“DISENCHANTING” THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGION

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By discarding the austere form, without, I hope, sacrificing the solid substance of a scientific treatise, I thought to cast my materials into a more artistic mould and so perhaps to attract readers, who might have been repelled by a more strictly logical and systematic arrangement of facts. (Sir James Frazer 1917: viii)

Science without magic is boring and sterile. (Andrew Weil 2001)

For love, say while kissing passionately: “I am THAZI N EPIBATHA CHEOUCH CHA I am I am CHARIEMOUTH LAILAM”. (Greek Magical Papyri VII. 405-406; Betz 1986)

The title of my paper alludes to Max Weber’s notion of “disenchanting (entzauberer) the world through science”, on the one hand (e.g., Weber 1946 [1919]: 148, 155; see also Winckelmann 1980), and to the volume of essays edited by Kimberley Patton and Benjamin Ray entitled, A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age, on the other (2000; emphasis added). The latter is a series of responses to Jonathan Z. Smith’s 1982 essay, “In comparison a magic dwells”, in which he perceptively argued that comparison, as it has been practiced in the human sciences, is more magical than scientific (Smith 1982: 22). However, Smith’s critique of comparison as a “magical” project lacking scientific, i.e., rule-governed, procedures (Smith 1982: 21-22), vanishes before our eyes as the editors of the A Magic Still Dwells, in a remarkable feat of postmodernist legerdemain, seek rather to “rehabilitate” homeopathy in comparative study as a “homological” domain of “creative insight and mutual understanding” (Patton and Ray 2000: 18). Patton and Ray describe such a “reclaimed” magical method of comparison as “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” (Patton and Ray 2000: 4).

Although the relationship between magical and comparative thinking had been acknowledged also by Max Weber (1963 [1922]:
he sought, by contrast, to organize his own interests in comparison as a science “of a generalizing nature” (Gerth and Mills 1946: 60; Weber 1946 [1919]: 152; see also Bendix 1968: 494b-495a), which he considered to be “the only possible form of a reasoned view of the world” (Weber 1946 [1919]: 355). I should like to argue, in the spirit of Weber, that comparison as scholarly inquiry should not be relegated to some artistic but finally “indeterminate” magic of the imagination, however impassioned that pursuit may be, but should be disenchanted, that is, formulated precisely as a science (*Wissenschaft*) (Weber 1946 [1919]), however “boring and sterile” such a disinterested “arrangement of facts” might seem to some. It was, after all, not James Frazer’s scientific impulse but his imaginative excess that has consigned his legacy more to the field of literary criticism than to that of comparative religion (Frye 1967: 109; see also Hyman 1974 and Frazer 1990).

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I should say at the outset that I am not persuaded of the general import of the postmodernist orientation that provides the occasion and the context for the Patton and Ray volume and that sets the agenda for its contributors. Although postmodernism’s critique of scholarly categories as products of culturally bound interests is valid—including, and perhaps especially, those employed in comparative studies—such deconstructive conclusions may be, and have been, arrived at through quite ordinary ethnographic and historical research. And, whereas postmodernists have correctly identified the role of power in many generalizing pursuits, they have yet to acknowledge, or even to recognize, that the specialized area studies with which they are so enamored (Patton and Ray 2000: 3) were a

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1 For an example of Frazer’s “imaginative excess” see Frazer 1917: xxvii.
2 Many of the literary critics who are primarily responsible for introducing postmodernist thought to the United States have now distanced themselves from it (e.g., Lentricchia 1996). Postmodernism, it would seem, is flourishing today almost solely among members of the American Academy of Religion ... but that’s another story.
3 I would, for example, characterize the work of Michel Foucault as basically one of historical research rather than that of postmodernist critique, about which he expressed severe reservations but which has, by and large, appropriated his authority (Martin 1995).