



PROJECT MUSE®

Reply to Nancy Levene

Gavin D. Flood

Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Volume 74, Number 1,
March 2006 , pp. 64-65 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/196803>

Reply to Nancy Levene

I FOUND NANCY LEVENE'S response to my paper to be most thought provoking and conducive to deepening consideration about these matters. I am not so sure that the kind of inquiry she advocates is so different from the kind that I would advocate. I am not sure whether to be offended or flattered by her comparison of my paper with Eliade's essay on the "A New Humanism" (which I have not, I am ashamed to say, yet read). The world has moved on considerably since then, and I clearly do not share Eliade's wish to demarcate a discourse peculiar to religion unaffected by history, politics, and social forces, although I do think that religions form particular kinds of subjectivity that are resistant to explanation in purely political terms and, indeed, offer resistance to the imposition of certain kinds of inner political colonization. But I shall confine my response to two points.

Firstly, yes, I accept that I am operating within the demarcations of "Theology" and "Religious Studies" as the markers of certain kinds of discourse about "religion" that have a history, have their own journals, and are often distinct departments within institutions of higher education. I also accept that there has historically been a tension between them, many within Religious Studies perceiving theology to be the advocacy of certain kind of (irrational) interiority, many within Theology perceiving Religious Studies to be either fundamentally descriptive and so arbitrarily excluding issues of truth, ethics, and politics from its remit or reductive in wishing to explain religion in other terms (such as cognition). This is simply the situation that we have inherited, partly from the historical trajectory of Religious Studies out of a critique of religion that has seen, in de Certeau's words, the history of religion as the history of error, combined with a liberal desire to be nice to others. Like Nancy Levene I think we should move beyond these rather stale dichotomies.

Secondly, I do think that "rational discourse" is necessary as it has developed over the last few hundred years from the Enlightenment. We certainly need to interrogate the kinds of reasoning we inherit (as many have done from Foucault to Kristeva), but this does not mean that we can jettison the idea of rational discourse (and this would certainly not be the intention of a thinker such as Foucault who sees himself within the Enlightenment tradition). In order to speak to each other and if we are to

participate in the same educational, social, and political institutions, we need a shared language to enable this (as Levene herself acknowledges in recognizing the need to identify adequate and nonadequate forms of work within the academy). Clearly, there are kinds of reasoning recognizable across histories and continents. If I may speak anecdotally, only last week I was reading the tenth-/eleventh-century Indian philosopher Abhinavagupta's commentary on a text by Utpaladeva in which he offers a sustained critique of the Buddhist understanding of perception. Although of course using the terminology of his own tradition and addressing problematics of his own philosophical world, his lucid argument and processes of reasoning are immediately recognizable to anyone who can read him. While McIntyre's idea of distinct institutions based on distinct thought worlds might be attractive in developing depth of thinking within certain parameters, it is also enriching and necessary to speak outside of those boundaries in a way that is enabled within that vague and imprecise term "rational discourse."

Gavin Flood
University of Stirling