

Directions and Reference Points in Recent Comparative Religion

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It is close to a custom for scholars to begin a paper about comparison in religion with some remarks about how comparison is a fundamental process of human thought. They appear to be right.¹ Some go further to remind us that religion itself is a comparative category, a family resemblance of apparently similar phenomena across cultures and history. It is *natural* for people to compare, therefore, and for most observers “religion” seems to be a natural category arising from comparisons of human activity. We can talk about religious studies because of this sense of naturalness, the intuition that a reliable comparative pivot exists around which to hold a conversation.

Nevertheless, scholars may not always be satisfied about the naturalness of the same formal comparative methods. In this paper I explore two of the most burgeoning directions in comparative religion today—one founded on self-critical hermeneutics of dialog and the other on scientific anthropology. The two appear to be in startling opposition to each other. Yet they share common intellectual roots in the methodology of earlier monumental projects, which are now interpreted selectively. Here I explore two of these earlier projects—in the work of Mircea Eliade and William James—in terms of the approaches taken up by the recent movements. These approaches, as I will label them, are *inductive* (associated with the scientists’s search for basic causes) and *discursive* (associated with the postmodern concern with problems of communication). By recognizing this distinction, we can state more clearly the respective goals of recent comparative scholarship. The distinction helps us see more clearly the ways in which these newer approaches have clarified the goals of their predecessors to suit contemporary needs. It also leads to a more productive discussion of how these new groups relate to each other.

¹ “Making comparisons,” for instance, makes Donald Brown’s list of “human universals,” traits found in every known human society. See Paden, “Universals Revisited,” 280-281.

The full meanings of these labels should emerge in the course of the discussion of the movements they represent. They are ideal types, of course. The inductive I take to mean the project of discovering the natural causes, beneath the work of human agency, the anthropological mechanisms of the religious. The discursive begins where induction leaves off: precisely the content of human life, the expressed in culture, directed by human *Geist*, and not evident in the non-human world. While the inductive problem is one of discovery, the discursive problem is expression. To distinguish it from induction, therefore, is to distinguish material-biological causes of religion from the experience of its being here among us.

I

The New Bottom-Up: Comparing through Science

2006 has been an interesting year for critics of religion. Three bestselling popular books came out that forcefully condemn traditional religiosity: Sam Harris's *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, and Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*.² *Wired* magazine has called this group "The New Atheists."³ The cultural significance of their work remains to be seen, but to be sure, it has been extensively reviewed and discussed. For students of religion, however, it is worth noting that two of these authors, Dawkins and Dennett, are principally evolutionary scientists who built their careers on subjects apart from religion. Harris is pursuing a degree in cognitive science. Dawkins and Dennett were forced to begin thinking

² All three are grouped together under Amazon.com's "Customers who bought this item also bought..." listing, suggesting that people are reading them together as an emerging corpus. People do not (according to Amazon) seem to be reading them alongside religious apologetics.

³ Wolf, "The Church of Nonbelievers."

about religion because of their participation in debates against creationism. But increasingly, they are drawing on theories of religion as a biological product of evolution to undercut its hold on the public sphere.

This recent flurry of activity rides a growing wave of not-necessarily-atheistic harder-scientific study of religion in the academy. Trying to put religion under the microscope in this way is not entirely new, but it has never gained wide acceptance among scientists, scholars of religion, or the general public. Evolution, of course, has been no stranger to the study of religion. Roughly Darwinistic frameworks were adopted by many of the progenitors of religious studies, including Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim, Weber, and James. On the whole, though, these have been regarded as misappropriations of scientific Darwinism and have offered little to mainstream evolutionary theory.⁴ In the minds of some, this evaluation has been grounds for reluctance toward using scientific methods in the study of religion in general. Other than the de-religionizing of society, the main thrust of Dennett's book is that religion has been protected from serious interdisciplinary study by a false "spell" surrounding it in researchers' and readers' minds.⁵ In part he blames humanistic religious studies for framing religion as irreducible and therefore inaccessible to study. Religious studies is not the only humanistic field that has felt tension on this account; a recent article in *The American Scholar* argues against a similar resistance to biology in literary theory.⁶

But there is now evidence that the spell is lifting, or that it will have to. Evolutionary-biological explanations of religious phenomena and its constituents are becoming more

4 See the third chapter in Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, which is aptly called "Evolution makes it possible."

5 Luther Martin makes a similar claim in a scholarly context in "'Disenchanting' the Comparative Study of Religion."

6 Boyd, "Getting It All Wrong."

widespread and convincing (see Pyysiainen, Martin, Atran, Boyer, Guthrie, Tooby & Cosmides, among others). The U.S. Air Force Research Laboratory has put confidence in this kind of work in hopes of understanding the psychology of religious extremists and human threat-response systems.⁷ In January 2007 a conference on “The Evolution of Religion” aims to generate a synthesis from among the field’s leading lights. Broadly, these researchers are working to understand the causes and maintainers of religious behavior in terms of established cognitive science, as well as to trace the evolutionary causes and development of these mechanisms. Ostensibly, they tend to keep some distance from the New Atheists, bracketing the question of whether these discoveries problematize religious belief.⁸

The July 2001 issue of *Numen*, with the comprehensive theme “Comparativism Then and Now,” reveals a striking gradient toward such hard-science approaches. Two articles, by Luther Martin and William Paden, argue for a comparative project founded in scientific anthropology. Both cite the influence of anthropologist Donald Brown’s influential 1991 book *Human Universals*, which seeks to recover the study of a human nature that precedes culture. Its climax is an impressively long list of behavioral characteristics common to every known human culture.

Paden’s article draws on Brown most directly. Based on such an emerging “species-level basis for both commonality and significant variation,” religious phenomena can be compared without reference to the misleading, culture-specific categories that have made comparison so

7 See Joel Mort, who now works under the Cognitive Systems Branch of the Air Force Research Laboratory. At the AAR session on Dennett (see NAASR, “A Conversation...”), he told us that “a lot of people I work with are really very interested in this.”

8 At the discussion on Dennett’s book at the November 2006 AAR conference (William Paden, Luther Martin, and Joel Mort ((see NAASR, “A Conversation...”)) were all in the room), there was a great deal of concern voiced that the research be disassociated with atheist apologetics in order to protect it both methodologically and in public opinion.

problematic in the past.⁹ Instead of wielding a problematic term like the “sacred,” drawn from a particular religious discourse and vaguely secularized by theorists, Paden, suggests, particular behaviors universal to human beings like “asking” and “reflecting on perceived errors of thought and behavior” (selected from Brown’s list) could form the basis of a more constructive and trans-cultural comparison of religions.

Martin, in his *Numen* article as well as a later one in *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, takes a more active interest in the mechanisms of human evolution. In a brief comparative survey of kinship and kingship concepts in ancient Greece and ancient China, he attempts to identify “biologically based constraints” (which is to say evidence of hard-coded genetic inclinations) that explain ubiquitous features of human societies and religions.¹⁰ Tracing such features brings Martin to the evolutionary psychology of religion outlined by Pascal Boyer and others, founded in the work of UCSB psychologists John Tooby and Leda Cosmides. Usefully, he summarizes the proposal of this whole emerging scientific (inductive) approach to comparison as “bottom up”—understanding religion in terms of its root causes in biology and physics—rather than the traditional “top down,” which begins with concepts “pre-labeled by cultural interests.”¹¹

The bottom, to use Martin’s metaphor, which may be coming to rest in a rapidly growing and extensively funded body of work in cognitive neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, and even genetics, is lower and clearer than ever before. As such, these inductivist thinkers see the potential for a stronger basis of comparison between religions, founded on the findings of

9 Paden, “Universals Revisited,” 276.

10 Martin, “Comparativism and Sociobiological Theory,” 302.

11 Martin., “ ‘Disenchanted’ the Comparative Study of Religion,” 39.

scientific research. Still, doing comparative religion in this way is far from the mainstream in religious studies departments. The discursive, culturally embedded model, for one thing, fits far better with the humanistic training most scholars are rooted in. But the claims this sort of work has made in the public sphere (such as the New Atheists) may lead to a growing academic interest in investigating the meaning of the research on which these polemics supposedly rest.

Learning from Each Other: Embedded Dialogs

One interpretation of the relation between these emerging approaches to each other is offered in Luther Martin's 2004 *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* article, which begins by defining itself against "the fundamentally anti-science position espoused by the postmodernists."¹² The postmodernists he refers to are those who are represented in the landmark collection *A Magic Still Dwells*, published in 2000. Unlike Luther et al., who argue for a "harder" foundation for comparison, these authors opt for an outline a destabilized, imaginative, and communicative comparative project. Putting aside the sense that religion is a thing static or identifiable enough to be scientifically explained, they instead emphasize the possibilities and problems the apparently religious represents for intersubjective knowledge about self and other.

A Magic Still Dwells begins by reflecting on the problems of comparison laid out in the work of Jonathan Z. Smith: principally, that scholars of religion have consistently wielded careless methods toward dubious results. "Theories and reasons" are lacking from the foundations of comparison, Smith shows,¹³ and *A Magic* responds by theorizing a method freer from the foundations. Juxtaposing particulars for unexpected insights takes precedence over the

¹² Ibid., 38.

¹³ Smith, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," 41.

search for broad, normative categories. Area studies supplants “world religions” and the study of particular traditions. This approach, the authors argue, is demanded by the contemporary world. The very religious communities we study are in the midst of a dialogic process of exchange, while wealth and armies hang in the balance.¹⁴ As such, “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.”¹⁵

Diana Eck’s contribution to the volume especially urges the need to see comparison fundamentally as an exchange between people and peoples. This process begins with the task of self-reflection in terms of “location, intention, and voice—indeed, voices.”¹⁶ Then we can begin to look out to others—the “other”—similarly embedded as they are, encountering them for the purpose of mutual understanding. Comparison, Eck and many of the other authors have come to recognize, should be understood in these terms from the beginning: “Comparison is a dialogical form of thinking and working in relationship.”¹⁷

In the same issue of *Numen* discussed above, Benson Saler takes up the questions raised by Brown’s *Human Universals* and urges more suspicion. Instead of universals, comparison should be undertaken in terms of “resemblances,” founded in particulars. Interestingly, he claims to take this position on the grounds that it is better supported by research in cognitive science on the intuitive process of comparison in the mind.¹⁸ At the same time, though, he joins with the *A*

¹⁴ Dunbar, “The Place of Interreligious Dialogue,” explores the connection between dialog and study, arguing for a need to conceive of them together.

¹⁵ Patton, “Introduction,” 7.

¹⁶ Eck, “Dialogue and Method,” 132.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁸ Saler, “Comparison,” 272.

Magic Still Dwells authors concern for problems of ethnocentrism whenever comparisons are formulated in language. At the scale of a cultural phenomenon like religion, he argues, the kinds of universals Brown and the inductionists are trying to erect cannot avoid doing some level of cross-cultural violence.

What comparison is, for either camp of new comparativists respectively, affects the meaning of the thing compared, and the elements we choose to compare in the first place. On the one hand, both the biological sources of religion and the destabilization of normative categories to describe it lead toward a tendency to see religion as integrally immeshed in both “secular” psychology and culture. Religion works with not-necessarily-religious material. On the other, the two groups approach this dynamic object from the perspective of a dramatically different subject. The “bottom up” authors come to religion and culture as founded in biological forces that precede human agency. Religion, therefore, is inductive: a collection of inherited, fundamental biological principles that our agency can understand and thereby even “manage.”¹⁹ The discursive program as expressed in *A Magic Still Dwells* instead places agency at the center of its object of study and the subject of the scholar. Comparison is a tool of understanding and reconciliation, both with self and other. Its object, therefore, is much more the emic description of religion as discourse, something encountered, felt, imposed, or examined.

II

In this section I look at the work of two earlier thinkers, William James and Mircea Eliade, in order to trace the roots of the conceptual distinction I have offered. James’s widely-read *The*

¹⁹ I draw this language from the discussion at the AAR session on Dennett (see NAASR, “A Conversation...”).

Varieties of Religious Experience, though philosophical psychology and pre-scientific empiricism, sits in the background of any attempt to describe religion in terms of biological and neurological causes. Eliade, as prolific writer, member of the University of Chicago Divinity School, and one of the institutional founders of American (and Western) religious studies, serves as an inevitable reference point for the more humanistic methods of comparison. In part Jonathan Z. Smith's articles that form the starting point for *A Magic Still Dwells* are based on criticism of Eliade's influence. Both figures helped to set the terms for any comparative project today, whether inductive, discursive, or otherwise.

Patterns for Critique: Eliade

Mircea Eliade has taken a peculiar place lately in the narrative that secular religious studies makes for itself. Institutionally and performatively, there are few figures so influential in making religion studiable. Nevertheless, today his scholarship is often considered not so much living theory as what not to do: theological more than truly historical, problematic in both cross-cultural and scientific contexts. Eliade's association with Christian-fascist politics in his native Romania also stain his legacy. This does not keep him from being read, though, by active scholars, students, and laypeople alike. Their overall elegance and underlying erudition is undeniable. His significance as a reference point and a founder, while also in to many scholars dismissible, is a matter of paradoxical consensus.

Patterns in Comparative Religion, Eliade's introduction to the comparative project, lays out his goals in its form. Arranged thematically, with chapter titles like "The Sky and Sky Gods" and "Sacred Time and the Myth of Eternal Return," he presents broad mythological tropes and

discusses them in light of their appearances in religions the world over, irrespective of the traditions' actual relationship or proximity in space or time. The picture painted is one of a single over-religion, of which the world's particular traditions are mere constituents and partial manifestations. In doing, he overwhelmingly emphasizes similarity as the mediator of comparison and ignores difference in context and content. Later readers have considered this tendency extremely problematic, particularly as the reassertion of difference has been recognized as a means of rediscovering cultural autonomy and distinctness, for instance, of the one-colonized from the colonizers as well as in feminist theory.²⁰

Unlike both more recent approaches to comparison I have discussed, Eliade dismisses the relevance of either broader psychological or specific cultural manifestations. He sees the proper locations of religion as studied in the cultural—through the windows of texts, myths, and rituals—but he sets them apart from the rest of culture. This appears to be what he means by studying religion “*as something religious.*”²¹ Under a theoretical distinction between sacred and profane, which he takes to be universal, and after defining religion in terms of the sacred, nothing properly deemed profane need have any meaningful bearing on the truly religious. The discursivists of *A Magic Still Dwells* fault both Eliade's conclusiveness on what religion is and his failure to account for its integrative dialog with culture. Their scientific counterparts see no need for his insistence on religion's being irreducible to biological forces.

Eliade did not fall short of science for lack of aspiring to it. *The Sacred and the Profane* offers a history of the study of religion in language that makes this evident.

²⁰ Paden, “Comparative Religion,” 1879. For a feminist exponent see the political thought of Iris Marion Young.

²¹ Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, xiii.

The science of religions, as an autonomous discipline devoted to analyzing the common elements of the different religions and seeking to deduce the laws of their evolution, and especially to discover and define the origin of the first form of religion, is a very recent addition to the sciences.²²

Repeatedly, Jonathan Z. Smith has insisted on the importance of comparative anatomy, particularly as expressed in Goethe's *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, to understanding Eliade's comparative religions.²³ What he saw in Goethe's view of plants Eliade brought to religions in a system of morphology: "Beneath the apparent surface differences lay a deep similarity of process, the result of internal, logical, teleological principles of transformation."²⁴ Smith points out that for Eliade to call on Goethe's morphological system in the age of Darwinism represents a "contrarian stance" to the reigning scientific paradigm. It appears to convey an agenda that is almost alchemical rather than scientific in the modern sense. In any event, recognizing the significance of this influence helps us to appreciate Eliade's sense for the scientific in his work. But doing his science according to a method that is curious more than functional and incompatible with modern standards of laboratory research, he left his successors with an ambitious question and a tendentious answer.

William Paden, who interestingly is represented in both *A Magic Still Dwells* and the inductionist side of the *Numen* discussion, consistently uses Eliade as a counterpoint. Against those who would either embrace or reject him entirely, Paden more cautiously contends that "there remains the possibility of relating some of his categories to a broader, more contemporary

²² *The Sacred and the Profane*, 216.

²³ Smith, "Adde Parvum Parvo," 80-85; Ibid., "Acknowledgments." The latter is a two article series with a very full account of Eliade's debt to Goethe and its consequences for a reading of Eliade's *Patterns*.

²⁴ Ibid., 325.

model of comparative study.”²⁵ Putting aside the crucial Eliadian concepts of the sacred and morphological patterns, he focuses instead on Eliade’s model of religion as world-building. This combined with what he calls a “new comparativism,”—a joint emphasis on specificity, difference along with similarity, and heuristic self-awareness—he suggests “may link the work of comparative religion with the human and cognitive sciences.”²⁶ Paden’s comparative proposal, which represents many of the points of agreement between my two ideal types, reflects ways in which Eliade is both inspiration and problem for each of them. The inductivists begin with Eliade’s scientific goals but find that in order to accomplish them requires abandoning his most fundamental assumptions about the sacred and the proper scale at which to study religion. In turn the discursivists begin with Eliade’s ambition of getting religious data across cultures to speak to each other and his textual-linguistic base of expertise, only to find that doing so requires a complete overhaul of his comparative method. Both use him as a starting point. For this reason, Paden is right to draw on Eliade when reformulating comparativism: doing so recognizes a profound debt and, in fact, a living body of work.

A Storehouse of Emotions:²⁷ James’s *Varieties*

There is no other “classic” scholar of religion that Daniel Dennett quotes or refers to as much as William James.²⁸ Often it is not James’s conclusions that Dennett is drawn to per se, but his rhetoric. At one point Dennett brings forth James to say his book’s thesis for him: “Til then, do

²⁵ Paden, “The Concept of World Habitation,” 249.

²⁶ Paden, “Elements of a New Comparativism,” 184.

²⁷ “... there thus seems to be not one elementary religious emotion, but only a common storehouse of emotions upon which religious objects may draw...” James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 29.

²⁸ There are fourteen mentions of James in *Breaking the Spell*’s index, compared to four of Durkheim, and one each of Eliade and Weber.

not, I pray you, harden your minds irrevocably against the empiricism which I profess.”²⁹ While in fact they do not share quite the same meaning of empiricism (James would probably accuse Dennett of “medical materialism,” see below), they do share a common polemic. Dennett sees himself as standing before the religious conservatism of the United States just as James did in the *Varieties* before an auditorium of Scottish theologians.

The extent to which William James identified the “naturalness of religious ideas”³⁰ is nevertheless remarkable, and he sometimes finds himself anxiously close to a dismissive reductionism. His first lecture in the *Varieties*, “Religion and Neurology,” outlines an approach that is eager to identify religion’s “organic” foundations in the mind. He carries out this investigation not with theological principles but with the testimony of mystics and saints, treated as data. Religious experience, he argues, should interest the ordinary psychologist as much as any other kind of mental state. By exploring his connection with the psychologist Fredric Meyers, Ann Taves has recently highlighted the extent to which James pioneered the integrated comparison of religious and nonreligious mental phenomena.³¹

Despite the radical significance of his method, by today’s standards James’s neurological accomplishments are minimal. The body of neurology and evolutionary psychology he had to work with in 1902 could only go so far and left him plenty of room for philosophical reflection. Today, obviously this body of scientific literature is far vaster. When he remarks that “I am

²⁹ Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 258. Quoted from James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

³⁰ To borrow from Pascal Boyer’s book title.

³¹ Taves, “Religious Experience and the Divisible Self,” 320. I should also note my debt to Taves’s current manuscript-in-progress for my discussion of James’s method. Though some, the inductionist Pascal Boyer for instance, assume that James held religion to be a *sui generis* category (Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 307-309), Taves’s research on James’s psychological forbearers suggests that his concept of religion was very likely more complicated than this.

expressly trying to reduce religion to its lowest admissible terms,” he can only go so far as feelings and behavior as “the more constant elements.”³² A modern scientific critique might, for instance, note that the “elements” he takes to be irreducible are beginning to be traced to specific neurological processes. The connections between brain physiology and emotion are coming to be better understood, as is a more nuanced understanding of the sources of behavior. For this reason people like Dennett might see the possibility of finishing the work James outlined but was never able to do.

Thus reaching the limits of natural explanation, James’s philosophical reflections venture far more into the discursive value of religion, beyond what would today be understood as strictly the job of the scientist. He qualifies his empiricism by defining it against “medical materialism,” which would dismiss the content of religious experience as “‘nothing but’ expressions of our organic disposition.”³³ The method that characterizes the reflective part of the *Varieties* is pragmatism, which his work helped make into a philosophical school. Under this banner he proceeds to judge religious phenomena in terms of its significance for human purposes. Mystical experience serves as an insight into other possible realms of consciousness. Saints are to be valued for their contribution to “the world’s welfare.” He explores the medical efficacy of prayer.³⁴ Ultimately religion “must necessarily play an eternal part in human history.”³⁵ It is the unavoidable means to certain perspectives on truth and the full, satisfying life. In the conclusion

³² James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 494.

³³ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 14.

³⁴ *Ibid.*: mysticism, 378; saints, 368; prayer, 453.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 493.

and postscript, he takes a deeply discursive position: the highest goals of religion are found in the experience of religious pluralism, the sharing of insight between different experiential worlds.

In both Eliade and James, I have identified tendencies that appeal to the sensibilities of each recent direction in comparativism. The chart below summarizes these in terms of the inductive and discursive. Even as they find things to draw on from the progenitors, the apparent exclusivity of these recent directions, in addition to the critique of particular flaws, makes these works now seem cripplingly problematic. James’s fascination with mystical insights and dismissal of social forces is distracting to the new inductionists. Eliade’s aspirations to Goethian science, similarly, would set counterproductive restrictions for the discursive project. Neither earlier scholar was trying to do quite what scholars now might want them to do. I submit that, from the perspective of today’s comparative goals, James, Eliade, and virtually the whole corpus of “classics” in the study of religion, have fatally mixed the inductive and discursive approaches. As such, we will only draw from them selectively, defining our methodologies at least as much against them as in fact we are indebted to them.

	William James	Mircea Eliade
inductive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • empirical method • the “mental” and “organic” conditions of religious experience • compares religious and non-religious phenomena 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • aspirations to “science of religions” and “laws of their evolution • borrowing Goethe’s scientific morphological aesthetic
discursive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • looks to the emic testimony of religious experience for intrinsic insight • the usefulness of religious phenomena for human purposes • resists “medical materialism” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • religion studied as <i>sui generis</i> and through the eyes of believers • search for unifying similarity • source texts as primary objects of research

III

In his writing on comparison, Jonathan Z. Smith has consistently reminded us of the need to be aware of the theoretical goals we bring into the process. “The ‘end’ of comparison cannot be the act of comparison itself,” he warns in the conclusion to *A Magic Still Dwells*.³⁶ We compare in order to arrive at certain insights, expected or unexpected, or to establish relationships, or to erect taxonomies, or to establish dominions of some kind. Without knowing which, we run the risk of a goal being chosen for us. The cacophonous criticism of ideology that Eliade’s comparative work has received serves as ample warning of this. Today as always, people doing comparison with religion have specific goals, some stated, and some undoubtedly unstated and even unrecognized. As Smith suggests, we should strive toward stating them as best we can.

For the inductive direction, the goal of the New Atheists to upset the place of religion in civic life and thought should certainly be taken into account. But so also should the appeal of the vast explanatory-performative-economic complex of modern science. That the Air Force is hiring religion researchers is just one indication of the consequences such a consilience could bring about. It must also be understood as an extension of the important demythologizing work of the Enlightenment project. On the other side, discursive approaches speak to the genuine problems of intercultural ignorance and misunderstanding that have increasingly dire results in the apparently globalizing world. At the same time, this framework fits with the textual-linguistic

³⁶ Smith, “The ‘End’ of Comparison,” 239. To me this represents a warning to the thread of *A Magic Still Dwells* to imagine comparison as a self-satisfying activity.

training of religion scholars, leading back to Eliade and his predecessors. Becoming scientists would mean an unwelcome retooling. The discursive theories represent a lease for scholars to simply do what they were trained for and what they enjoy: exploring the particulars of religious expression.

In either case, we can observe that the growing differentiation between inductive and discursive methods reflects the general tendency of modern society toward division of labor. The more we understand, say about science and mythology, the more necessary it becomes to corral them in zones of expertise. Protecting each respective methodology from imprecision demands this. As it becomes more and more formalized, a way of doing needs to be better and better insulated from what it is not. A field of study simply gets unmanageably complex otherwise.

But does it follow that the two approaches should be in conflict? Scholars on either end sometimes see themselves as opposed to their counterparts, the work of each as counterproductive to the other. Luther Martin speaks quite critically of *A Magic Still Dwells*,³⁷ while the discursivists would certainly reply with accusations that he exercises damagingly dismissive reductionism. But if this is fundamentally a case of the division of labor, which I infer from the different skill sets required and the legitimate social needs each addresses, a sensible coexistence should be necessary. What professional rivalries occur between these groups may be best understood as analogous to the endless, ultimately collaborative infighting between overlapping government agencies. Perhaps later on, a synthesis will become more apparent. I have noted already that William Paden appears quite comfortable working with both approaches. In some ways, Edward Slingerland's dialogic-yet-embodied proposal of "conceptual metaphor

³⁷ Martin, "Disenchanted," 36-37.

theory” is an example of a useful starting point.³⁸ Regardless, scholars should wield their respective approaches as methodological tools rather than normative, comprehensive theories. Expending scholarly energy on dialogic comparison by no means should exclude scientific study. Ronald Dworkin put it nicely in an exchange of letters on Darwinism in the *New York Review of Books*: “Flowers can be beautiful and love can be wonderful even if there is a good scientific explanation of why they exist.”³⁹

It is worth recognizing, through all this, the value of the earlier thinkers in working out this relationship. They, after all, found room for both inductive and discursive analysis in their studies. Eliade usefully reminds us on the first page of *Patterns* of the dictum: “It is the scale that makes the phenomenon.” Which is to say, the way we approach our subject will determine what it comes out looking like. It is the first rule of thumb when dealing with a category as immediately multifarious as “religion.” We should therefore be humble about ways in which the results of one methodology seem to rule out those of another. Benson Saler offers at the end of his *Numen* article a useful model of commerce between scales of research. Though universals within a particular scale of research become conceptually problematic, the problems may disappear at other scales.⁴⁰ It is easier, for instance, to talk about universal human characteristics when comparing humans to other animals than when talking only about humans. Perhaps in a similar way the two models of comparison I have discussed here can mutually inform each other.

³⁸ Slingerland, “Conceptual Metaphor Theory.” In this article, Slingerland uses different words for a distinction much like what I have called the inductive and discursive; his are “Enlightenment realism” and “postmodern antirealism.”

³⁹ Dworkin, “Darwin and Spirituality: An Exchange.”

⁴⁰ Saler, “Comparison,” 273.

James, in turn, offers a great deal to contend with on the relation between material explanations and social benefits in the study of religion. In his melancholic way, he concludes that both explanation and religious feeling fail to be totalities in themselves, that they cannot but need each other. Even after asserting the need for scientific study he turns back:

To describe the world with all the various feelings of the individual pinch of destiny, all the various spiritual attitudes, left out from the description—they being as describable as anything else—would be something like offering a printed bill of fare as the equivalent for a solid meal.⁴¹

⁴¹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 490.

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