COMPARISONS COMPARED: 
A METHODOLOGICAL SURVEY 
OF COMPARISONS OF RELIGION 
FROM “A MAGIC DWELLS” TO A MAGIC STILL DWELLS

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1. Comparison and its critics

The project of comparative religion, a mainstay of the academic study of religion from the time of its inception, has justifiably drawn sharp criticism from postmodernist circles for its association with the colonial and Orientalist enterprises of Western scholarship. Critics have asserted that the comparison of religion is inherently flawed because of its emphasis on similarity and minimization of differences between religious traditions, as well as its failure to consider religious phenomena in their original contexts. Critics also point out the biases which scholars inevitably bring to their comparisons. For these reasons, many have called for an end to such comparative endeavors. Yet Jonathan Z. Smith, whose article, “In comparison a magic dwells”, was among the most influential of these postmodernist critiques, concludes his work with a dramatic insistence on the need for viable, methodologically defensible comparisons of religion (1982a: 35). Since that time, scholars have continued to compare phenomena in multiple religious traditions and have engaged critiques of this practice both by incorporating many postmodernist principles into their comparative methodologies and by offering counter-arguments regarding the importance of properly-constructed comparisons in the study of religion. A collection of essays reflecting on these responses to the postmodernist critique in general and to Smith’s article in particular was published as A Magic Still Dwells (Patton and Ray 2000). These two works constitute important milestones in the methodological conceptualization of the comparative study of religion.

In this article, I treat these two works as bookends and examine how the comparison of religion has taken place between their respec-

1 I would like to thank Rachel McDermott and Kimberley Patton for their constructive comments on earlier drafts of this article.
tive dates of publication. I offer a typology of methodological approaches used to construct and interpret comparisons of phenomena found in distinct religious traditions, and I assess the value of these methodologies on the basis of their consideration of similarities and differences, attentiveness to context, and effectiveness at illuminating the subject matter under consideration. By examining the strengths and weaknesses of comparative religion as it was practiced from 1982 to 2000 in light of Jonathan Z. Smith’s critiques, I hope to provide a sense of the directions in which the scholarly comparison of religion ought to proceed in the twenty-first century.

The sources cited in this study have been selected out of a large, eclectic corpus of scholarly works engaged in the comparison of religion which were published during the time period under consideration. I define the comparison of religion as the examination, in a unified work, of sources from at least two distinct religious traditions addressing an aspect of religion common to the comparands. Of the dozens of publications meeting these criteria which I have examined, I refer here only to those that exemplify clearly a particular approach to the comparison of religions, although these are certainly not the only or even the best-known works that make use of their respective methodologies. Smith (1982a: 22–24, 1990: 47–51) and other scholars in this period also classified or described several approaches to comparative religion, but I found that no existing typology adequately accounts for the full range of methods used in comparative scholarship published between 1982 and 2000. For this reason, I have selectively drawn from earlier classificatory systems and their terminology in the creation of my own typology of approaches to the comparison of religion. I have divided these approaches into the broad categories of “comparative focus on similarity”, “comparative focus on difference”, “comparative focus on genus-species relationship”, and “the use of comparison to refocus”.

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2 Due to constraints of space, this work will not examine the ways in which comparativists have responded to the postmodernist critique that scholarly biases irreparably mar all comparisons of religion.

3 Beyond selecting works on the basis of their utility as methodological exemplars, I must acknowledge that these works also tend to focus on areas related to my own personal interest and scholarly expertise. The approaches to comparative religion which they exemplify, however, are found in works covering a much wider array of subjects.