POWER STILL DWELLS: THE ETHICS AND POLITICS OF COMPARISON IN A MAGIC STILL DWELLS

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[T]he student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study. Jonathan Z. Smith (1982: xii)

[T]here is a significant political dimension to all religious discourse, and ... it is not only possible but important to render this visible so that it may be subjected to critical analysis. Bruce Lincoln (1991: 244)

The title of this brief review is a play both on the title of Jonathan Z. Smith’s classic essay, “In comparison a magic dwells” (1982), and on the title of the volume edited by Kimberly Patton and Benjamin Ray, A Magic still Dwells (2000). Here I am using the word “power” in the sense of the Latin potestas, which carries the dual meaning of both power as efficacy, or the “ability to do” something, and power as the exercise of force, domination, or control.1 My basic point is that the enterprise of comparison in the academic study of religion bears with it a real power in both these senses of the word. Comparison has the seemingly “magical” power to make us see new things, to make connections between disparate phenomena, and so to re-configure our usual way of imagining the world. Yet comparison also bears a more overtly political, often negative and destructive kind of power; it has the power to categorize, classify or “signify” other cultures, sometimes in oppressive ways (Long 1986; Urban 2001b); it bears the seemingly “magical” power—in the sense of mystification and obfuscation—to define other peoples in ways that serve our own political, social, or economic interests.2

1 Although it is now somewhat dated, I still find the most useful work on the concept of “power” to be that of Michel Foucault (1977, 1980: 92-102). Within the field of religious studies, Bruce Lincoln’s various discussions of power, authority, and discourse are particularly helpful (see Lincoln 1989: 3-5, 1996, 2000).

2 As Marsha Hewitt observes, “comparativism ... must become self-conscious of its political nature, that is, it is both a political and academic activity ... it is political because it harbors a dimension of power, which can never be abolished” (1996: 17).
A Magic Still Dwells does an admirable job of addressing this first sense of the power of comparison, its ability to help us see the world in new ways, to make connections between otherwise disconnected phenomena and so re-imagine the world. Yet it does less well in addressing the second aspect of the power of comparison, that is, its real political role in our relations with other cultures, the ways in which it can be used and abused to classify other peoples in relation to ourselves.

Patton and Ray’s volume is clearly an important, provocative book and a valuable contribution to the comparative study of religions. This being said, however, I also think it leaves us with a series of troubling, unanswered questions, questions that were already present in Jonathan Z. Smith’s own seminal work on comparison (see Urban 2000). The first problem is that, despite its call for a more open, pluralistic approach to comparison, this volume is still almost entirely dominated by post-Enlightenment Western models and biases; the second is that, while it does a good job of countering the postmodern critique of comparison, it does less well in addressing a more serious political critique of comparison; and the third problem is that it also remains fundamentally ambivalent and ambiguous with regard to the ethical and political role of the comparative study of religions today.

I will suggest some more positive ways to salvage the comparative enterprise, by building upon some of J. Z. Smith’s most important insights, above all, his key point that comparison is always a fundamentally interested enterprise, and that we must therefore remain relentlessly self-conscious about our scholarly interests—and, as I will argue, our political interests, as well.

A Magic Still Dwells makes a valiant and laudable call for a new, more pluralistic, non-totalizing form of comparison that would meet the criticisms of postmodernism by opening itself to a more eclectic and decentralized approach to religious studies (Patton and Ray 2000: 1-18; Patton 2000: 153-168). Yet despite its rhetoric, this volume is still largely grounded in a fundamentally post-Enlightenment European and American intellectual framework, which does little to include the voices of other cultures or other worldviews in any active way. I could not help but notice, for example, that there is not a single non-American contributor to this volume. There are no “others” in this text, no Native American, Hindu, Muslim or African is included as either a religious spokesman or critical scholar. It is still “us” interpreting “them”—that is, we largely white, European, and