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William E. Paden is Emeritus Professor of Religion at the University of Vermont. His publications on comparative religion include Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion, Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion, and his most recent which will be under discussion in this review: New Patterns for Comparative Religion: Passages to an Evolutionary Perspective. The book’s chapters are composed of articles written by Paden between 1991 and 2013 from a series entitled “Scientific Studies of Religion” published by Bloomsbury in 2016. Much of the book’s material has already been published in different venues. Thus, the present review will summarize the book’s salient points and their relation to the comparative study of religion broadly.

The introduction (1–15) sketches out some shifts in Paden’s intellectual arc and concisely lays out the evolution of his thought throughout his academic career. The first shift mentioned expands the notion of “religious worlds,” “worldmaking” or “cultural enclaves” (2–3) to something akin to what evolutionary biologists refer to as “niche construction.” (2–3)

Arguing for an “ethology of religion,” (4) Paden emphasizes the necessity for a methodological approach to the academic study of comparative religion that is appealing to the behavioral and evolutionary sciences. Additionally, Paden addresses in the introduction that within postmodern intellectual circles in the 1990s, any mention of the idea of ‘human universals and the “psychic unity of mankind” had become terms of derision…” (3) Paden states that many of the essays of which the book is composed were composed in response “to the postmodernism in the early 1990s which challenged the traditions of comparativism. (3) Compelled to respond to such criticisms to the comparative

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approach, Paden felt it necessary “to look for points of comparability at the level of human behaviors—verbs, as it were, instead of nouns... (3). This approach, utilized in his first book Religious Worlds (and expanded, in New Patterns) although he admits is basic, still appears as a useful model for the comparative approach to studying religion.

The book, like a triptych, is composed of three parts. In each part, Paden explores and elaborates on some of the most prolific thinkers, typological concepts, and hermeneutical tensions in the scholarly literature on comparative religion. Paden pays especial attention to the ideas of the historian of religions Mircea Eliade, and sociologist Emile Durkheim. An important conceptual distinction that Paden lays out in part one, “Rethinking and Redirecting Classical Resources”, is between the way the “Durkheimian” and “Eliadean” paradigms employ the term “the sacred” in their work. Paden explicates how Durkheim used the term in The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life as an adjective, “as in ‘sacred things’” (19) whereas the Eliadean school uses it as a noun, an “ontologically privileged category” (27) to “denote some wholly other, irreducibly, sui generis, category of experience” (19). Inclined to the comparative reflex, Paden makes an important point in this section that although the rise of secularism has largely dominated the Western world, we might still perceive “the sacred” in secular societies in notions such as the “principle of individual rights” (23).

The first part of the book is essentially conciliatory and thus, non-provocative. While it is somewhat light in evolutionary commentary, it lays out Paden’s conceptual schema by way of reconciling key aspects of a significant dichotomy of methodology in the study of religion. Paden concludes the first chapter with a perceptive assertion concerning two seemingly contradictory approaches, which is that both the “Eliadeans” and “Durkheimians” both have reductive proclivities in either of their approaches: “While Durkheim could not resist calling the object of religion ‘society,’ neither could the religionists resist calling the object of religion “the sacred,” a gloss for the supernatural. [In this way] neither the Durkheimians nor the religionists could face the data of sacrality without an act of metaphysical reduction” (28). This is among Paden’s key perceptions provided in the first part of the book as it draws attention to an easily overlooked aspect in the two approaches.

In the second part, “Some New Levels for Cross-Cultural Comparison,” Paden explicates his central notions about pan-human behavioral religious patterns. Most salient in this regard is the notion of “sacred order.”
Paden views “sacred order” as a widely observed religious behavioral proclivity: “Most religions have terms for sacred order, for example, dharma in Hinduism, t’ien or t’ien-li in Confucianism, or sharia in Islam. Incentives for moral behavior and disincentives for immoral behavior rule the social world.” (129) The notion as Paden sees it is replete with potential for evolutionary interpretation. Paden envisions publicly organized religious ritual procedures as containing adaptive value in an evolutionary context: “Much of the world of piety and practice can in this sense alone be understood as permutations of respect behaviors...” (171). Throughout the latter half of the book, Paden comments on religious procedures functioning as vectors for complex displays of social hierarchy and status, and thus, containing significant evolutionary value.

Chapter seven of part two, “Universals Revisited: Human Behaviors and Cultural Variations,” is the most engaging and persuasive chapter of the work. Paden illustrates a laundry list of what he describes as “panhuman behaviors” which fall under the following categories: social behaviors, socio-cultural behaviors, conceptual behaviors, and self-modification behaviors. Such categories, Paden argues, “constitute part of a ‘grammar of behavior,’ a ‘behavioral repertoire,’ or what some have called a kind of ‘ethosystem’.” (111) Paden thus views such “panhuman behaviors” as components of a larger picture of “religious world construction,” itself a subtype of cultural “niche construction” populated with “status lineages” which confer evolutionary advantages to those who perpetuate the pattern of a given religious tradition. Furthermore, Paden states that the “panhuman behaviors” which he outlines find their expression in the world in an analogous fashion as that in which human language does: “...exactly as actual language plays out the possibilities of an unconscious grammar” (111). Thus, he claims at the end of part two that “In this panoramic scope, all civilization, including religion, is a theater of behavior, and we are its actors” (122).

Integrating the academic study of comparative religion with the evolutionary sciences is the subject of the third and final part of the book. A quote by William James that Paden opens with indicates the overall gesture of the book: “One of the duties of the science of religion is to keep religion in connection with the rest of science” (163). Surprisingly, Paden never explicitly mentions Carl Jung’s work but he does come close to the Jungian conceptual world when he refers to “archetypes of behavior.” (174) Whereas Jung defined his archetypes as “patterns of instinc-
tual behavior,” (see *Archetypes & the Collective Unconscious*, 44). Paden maintains that with regard to his “universal religious behaviors” mentioned in chapter 10, now termed “archetypes of behavior”: “...one could say that here one addresses not the archetypes of meaning [as Eliade might have put it, AN] but what amounts to the archetypes of behavior, in terms of which the edifices of meaning and value are built” (174). While it is not the most novel of ideas in the field of comparative religion, it is an important connection and reflects the general assumption in evolutionary psychology which Paden alludes to in the introduction and again in the epilogue, that the human mind (contrary, according to Paden, to the “Standard Social Science Model”) (192) is not “as often believed, a blank slate, but is full of inherited programs” (12).

A persistent thread throughout the work is Paden’s intelligible handling of the debate between the “Durkheimian” and “Eliadean” schools of thought. Though frequently portrayed as contrasting one another, much of Paden’s text gestures towards a reconciliation between the two. The framework that Paden outlines can thus be relevant for studying new religions in part due to his conscious attempt at wedding these “opposite” approaches to arrive at something approximating a synthesis. In particular, Paden’s concept of “religious worlds” which he develops in his earlier work (finding its apogee expression here) would be fruitful in studying new religious movements because it presupposes a multiplicity of novel case studies, e.g., “worlds,” in the plural. Ultimately, with *New Patterns*, Paden provides a valuable and nondogmatic glimpse into the current state of the scholarly domain of comparative religion and succeeds in addressing some of the field’s important hermeneutical tensions while offering inventive heuristic tools in an erudite and laudable manner.