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RESPONSES
AND REJOINDERS

The Discipline(s) and Its (Their) Other(s): A Response to José Ignacio Cabezón

I WANT TO THANK Professor Cabezón for an engaging paper written, supposedly, from his “little corner” of the field of religious studies but which, in fact, sheds light on much of the field as a whole. As he notes, the authors of these essays for the *JAAR* were encouraged to write something like a “manifesto” and so, per definition, to call others to awaken and to change. Cabezón has done so with considerable skill and dispatch. The respondents to these manifestoes were directed to focus on “the promise and dangers, scope and limitations of the agenda” announced in an essay. My task is, then, a relatively easy one. If I have understood Cabezón’s argument, there is little, if any, substantial disagreement among us. The worries I have are about *how* the case is made for the future of religious studies as he envisions it. Ironically, the essay might at points be at odds with itself, announcing a future that it does not enact. Before isolating the worries about *possible* points of dispute, let me characterize the essay’s argument.

THE DIALECTIC OF ALTERITY

Professor Cabezón provides us with what he calls a “microhistory” of his (sub)discipline and his particular interests. Yet, he provides this history

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by means of the use of macro-abstract conceptual dyads: Self/Other; Insider/Outsider; Identity/Difference. I return to these dyads later, because they provoke my main worry about how the argument of the essay might block the future it envisions. Suffice it to note here that the attempt to escape the principle of identity (I am I) by expanding it to I and not-I (read: self/other) is just the legacy in Western philosophical idealism.¹ One has good reason, in my opinion, to be concerned about the adequacy of such dyads for exploring and trying to understand the actual complexity of human cultures and “religions.” This is all the more the case when the dyads are enshrined in capital letters, so that we can be sure that it is not any old other but a Real Other and a Real Self. What one is charting are abstracted dialectics and not the rough and tumble of accounts of human interactions with all their messiness and sloppy non-dialectical workings.

The main thrust of Cabezón’s story is to chart the ways in which scholars of religion mimic the progression of the interactions between the (Christian) West and its Other. Charting this history is meant to provide the cognitive space for new approaches to the religions liberated from categories and theories imposed from just one socio-historical-religious context. The “microhistory” is then told via a dialectic build on logical dyads that moves from complex exclusion through principled hierarchy (“they are like us, but we are rational”) to a “universal rationality” that is more inclusive even if defined from the stand point of the Self. The interesting part of this lock-step history is of course not the history itself. For instance, any historical work on (say) Enlightenment thinkers quietly reveals how self-critical they were rather than simply demarcating themselves from some abstract Other. Recall Voltaire’s wonderfully ironic use of the term “barbarian” to refer to Europeans or Hume’s inversion of “polytheism” and “theism” (i.e., Christianity) in *The Natural History of Religion* such that polytheism is to be preferred for its tolerance. Abuses and bigotries about other peoples there were—and are—in the history Cabezón charts, and he is quick and right to note them. My point is that this “dialectic” of history begs for, well, history. And this is so even through the point of the history, as noted, is to enable us to think beyond it.

The crucial and winning insight of Cabezón’s story, about which I want to stand up and cheer, is that there is in fact some human progress.

¹ The move here is from Descartes to Fichte and beyond. It is interesting that so much academic work has not advanced beyond this point, even when it is reversed so that the Other constitutes the Self. Schleiermacher, hardly the darling of current history of religions, in his *Speeches*, was the first who tried to break this framework while also using it. Religion, he insisted, is the non-reducible Other to morals and metaphysics, will and reason.

He writes, “the human sciences are then, in this formulation, an interminable quest to break down the barriers that cultures construct to separate Self and Other . . . and that it represents something like progress.” Hurray! In fact, my own “manifesto” in this issue of the *JAAR* speaks about religious humanism for many of the same reasons. Yet, Cabezón is daring enough to reclaim the hope of progress in the human sciences. Here he has clearly articulated a real challenge for the future of religious studies.

That is not all. The story we are told is not really about religion but about how *scholars of religion* construct their identities in rough analogy to the ways communities and religious traditions do, namely, through the political act of boundary formation and mechanisms of securing loyalty. The microhistory is the story not of progress in religion but in the study of religion. Cabezón charts four trends that are, happily, changing the study of religion: (1) theory pluralism; (2) the challenge of religious believers to academics;² (3) the self-disclosure of scholar’s religious identities; and (4) “the movement to the institutionalization of non-Western theologies.” The way academics have defined Themselves against some Other is being transformed even as the lines of loyalty—to the guild and/or to a religious tradition—are being negotiated anew. Surely, the essay is right about these points and right not only for Cabezón’s “small corner of the discipline,” but, in fact, for religious studies in general. Religious studies certainly needs new categories and theories developed in and with religious resources and not simply applied to them. And he concludes, realistically enough, that given his account of identity construction, it is uncertain whether or not the future will bring new forms of exclusion or “alterity.” Even if that is so, Cabezón seems to whisper, we have at least made some progress. Our scholarly history does not determine our intellectual future.

POINTS OF WORRY

By now, I hope my appreciation for the intent and direction of Cabezón essay is clear as well as some of the points where there might be justified concern about how the argument is formulated. It is vitally important for me to insist that these points of concern are not about the intent and direction of the essay. I heartily agree that there has been

² I put it this way because manifestly not only are there challenges posed by non-Western, non-academics to the categories of the West academy, the way it is put in this essay, we also see challenges from within the West and the academy to the study of Western Christianity (as if Christianity was ever just Western!).

progress in the human sciences. I agree with Cabezón that we *ought* to continue to labor under the demand to make some real progress. That is the intellectual's responsibility. We need to know the past not only to learn from it but also to move beyond it, to embrace and enact a different future.

At issue in my mind, then, is the extent to which the conceptual machinery—the method—adopted in the “manifesto” to make the case for religious studies is really up to it assigned task. I do not think it is, on a number of fronts.

First, the abstract dyads (Self/Other; Insider/Outsider; Identity/Difference) are awkward instruments in trying to understand historically the careers of peoples or traditions or even disciplines. Anyone interested in history rather than the *philosophy* of history must admit that this strategy did not work even for Hegel—the supposed master of the enterprise—or, for that matter, Marx: the dialectic of history usually eviscerates history of actual human agents with all of their faults, capacities, bodies, and dreams and replaces them with Geist's or Capital's working. The whole point of doing microhistory, or any history for that matter, is to muck about in the messiness of competing accounts of human doings. Furthermore, most “religions” with which I have any familiarity have their own ways of defusing these “dyads” and imagining forms of identity constituted in other ways. Here one has to insist, as Cabezón does, on theory plurality. Too often religious studies works with theories and conceptual forms below the level of complexity of that about which we are trying to think. I believe Professor Cabezón would agree with me on this point. Indeed, I am not sure about the extent to which Cabezón himself imagines there is an essential connection between this machinery and his program.

The second point of worry has to do with its analogical structure. Professor Cabezón reads religious studies as a tradition (“religious studies, whatever else it may be, is obviously a tradition”) that warrants a corresponding story of exclusion and yet progresses like that found in the West. Like a good deal of work in religious studies nowadays, the subject matter of this essay is not religion but scholars of religion. Cabezón's exciting call for “progress” in humanistic inquiry just means that we “scholars” should form our identities more inclusively, that we “scholars” ought to overcome the invidious “repudiation of the Other,” and that we “scholars” must be honest about the guild's way of identity and loyalty formation. I worry here that religion scholars too quickly, too often, and too easily imagine that “progress” in the guild translates to human progress more generally. If the study of religion becomes reduced to the study of how religion scholars fashion their identities, then it is not at all clear to me why universities should fund departments of religion. Put otherwise, does the

analogy drawn in the essay constrict the properly public responsibility of the scholar of religion and blunt the interest in religion that moves most folks to want to study religion?

From logic to analogy to, finally, matters of “sources” with respect to the method or argumentative strategy of this essay. One of the many exciting points in Cabezón’s essay is the claim that religious sources are not only something “we can think of, but also think with.” For too long, concepts, categories, and theories have been imported from other disciplines and used to decode the religions. There is no good reason for this tactic, argues Cabezón. As he notes, “a handful of scholars have begun to look to religion not just as data—not simply as the raw material to be manipulated by theory—but as the source of theory.” Surely, this is right, both descriptively (scholars are, thankfully, doing this) and also prescriptively (it would be a—theoretical—boon to cast the theory net a bit wider). Here too I want to stand up and cheer.

Interestingly, this claim about *sources* opens anew a debate that virtually defines religious studies for many scholars, namely, how to keep theology—usually Christian theology—out of the academy. (I happily note that a tried and true dyad that has defined the history of religious studies is not found in the essay: descriptive/normative!) Because I am sometimes called a theologian, and, what is more, one who never thought that theological thinking was not also and always a form of thinking, this is grand stuff. What is my worry? If Professor Cabezón’s history is right, then “Christian” sources were always being used in the way he recommends non-Christian sources to be used. Why then condemn those Christian “theories” of the Other? The West rightly theorized Christianity and shipped that theory off to its colonies. In other words, although I agree that we need to theorize with religious sources, one does not want to repeat the problems of the past by assuming that the “dialectic of alterity” is answered by merely replacing Christian with non-Christian sources. What is needed is a multi-sourced and multidimensional form of thinking. Yet this form of thinking, I worry, may be blocked by the essay’s dyadic logic and analogical structure of argument and thereby partially thwart the struggle for progress in religious studies. The “manifesto” seems at times to imply an either/or that curtails a future of theory plurality: either practice the dialectic of alterity in just this form or miss the point of religious studies.

IN GRATITUDE

That then is my reading of this essay and my points of concern. I thoroughly agree with the intent and direction of Cabezón’s argument.

The only points of worry or dispute have been in the finer details of *how* the argument is made and not the *orienting claim* of the manifesto. Yet thinking, like life, is in the details. I hope the details that I have fasten upon helpfully engage Professor Cabezón so that the conversion will continue. No matter what happens, I want to express my sincere gratitude to him for presenting a sane and genuinely humane vision of the field for those of us laboring in other corners of religious studies.

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