“This book offers the most original and provocative recasting of the comparative study of religion in decades, and it’s aimed just where we need this rethinking the most: the classroom. Other textbooks tend to work with a checklist of subjects as they summon the major religions serially to the stage. Kripal starts instead with the mystery of the comparative act itself, allowing that to determine what he brings forward for our attention. So it’s charisma, sex, the paranormal, and ‘soul practices’ more than it’s Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam. Kripal recognizes the comparativist in each of us and urges us to take it seriously. The result is deep and wide, and excitingly open-minded.”

John Stratton Hawley, Barnard College, Columbia University

“Armed with an extensive array of case studies and a richly diverse portfolio of illustrations, Kripal not only provides a lucid survey of the ‘facts’ of the world’s religions, but inspires us to embrace the fundamentally transcendent nature of the religious experience in all of its manifestations, both ordinary and uncanny, and to confront the inherent challenges of studying religion in a responsibly comparative manner. Comparing Religions is a masterly example of how a book intended for the classroom can be an invigorating stimulus toward new ways of thinking about a phenomenon that pervades every aspect of our world.”

Sarah Iles Johnston, The Ohio State University

Comparing Religions is a next-generation textbook that teaches the art and practice of comparison as a vital skill in our modern globalizing world. Using a three-part “initiatory” structure, the book provides the reader with a map and an effective process through which to understand and practice the comparative analysis of religion.

The three-part structure leads readers through:

• an historical outline of comparative practices, both in world history and in the modern West, demonstrating that comparative forms of understanding religion are ancient and global;

• six chapters focusing on classic comparativist themes, exploring and modeling the nature of responsible comparativist practice;

• the exploration of a number of key strategies through which to understand, analyze, and re-read religion with a sense of accomplishment and closure

The result is a fascinating, wide-ranging, and genuinely exciting book that will inspire as well as guide readers who wish to think seriously about religious pluralism in the modern world. By embracing the last three decades of comparative work and critical theory, the book strikes a new balance and offers a positive vision of the field’s most promising future. Throughout, the impact of comparativist practices on individuals is fully acknowledged and worked with. Toward this same end, the book contains numerous features to help students, professionals and interested readers understand this challenging but extraordinarily rich area of critique and wonder.

The supporting website features numerous additional resources, including information on individual religious traditions, images, a glossary, discussion questions, links to other sites. These resources are available at www.wiley.com/go/kripal.

Praise for *Comparing Religions*

“Jeffrey Kripal provides a thoughtful and compelling discussion of key themes, ideas, and challenges that ground the study of religion across traditions and geographies. It is a layered and textured treatment that will capture the imagination and engage students from start to finish. This important and timely text is not to be missed.”

Anthony B. Pinn,
author of *Introducing African American Religion*

“Comparing Religions is a lucid, entertaining, and even fun introduction to the comparative study of religion. It will be effective with its target audience, young people and the undergraduate classroom, because, while they must wrestle with the way scholars deconstruct and reduce to social or evolutionary functions such phenomena, Kripal never loses sight of the experiences and meanings of those transformed by, engaged in, and mobilized through it. There is no better single volume to entice students into the fraught and fascinating study of religion.”

Bron Taylor,
author of *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*
and editor of *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*

“Kripal is at his very best in this exceptional introduction to the study of religion. After a self-reflexive journey through the religious realms of myth, ritual, nature, science, sex, charisma, soul, salvation, and the imagination and its paranormal powers, we are guided to put it all back together with an eye to religious tolerance, freedom, and pluralism. This book is the red pill. Ingest it and you will be enlightened.”

April D. DeConick,
Rice University

“Armed with an extensive array of case studies and a richly diverse portfolio of illustrations, Kripal not only provides a lucid survey of the “facts” of the world’s religions but also inspires us to embrace the fundamentally transcendent nature of the religious experience in all of its manifestations, both ordinary and uncanny, and to confront the inherent challenges of studying religion in a responsibly comparative manner. *Comparing Religions* is a masterly example of how a book intended for the classroom can be an invigorating stimulus toward new ways of thinking about a phenomenon that pervades every aspect of our world.”

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John Stratton Hawley,
Barnard College, Columbia University
COMPARING RELIGIONS

Coming to Terms

Jeffrey J. Kripal
with Ata Anzali, Andrea R. Jain, and Erin Prophet

The Reader (2011), digital artwork by Rob Beschizza for BoingBoing and Jeffrey J. Kripal, “Psi-Fi: Popular Culture and the Paranormal.”

WILEY Blackwell
God Appears & God is Light
To those poor Souls who dwell in Night,
But does a Human Form Display
To those who dwell in Realms of day.

William Blake, “Auguries of Innocence”

Be then, within yourself, a receptacle for the forms of all beliefs, for God is too vast and too great to be confined to one belief to the exclusion of another, for indeed He says, “Wheresoever ye turn, there is the Face of God.”

Ibn 'Arabi, Bezels of Wisdom
About the website
This book has a companion website containing a range of resources for instructors, students, and other readers. The features include:

- a set of simple guidelines for doing responsible comparison
- a set of brief summaries of the standard world religion systems
- suggestions for further reading
- an annotated bibliography of explicitly comparative works
- glossary
- sample syllabus and teaching ideas

and a range of other materials.

These resources can be accessed at www.wiley.com/go/kripal.
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An Important Note to the Instructor
Or Why You Should (or Should Not) Teach This Text

Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation that I can receive from another soul.
Ralph Waldo Emerson, Divinity School Address, 15 July 1838

Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.
William Butler Yeats

This is a book that focuses on the histories, nuances, promises, and costs of different comparative practices and their potential importance for our contemporary world, not on the content of the religions themselves. It is about exactly what it announces in its subtitle: “coming to terms” with the comparative method itself. This means understanding the comparative method’s ancient roots in the religions themselves and, above all, in radical, often heterodox mystical forms of experience and expression. It means understanding the method’s paradoxical structures and simultaneous challenges to both rationalist reductionism and dogmatic religious belief: understanding them “beyond reason” in one case and “beyond belief” in the other. It means refusing to demean and dismiss the comparative enterprise with perfectly true half-truths and a historical consciousness that can see no further back than a few hundred years. It means recognizing comparison everywhere, from the polytheistic logic of ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman religions, through the Indian poet Kabir and his radical singing beyond Hindu and Muslim identity, to Darwin’s Origin of Species and the most basic cognitive structures of the human brain, as mapped in modern neuroscience. But, above all, this “coming to terms” means acknowledging and working through the very real existential costs (cultural, emotional, religious, familial, and moral) that a disciplined comparative practice demands of anyone who dares take up its call.

Obviously, then, this is not a “world religions” textbook of the kind that goes through each major religion, treats all of them as more or less closed systems of practice and thought, and leaves them mostly unchallenged at the end. I am by no means against such an approach, and I recognize that it can serve all sorts of important remedial purposes. I must confess to a deeper disquiet, though; for I have come to see, with many a colleague (maybe you), that the standard “world religions” approach tends to leave most of the interesting questions and all of the most difficult ones unasked, much less answered. It can also, all too easily, leave unchallenged traditional forms of religious identity and their identity politics, which has played such a central role in real-world conflict. In the language of the historian of religions Charles Long, what I have grown most concerned about is the way in which our academic discipline has helped produce a whole series of significations,
that is, signs that are much too certain of themselves and that, moreover, hide or suppress their own constructed nature.⁴ Students can walk away from such a classroom confirmed in their convictions that they are indeed an eternal this or that, instead of a human being born into a particular cultural context and taking on a particular social and religious identity that is itself largely determined by previous historical processes, cultural debates, institutions, and violences.

This insight into the constructed nature of all types of social and religious identity can be quite disturbing. Or quite liberating. If, after all, we can take apart these social constructions, we can also put them back together again, in new and more adequate forms.

This taking apart and putting back together is what the present book is all about. Its basic premise is that a truly effective pedagogy needs to identify the existential costs of the modern study of religion and then deal with them openly and positively. Put more directly, this text asks us, as both teachers and students, to own up to the radicalism of what we are actually doing in the study of religion. Just as importantly, it asks us to hope for far more from the study of religion than we are accustomed to hoping. It warns and celebrates.

Comparing Religions attempts to accomplish this double goal through a modal initiatory structure. The book is divided into three distinct parts: (1) a first part of three chapters in which we historically locate the comparative practices discussed here and ask the students to define their worldviews as they prepare to take up their own comparative practices; (2) a middle or “liminal” part of six chapters in which we guide the student/reader through a series of comparative acts that are meant to be illustrative but by no means exhaustive; and (3) a final part of three chapters in which we ask the student/readers to “come back” to their own beliefs and convictions and to restate them in the light of the comparative acts in which they have engaged over the last few months. The entire book, in short, is organized around the naming, questioning, and revisioning of the religious or secular identities of the students themselves.

There are five things to emphasize here.

1 The first and most important thing to say is that the textual initiation, like any initiation, is not for everyone and so requires an initial taking of responsibility and a moral assent on the part of the student or reader. That is to say, the student needs to be told, up front and immediately, that the existential risks are very real here and that what follows may well feel like an ordeal or trial, even as it points toward a potential transformation at the end.

2 The second thing to emphasize is that the basic spirit and intent of the book is positive and constructive, not negative and deconstructive. The text certainly embraces, celebrates, and practices a whole spectrum of reductive and deconstructionist methods (there is plenty here to provoke just about anyone, including the secularist and materialist), but it does not leave the student hanging in the end, without anything positive or hopeful to take away. It does not deconstruct “religion” down into a depressing mush. Rather the book is explicitly designed to help the student engage the critical study of religion in its full force and then emerge from this engagement with a positive and constructive outlook on how to re-read religion.

3 The third thing to emphasize is that, in both structure and conversational tone, the text is focused on the individual reader. So, for example, in the third and final part we offer the students a number of options, leaving it to the individual to choose one (or two or three) of these. The goal, obviously, is not to reach the “correct” answer (the comparative study of religion is not a standardized multiple-answer test), but to arrive at a new level of reflexivity and awareness about how religious worldviews function, how they come to be (and come not to be), and how they work in relation to other worldviews.

4 Fourthly, the book privileges structure over content. The initiatory or tripartite structure has one major,
An Important Note to the Instructor

and perhaps surprising, implication: in some real sense, it does not matter what you teach in the middle section of the course. What does matter is that you provide the students with enough “confusion” and “difference” here in order to challenge (and thereby sharpen, deepen, or broaden) their specific worldviews and assumptions about sameness, whatever those happen to be. Put a bit differently, in the end it does not matter so much what that confusion or difference is, only that the matter is sufficiently confusing and different.

Toward this end, we have provided a set of chapters on six robust comparative themes, many of which we hope you find useful. But you should feel no pressure to use all of them, and you, of course, should feel free to substitute your own. I would also strongly encourage you to provide sets of lectures on at least three different religious traditions at this “liminal” point in the course. The book, in other words, is explicitly designed to work in tandem with an expert: that is, with you. So play to your strengths here. I did.

The flipside is that I am keenly aware of what I do not know, which is really everything other than the few things I do know. Accordingly, I approached the five years it took to write this text with a sensibility that bounced back and forth somewhere between humility, moral despair, and professional terror. Which is all to say that I am all too aware of the text’s shortcomings and limitations, particularly with respect to content and cultural reach. I am especially aware of the book's slim treatment of indigenous and tribal religions. I ask you, then, to read and use these pages not as a vain attempt to cover everything, but as one colleague’s sincere effort to capture something of the fire that first brought so many of us to the field in the first place. I am mostly after that fire, not after the different pieces of wood that feed it.

5 Fifthly and finally, the book privileges the extraordinary and the uncanny over the ordinary and the common. This is probably its primary originality (and offense). I am, after all, hyper-aware that colleagues have argued, and continue to argue, for the exactly opposite approach, namely that we need to get away from the religious as the fantastic, as the weird, as the strange. We should not be exoticizing religion. We should be normalizing it. J. Z. Smith’s eloquent plea, in Imagining Religion (1982), for studying religion in the ordinary rather than in the exotic—in “what we see in Europe every day” rather than in those things “which excite horror and make men stare”—is perhaps the most famous example of this position: a position that he captured again, perhaps humorously, in the title of his third collection of essays, Drudgery Divine (1990).²

Like many, I consider Smith to be a pillar of the field, and I understand and respect this commitment to the ordinary, particularly if one is more sociologically inclined. The statistical and demographic methods of sociology, after all, flatten out and finally erase the anomalous: they turn the divine into the drudgery of Smith’s book title. But I happen to think that this normalizing and flattening out of the sacred is largely a function of what we have chosen to take off the table. That is, it is a function of what we have chosen to focus on and what we have refused to look at seriously. If we put other things on the table again (as this text clearly does), the field looks very different and, I dare say, much more attractive and exciting to an eighteen-year-old (not to mention this fifty-year-old).

Let me lay my cards on the same table: because I work in comparative mystical literature, a literature that features some of the most extreme experiences on record, I have come to conclude that actual historical human encounters with the sacred are uncanny, are fantastic, indeed they are often so strange that we cannot possibly exaggerate this weirddom. I even have a personal rule, which I developed out of my ethnographic experiences with individuals who have known such encounters up close and personal: the more one discovers about these kinds of events, the weirder they get. Put differently, such histories become more improbable, not less, the more we know about them. I am thus skeptical of models of religion that focus on the normal, on the everyday, and on the ways these events are domesticated, rationalized, and
institutionalized. All that, too, is “religion”—of course. Maybe it is most of religion. But, if we only focus on these social processes, we will get a very flat view of religion, which is exactly what we have today in much of the field.

I also have a deeper concern here, namely that normalizing scholarship on “ordinary” religion is part of this same domestication, rationalization, and erasure of the sacred. It is as if we can study everything about religion, except what makes it fiercely religious. And then we are told that there is nothing essentially or really religious about religion, which of course is true if we have just erased all of the weird stuff with our methods and philosophical assumptions. If we have taken everything off the table that can challenge our own reigning materialisms, relativisms, and constructivisms, then everything will look like more evidence for materialism, relativism, and constructivism. Which is where we are at the moment.

I am always humorously reminded of a classic sci-fi movie at this point in my long-standing argument with the field. Our present materialist and historicist models have rendered human nature something like the protagonist Scott Carey in the film *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957). With every passing decade, that human nature is getting tinier and tinier and less and less significant. In a few more years we’ll just blip out of existence, like poor Scott at the end of the film, reduced to nothing more than cognitive grids, replicating strings of DNA, quantum-sensitive microtubules in the synapses of the brain, or whatever. Either that, or these same methods will simply kill us off. Indeed, at this point, we are constantly reminded of the “death of the subject” and told repeatedly that we are basically walking corpses with computers on top—in effect, technological zombies or moist robots. We are in the fantastically ridiculous situation where conscious intellectuals are telling us that consciousness does not really exist as such, that there is nothing to it except cognitive grids, software loops, and warm brain matter. If this were not so patently absurd, it would be very funny.

Why do we want to be so incredibly small? And why do we allow these present philosophical assumptions—and they are assumptions—to erase entire swaths of the history of religions, which give powerful witness to the exact opposite, namely that human nature is immense, that mind is not brain, that consciousness is not cognition, and that there is something fundamentally transcendent about, well, us? This does not mean that we should then deny or ignore the everyday, the institutional politics, the violences, the daily rituals, the emotions and sensibilities of piety, the visual art and material culture, the demographics, “what we see in Europe every day.” Of course not. Why do we have to keep playing ping-pong here? Back and forth. Back and forth. As if we could not simply do both and move on. This, anyway, is the conclusion of the present text: “Do both.” Which, of course, is precisely what the field as a whole, as a “big tent,” has been doing all along.

At the end of the day, however, I have not written this text for our own internal professional debates. I have written it for young people with little or no exposure to what we do and why. I am talking to, chatting with, joking with, provoking them. I would ask, then, that you judge the book and its sometimes admittedly eccentric choices by the total effect these pages have on your students, and not by the measure of whether it fits into this or that professional consensus.

It probably does not, by the way. That was the whole point in writing it.

**Notes**

Both the cover image and the paintings that announce each chapter are expressions of the vibrant art scene of my campus and home city: Rice University in Houston, Texas.

The cover features the sculpture *Mirror* of the Spanish artist Jaume Plensa. This piece was installed at the center of the campus of Rice University in the spring of 2012, while I was finishing this textbook. Happily, it embodies in striking ways the core practices of the following pages. The two seated figures peacefully face each other, mirroring each other with literally "open" fronts (one can often see children playing inside them). They are also entirely open to the environment: the light, wind, and weather move effortlessly through them, *are* them. Each of their immense bodies, moreover, is constituted entirely of letters from the world's languages (and hence religions), as if to suggest the potentialities inherent in the human form. I imagine these two figures as giant "comparative bodies" that have attained their present magnificence through the radical openness, reflexive mirroring, and spirited diversity that is comparative practice.

The paintings that open each new part and chapter are all by the Houston surrealist artist Lynn Randolph. Lynn and I met a few years ago, after she had read some of my work on erotic mystical literature and detected deep resonances between what she was trying to do on the canvas and what I was trying to do on the page. After I encountered her stunning paintings, I could not agree more. Like the religious imagination at its best, Lynn's paintings are ambiguous, paradoxical, open to multiple meanings, fierce in their honesty and criticism, gorgeous in their bodies, and, above all, magically capable of pushing their viewers into a direct vision, an intuited sense, or at least a gut suspicion that the real is not what we think it is. At all. With Lynn's help, I will be attempting something similar in the pages that follow through the brush strokes, some of them quite surreal, of my words. We paint together here.
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I would most like to thank Rebecca Harkin, my editor at Wiley-Blackwell. I still remember the day when I received an e-mail from her, in the spring of 2008, asking me to consider proposing a textbook for Wiley-Blackwell on the subject of comparing world religions. I responded that I could not see myself writing another world religions textbook. She artfully responded that she was not asking me to write a world religions textbook; she was asking me to propose something different. Rebecca caught my attention, and then about five years of my teaching and writing life. She has been an ideal editor, guiding, prodding, and supporting the project from beginning to end. Rebecca also employed some most careful and insightful anonymous readers of the manuscript at different stages, who responded to the project with enthusiasm, care, and constructive criticism. I have tried my very best to take their suggestions and criticisms to heart, even when I occasionally disagreed with them, in some cases profoundly.

I am also in debt to Rice University’s Humanities Research Center in the persons of Vice Provost Caroline Levander (the former director of the Center), Carolyn Adams, Dr. Melissa Bailar, Lauren Kleinschmidt, and, most recently, Director and Professor Farès El-Dahdah. The Center has supported this project through multiple channels, including a Mellon-funded seminar on the history and practice of comparativism and a semester-long teaching leave. As has my dean, Dean Nicolas Shumway, who has done more than anyone to support my work and welfare in these middle years. I am extremely grateful.

I must also thank my co-writers. I wrote this textbook after teaching the aforementioned Mellon Seminar, and then, again in the spirit of the Mellon Foundation’s desire to encourage collaborative research, with the help of four of my advanced graduate students: Michael Adair-Kriz, Ata Anzali, Andrea Jain, and Erin Prophet. This, by the way, is why the voice of the text alternates, consciously and intentionally, between the “I” and the “we” (I have consciously used “I” in those places where I want to make it clear that what is being said reflects my own positions and approaches, which, of course, are not always those of my co-writers). Michael is an anthropologist and Mormon who wrote his dissertation on graffiti art and gay identity in Chile. He eventually had to leave the project for other academic commitments, but he was, and is, an important conversation partner. Ata is a historian of religions teaching at Middlebury College and working on Sufi traditions of the Islamic world, especially in Iran, from a comparative perspective. Andrea is a scholar of Indian religions teaching at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis who shares a dual
Jain and Protestant parentage and is presently finishing her first book on the constructions of yoga in contemporary consumer culture. My fourth co-writer, Erin Prophet, is presently studying with me here at Rice as an expert on new religious movements in the USA, partly out of deep and abiding intellectual interests, partly because she grew up in one. Obviously, comparison is much more than an abstract intellectual exercise for this team. It is who we are.

Another key contributor to the textbook is Lynn Randolph, a gifted surrealist artist here in Houston who initially contacted me after reading some of my work. Lynn's paintings and person grace the following pages and, I hope, provide the work with a striking and consistent aesthetics that will be difficult to forget. The truth is that I have always thought of my own work as an intellectual and literary expression of the surreal and that I wanted to be an artist in my youth, so this was an especially happy collaboration for me. Lynn's late husband, Bill, also needs to be recognized here, as his image and his body play key roles in the openings of Chapters 9 and 12.

There were also colleagues who “test-ran” the textbook at different institutions: the New Testament critic and scholar of early Christianity Brent Landau of the University of Oklahoma; the classicist Roshan Abraham of Washington University; and the historian of Christianity and philosopher of religion Chad Pevateaux of St. Mary's College, Maryland. The feedback we received from these colleagues and their students was invaluable.

I would thus like to thank all those who helped me out in specific areas of expertise. In alphabetical order, they were: Egil Asprem on the history of science and psychical research; Harald Atmanspacher on C. G. Jung and Wolfgang Pauli; William Barnard and David Presti on ayahuasca shamanism; Elias Bongmba on African religions; Bernadette J. Brooten on slavery in the monotheisms; Kelly Bulkeley on religion and cognitive science; Nathan Carlin and Elliot Berger on Protestantism and the King James Bible; Francis X. Clooney, SJ, on comparative theology; April DeConick on the New Testament and early Christianity; Robert Erlewine on monotheism and religious tolerance; Lawrence Foster on Mother Ann and the early Shaker community; Claire Fanger on the history and structure of magic; Michael Grosso on the flying Catholic Saint Joseph of Copertino; David Haberman on the ecological movement and deep ecology; Wouter Hanegraaff on the history and interpretation of western esotericism, and especially on its influence on the academic study of religion; George Hansen on the paranormal and the social sciences; John Stratton Hawley on Hindu devotionalism; Jess Hollenback on the imagination and the symbol; David Hufford and Whitley Strieber on supernatural assault traditions; Mary Keller on possession studies; Louis Komjathy on Daoism; Daniel Levine on nature and religion; Gurinder Singh Mann on Sikh history; Dennis McKenna on psychoactive sacred plants; Richard Miller on liberalism; Brother Gregory Perron, OSB, on comparative theology; Anthony Pinn on African American thought and black theology; Dinesh Sharma on Hinduism; Robert Sharf on the category of experience; Frederick Smith on a note concerning Indo-European linguistics; Richard Smith on China and the *Yijing*; Rob Swigart on human prehistory; Ann Taves on religion, cognitive science, and evolutionary psychology; Bron Taylor on nature and religion; Ross Tiekoven on nature and religion; Jeff Wamsley on the Mothman and for a really cool drawing; and Elliot Wolfson on the Kabbalah and the paradoxical nature of the symbol.

I am not the first to imagine structuring an intro-level course around a tripartite initiatory structure inspired by the work of Victor Turner (soon to be explained). Indeed I happily borrowed the idea from my colleague Bryan Rennie, who proposed it to me at Westminster College some time around 1995 or so, after which I taught our introductory course there with this same “Turner” technique throughout the second half of the 1990s. I first described this pedagogy in a paper for a conference at the University of Notre Dame organized by James Boyd White under the auspices of the Erasmus Institute in 2000. This paper was later published as “Liminal Pedagogy: The
Liberal Arts and the Transforming Ritual of Religious Studies,” in How Should We Talk About Religion? Perspectives, Contexts, Particularities, edited by James Boyd White (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006). At least one other scholar has practiced something similar within the textbook genre: Gary Kessler in his Studying Religion: An Introduction through Cases (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), through his elegant categories of Preliminaries, Liminalaries, and Postliminaries. I very much want to acknowledge that confirming resonance, even if I did not become aware of it until I had conceived and written much of the present text.

Finally, a collegial request. I have read and written enough books to know that there is no such thing as a perfect book. I at least have never read or written one, and I doubt very much that anyone else has either. We have done our very best to check our facts (when there are facts to check), share sections with experts for feedback, and more or less do everything in our power to ensure as clean a textbook as possible. I am absolutely certain that we have failed. And so I sincerely hope that you will send me any errata that you happen to find via the website that Wiley-Blackwell has so kindly set up around this project.

This is one of the many things that I love about comparison: it is a collegial project through and through, which relies on the intellectual labors of others. Without those colleagues and their labor, there can be no comparison. Comparison is us, or it is nothing at all.

Jeffrey J. Kripal
Houston, Texas
15 April 2013
Listen to the Amniotic Cosmos—Once Upon a Time again (1991), by Lynn Randolph. Diptych, left panel, 36” × 28”.
In these first three chapters we will be concerned about one and only one matter: locating and defining our own perspectives, that is, the “places” from which we are comparing religions.

In Chapter 1 we will sketch out a few of the innumerable comparative practices of the ancient world, since we do not want to leave the impression that comparison is somehow unique to the modern world. In Chapter 2 we will locate the professional study of religion itself: when it arose, where it came from, how it works or “thinks,” and what its most basic values are. In Chapter 3, after offering some working definitions and assumptions, we will ask you to think about your own most basic assumptions, define your present worldview, and “place yourself” in terms of the perennial questions that the religions attempt to answer: where we came from, where we are going, what we are, what the purpose of life is, and, finally, what happens to us when we die.

This is a very important exercise, because, as the textbook progresses into Part II, you will find yourself working with a whole host of stories, practices, and truth claims that you will no doubt compare to your own. You cannot do this, of course, unless you know at least something about your own beliefs, values, and assumptions about the world. It is perfectly fine, of course, not to know, or to be uncertain of these. If you are conscious and clear about your uncertainty or about not knowing, that too is a form of knowledge. Indeed, some would say that this is the best knowledge of all; that this kind of humility, uncertainty, and openness is the beginning of wisdom.
The professional study of religion is a rare bird in most people’s lives. It is not often seen. Religion, for example, is almost never studied in high school in a country like the US. Religions may well be safely described there in, say, a world history course, but they are never critically compared or analyzed. As a consequence, few of the undergraduates who come to my particular university each fall consider majoring in the study of religion, and most of them think that our department is here to meet someone’s religious needs or affirm some very particular set of beliefs. They also assume that a religious studies major is “soft,” as opposed to the sciences, which are “hard.”

The truth is that the study of religion aligns itself with no particular religion and is in fact deeply suspicious of any and all absolute truth claims. This does not mean, however, that the field as a whole is against religion. The discipline is neither pro-religious nor anti-religious (although, as we shall repeatedly see, its comparative terms arose out of very particular religious contexts and its basic methods are clearly incompatible with particular types of religiosity). There is, moreover, nothing “easy” or “soft” about what we do. One of my former students put it best: she felt each day as she left class that her tennis shoes had just burst into flames, that she had just stepped onto some very dangerous, but very exciting ground. And why not? As Margaret M. Mitchell has captured it so well, when we are talking about religion deeply, we are essentially playing with fire. Scholars of religion play with this fire for a living, and we teach others how to do this too, hopefully without getting burnt.¹

Some of us get burnt anyway.

Which is all to say that scholars of religion are not here to justify or confirm anyone’s religious assumptions. We are here to interrogate them. We are here to
think critically about religious systems the same way political scientists think about political institutions, sociologists think about social systems, anthropologists think about cultures, or literary critics think about literature. Indeed, we use all of these to do our own work, for religions are always and everywhere also political, social, cultural, and textual phenomena. You might say that we are radically interdisciplinary. I prefer to think of us as intellectually promiscuous.

I wrote this textbook together with my three co-authors for two reasons. I will, by the way, do my best to make it clear when I am writing strictly in my own voice; you will thus notice a common shift between “I” and “we” in the textbook.

The first conviction out of which I wrote this textbook is that the critical study of religion is the most relevant, the most exciting and dangerous (hence the flaming tennis shoes metaphor), and the most radical intellectual study presently pursued in the colleges and universities of the modern world. The so-called “hard” sciences in fact do the easy stuff: they study things that can be measured, that can be controlled, that can be predicted. We do the truly hard stuff: we study things that cannot be measured, that cannot be controlled, that are fiercely alive, and that are ultimately about the “hardest” of all humanistic and scientific problems: the nature of consciousness itself.

More specifically, it is the methods of the humanities, and particularly those of historiography (the recovery, writing, and analysis of history), that represent the greatest challenge to religious claims. Religious claims, after all, routinely claim to be exempt from history as such, that is, they claim that their scriptures and doctrines are eternal, when in fact good historical scholarship can always show that, whatever else they may or may not point toward, all religious expressions—including (and especially) scriptural texts—are also products of human labor, human agency, and human history. Religious texts and beliefs may or may not “fall from the sky,” as we say, but they always, always fall through human beings.

The second conviction out of which I wrote this textbook is that the future hinges largely on how future generations, including (and especially) your generation, critically compare across cultural, religious, and social divisions.

I am not exaggerating either point. You are about to be introduced to an intellectual practice and to a body of knowledge that leave few unmoved. What you encounter will almost certainly excite you, scare you, or infuriate you. It will also very likely change you and, with you, the world. If you are not ready to be changed and challenged to your very core, put down this textbook and read no further. As David Weddle once put it with respect to his own comparative study of miracles: “Like every serious book, this one is also out to get you.”

Consider yourself forewarned.

Before we begin, it is important that you understand the most basic nature of this textbook’s central focus: comparison. What is comparison anyway? Most simply, comparison is the intellectual act of negotiating sameness and difference in a set of observations. More complexly, this act of negotiating sameness and difference leads to the recognition of patterns and to a subsequent classification of what has been observed. Most complexly, these classifications in turn lead to a theory about the deep underlying structures that produce these particular patterns, that is, to a model of what might lie behind them. There are at least four stages, then, implied in that single word “comparison”: (1) the negotiation of sameness/difference in a set of observations; (2) the identification of patterns in that data set; (3) the construction of a classificatory scheme that organizes these patterns into some meaningful whole; and (4) a theory to explain the patterns one sees.

Comparison lies at the root of some of the simplest acts of perception and thinking. It also lies at the root of some of the most stunning and successful achievements of human thought.

Take Darwin’s idea of natural selection, for example, which has since morphed into the achievements of evolutionary biology, the discovery of DNA,