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Ebrahim Moosa

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Rejoinder to Paul J. Griffiths' Response

I APPRECIATE PROFESSOR GRIFFITHS' CRITICAL provocations and comments on my essay. Even if he is unfamiliar with my work or that of al-Ghazali, I thank him for raising pertinent questions in order to sustain a conversation.

I was unable to decipher whether Griffiths seriously mourned the passing of *Religionswissenschaft* despite growing evidence of its limitations or whether he was just playing devil's advocate. My essay inflected the syntax of translation and contrapuntal engagement in the study of religions coupled with a polemic to make us attentive to the ways in which the geopolitics of knowledge encode our study of religion. Here I invoke the work of Richard King, among others, who all had spent considerable time in working through the skeins of various models for the study of religions. One model that I prefer is to view "religion" as part of a broader rubric of cultural studies. This model questions the privileged place allotted to "religion" within our discursive practices and integrates it into a larger frame. And, if the cultural study of religions were informed by an empirically responsible philosophy, ethics and history, then we would be in a position to problematize the category of "religion" with greater salience.¹ As many studies have already indicated, the post-Enlightenment and Euro-Christian notion of "religion" was the product of one specific cultural experience, while a range of economies of meaning related to the question of the ultimate in other experiences beg to be explored with integrity. Since Griffiths also acknowledged the limitation of the category, I therefore found his writhing at the requiem of "religion" a little odd.

In theory, all ideas are vulnerable to mutation as well as to questioning. I am wondering which of my utterances gave the impression that they were immune to critique. Without pressing too hard on two of Griffiths' favorite metaphors, all ideas are subject to "consumption" and "excretion;" both are signs of a healthy metabolism. It requires some

¹ Here I am thinking of the pioneering work by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson who have questioned the limits of categories in Western philosophy and whose critique of categories would be equally applicable to the study of religion. Also see George Lakoff (1987).

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nerve, however, to embrace a new approach, for it is after all, Zeus “who gives what fate he pleases to adventurous men,” Homer wrote by ironically adding: “Men like best a song that rings like morning on the ear.” How we study the complexities of human societies and the way people grapple with issues of an ultimate nature animates my inquiry more than whether the AAR preserves the term “religion” in its name. Politics is also a critical component of my work. Often the term “religion” is used as a blunt instrument to homogenize all human experiences to facilitate the imposition of specific political and economic agendas. The current human rights wars meant to legitimate the imposition of liberal capitalism in Iraq or to legitimate theocratic dictatorships are examples that I have in mind. As a cultural artifact, among other things, “religion” also provides narratives of diversity and plurality, dimensions that undo the dominant monolingual character of the public understanding of religion prevalent in both the globalizing East and the West. I was therefore surprised to find my view being caricatured.

If Griffiths’ goal was to push me to clarify the involvement of the term “religion,” then let me say this. If the term “religion” in the acronym AAR pretends to be an “immaculate representation,” then together with anthropologist Fernando Coronil, I would argue that there is no such thing. The term “religion,” like all other significant categories of representation, is saturated with history. For, the use of the term “religion” is in the end a matter of politics rather than metaphysics. Religion as a category of representation is a matter of “alterable historical consequences rather than of unavoidable transhistorical effects.” In other words, it is about the politics of epistemology and the epistemology of politics. Power or politics creates the conditions of possibility for every signifier in the acronym AAR to be dissolved, renamed, or substituted. Time can also widen the meaning of each signifier, like it does with verse and music, to mean all things to all people!

Of course, I acknowledge my commitment to an axiology unlike some of my colleagues in the field of religious studies who feign an abhorrence for it, but whose clandestine trafficking in values would make cartel bosses turn green with envy. Even automatons, scientist Bill Joy mused, involuntarily grow values and purposes. Indeed, debate and contestation have to be taken seriously precisely because we have investments in knowledge; without values, the enterprise of knowledge becomes facile. Griffiths tries to tempt me to the “warm embrace of theology,” but what if I have a preference for banquets and buffets instead of a single plate? I like the “logian” part in theo-*logian* since scholars qualify as “logians” of some sort: professionals who speak a certain language or treat a specific subject. Which reminds me of Jorge Luis Borges’ com-

ment that in theology “there is no novelty without danger.” Perhaps I can best respond to Griffiths’ invitation to theology by way of a Borgesian riddle. “In Alexandria,” Borges wrote, “there is a saying that only the man who has already committed a crime and repented of it is incapable of that crime; to be free of an erroneous opinion, I myself might add, one must at some time have professed it.”

Ebrahim Moosa
Duke University, Durham, NC

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