

JEFFREY J. KRIPAL

# COMPARING RELIGIONS



WILEY Blackwell



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*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."

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## **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.”

**Sarah Iles Johnston,**  
The Ohio State University

“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, and 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

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](http://www.wiley.com/go/kripal).

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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,



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).<sup>2</sup>

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 weirdness. 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 modules, 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

- 1 Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986).
- 2 J. Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xii.

# A Comment on the Cover Image and the Paintings

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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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.

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