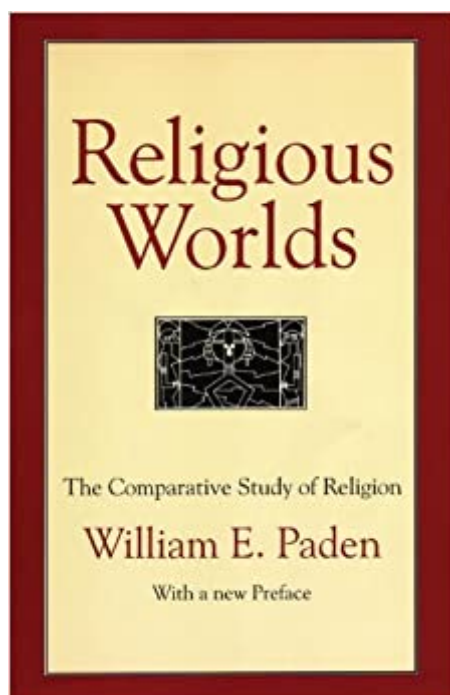


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# Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study Of Religion



## Synopsis

From Gods, to ritual observance to the language of myth and the distinction between the sacred and the profane, *Religious Worlds* explores the structures common to all spiritual traditions.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Beacon, dist. by Harper. Dec. 1988. c. 186p. index. ISBN 0-8070-1210-6. \$19.95; pap. ISBN 0-8070-1211-4. \$9.95. rel ~ see Cox, Harvey. *Many Mansions*. Copyright 1988 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

One of the best thought out and written introductions to the study of religion I have seen thus far. It not only explains but invites discussion and comment. --Charles H. Long, University of California, Santa Barbara "A good introduction to the phenomenology of religion. Stressing that religions are not just systems of belief, but forms of behavior...Paden focuses on four key complementary categories: myth, ritual, gods and systems of purity." --Choice "[Religious Worlds] provides clear bases of comparison from all of the world religions." --American Anthropologist "A richly textured study of religion . . . erudite and written in a very lucid prose style." --Philosophy East & West "A useful overview of contemporary trends in the study of the faiths of today's world." --Publishers Weekly "A work of thoughtful breadth." --Religious Studies Review

Great read.

Good price and very timely shipping

Religious Worlds is a must read for anyone who wants to understand other religions without a pre-conceived slant, and to get a broader perspective on why others believe as they do. I would highly recommend this book to theological and religious studies students.

Teeny print and absolutely boring--gave it away.

I had this book as a text for my class on World Religion this summer. It's something of a landmark work within its field. "From gods to ritual observance to the language of myth and the distinction between the sacred and the profane, Religious Worlds explores the structures common to the most diverse spiritual traditions."<sup>(1)</sup> In other words, Paden is studying the concept of religion itself and how it manifests across the spectrum of available world religions. He is not surveying what individual religions have to say and then comparing his findings to find a right one. So rather than see which religions best address the big questions in life or help people live on a daily basis, Paden wants to ask questions like: What function do rituals serve across all religions? And, what about sacred writings and histories (properly called "myth" within comparative religion); how do these shape and fashion religion? From his perspective, Paden is attempting to let each religion speak on its own terms and simply listen to what each is saying, devoid of any generic, universal standard; something he believes traditional styles cannot do, whatever their standard is. Then, Paden seeks to classify these facts, or "phenomena,"<sup>(2)</sup> in the search for religious structures, or "forms of expression,"<sup>(3)</sup> from any emerging patterns. Throughout the process, respect must be given to each religion's complexity of contexts (geographic, historical, sociological, etc.); each one sees the world in its way because of these dynamics, what Paden calls a "religious world," and engages the world accordingly. Only when we shed our "religious world" and enter into those of others can we truly understand them. Finally, Paden also stresses sensitivity for the sacred while surveying religions to help discern what is religious by nature.<sup>(4)</sup> Throughout this comparative process, Paden argues that his contextualism, or relativity, is for educational purposes not metaphysical ones. His goal is to understand and survey each world's respective landscape in a spirit of tolerance and diversity, and let the reader evaluate from there as necessary.<sup>(5)</sup> I find the whole affair somewhat murky in how it works out. For me, Paden's method is an attempt at neutrality that prefers a pluralistic paradigm as opposed to the traditional options. He well-meaningly, though naively, fails to see such a paradigm

brings its own brand of limitation on the "raw data" of religion, and consequently, is just as biased. Paden must play by the rules of pluralism, which includes its own set of presuppositions and limitations on the subject matter. Consider: First, he recommends "bracketing out one's biases" in order to view religious study neutrally. I would argue that worldviews are not so easily partitioned. The many branches of a worldview often symbiotically feed into each other and reinforce themselves. They are unified systems that, at least from the individual's perspective, are coherent. So trying to break a piece off seems unpractical. Add to that the fact that sometimes the "religious" aspect of a worldview is the dominant, overarching factor in a worldview, and bracketing becomes near impossible. In addition, there is a certain dialectical tension in saying we must bracket our religious positions but not any other aspects of our perspective, as if those other things (like our politics, philosophy, culture, etc.) have nothing to do with our interpretive process. So regardless if religion is partitioned or not, there is still plenty between the observer and the observed that prevents presuppositionless study. Second, and along with the first, Paden's recommended approach is a result of his own context. He only chooses it and considers it to be neutral because of his standing at this particular point in Western history (after our long conversation about reason being superior to faith, the introduction of evolution, the inception of humanism, the influence of existentialism on epistemology, etc.) Despite then his claim, that his eclectic view is a result not by default but of choice,(6) he admits that the world in which he lives is a highly pluralistic one and thus requires such a perspective in studying.(7) In other words, Paden's world has conditioned him to see the need for pluralism. Furthermore, it has given him the tools for the task: Western logic, Western anthropology, Western sociology, etc. The very way he reasons and predicates about that which he is saying is a result of his background,(8) and so positing that only bracketing our religious views somehow enables objective neutrality is simply not true. He will always interpret through his worldview, from the mechanics of language itself to the behind-the-scenes logic at work. So, the Padenian comparative method isn't value free or open-minded, as those engaging it still come with the mindset of their culture (sans religion). Open-mindedness from an American context is not necessarily the same thing from an Afghanistan context; each conveys entirely different worldviews, modes of thought, preconceptions about people, the world, etc., regardless if religion is considered or not. Furthermore, Paden clearly outlines how the precursor to comparative religion (the science of religion) "opposed the priority of theory to investigation;" a statement that comes after comparing the Biblicists' opposition to false religion, the rationalists' opposition to unenlightened beliefs, and the universalists' opposition to parochialism.(9) The irony is that opposition to "the priority of theory" is a bias and a value in itself that stems from a certain worldview. Rather than get closer to

objectivity by not confusing their beliefs with the study of others, the forerunners of this movement traded their beliefs for new ones. Third, I don't know that his approach is any fairer to religion itself. Religions do propose metaphysical claims and judgments about other religions; pretending they do not or approaching them only as though such claims only applied in the specific religious world in which they are made takes the meaning out of them on the terms of the religion in question. As an analogy, imagine a group of students has to do a long algebra problem, and rather than look at their answers (to see if they're right) and their work (to see if it shows how they got that answer), we just want to look at the way they sat in the chair, perhaps what pen they wrote with, or how good their handwriting is, in hopes of comparing methods of how students complete algebra problems. I don't think that it would be fair to the students who were really dealing with the problem if we looked at everything but the work they actually put in to answering the problem and the answer itself. From their perspective, they are really trying to answer the problem, not just complete an exercise in how the forms of problem-solving look. Moreover, we would not be doing them a favor either by simply looking at their work and their answers and then not actually telling them if they're right or wrong, or where they were going right but missed it, etc. Fourth, I don't think Paden escapes the slippery slope of pluralism as a formal philosophical position as easily as he supposes. (10) How long until we would study all things this pluralistically in hopes of achieving neutrality and objectivity? How long until we approach the marketplace this way, the arts, politics and government, or read the Bible this way, until finally all our beliefs are bracketed and everything is true only relatively to the perspective we are using? I found Paden's comments on page xi to almost hint at what happens when pluralism as a study tool gains a deeper philosophical foothold. His closing paragraphs there carry a definite postmodernism feel, including: the implication that no one really knows the world as it is; we only know it relatively to a specific field; those distinct fields cannot be synthesized into one overarching worldview; and we are free to study the world and come to our own conclusions (to which he is right, but any implication that all conclusions are equal or valid is not). So, I do see some bias, or special pleading, on Paden's part that limits the material in its own ways. The reason it is especially noticeable is the way in which he knocks down the biases of the traditional views. It would be one thing to present his perspective as one option for study, but when presented superiorly [and critically of those who disagree by saying they hold allegiance to "highly specific or narrow religious commitments" (11)], these problems must be addressed. As a Christian, "bracketing our biases" is not an option. Jesus doesn't call His followers to acknowledge His lordship in every area of life, except when doing comparative religion. Consequently, if such bracketing is a requirement, then the proper Christian response would be to not do such comparative religion (though it could still be

approached from the traditional method).-----[1] William E. Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), back cover.[2] *Ibid.*, 39.[3] *Ibid.*, 161.[4] *Ibid.*, 39-49.[5] *Ibid.*, 168-170.[6] *Ibid.*, 12.[7] *Ibid.*, 170.[8] See the way he uses philosophy on page 3, point 2. He says that comparative study is an inductive enterprise regarding history, not a deductive one regarding one's philosophy. In context, he uses the word "philosophy" in terms of a set of beliefs, but the logical methods he mentions (deduction and induction) are distinctly Western, thereby belying that his skeletal structure of philosophy cannot be shed regardless if the flesh can (which is addressed in my first point).[9] *Ibid.*, 36.[10] *Ibid.*, 168.[11] *Ibid.*, 169

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