Review

William E. Paden, *New Patterns for Comparative Religion: Passages to an Evolutionary Perspective* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2016), ix +253 pp. ISBN: 9781474252102. \$114.00 (hbk); ISBN: 9781350057890. \$39.95 (pbk).

Reviewed by: Jeppe Sinding Jensen, School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark
jsj@cas.au.dk

Historian of religions William E. Paden is well-known for a little but highly influential textbook entitled *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* and first published 30 years ago (Paden 1988). In that book, Paden resorted to the theoretical proposals advanced by Émile Durkheim, Mircea Eliade and, more surprisingly, philosopher Nelson Goodman's theory of "world-making". Basically, *Religious Worlds* told the story of how humans construct and inhabit their mental, behavioural, and socio-cultural worlds, with a focus on the religious dimensions of such worlds. The communicative basis for such human enterprises are linguistic and semiotic, as humans do signify and interpret. Humans achieve aims, act, and do things with words, and so language is the primary means of the activities whereby their life-worlds come into being. This pragmatic view of linguistics has a rich philosophical ancestry, with noteworthy ramifications within anthropology (in this sense, Bronislaw Malinowski's contributions are sometimes overlooked). Language, world-making, and religion are practices intimately woven together. Paden's gift was to see all this and put it into plain words that would leave a remarkable impression on readers. World-making was the "common meta-behavior" backing the comparative and general analyses in the book. From an epistemological perspective, it made good sense.

Paden's new collection of essays, *New Patterns for Comparative Religion*, offers us a rich documentation of some among the most promising cutting-edge developments in the academic re-analysis of the History of Religions of the past. More importantly, *New Patterns...* shows us what has occupied the author since the publication of *Religious Worlds*. There are changes, yes, but the general impression is that Paden has further tracked down answers to the questions that framed his vision 30 years ago: comparison and its

epistemic warrant in world-making, in culture, and in human behaviour. Paden's insights are now being backed by an imposing scientific scaffolding drawn from evolution and biology. Where world-making could be seen then as a socio-cultural, high-level common denominator for the comparative task, this tool has now been rebuilt upon biological and behavioural foundations. As stated in the "Epilogue", Paden has sought out the cross-disciplinary reference points between commonalities and differences to find the *general* behind the *particular*. The main result of Paden's inquiry is the offer of an "emerging evolutionary perspective" as a comparative tool (2016: 1). Interestingly, our author draws a parallel between this epistemological exploration and his own intellectual development in a series of biographical transitions explained in the *Introduction* (esp. 2016: 2-8): "From Worldviews to Environments and Habitats", then to "Comparative Patterns: From Culture-level Topics to Human-level Behaviors" and, finally, to the "Impetus of the New Evolutionary and Cognitive Sciences of Religion". This clearly brings home the most fundamental point of the book: how intricately interwoven some of our research activities are with regards to our personal environments. Given Paden's contributions to the development of the field of comparative religion over the past decades one might say that he *has been* actively engaged in the shaping of his own professional environment. The mental plasticity of *homo academicus* (permit the masculine form here) is genuinely astounding; we are what environments make us while, at the same time, our actions shape our own niche within that mental ecosystem. "Organisms and their environments can hardly be disconnected", notes Paden (2016: 232). This is truly a new kind of holism, not of the mental or the semantic but based on behaviours and environments.

Now, the penchant for evolutionary approaches takes the author from religious histories to *deep history* and from texts to bodies. There is much promise in that direction; *bio-cultural theorizing* of religion is a new mode of critique, or analysis if you will, of religion. However, there is also some disappointment as we do not really get to "deep biology". There is not much talk on emotions and religion, and we are still waiting for someone to open up the field of religions and hormones – with the exception of the neuroendocrinological insights by Daniel L. Smail (2008) for deep history in general, no one has taken on this challenge (as far as this reviewer knows).

Indeed, the "new comparativism", a term that was allegedly coined by Paden, could welcome theoretical grounding on all possible tiers – from the deeply biological to high-level semiotic constructions. As far as scientific analysis itself is concerned, comparison is not a choice, it is unavoidable in any scholarly undertaking. Even the most particular and unique items of

interest are so in relation to others. How would their uniqueness shine if not through comparison? That is how our own cognitive machinery intuitively works as well. The nature and scope of comparison have been hotly debated in the History of Religions, hardly reaching a definitive consensus on the topic. Paden has dedicated his entire career to the disentanglement of those issues. In *New Patterns* he does that with even more clarity and ambition.

The essays are grouped into three parts: “Rethinking and Redirecting Classical Resources”; “Some New Levels for Cross-cultural Patterns”; and “Responses to Evolutionary Sciences”. It is evident how Durkheim is still a pivotal figure here, while anthropologist Roy A. Rappaport’s and psychologist Henry Plotkin’s works (the latter rarely referred to in the study of religion) provide more elements for the coupling of organisms and environment and evolutionary approaches. As Paden says, “the point has been to show how my thinking about comparative religion has itself evolved to the point of close encounters with evolutionary models in a general sense” (2016: 13). Here, he refers to the “service of breaking down or parsing religious subject matter into varieties of behavior patterns with deep lineages such as agency detection, submission, reading other minds, kin recognition and trust, ritualization, status display, imitation, reciprocal altruism, the differential functions of schematic and episodic memory, and so forth” (2016: 174). The topics are that complex. Yet, religion is not *one thing*; in the words of Pascal Boyer, it is rather an “impure subject” (1996).

Adding Paden’s academic insights to the disciplinary toolbox markedly adds to our field of study, not so much because the broken-down subject matters of “religion” are novel but because they are handled by someone with a deep knowledge of the *impurity* of religion and its study. That also makes the anthology well worth reading.

However, the complexity of the subject does affect the style of presentation. When Paden describes and analyses the various modes of religious practice he exploits the evocative potentials of metaphorical and trope-laden discourses. As a result, sometimes the reading is more arduous than it should be. As there are (as yet) no exact terminologies for the kind of cross-disciplinary approach heralded by Paden, then that is perhaps what we can accomplish so far, when staking out new territory.

References

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