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ARTICLE

The Discipline and Its Other: The Dialectic of Alterity in the Study of Religion

José Ignacio Cabezón

The academic study of religion emerges, in part at least, from an encounter with the religious Other. This essay traces out a history of this encounter, a history that is dialectical. In each historic moment, the simple dichotomy that was previously thought to ground a hard and facile distinction between self and other comes to be challenged. But in the wake of such challenges, new categories come to be posited, categories on the basis of which the Self can (once again) emerge not simply as *different from*, but also as *superior to* the Other. This process – this dialectic of alterity – is as operative today in the discipline of religious studies as it was in the discipline's antecedents. We consider some of the core concepts around which the identity of the discipline is constructed in the present moment: the categories that allow for the differentiation of the discipline from its Other(s), and for its emergence in a position of superiority vis a

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vis its Other(s). The essay concludes by identifying four recent developments that are challenging a notion of the discipline constructed in these terms.

THIS ARTICLE BELONGS TO A GENRE THAT I WILL CALL *MICROHISTORY*,¹ by which I mean the self-conscious use of a quite specific historical trajectory (in this case, tracing out one strand within the history of the study of religion) with the goal of contextualizing a specific set of idiosyncratic concerns (issues that are of importance *to me* and *to my work* as a scholar of religion). I choose selectively from the various strands of the grand narratives of the discipline to gain some purchase on how and why the issues that concern me and a group of my colleagues are issues in the first place. All of which is to say that this short contribution is limited in the ways I have just described. But, this will not prevent me from feigning a greater generality to my conclusions nor will it cause me to qualify my claims at each turn of my argument, as a good microhistorian surely would. The editor of the journal has invited us to think of our contributions to this issue as “manifestos.” In that vein, I will paint a picture in broad and bold strokes, taking this as one of the luxuries afforded someone being asked to write in manifesto mode.

This article is concerned (in part at least) *not* with the question of whether there is progress in religion—heaven forfend!—but rather with the quite different (though not totally unrelated) question of whether there is progress *in the study* of religion. To anticipate my conclusion, I want to claim that there is something like progress, but I want to problematize this stance by arguing that the study of religion still (indeed, always) faces new challenges. I will delineate what some of these challenges are at present, and, by way of conclusion, I will suggest some directions that are being taken to face them.

Of the many things that the study of religion is, it is obviously an encounter with the Other.² That encounter, of course, began before the

¹ Professor Cathy Albanese has pointed out to me that the term has also been used by Ginzburg (1992), but it will be clear from what follows that I mean to imply something quite different by this term here.

² I have found two essays by J. Z. Smith (2004b, 2004c) particularly helpful in thinking through the issue of Otherness even if the topics that Smith treats in those two pieces are different from the concerns I have here. I have also been influenced in my thinking by what the Buddhist logicians have written on *apoha* or *anya apoha* (“the exclusion of what is other”), though how to get at the issue of alterity from what is basically a theory of linguistic meaning and conceptuality (what *apoha* originally is) is by no means straightforward.

rise of the study of religion as an academic discipline—before the emergence of *Religionswissenschaft* or *l’histoire des religions* or “the comparative study of religions” as distinct fields. It began with the face-to-face encounter of different religious people—for example, in the interactions between Christian missionaries, European colonial officials, traders and travelers with the indigenous people of Asia, Africa and the Americas. Although every such instance of contact has its own unique and complex history, I want to focus on one strand in the evolution of such interactions.

Stage I: “They are not like us.”³ In the initial phase of contact what appears to be most striking to Europeans⁴ is the sheer difference of the religious Other. The writing that emerges from this encounter is suffused with this sense of sheer alterity, as evinced in the use of nomenclature like “savagery,” “barbarism,” “sorcery,” “idolatry,” and “heathenism” as appellations for the religious Other. In this stage of the encounter there is a reluctance to refer to the worldview of the Other as “religion,” a term that is reserved almost exclusively for Christianity or, in time, for that denuded version of the latter called Natural Religion (or sometimes, and begrudgingly, applied selectively to the Abrahamic monotheisms as a whole). “Religion” is used sparingly, if at all, as nomenclature for non-European worldviews.⁵

Stage II: “They are like us, but we are rational.” The term “religion” becomes universal. It comes to be applied ubiquitously across cultures,⁶ and this brings with it the rise of the notion of “world

³ Here, I am borrowing from (and manipulating to my own ends) some concepts introduced by Smith (1993: 241–242 and elsewhere in his writings), who in turn borrows this nomenclature from Redfield.

⁴ In this piece I am most interested in the European encounter with other religions because I am interested in charting the course of the discipline of religious studies, which is a European invention. This is not to say, of course, that similar histories of encounter could not be written from the perspective of other cultures.

⁵ How the word “religion” is meted out or withheld as a designation for others’ worldviews is, of course, context specific, and even in a single cultural region such a process can be extremely complex. For a thorough examination of the history of the designation “religion” to refer (or *not* to refer) to a variety of African worldviews, see Chidester (1996). For a more general history of the use of the term, see Smith (1998).

⁶ Anidjar (2003) has astutely observed that “the West claimed to have lost religion, that secularization became triumphant, at the very same moment that religion was ‘discovered’ in the East.” I would put it in a slightly different way. As Enlightenment secularism gained momentum there was less at stake in granting the Other a status (that of having “religion”) that was now seen as less central to European identity. The same, by the way, might be said about rationality—namely, that it came to be acknowledged in the Other just as the category itself was beginning to be questioned. And one wonders whether in both the case of religion and of rationality this is not something akin to the luring of rats onto a sinking ship.

religions.”⁷ While granting that the Other possesses something called “religion,” however, European scholars (and Christian apologists) insist that there is a qualitative difference between the worldview of other cultures and that of the Christian (or scientific) West. That difference is usually conceived in terms of rationality or systematicity, qualities that the West (and Christianity) possesses and other worldviews lack.⁸

Stage III: “They are like us, but . . .” Like religion, rationality eventually comes to be seen as ubiquitous.⁹ The battle to assert the existence of a universal rationality is fought in various arenas—for example, in the debates concerning whether other cultures possess something called

⁷ On how Chinese religions came to be “discovered,” see Reinders (2004). On the British encounter with Buddhism, see Allmond (1988). On the West’s discovery of the religions of India generally, see Balagangadhara (1992: chaps 3–4). On its first encounters with Taoism, see Clarke (2000: chap. 3). More general studies that treat European encounters, interactions, assimilations, and manipulations of multiple religious worldviews include Sharpe (1986), Clarke (1997), and Masuzawa (2005).

⁸ Weber, for example, is willing to acknowledge that many (even if not all) religious traditions have “theology,” but he goes on to state that their systematic development “varies greatly.” “It is no accident that Occidental Christianity—as opposed to the theological possessions of Jewry—has expanded and elaborated theology more systematically, or strives to do so. In the Occident the development of theology has had by far the greatest historical significance. This is the product of the Hellenic spirit, and all theology of the West goes back to it, as (obviously) all theology of the East goes back to Indian thought” (1946: 153). Even a thinker like Boas (1970), who in many ways challenged the ethnocentrism of his day, writes (albeit in the early part of his academic career) that

Another fundamental difference between the mental life of primitive man and that of civilized man lies in the fact that we have succeeded in developing, by the application of conscious reasoning, better systems from these crude, unconscious classifications of the sum total of our knowledge, while primitive man has not done so. . . It is therefore not surprising, that, with the advance of civilization, reasoning becomes more and more logical, not because each individual carries out his thought in a more logical manner, but because the traditional material which is handed down to each individual has been thought out and worked out more thoroughly and more carefully. While in primitive civilization the traditional material is doubted and examined by only a very few individuals, the number of thinkers who try to free themselves from the fetters of tradition increases as civilization advances” (201–202, 206).

Of course, the conceptualization of the difference between Self and Other in terms of intelligible/rational speech (“we have it, they don’t”) is not something that is either particularly western, or particularly modern, on which see Smith (2004b: 238–239).

⁹ Let me reiterate that all of this is much more complex than I am making it out to be in this overly simplified periodization. To take just one example, Paul Masson Oursel, whose most important published work appeared in the 1920s and 1930s and who is often considered the founder of comparative philosophy as a discipline, was willing to grant Buddhism the status of a religion. In a limited way he was even willing to characterize Buddhism as “rational,” but it is clear from his writing that he had reservations about considering Buddhism a fully developed *philosophical* tradition. Believing that all cultures had to pass through fixed phases of philosophical development—from sophism to scholasticism to science—Masson-Oursel maintained that Buddhism was mired in the sophistic phase and that as such it was at most a kind of proto-philosophy.

“philosophy.”¹⁰ And of course it is the presumption that there is a universal rationality that is seen as making possible fields of inquiry like “Buddhist philosophy” and “African philosophy.” These, in turn, lead to the emergence of disciplines like comparative philosophy, and more recently comparative theology.

Is this progress? None of these moves—the assertion that religion is a universal category, the construction of the category “world religions,” the claim that there is a universal rationality, or that there exists a generic category called “the human”—is, of course, unproblematic in its own right (see, for example, Masuzawa 2005). These shifts do not occur in a vacuum; sociopolitical and economic factors are always involved. Instead of resulting in tolerance, they have often resulted in marginalization and oppression,¹¹ ending up as yet another instance of what Radhakrishnan (2003: 6) calls “Eurocentrism masking as authentic universalism.” But, these various shifts have *also* had positive consequences. At each point—in the wake of each of these shifts—there is a weakening of the structures that undergird a facile Self/Other dichotomy. There is an insistence that whatever it is that separates us as human beings it is not as simple as we once thought it was. The moves have sometimes been “totalizing”—the absorption or reduction of the Other into the Self or the absorption of both Self and Other into a generic notion of the human that is (at least genealogically) quite modern, European, and Christian. But, these shifts have not *always* been totalizing, or rather, they have not been totalizing in all respects. Sometimes they have challenged our dogmas about otherness without succumbing to facile assertions of sameness, and without allowing us to retreat into indifference.¹²

¹⁰ Although there are several excellent broad, cross-cultural, historical studies of the use of the term “religion” to refer to the worldview of other cultures, a similar literature on the use of the term “philosophy” does not seem to exist—or at least it is unknown to me. There do, however, exist studies of specific debates concerning whether or not, for example, there is such a thing as African or Indian philosophy. See, for example, Mudimbe (1991: chap. 2) and Serequeberhan (1991).

¹¹ As Davaney states, “The great Enlightenment ideals and the academic visions of universal truth [to which we might add religion and rationality], detached inquiry, and unsituated knowledge no longer appear as irenic and detached attempts to achieve public knowledge and to adjudicate political differences nonviolently but to assert the ascendancy of very particular western values and power configurations in the period of colonial, imperial and capital expansion” (my insertion) (2004: 30).

¹² As Geertz states, “Comprehending that which is, in some manner of form, alien to us and likely to remain so, without either smoothing it over with vacant murmurs of common humanity, disarming it with to-each-his-own indifferentism, or dismissing it as charming, lovely even, but inconsequential, is a skill we have arduously to learn, and having learnt it, always very imperfectly, to work continuously to keep it alive; it is not a connatural capacity, like depth perception or the sense of balance, upon which we can complacently rely” (2000: 87).

An aside: if one were forced to give a pithy characterization of the humanities, this, it seems to me, is as good as any. The human sciences are then, in this formulation, an interminable quest to critically challenge the structures that cultures erect to separate Self and Other; an unending program to destabilize and denaturalize categories that have previously stood as obstacles to a real and substantive engagement with the Other, to “relativize difference”¹³ without eliminating it. Despite all of the complexities and ambivalences associated with the enterprise, I believe that this has happened and continues to happen in the humanities and that it represents something like progress.¹⁴

The dialectic operative in the stages I have just described—the logic of the genitive¹⁵ that concedes to the Other the possession of one trait while at the same time insisting on the absence of another, which admits a presence while simultaneously asserting a lack—does indeed grant to the Other something that heretofore had been denied it, something that was previously seen as an exclusive possession of the Self.¹⁶ And yet in the same breath it posits the existence of another category or attribute that reasserts the difference.¹⁷ They may be human, *but* they lack religion. They have religion but lack rationality. They have rationality but lack the ability to philosophize systematically. They have philosophy, *but*. . . . Although this dialectic of alterity begins with the historical contact of

¹³ See the following note.

¹⁴ While resisting the use of the term “progress,” Smith (2004a: 5) nonetheless seems to be making a similar point when he says that he “would rather speak of a human cultural attempt at ‘liberation’ from culturally created, culturally imposed, constraints through efforts at thought.” Elsewhere (Smith 2004b: 242), he takes up this theme in a slightly different context, arguing that “culture itself is constituted by the double process of both making differences and relativizing those very same distinctions. One of our fundamental social projects appears to be our collective capacity to think of, and to think away, the differences we create.”

¹⁵ Smith (2004b: 231) has suggested that there are three basic models of the Other. The first of these he calls “metonymical,” wherein the other “is represented . . . in terms of the presence or absence of one or more cultural traits.” There is clearly overlap between Smith’s metonymical model of Otherness and what I am here calling the genitive logic of alterity. Smith’s stress on metonymy is the result of the types of examples (the “cultural traits”) he considers. By contrast, I want to stress “genitivity” to highlight the actual functioning of this type of othering-discourse—the way in which “the presence or absence of one or more cultural traits” is actually played out in language through the rhetoric of possession and lack.

¹⁶ Of course, things like “religion” and “rationality” are only the tip of the iceberg. A host of scholars have claimed the West to be the sole possessor of a variety of categories, ideas, and modes of thought—from “history,” “nationalism,” and “homosexuality” to “science” and “openness”; on the latter, see Bloom (1987: 36–37) and Couzens Hoy (1995: 113–117).

¹⁷ Smith puts it this way: “Difference is rarely something simply to be noted; it is, most often, something in which one has a stake. Above all, it is a political matter Difference is seldom a comparison between entities judged to be equivalent. Difference entails a hierarchy of prestige and the concomitant political ranking of superordinate and subordinate” (2004c: 252–253).

cultures in the religious past—for example, with European Christian theological and apologetic responses to other religions—it continues on in the secular rhetoric of the Enlightenment and even into the post-secular present. The terms change, but the pattern persists. And now I want to turn my attention to what resides on the other side of the conjunction “but” in our present moment and, more specifically, in the discipline of religious studies. How does this give-and-take function today?

Let me begin by observing that I see this back-and-forth movement—the meting out of certain attributes while simultaneously constructing others and then withholding them—as an inevitable part of living with/in traditions. It is not something that is intrinsic to western culture or to religious studies as a discipline. All traditions (and religious studies, whatever else it may be, is obviously a tradition) define themselves by what they are not. That is simply how traditions function, how they create legitimacy for themselves, and how they justify their existence vis-a-vis competing institutional forms (see Messer-Davidow et al. 1993). Of course, the academic study of religions has a much more broadly defined Other than the Christian West had a century ago, because the academy constructs its sense of identity in large part in contrast to *religion itself* (see Preus 1987). My sense is that because of both the demographic and ideological hegemony of (especially Protestant) Christianity in the academy, there is still a very real sense in which *non-Christian* religions (and especially nonwestern religions) continue to occupy for European and American intellectuals a preeminent position in the hierarchy of otherness. These religions are, as it were “other-squared,” Other not only because of being *exempla* of religion but also because of their cultural distance from us.¹⁸

There is no unique and unchanging set of traits that define us as scholars. To quote Mr. Spock (the Vulcan, not the pediatrician), we are “infinite things in infinite permutations.” And yet the rhetoric that we use when we portray ourselves as scholars often invokes certain key notions and norms. We construct our sense of identity—our uniqueness and our otherness vis-a-vis religion in general, and non-Christian religions in particular—by

¹⁸ I admit, however, that this is an open question, as there are those who would argue that because of the role it has played in the emergence of the discipline, it is Christianity (or, some would say, religion generally) that is now and forever will be the paradigmatic Other, and this precisely because it is the discipline’s “proximate other” (to borrow a term from Smith) or, because it is our “significant other” (to borrow a term from Couzens Hoy). I will, however, proceed as though what is both a religion and culturally Other is “more” other (and more problematic) than what is a religion and culturally proximate. But, as I say, this is an open question, and my conclusions do not depend on it.

appealing, for example, to notions like criticality/criticism,¹⁹ theoretical sophistication, methodological rigor (our ability to contextualize, to quantify, etc.), and the ability to be self-reflective and to expose our biases. These are some of the features of the intellectual program that defines us—the traits that we presume to possess and that religion, the religious, and especially the alter-religions/religious lack. It is our commitment to a project defined in roughly these terms—in terms of criticism, methodological rigor, theory, self-awareness, and so forth—that we believe gives us (please read ironically now) the wherewithal to clarify the opacities and to unmask the misrecognitions that are endemic to the first-order discourses and practices of religion that are constitutive of both our object and our Other.²⁰ It is also, we believe, what permits us to unmask (even if not to completely eradicate) our own *self*-misrecognitions as scholarly agents. In short, this set of traits (or something like it) is what constitutes, in our present moment, the method for differentiating ourselves from—and for emerging in a position superior to—our object/Other.²¹ It is the way we justify our existence and legitimate our specific forms of knowledge production.

Having laid out some of the traits that I think define us as intellectuals in the present moment, and having done so in somewhat ironic terms, let me backtrack a bit. First, I am not claiming that our notion of scholarly identity is always constructed on the basis of an *explicit* repudiation of the Other. Sometimes it is—“we’re critical, they aren’t”—but more often than not we simply assume (and only imply) their “lack” through the subtleties of our rhetoric, through the tactful turn of phrase that never explicitly asserts what it is that actually separates us from them. But whether explicit or only assumed/implied, some such affirmation/denial is present in much of our writing, just as it is present deep within our

¹⁹ Almost thirty years ago, Starobinsky (1977), in his brief overview of the emergence and historical development of the idea of criticism, showed how the notion of criticism begins to take shape in the Renaissance, and how in the minds of its exponents it was a mode of analysis that was meant not only to contest, but also to supplant what Renaissance thinkers perceived to be religious dogmatism and speculative philosophy, driving religion into the realm of private experience. Hence, the modern notion of criticism emerges *from its very origins* as the antithesis of religious method.

²⁰ See, for example, Jaffe (2004: 32–33): “Criticism unmasks the rhetoric of religions, yet it also, when taken seriously, unmasks itself. Criticism has constructed the facts that we teach about religion and religions; yet criticism also discloses the ways in which facts are themselves manufactured to serve certain unquestioned programs of truth.” I do not want to be seen as belittling Jaffe’s insights in this essay, which problematizes the issues of insider/outsider in nuanced and complex ways. I have chosen this passage to exemplify the intellectual program I am describing here simply because I see it one of the most concise and elegant formulations of the notion of “the critical” that I know of.

²¹ As Gunn (1998: 298), invoking William E. Connolly, states, our sense of identity, we believe, “can only establish itself paradoxically in relation to a set of differences that it is constantly tempted to view not only as ‘other’ but also as inimical,” or, I would add, if not always as *inimical*, at the very least as *inferior*.

constructed identity as scholars of religion.²² Second, and more important, I do not wish to be read as implying that criticality, rigor, theoretical sophistication, and self-awareness are not virtues—that these are not qualities we should be striving for in our scholarship—even if (as I think is the case) we are sometimes a bit sanguine about the extent to which we can achieve these goals.²³ What *is* worrisome is that in creating a sense of identity around these core attributes, we usually do so in an uncritical way that simply presumes that we possess these attributes *in toto* and that they do not. Our sense of identity is therefore fashioned at the expense of the Other, through an implicit denigration of the Other, and specifically through a dogmatic (albeit often implicit) denial of the fact that criticality, theory, and self-awareness are *also* concerns for religion(s) in general,

²² In Buddhist studies, for example, it is not unusual to find scholars who still define their approach to the subject matter through a stark contrast to the way that *Buddhists* go about analyzing a similar object. Case in point is Ronald Davidson's characterization of the historical method he employs in the study of Buddhist texts and saints, which he calls "humanist history": "I have approached those of saintly aura and sought humanity where others [i.e., Buddhists] seek holiness, having looked for the fragile edges of their personalities while the tradition affirms the impenetrable core of their personas" (2002: xi). Or again, "the epistemological claims to exclusivity by the Buddhist tradition itself have caused some serious scholars to pause in their inquiry, often in the hopes that the tradition will respond to the challenge of critical method with an indigenous alternative" (2002: 7). Translation: the Buddhist tradition *has* no critical method, and we should not hold our breath waiting for it to come up with one. This is because Buddhist historiography is dogmatic and noncritical, proscribing, as it does, "any questioning of the received tradition" (2002: 15) and prohibiting any interrogation of "such historical incidentals as authorship, composition, contradiction, discontinuity" (2002: 14). But "with or without orthodox approval," Davidson continues, "we should engage this material with the critical faculties at our disposal. We might separate this mode of address from that required by traditional Buddhism by understanding that reflexive historical awareness is different from direct spiritual experience" (2002: 14). In citing these passages from Davidson's work—with which, as the reader might guess, I take exception—I do not mean to cast suspicion on the book's overall contributions to the field, which are considerable. My point here is only to show that scholars in the field of Buddhist studies still construct their identity in contradistinction to the Buddhist Other. Increasingly, however, Buddhist studies scholars are situating their work not through a simple and stark contrast to Buddhist orthodoxy but in more complex ways. Hence, for example, Bernard Faure sees himself as creating a space for Buddhism "equidistant from a purely philosophical understanding (which, despite its best intentions, is often reductionistic), and from a naïve faith frequently manipulated by ideologies of the New Age type" (2004: xii). Even so, Faure goes out of his way to make it clear that trodding this middle way between pure reason and pure faith, as it were, does not require "becoming Buddhist" (2004: x) and that it carries with it no "confessional connotations" (2004: xi), thereby reinscribing his distance from the object (Buddhism) that he chooses, as he says, to "think with."

²³ Take the notion of being self-critical, for example—a notion whose genealogy can be traced to modernist western notions of self-reflexivity (see Taylor 1995) and to movements like psychoanalysis. I am often struck by how overly optimistic we are concerning our ability to expose our own intellectual baggage: as if our biases and prejudices are readily accessible—on the surface (or just beneath it), as it were, just ready to be identified. It also seems to me that our amorous relationship to this thing we call "theory" has remained under-informed by the critique to which the notion of theory has been subjected in fields like literary criticism over the past two decades, on which see Butler *et al.* (2000), Eagleton (2004), and Mitchell (1985).

and for non-Christian religions in particular. Third, none of this is to say that the notions of criticism or theory operative in the guild are identical to those found in, say, Confucianism or Hinduism.²⁴ It is to say that we would benefit from thinking about things like criticism and theory comparatively, asking ourselves what notions of theory *are* operative in the religions we study, and seeking to establish a conversation with religious texts and believers *at the level of theory* rather than, as has heretofore been the case, being content with grinding the data that is the Other through the mill of our own theoretical apparatuses. Finally, let me make it clear that the goal of all this is *not* to achieve some kind of dialectical synthesis of western/secular and nonwestern/religious theory. It is rather to broaden our theoretical perspectives, to challenge our theoretical parochialism, to suggest new questions and perhaps even a few new answers to old questions. If it is true that at least one of the functions of the human sciences is, as I have suggested, to serve as a perpetual challenge to the structures that impede a more authentic (and, pragmatically, a more fruitful) encounter with the Other, then is this not a logical next step?²⁵

That shift, in any case, has already begun, and there is reason to believe that this is a trajectory on which we are already embarked. For example, in the past decade or so, a handful of scholars have begun to look to religion not just as the data—not simply as the raw material to be *manipulated by* theory—but as the *source of* theory. Hence, for example, there are now studies that bring Confucian and European theories of ritual into conversation (Campany 1992); there is work that looks to the Christian tradition as a source for literary theory (Ferretter 2003), studies that look to Indian religio-philosophical texts as a resource for thinking about comparison as a method (Cabezón 1988), and monographs that demonstrate how Buddhism can be an interesting conversa-

²⁴ This is an issue that is taken up by Neville, whose main concern in *Normative Cultures* (1995) is to fashion a “theory of theories” that can somehow bridge the gap between Platonic and Confucian first-order theories. Whatever one might think of the broader program Neville has set out for himself in that volume—for example, one wonders whether such a metatheory is necessary to engage in the comparison of theories—he is one of the few scholars in the field to treat the religious Other as a theoretical equal.

²⁵ In this essay I have elaborated this point—that we cannot in an *ad hoc* manner simply dismiss the Other as possessor of theory or criticality, that we would benefit from taking others’ theories seriously—chiefly on historical, epistemological, and pragmatic grounds rather than along ethical lines. But of course one can easily imagine making such a case ethicopolitically—on the grounds that *not* to do so is to do violence to the Other by, among other things, depriving the Other of agency. Inden (1990), for example, has shown how the western representation of India as a culture devoid of reason deprived Indians of agency, and how this, in turn, served as fodder for western domination of the subcontinent (see also Radhakrishnan 2003).

tion partner for feminist theorists (Klein 1995). In each of these works religious texts become resources for thinking about the world at large. Faure (2004) puts it more simply and elegantly when he says of Buddhism (the focus of his study) that it is not only something “we can think *of*, but also think *with*.” By putting these various examples of current work side by side I do not mean to suggest that there already exists in the discipline of religious studies a self-conscious movement akin to what in psychology has been called “the move toward indigenous theory” (Ho 1998) or what some political philosophers have called “counter-theory.” There is as yet no such movement in religious studies (as far as I know), and for all I know there may never be. In any case, we are a long way from achieving *theory parity*. For example, it is hard for us even to conceive of the day when a “Theories of Religion” course might be taught with a substantial selection of readings from nonwestern sources, to take an example of something that some of us consider a sign of maturity in this regard. Still, there does seem to be movement in the direction of theory-pluralism, even if the limited experiments that we have engaged in are still dominated by a predominantly western agenda.²⁶ Be that as it may, the “comparative theory” turn is obviously one way in which our self-definition as scholars (the academic as wielder of theory) is being challenged, for if “they” have theory *too*, then theory (or its use) is not what makes us unique, and theory cannot be posited as that which distinguishes religious studies from religion in general, or from non-Christian religions in particular. Similar observations might be made, *mutatis mutandis*, as regards things like criticality, self-awareness, and so forth.

As a few scholars work to bridge the theory gap in the way just described, there are other factors both outside and within the guild that

²⁶ That is to say that things like “ritual,” “literary theory,” “comparison,” and “feminist theory”—the examples of comparative theoretical foci that I cited above—have emerged as objects of scrutiny because they are of interest *to us*, and (more fundamentally) because they can be conceptualized by us as themata that have an important place within religious studies. In this sense the work is still relatively provincial. Still, we have to start somewhere, and although one might imagine a future in which comparative theoretical themata *unknown to us* might emerge from the encounter of theories and theorists, this has clearly yet to happen, at least in the study of religion. And even if it does, who knows where the comparative analysis of theory might lead us. It is not inconceivable, for example, that such a direction of research could destabilize the notion of theory altogether. Or it may be that those who occupy the place of the cultural and/or religious Other may resist the imposition of “theory” as a relevant or useful category—for example, by maintaining that it is grounded in a false dichotomy between theory and practice that their worldview explicitly repudiates. The point is that it is impossible to predict ahead of time what direction such a conversation might take, which is not to say, of course, that it is not a conversation worth having.

are also challenging the boundaries between the discipline and its Other. On the one hand, outsiders to the field—in particular, nonacademic believers—have begun to contest and to protest the type of work we do. For scholars of Christianity this may be old hat,²⁷ but for scholars of non-Christian religions this is a relatively new development. As problematic and pernicious as many of these encounters have been in recent years (see Cabezón and Davaney, 2004; Patton, forthcoming), at the very least they remind us that our object of study is not mute. Given that many of the believers' critiques have focused precisely on the appropriateness of western theory as the hermeneutical lens through which to understand nonwestern religions, the controversies have, if nothing else, highlighted the extent to which our theoretical structures are monocultural and secular.²⁸ They challenge us to at least entertain the possibility of employing other theoretical (and especially other-cultural religio-theoretical) lenses,²⁹ and they remind us that there is a constituency to which this matters. This is not to say that psychoanalysis (to take an example of a theory that has been the object of considerable controversy in the current debates) should henceforth be banned from the scholar's toolbox. It is to say that there may be other tools that could be potentially useful and that psychoanalysis itself might benefit from a serious comparative conversation with these systems of thought *at the level of theory*.

Just as there have been challenges from outside the guild, there have also been challenges from within it. Within the academy (and especially in my corner of it—Buddhist Studies, South Asian Studies, and Comparative Philosophy) an increasing number of scholars are choosing to

²⁷ See, for example, how easily and matter-of-factly Stark sloughs off church historians' response to his work, a response which he characterizes as "surprisingly personal, if rather irrelevant, attacks" (1998: 189).

²⁸ The issue of the secularity of theory is a complex one. In religious studies the presumed secularity of theory has often been seen as a guarantor of its impartiality, much in the same way that the presumed secularity of the western nation-state is seen as the guarantor of religious liberties. But many scholars now believe that this secularity (of theory *and* of the nation-state) is really more complex than is allowed for by a simple secular/religious dichotomy. Since our notion of the secular emerges principally through the repudiation of western Christianity, the latter lives on in the ideology of secularism. In this sense secularism carries within it the trace of—and to that extent is constituted by—(a very particular form of) religion.

²⁹ By stressing the importance of *cross-cultural* comparative theorizing in this essay I do not mean to suggest that it would not be useful to also bring western "secular" theories (e.g., psychoanalysis) into conversation with other western theories (e.g., Marxism) or with western religious theories (e.g., those of Augustine). If I put special emphasis on theorizing across cultures it is (1) because there are special impediments to treating the culturally-other as "theory-savvy," (2) because this represents a relatively new turn in the direction of scholarship, and (3) because it is a turn that is of special relevance to my own scholarly work.

“come out”³⁰ as believers and practitioners. While professing religious belief/practice may, once again, seem relatively unproblematic to those who work in the area of western religions, the use of the term “coming out” signals the (still) problematic nature of such disclosure in fields like Hindu and Buddhist Studies, and perhaps more widely. How widely? There is good reason to think that there is still a widespread reticence to engage the question of the religious (or nonreligious) identity of the scholar within religious studies as a whole. Consider the fact that for all the demographic data we have collected about the membership of the AAR—race, gender, sex, institutional affiliation, and so forth—we have, ironically, nothing to say about the religious (or nonreligious) composition of the membership. This suggests that at some level we believe that the religious identities of our membership is, if not quite a taboo subject, at the very least something that ought to remain private. As a corollary, this means that the question of our own religious identities (or lack thereof) remain immune from critical scrutiny. But regardless of how prevalent or how “deep” the occlusion of scholars’ religious identities is within the discipline as a whole, it is very much a part of the ethos of the study of *non-western* religions. And yet, despite this, scholars of nonwestern religions continue to “come out,” and by coming out—by disclosing their religious identity (or identities, in the case of those who self-identify as belonging to multiple religious traditions)—scholars (Buddhist, Hindu, Confucian, etc.) have complexified *through their person*, as it were, the all-too-easy divide between “us” and “them,” the facile distinction between those who are critical and self-reflective and those who are not. This is because those of us who have (to use a problematic expression that is still in circulation) “gone native” embody a commitment to both the first-order discourses of religion and to those meta-discourses upon which we build our identity as scholars of religion. As Smith reminds us, “the ‘other’ . . . is, in fact, most problematic when he is TOO-MUCH-LIKE-US, or when he claims to BE-US” (2004c: 275). This is true, but it is equally true that the Other becomes problematic when *we* claim to BE-THEM.

³⁰ The term “coming out” is not of my own coinage, though I think it appropriately descriptive of the process that many scholars have gone through when they make their religious identities public. Other scholars have put it differently, as when Williams refers to his dissimulation of areligiosity as “the bluff necessary for an academic career” (2003: 3). The term “coming out” was in the title of a panel (which I myself participated in) at the AAR annual meeting in Nashville in 2000: “Coming Out as a Buddhist and Hindu in the Academy.” That most of us who are “coming out” are ethnic outsiders to the traditions with which we affiliate is an issue that deserves greater attention but is not one that I can treat here.

Finally, a subset of religiously “out” scholars of nonwestern religious traditions, not content simply to embody this dual commitment silently, have begun to write in discursive modes that are at once “insider” and “scholarly.” They have also made a case for the fact that there need to be forums within professional organizations like the AAR for their constructive work. Identifying themselves—or, I should say, ourselves—under such rubrics as Buddhist, Hindu, and/or comparative theology (see Clooney 1993; Jackson and Makransky 2000; and Neville 1995), we have argued that the term “academic theology” is not an oxymoron and that there is no reason why the academy should not make room for non-Christian religious/constructive work that is (to invoke the “password”) critical, especially since Christian varieties of this same discourse have been an integral part of an organization like the AAR since its inception. Obviously, all of this adds more fuel to the fire that is slowly consuming the all-too-easy distinctions between insiders and outsiders, and the presuppositions about identity/difference on which such distinctions are based.

Taken together, these four trends—(1) theory pluralism, (2) the challenges posed by nonwestern, nonacademic, religious believers (those who are, *vis-à-vis* the academy, “other-cubed”), (3) the self-disclosure of scholars’ religious identities, and (4) the movement to the institutionalization of nonwestern theologies—constitute something like a paradigm shift, even if a microdisciplinary one.

Paradigms, however, do not shift overnight, and even in my small corner of the discipline, where I think these shifts *are* taking place, they are happening slowly. Still, they are happening. What implications (if any) they have for the academic study of religion as a whole remains to be seen. Let me end by reiterating a point that I made earlier. The dialectic of alterity does not simply end when a given category or attribute (religion, rationality, and theory) is granted to the Other. Disciplines/traditions always find new ways of creating a sense of identity for themselves on the basis of new differences. What will come to replace our present core concepts of who we are—the notions around which we will construct a new sense of identity as scholars of religion—remains to be seen. Perhaps a new alterity will be fashioned around notions of openness, inclusivism, and fallibilism (“we have these traits, but their worldviews prohibit them”). Or perhaps the new alterity will be constructed around themes in the cognitive sciences. Or maybe it will have to do with the new media at our disposal—with multimedia, digital technologies as modes of communication/dissemination. But we were asked to write a manifesto, not to be diviners, and so I leave the task of “academic prophecy” for those individuals more prescient than me or for a time when we are invited to write in a quite different genre: that of the oracle.

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