The study of religion in North America has been shaped by the work of Mircea Eliade more than by that of any other single scholar. Whatever one might conclude in retrospect about his scholarship or its theoretical validity, Eliade’s vision of an academic study of religion provided the formative rationale for much of the enormous growth in the field since the 1960s. In the last decade, however, Eliade’s work, together with that of the phenomenological/morphological tradition of which he was a part, has increasingly been called into question – rejected outright by some, refined or reconsidered even by his staunchest supporters. We thought it timely, therefore, to explore systematically the possible shapes of a post-Eliadean paradigm for the study of religion. Since the field initially emerged from and around issues of comparison, issues that remained central to the work of Eliade and to that of those influenced by him, we concluded that this might be an appropriate question with which to begin. Consequently, North American Association for the Study of Religion panels on the “new comparativism” were organized in the context of the Spring 1994 Midwest regional meeting of the American Academy of Religion and for its Fall 1994 annual meeting. The following articles are the revised presentations to the Spring panel.

The focus of the current discussion is a paper by William E. Paden on “Elements of a new comparativism”. Paden’s position seemed appropriate for the focus of this discussion, not only because his volume on the comparative study of religion, Religious Worlds (1988), is being widely adopted for classroom use by academic departments of religion in North America, but because he is one of the defenders – if a critical one – of Eliade’s general contribution to the comparative study of religion. The question of the panel, in Paden’s formulation, is: “How, after Eliade, and after the critique of the contextless character of classical comparativism, is it possible to recast the viability of cross-cultural analysis” (Paden 1996: 5)? In response, Paden insists that comparison must note both differences as well as similarities,
both cultural plurality as well as transcultural concerns; nevertheless, he fi-
nally bases his comparative program on macro-thematic conceptualizations
or assumptions, as it seems one must if cross-cultural comparison is to take
place. Paden attempts to reconceptualize or reinstate the problems of cross-
cultural comparison by employing “bridging” concepts of “world” and world-
making practices.

All three of the panelists respond to Paden’s suggestions by questioning
how new his comparativism really is. In her paper on “Difference, dialectics,
and world-making”, Marsha Hewitt remains concerned that the integrity of
“others” be preserved in the comparative enterprise. She fears that Paden’s
suggested direction still subsumes difference to similarity, an intellectual –
if not political – imperialism that has characterized classical comparativism.

In his response, Donald Wiebe argues that the novel elements in Paden’s
view of comparison lies in his differences from Eliade – but in little else.
Paden’s comparative analysis, he suggests, resembles more precisely the mod-
est comparativism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, exem-
plified by the work of Louis Jordan.

Finally, E. Thomas Lawson notes that the act of comparing is a funda-
mental cognitive property of all human beings and, as such, can be neither
old nor new. The issue, in Lawson’s view, is not whether to compare but how
well we compare. Lawson is concerned, in other words, to address directly
the theoretical framework within which comparison proceeds.

Paden has generously provided a careful response to the panelists which
addresses many of the questions that were raised of him. However, funda-
mental issues concerning comparison, whether old or new, remain unresolved.
Paden considers the comparative enterprise to be constitutive of the general
study of religion, whereas Wiebe following Jordan, understands the role of
comparison to be but one aspect of the study of religion. Whether constit-
tutive or aspectival, Paden seems to agree with Jonathan Z. Smith that the
“macro-thematic conceptualizations” upon which he would found a compar-
ative study are not “givens in nature” but are the results of mental operations
(Paden 1996: 13; Smith 1990: 51). If these patterns are the consequence of
mental operations, Hewitt’s question remains: who thematizes the concepts
that are considered to be religious and thus comparable, and from what per-
pective? And yet, Paden twice illustrates his position with an analogy drawn
precisely from nature – that is, from the biological taxonomy of genus/species
(Paden 1996: 8; 10). Perhaps there are, in other words, mental operations that
are given in nature, as has been suggested by cognitive studies at least as
early as the investigations of Lévi-Strauss and more recently by Lawson,
among others. By focussing on human practices rather than on typologies of
the culturally-specific productions of those practices – including those that
might be conceptualized as “religious” – Paden does seem to be moving