

Book Review: *Interpreting the Sacred*

Written in 1992, William Paden's *Interpreting the Sacred*<sup>1</sup> serves as a worthy introduction to the use of interpretive frames. Paden's thesis is that our lenses shape our worldviews, which in turn shape our views on religion. The author also argues for plurality in our definitions of religion and asserts that we must make wide allowances for cultural differences.

Paden begins this acclaimed academic study by explaining that there are many varied descriptions of reality itself. He introduces the reader to his idea that "scale creates the phenomenon," (p.4) which suggests that the size and scope of scholarly analysis determines what is observed and identified as religious phenomenon. He discusses various definitions of religion, explores the relationship between cause and meaning, and the use of interpretation as a form of behavior.

Paden moves through the rationalistic criticism of religion, citing Feuerbach, Hume and Marx, with the latter quoted as saying, "religion is the camouflage of social power" and that holy scripture such as the Pentateuch of Moses was written by humans. (p.23) To his credit, Paden also focuses upon the negative consequences of religion, which have included slavery, feminist repression, with some asserting that religion can be intellectually repressive as well. Paden identifies religion as the traditional interpreter of reality, but explains how religious interpretation itself is now open to being re-interpreted.

Paden moves through a brief sociological study of religion, citing Emile Durkheim's view of religion as "a function of society, of culture, a system of belief and behavior which represented social ideals." (p.29) He asserts that society creates the roles we play, and that the "gods" were originally social figures, such as patriarchs. Paden then cites Max Weber as teaching that

“religion absorbs and then mirrors back the ethical and ideological orientation of different social classes” (p.37) and that the “prophets were manifestations of the capacity of religion to critique religion.” (p.39) Once again, Paden subjects these claims to sound scholarship and finds that Durkheim’s view is problematic because it is not a falsifiable hypothesis. (p.45)

Paden discusses Carl Jung’s “depth psychology” (p.48) and makes various assertions about the nature of the unconscious and the archetypes and gods as its symbols. Jung identifies three key stages as the ego relates to the unconscious: dependency, autonomy, and integration. These correspond to different levels of religious experience. He discusses the self as the ego connecting backward to past factors, and forward to its own transformation (p.54) and equates the Great Mother as the unconscious prior to ego development. Paden describes Jung’s view of YHWH as amoral, lacking in self-reflection, and unconscious. For Jung, YHWH develops morally throughout the biblical story. Paden uses Jung’s view of “the Shadow” to assert that what we dislike in others equates to the Shadow in ourselves, and views the gods as projections of our empowerments, and the demons as embodiments of our fears.

Overall, Paden does an admirable job at describing the underlying challenges of comparative religion, ultimately stating that these competing “perspectives existing side by side do not necessarily conflict until they start denying each other.” (p.126) In other words, religious conflict doesn’t result from what we *agree* to be true, but what we *deny* to be true. Paden’s “reciprocity model” appears to seek a middle ground between scientific objectivity and subjective relativity by asserting that interpretation informs meaning just as meaning can inform interpretation.

Works Cited

1. Paden, William. *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion*. Beacon Press, 21 Nov. 2000. <https://www.amazon.com/dp/0807077054>.