view—making totalizing claims and “finding” universal sacred realities. Nor do they believe that positivistic forms of postmodernism are the only alternative. “It is possible,” argues White, “for comparative studies . . . to steer a middle course—between the universalism of our modernist forebears and the nihilism of certain of our postmodern contemporaries—through the opening afforded by the cognitive activity of reading and interpretation.”

No one in this volume is willing to follow the postmodernist strategy of today’s reductionisms—the turning of religion’s perceived truths into merely exploitive systems of power, the fantasies of the weak, or the sociobiological strategies of the human species. Nor do our authors practice theological apologetics. Nevertheless, as Kimberley Patton points out, the similarities that comparativists perceive between different religious traditions are often realities for the believers themselves: “If human religious thought did not function in equivalencies, much missionary thought would have fallen on deaf ears, rather than, in many cases, relying so heavily on the translation of new concepts or divine figures into indigenous ones.”

To those who would deny the possibility of any universal understanding across cultures or the possibility of shared concepts of virtue, as Alisdair MacIntyre does in *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?*<sup>10</sup> Huston Smith responds by referring to the simple fact that Maasai warriors with whom he had absolutely nothing in common and with whom he

could not communicate saved his life in East Africa. MacIntyre's naïve assumption that there might exist entirely self-contained cultures in today's polyglot, multicultural, postcolonial world is, of course, a philosopher's fantasy. MacIntyre intends this concept to support the culturalist's claims about the hyper-particularized character of human existence. Such a view, Doniger points out, "seems to deny any shared base to members of the same culture, much less to humanity as a whole." As globally oriented historians of religion, we can affirm with Doniger that there is no periphery to humanity, but only, of course, if we use the term "humanity" as with its inclusive Enlightenment meaning.

Nevertheless, as Jonathan Z. Smith rightly maintains in a more recent work, *Drudgery Divine*, "[T]here is nothing 'natural' about the enterprise of comparison."<sup>11</sup> This means that the comparativist must be acutely self-conscious of her task, not ignoring differences, despite the "oneness" of humanity. "A newer comparative frame," writes William Paden, "will neither ignore resemblances nor simplistically collapse them into superficial sameness; and it will neither ignore differences nor magnify them." The newer comparativism, he continues, "unavoidably involves the factor of reflexivity: self-awareness of the role of the comparativist as enculturated, classifying, and purposive subject, a cleaner sense of the process and practice of selectivity, and an exploratory rather than hegemonic sense of the pursuit of knowledge." For Diana Eck, scholarly reflexivity involves a self-consciousness about the scholar's situatedness and voice: "[W]henever I write or speak, I must be clear about which argument I am currently participating in. . . . We are, as my colleague Michael Sandel has put it, 'multiply situated selves.' We speak and write in multiple contexts—religious, academic, civic, familial. Recognizing this is what being aware of 'voice' means. As teachers and writers, we must work to discern clearly the distinctive voices we ourselves speak, and when we shift lanes, we are obliged to use a turn signal."

Just where do our comparativists stand on the question of religious truth claims and the existence of religious universals? None assumes the scholar must automatically endorse or deny them. Certainly, as Huston Smith and Benjamin Ray emphasize, the pursuit of meaning and understanding requires judgments about truths that are commonly perceived. But no one wishes to turn today's universities into theological seminaries of perennial religion. The scholar's first aim is intelligibility, and she must make up her mind about the reality claims and moral principles she can accept, and whether she has discovered shared religious truths.

All of our contributors recognize that it is only by identifying our common as well as separate cultural and religious beliefs that we gain greater understanding of ourselves and others. All implicitly accept Huston Smith's recognition that as members of secular universities they are engaged in "Enlightenment-vectored" teaching and research that is value-centered and morally engaged. This involves investigating religious meanings for their full moral and spiritual significance in peoples' lives and their role in shaping cultural systems.

For the historian of religion whose work concerns the ancient world, of course there can be no "historical" or dialogical interaction with the peoples and traditions of the past. There can, however, be moral, analytical, and even spiritual engagement with them—and in turn they can and will affect the historian. As Kimberley Patton writes, "[I]n the study of religion we are not playing a game that is purely intellectual, one that will leave us unaffected as we go about our business." Emboldened by J. Z. Smith's vision of the scholarly challenge involved in comparative study, she emphasizes both its risks and its rewards: "I know it now to be a bit more like the juggling of torches; either we will mishandle them and they will burn and wither us, or else our faces will begin to glow." The very concepts and terms of the scholar's analysis, whether it be of the past or the present, are enmeshed in contemporary social, religious, and academic arguments which the engaged scholar must confront if she is to examine their value. Winnifred Sullivan emphasizes, for example, that "a comparative perspective would give needed perspective" to the study of American religion which "occurs in the context of a highly politicized and polemical local debate concerning the interpretation of the First Amendment . . . and the appropriate location of religion in contemporary American life."

Finally, as this latter statement implies, our contributors' principled aim of increasing understanding is implicitly linked to wider intellectual, moral, and ideological norms, indeed, to the metanarratives of Western political liberalism: respecting cultural differences, recognizing the rights of others, listening to multiple voices, discovering shared truths, achieving mutual understanding, and developing what Martha Nussbaum calls "normative skepticism."<sup>12</sup> In postmodernist language, these goals belong to the West's totalizing vision of free society, equal rights, and distributive justice, to which our comparativists are committed. For them, universal moral principles may change, but they cannot be abandoned for the sake of solipsistic relativism. The goals of mutual under-



standing and self-critical scholarship are, as these essays demonstrate, the foundation of any situated scholar's work.

Our authors do not, then, adopt the modernist pose of "value-free" scholarship. Laurie Patton observes that "comparison reinforces ethical relations between scholars and the objects of their study" and asserts that "the comparative move and the ethical move can be one and the same." For Benjamin Ray, moral engagement ought to be one of the goals of comparative study—the tearing down of hideous stereotypes of the "other" and the encounter with moral and political issues that affect the communities we study.

The contributors would agree that postmodernism in its extreme form goes too far in rejecting all metanarratives and all essentializing and totalizing claims. As the critical theorist Terry Eagleton has pointed out, postmodern scholars committed to equal rights and distributive justice can reject the totalizing concepts of anti-racism and political emancipation, which comparative scholarship exposes, only on pain of contradiction.<sup>13</sup> The global story of imperialism and colonialism is, in fact, one of the metanarratives which the postmodernist critic takes as a basic premise. Finally, Eagleton reminds us that "it was by virtue of our shared human nature that we had ethical and political claims upon one another, not for any more parochial, paternalist, or sheerly cultural reason."<sup>14</sup> The authors of these essays reassert the old humanistic view that it is only by coming to understand our shared cultural and religious beliefs and practices that we gain greater understanding of ourselves and others.

In sum, our contributors argue that scholars can risk posing a comparative framework not to reach closure in service of a particular theory, nor to achieve moral judgment or to gain intellectual control over the "other," but to empower mutual dialogue and the quest for understanding. Although no author presents a simple formula or definitive method—an inadvisable strategy—each offers the vision of a renewed comparative enterprise. It is a vision that attends as strongly to difference as to similarity, while recognizing that both depend upon the scholar's choices and assumptions. This renewed and self-conscious comparativism is eclectic and circumscribed, dialogical in style and heuristic in nature; and it is self-confidently situated within interdisciplinary area studies programs and religion departments of the secular academy. Its ultimate purpose is not to create more generic patterns of the sacred in support of grand theories but to enlarge our understanding of religion

in all its variety and, in the process, to gain renewed insight into ourselves and others.

While comparative religion must come to terms with its past, the contributors to this volume argue that it can be contextualized and re-fashioned so as to yield significant insight into particular aspects of religious ideas and practices, while still recognizing that comparison is the scholar's own *inventio*—the “magic” of creative insight and mutual understanding.

In titling this volume—which seeks to rehabilitate the comparative approach—*A Magic Still Dwells*, we note that the term “magic” has undergone its own rehabilitation. Particularly in studies of Mediterranean antiquity through the Hellenistic and Byzantine periods, and in Indo-European thought,<sup>15</sup> the term “magic” emerges as a concept describing religious practices and sciences that involve internally consistent, tightly logical relationships between a wide variety of physical elements and metaphysical principles of power. As Bruce Lincoln writes, “‘Magic’ . . . is not idle superstition . . . it is a system of non-Aristotelian, homologic causality, whereby items are considered capable of acting on one another.”<sup>16</sup>

The argument that in the case of comparative religion the items compared really don't “act” on one other except in the scholar's mind can hardly be defended, as Diana Eck shows: on-the-ground interaction between traditions has never been more prevalent than today. But even in scholarly discourse, it is time to recognize that our discipline is more than a scholarly language-game with no relationship to its purported field of inquiry. Like magic, comparative religion can be an efficacious act of conjuring, of delineating and evoking homologous relationships while simultaneously holding in view, and thus in fruitful tension, undisputed differentials. In the act of comparison, the two original components juxtaposed in scholarly discourse have the potential to produce a third thing, a magical thing, that is different from its parents. Not only is it “different,” but it can illumine truths about both of them in ways that would have been impossible through the exclusive contemplation of either of them alone.

## Notes

1. This volume grows out of two panels presented under the title “The Comparative Study of Religion: Contemporary Challenges and Re-

sponses” at the Annual Meetings of the American Academy of Religion in 1995 and 1996.

2. David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics, and the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 16.

3. James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” in *Writing Culture*, ed. James Clifford and George Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 119; Stephen A. Tyler, “Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document,” *ibid.*, p. 139.

4. Jonathan Z. Smith, “Afterword: Religious Studies: Whither (wither) and Why?” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 7-4 (1995): 407-414.

5. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 21; 25-26.

6. Barbara A. Holdrege, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

7. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), p. 240.

8. Diana Eck, *Banaras, City of Light* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

9. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Other Peoples’ Myths* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), p. 16.

10. Alisdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

11. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 51.

12. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of the Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 136 ff.

13. Cf. Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

14. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

15. See, among many others, the works of Christopher Faraone, Dirk Obbink, Hans Dieter Betz, Fritz Graf, John Gager, Albert Henrichs, Sarah Iles Johnson, Alan Segal, Henry McGuire, Roy Kotansky, Rebecca Lesses, Bruce Lincoln, Susan Stewart, and Jonathan Z. Smith himself.

16. Bruce Lincoln, *Myth, Cosmos, and Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 110.