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José Ignacio Cabezón

Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Volume 74, Number 1,
March 2006 , pp. 102-104 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press



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RESPONSES
AND REJOINDERS

The Limits of History: A Response to Nancy Levene

IT IS, OF COURSE, IMPOSSIBLE to do justice to an essay as rich and provocative as this one in the few lines allotted us. Rather than a direct response, I will take a more asymptotic approach to Professor Levene's essay. Such a tangential response is, in any case, all that a buddhologist (or at least one the likes of me) is capable of in the face of an essay that weaves together (with a great deal of grace, I might add) modern poetry, gender theory, continental philosophy, and the history of religions. Unlike Levene, however, I lack the aesthetic sensitivity to engage a poet—much less one the likes of Stevens—as a conversation partner. So, my comments cannot help but be more prosaic. Still, I am truly appreciative of Levene's willingness to think through the issues with a poet as her interlocutor, and it emboldens me to risk something similar, albeit with a different genre and with a quite different conversation partner. Rather than begin with a poem I begin with a narrative—a story of an incident that took place in a very different “region” than the one(s) we inhabit, in a place where “mythology *was* possible” (and, in spite of an encroaching modernity, perhaps still is).

Levene's essay is about myth and history, but mostly it is about history. It is an attempt to craft a version of history that is “more self-conscious, more dialectical,” an historicized history—in short, a version that is more adequate than the versions of history currently employed by

Journal of the American Academy of Religion March 2006, Vol. 74, No. 1, pp. 102–104
doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfj019

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Advance Access publication January 5, 2006

scholars (historians) of religion. My tale is also about history, or at least it begins as a tale about history.

In the summer of 2004 I sat in a monk's room in Tibet, where I had the pleasure of engaging in one of those conversations that one recognizes (in retrospect at least) to be the type of exchange that will leave an indelible imprint on one's intellectual life. I was working on the history of this particular monastery and had finally found a scholar whose knowledge of the "record of changes"—the details of the narrative history of that particular institution—was as profound as his insight into the politics of history (the hows and whys of movements suppressed, documents sealed, and individuals marginalized). But what has made the conversation stick with me is not so much the first-order tale or even the second-order reflection about the vectors of power at work in the construction of that tale. Rather, what has made the event memorable was the way it ended, the words with which this monk-scholar signaled to me that the conversation was drawing to a close. It was a claim about history *itself*: "But, of course, you know that history isn't what matters most." Somewhat taken aback, I nodded, even as I wrestled with the implications of his words.

In the months since this exchange I have often contemplated this one sentence, and Professor Levene's essay has given me the opportunity to contemplate it yet again and in a new light. Here was an erudite historian of Tibetan monasticism—every bit as sophisticated as a Western academic historian—who "got" history, and in practically the same breath for-got it. I am not sure that I have managed to come to terms with all of the issues this episode has raised for me: How can you forget history once you have "gotten" it? How can one have a commitment to history but (occasionally) bracket it and devalue it as a discursive form? How does one live in a world where history is not denied, but neither is it given pride of place, where the dictum "Always historicize!" is problematic not because of the verb but because of the *adverb*? And perhaps the most important question of all: If history is not what matters most, then what does?

What I think mattered most to this monk—what for him trumps history, at least axiologically—is probably some combination of doctrine, practice, and the (mediated) experience to which this gives rise: in a word, Buddhism, or, more accurately, the "high tradition" of Buddhism. But where does this leave history? And what then of the relationship of history (what matters less) to religion (what matters most)? It is perhaps worth reiterating that my interlocutor was not repudiating history—it is not that history does not matter. Nor was he denying the power of historical analysis. What *was* being denied is that history is the road to liberation

(or at least to the kind of liberation worth having). (His response to Foucault, perhaps.) In the same vein it seems clear that he did not see his commitment to the discourse of the “transcendent and spiritual”—that is, his commitment to religion—as requiring a repudiation of the discourses of the “temporal, contextual . . . and material.” (His response to Lincoln, perhaps.) For him religion and history can coexist. They can, one assumes, even mutually influence one another—a history of Buddhism, a Buddhist theory of history. Yet, history, in this monk’s view, clearly belongs on a lower rung in the ladder of value. It is not that history does not matter but that Buddhism—the study of doctrine, its internalization in meditation, and the transformative result of such practices—matters more.

Perhaps, I have already put too many words into the mouth of my monk-interlocutor, so let me conclude with a few sentences in my own voice. I have taken as my cue for these remarks Levene’s suggestion that “the history of religions may only ever be . . . the concept and content of one particular way of being in, and seeing, the world.” This transcription of a conversation-once-had has been my attempt to stand in a “region” very different from the one we usually inhabit as scholars of religion, and to ask “was it always, has it always been, is it everywhere, so?” In the elsewhere of this Buddhist insider’s “region,” the problem is very different from the problem that Professor Levene treats (and, in fact, treats with a great deal of flair) in her essay: the problem of a history that is not sufficiently self-aware, that has failed to account for “what, and how, it has seen.” Rather, the problem (or perhaps the challenge) posed when one stands in this alter-re(li)gion is that history—even a self-aware, self-“decomposing,” post-historicized history—can never yield what is most worth having. The mere presence or absence of an historical consciousness—the ability to historicize—is not, therefore, what distinguishes “us” from “them.” It is not what separates the historian of religion from the religious believer. It may be, however, that the *valuation* of history, the estimation of its capacity (to yield insight, to liberate), represents a fissure between the history of religions and religion itself. A fissure (that is negotiable) or an incommensurability (that is not)? That, of course, is something that requires a different type of conversation, one that we have not yet had, but one that, it seems to me, is worth having.

José Ignacio Cabezón

University of California Santa Barbara