Reply to Jose Ignacio Cabezon

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JOSÉ IGNACIO CABEZÓN TAKES MY ESSAY in a direction I did not anticipate, one of the many pleasures of an exchange like this one. Reading the essay as first and foremost about reforming history, Cabezón would have us still rescue myth—not, I take it, as a flat rejection of the claims of history but rather as a, if you will, pent-up desire in light of its provisional acceptance: and yet. It is because I share Cabezón's "and yet" that I find his response so intriguing, for although I argue for a conception of history that is as acutely cognizant of its own limits as of its reach (and indeed contend that the latter depends on the former), Cabezón senses that there is still something this account leaves out. It is too misleading, I think, and too easy, really, to call this something "myth." What Stevens' language helps us to think through is the way in which (what he calls) the mythic is just that thing we feel deprived of; just that thing that functions to make us dissatisfied with history alone; and just that thing, therefore, that will always disrupt—and thus mark the origin of—the historical as that which recognizes what it is not. Most importantly, though, this recognition, I have argued, has two versions: one, that history has no exceptions (myth as "the nothing that is not there"), and two, that history is its own exception ("the nothing that is")—that history itself is able to contain its own exceptions. In this latter light myth is simply a substitute for desire, for the "and yet" (the longing) that history itself already communicates. This is not, then, a discussion about myth—what it is, what it can and cannot do, can and cannot signify. It is, as Cabezón appreciates, a discussion about history.

So I grant the "and yet" even as I sidestep the word Cabezón uses to express it. But what is this to grant? For Cabezón, it is to concede that history is not what matters most; that history might in certain instances productively be forgotten; that history "can never yield what is most worth having." To this end, he uses my phrase that "the history of religions may only ever be . . . the concept and the content of one particular way of being in, and seeing, the world" to stake a claim for the limits of history. This is decidedly to betray my point, which is to rid us of precisely the conception of history that claims to see all things, that precludes forgetting—precisely the conception of history that provokes a scholar like Cabezón to reach for narratives to (and of) escape (in "religion itself"). What I maintain is that, agreed, the maxim "always historicize!" is problematic by virtue of

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the adverb, because the issue is not (only) to consider the concept of history but to consider the nature of its ambition. The point is not (only) a better conception of history but a better sense of its scale and scope, concept and content, and thus a better sense of history's own gaps.

It turns out, however, that it is not such a terrible thing to be betrayed—in this manner, by a scholar as thoughtful as Cabezón. For he gestures toward a conversation that is indeed worth having, about the extent to which history is a discourse concerned with values, including the value of history itself. Though I would be reluctant to begin (or end) the conversation where Cabezón's monk-interlocutor might—with doctrine, with experience, with personal transformation—I think Cabezón himself is right when he calls for a better account of "the *valuation* of history" (and, it seems to me, the history of valuation). What such a conversation could squarely confront is Cabezón's question, "if history isn't what matters most, then what does?," without having recourse to something beyond history. In other words, the discussion of what is of value, what matters, and what is "most worth having" can take place within the precincts of history itself, at least as it is expressed by and with Stevens. This is, though, once again to insist that the fissure that matters here is *not* between "the history of religions" and "religion itself"—between scholars and monks—but rather between two concepts of history, two kinds of scholarship. To riff on (betray) Cabezón's final terms, it is between the nonnegotiable history of total commensurability, wherein nothing is recognized as other than anything else (wherein what is recognized is nothing of value, and thus where everything that is valued must be found beyond), and the infinitely negotiable history of the incommensurate, wherein we ourselves can properly recognize and be recognized as what never, quite, fits.

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