Cluj Center for Indian Studies
Babeș-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca

From Influence and Confluence to Difference and Indifference

Studies on History of Religions

Mihaela Gligor
Editor

Presa Universitară Clujeană / Cluj University Press

From Influence and Confluence to Difference and Indifference

Studies on History of Religions

Mihaela Gligor
editor

From Influence and Confluence to Difference and Indifference

Studies on History of Religions

Mihaela Gligor
editor

Presa Universitară Clujeană
2015

Cluj Center for Indian Studies Collection, no. 1

On the cover:

Adrian Ghenie, *Charles Darwin at the age of 75*, 2014.
Oil on canvas, 200 x 270 cm.
Image courtesy of Adrian Ghenie.

ISBN: 978-973-595-887-9

Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai
Presa Universitară Clujeană
Director: Codruţa Săcelean
Str. Hasdeu nr. 51
400371 Cluj-Napoca, România
Tel./fax: (+40)-264-597.401
E-mail: editura@editura.ubbcluj.ro
http://www.editura.ubbcluj.ro

Contents

Motto:

Exercise of faith will be the safest where there is a clear determination summarily to reject all that is contrary to truth and love. I confess that I have no argument to convince through reason. Faith transcends reason. All that I can advise is not to attempt the impossible.

Mahatma Gandhi, *On God*,
Radio Lecture, London, October 20, 1931.

Introduction

> Religions are grounded in a source of ultimate meaning and authority; they command and demand respect. Any attempt to confine religion to a private sphere of individual belief and devotion is bound to be challenged. It is not possible, even in a society that aspires to be secular, to treat religion as a purely private affair to which the state can be indifferent.[1]

In an article published in *Observator cultural*[2], a well-known literary magazine from Romania, immediately after 2006-EASR/IAHR Conference *Religious History of Europe and Asia* (Bucharest, September 20–23)[3], Sorin Alexandrescu, Mircea Eliade's nephew, discussed the

---

[1] Alan Aldridge, *Religion in the contemporary world: a sociological introduction,* Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007, p. 7.

[2] Sorin Alexandrescu, "Eliade changed my life" (I), *Observator cultural*, No. 85 / 12-18 October 2006 and "Eliade changed my life?" (II), *Observator cultural*, No. 86 / 19-25 October 2006.

[3] EASR - European Association for the Study of Religions, IAHR - International Association for the Study of Religions. With the support of these two, Romanian Association for the History of Religions organized in 2006 the International Conference *Religious History of Europe and Asia*, Bucharest, 20-23 September, with the participation of many former students of Mircea Eliade. At that time, many of them were also awarded for their contribution to the history of religions.

way in which Eliade changed the lives of those who were in touch with him, as students and colleagues, or even of those who knew him only through his books.

In his article, Sorin Alexandrescu mentioned the name of Lindsay Jones, from Ohio State University, who edited and published the second edition of *Encyclopedia of Religion*[4] in 2005. Alexandrescu was surprised to find out that Eliade was the reason behind Jones's decision to study religion:

> I'm one of the many American students who started to study History of Religions because of Mircea Eliade, but, on the other hand, I remained for him [Eliade] indistinct, among others […]. I wanted to study architecture, but after meeting him [Eliade] I chose religion. I had no money for University and I could follow only one semester; in the other one I was chopping trees in the woods, to pay the taxes, and maybe then, in that loneliness, I understood what religion is and what Eliade told me[5].

[4] *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 15 volumes, second edition, Editor in chief: Lindsay Jones, Macmillan Reference, USA, Thomson Gale, 2005. Lindsay Jones is also the author of *Twin City Tales: A Hermeneutical Reassessment of Tula and Chíchén Itzá* (University Press of Colorado, 1995) and *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison* (Harvard University Press, 2000), two volumes; and co-editor with Davíd Carrasco and Scott Sessions of *Mesoamerica's Classic Heritage: From Teotihuacan to the Aztecs* (University Press of Colorado, 1999). In 2010, he became the director of Ohio State's Center for the Study of Religion.

[5] Cf. what Jones declared at the end of his discussion with Alexandrescu. For more details see Sorin Alexandrescu, "Eliade changed my life" (I), *Observator cultural*, No. 85 / 12-18 October 2006.

For several years now, working on the *subject* Mircea Eliade, I have had the privilege to be in touch with many former students and colleagues of Eliade and it became so clear to me that, in one way or another – either in their academic studies or in their spiritual practice –, the encounter with Eliade changed their lives. He had widened their horizons and offered them new methodologies in their research work. He did the same for me.

I decided to study Philosophy after I read Eliade's novel *Maitreyi*[6], or *Bengal Nights* as it is known abroad. And that was the best decision I had ever made. Eliade, and my work on him, took me to India, where I met Maitreyi's family and also put me in touch with friends and students. I am what I am today because of Eliade and I will be always grateful to him.

There are 10 years since I entered the wonderful world of making (writing, editing, translating) books. During this time I had the privilege to work with wonderful people. I was interested in Eliade's legacy, Indian studies, Jewish culture or political aspects of interwar Romania. My areas of interest were different and not always connected, but I have managed to come out with interesting volumes, most of them being indexed in world catalogue and cited in the works of great specialists.

[6] Mircea Eliade, *Maitreyi*, first edition, Editura Cultura Națională, Bucharest, 1933. See, in English, Mircea Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, Chicago University Press, 1994.

I do not consider myself a historian of religions, but in all these years I have come across the line many times, in my struggle to understand Eliade's legacy and to explain myself his theories. Reading his works on the history of religions I have understood that Religion has been a key component of all societies and remains an institution that has vital implications for human existence. Any study of religion must aim at the comprehension of the phenomenon in all its forms.

For a very long time, humans have tried to understand and decode the mystery of existence, and of God. While searching for the meaning of "life", people have resorted to philosophical exercises or indulged in some form of art. By following the mystery of the Divine, so many people have immersed themselves in religion. For millennia, religion has played a vital role in people's lives and it seems quite evident that it continues to be a key factor in human life and thought. In our times, religion presents a challenge to social order in many ways and continues to be controversial too. We are witnessing a general revival of religious sentiments in all forms of religious thought, radical, even fundamentalist. To make sense of present-day religion we need to examine theoretical ideas about the uniqueness of advanced industrial societies and the emerging world order, as well as, take into account the changes that have taken place in the ideas about the social significance of religion.

By this volume, the first of *Cluj Center for Indian Studies* Collection, we do not try to explain the

differences or the similarities among religions or different periods of time. We only try to introduce the reader into the fascinating world of religions and faiths. Each and every one of them has something unique about it. There are a great many similarities among world's religions and yet a great many differences. As in the case of multiculturalism, a term we usually understand as a practice of giving equal attention or representation to the cultural needs and contributions of all the groups in a society (special emphasis may be given to minority groups underrepresented in the past, as through bilingual education), in case of religions general approaches are alike: the term "religion" defines internal relationships among communities relatively circumscribed, and also among people of specific provenience engaged in external, professional, cultural, linguistic, or any other relations.

The six essays, besides the present introduction, that comprise this book engage with a number of themes from a variety of perspectives. The authors include scholars of religion, philosophy, art, and philosophy. Some of them address substantive issues such as myth and ritual and religious symbolism; others are concerned with the role of religion in the public square and especially in the art, no less than in the private domain in a modern, globalizing world, with particular reference to contemporary discords worldwide.

The essays united in the present volume insist on multi-facetted expressions of religiosity in the contem-

porary global context, appropriately grounded in a historical and artistic perspective. The volume brings together articles signed by reputed professors and researchers from United States and Europe. It was born from our intention to show that there is a common ground for all beliefs and religious manifestations: the presence of the sacred beyond the Influence and Confluence or Difference and Indifference. Our hope is that it will enhance the reader's appreciation of and sensitivity to different points of views regarding religion in the increasingly pluralistic world.

Acknowledgements

First, I wish to thank to all contributors to this E-book for accepting my invitation. I would also like to express my appreciation to the Romanian painter Adrian Ghenie, who welcomed my request and gave us the permission to use his work, *Charles Darwin at the age of 75*, 2014, on the cover of this volume.

Many thanks to my Bengali friend from Bucharest, Bishwaroop Ghosh, for financially supporting this E-Book, and to my dear friend and colleague, Diana-Viorela Burlacu, for proof-reading the articles.

In addition, I would like to thank, for support and love, to my beloved family.

Mihaela GLIGOR
The Romanian Academy, Cluj-Napoca
Department of Humanities

& *Cluj Center for Indian Studies*
Babeș Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca

October 2015

The Sacrifice of Domestication: Theorizing Religion

Jeremy BILES

Theory is not life,
but I know with perfect surety that it is liveliness.

Jonathan Z. Smith,
When the Chips Are Down

To whom…

> I am working in contradiction to the scientific method […]. As often as not, it seems to be assumed that man has his being independently of his passions. I affirm, on the other hand, that we must never imagine existence except in terms of these passions.
>
> Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*

In my initial correspondence with Mihaela Gligor, the editor of this volume, I suggested taking an experimental approach in writing about whatever topic I would eventually choose to treat – for I have been preoccupied with considering and enacting modes of writing in religious studies that would be antipodal to the ascendant, indeed prevailing, approach, modeled on the scientific method, with its pretenses to detached objectivity. As a scholar influenced by surrealism – its

experimental attitude, its evocations of desire, its intrepid exploration of mediums and techniques – I had envisioned, albeit obscurely, producing a trans-generic document comprising a series of jarring juxta-positions: theoretical ruminations and philosophical passages alongside diaristic musings, dream *récits*, fictional interludes, personal letters, drawings, descriptions of delirious visions – multifarious modes of writing that would deliberately eclipse scientific objectivity in foregrounding personal *experience, passion,* and *desire*. In the spirit of surrealism's aim to upset rational patterns of thought through techniques of shock, the document I imagined would seek, in however modest or inept a fashion, to enact a vitalizing disturbance to the scientific approach to religious studies – an approach that, for reasons I hope to make clear, I take to be in need of critical reassessment.

That such an "experimental" approach risks disastrous (not to mention embarrassing) consequences is obvious, and my query must have given the editor second thoughts about including me in this volume. But in her perfectly gracious reply, Mihaela managed to subdue any trace of anxiety. (Should I mention that I had offered but an inkling of the writerly risks I had hoped to pursue, merely querying about "kinds of writing that would not be typical for scholarly publications"?) She did, however, indicate with courteous clarity that the present volume would be strictly "scholarly," and therefore the "writing should

be typical for scholarly publications."[1] This reply was expected and, of course, well justified in light of the conventions and demands of academic publishing. After some deliberation, I decided that I would relinquish my intentions to make of this essay an occasion for experimental writing, so as to be able to participate in the project that has culminated in the publication of this book.

Though it countered my desire to pursue a certain level of experimentation, Mihaela Gligor's reply nonetheless suggested a focus for this essay: modes of theorizing about religion.[2] More specifically, in these pages I want critically to examine and compare the particular attitudes of thought underlying two basic modes of theorizing and writing about religion. Thus, rather than performing the kind of writerly experimentation I wish to advocate, I pursue, in as systematic a manner as I can manage, a set of meta-theoretical reflections, borne out in a demonstrative "case study," on the stakes, possibilities, and perils of

[1] Personal e-mail correspondence, January 20, 2015.

[2] I mean to gesture, in these opening paragraphs, toward a matter that remains the provenance of some future publication: the relationship between theory and writing, more specifically, between *modes* of theorizing and *styles* or *genres* writings. The present essay advocates for an "experimental" mode of theorizing, but leaves aside discussion of what avenues of thought and inquiry might be opened simply by expanding the purview of what constitutes acceptable scholarly writing. What modes of thinking might be activated and enabled by the creation of a publication, bearing the imprimatur of an academic press, willing to provide a platform for radical experiments in writing style?

two opposed approaches to the study of religion. The first of these we may refer to as the objective, rationalist, or scientific approach, here exemplified by the writings of eminent historian and theorist of religion Jonathan Z. Smith. As we will see, Smith is intent on "imagining" religion in a rationalistic mode, and in doing so effectively avoids or suppresses the genuinely excessive and disturbingly personal and passionate aspects of the human experience of religion. The explicit aim and effect of his scholarship is to *domesticate* both religion and religious studies.

The second approach stands "in contradiction to the scientific method," as the epigraph above puts it, affirming and activating, rather than avoiding or suppressing, human passions in all their intractable subjectivity and excessive, polymorphous perversity. This latter mode, which I will refer to as "experi–mental," is exemplified by French writer Georges Bataille (1897–1962). Though recognized in academic departments of literature, art history, and philosophy, Bataille, a renegade surrealist, literary pornographer, economic theorist, and heterodox mystic, has received relatively little attention in religious studies depart-ments, despite his lifelong obsession with religion and his distinctive writings on sacrifice, mysticism, and the sacred.[3] In contradistinction to Smith, Bataille both

[3] A recent volume takes a step toward redressing this unfortunate neglect of Bataille in the academic study of religion. See Jeremy

embraces and actively engages the ineluctably excessive, violent, erotic, and deeply experiential dimensions of (the study of) religion, finding in these aspects the human core of the "religious sensibility" and the genuine power of the sacred.[4] He seeks not to domesticate religion but, on the contrary, takes the deep truth of religion to lie in our intractable, undomesticable desire for intimacy or "continuity."[5]

This comparative study will thus serve the scholarly purposes of articulating a multifaceted critique of Smith's work while offering a corrective to his theory of religion through a turn to Bataille. More broadly, it commends further attention to Bataille by students of religion, for the field of religious studies stands to be invigorated by Bataille's provocative, deliriously lucid writings. Following the example of Bataille, I will formulate grounds for resisting the rationalist mode in religious studies as exemplified by Smith, inquiring into the possibilities presented by shifting the register of religious studies from Smith's privileged ratio-scientific concepts – for example, objectivity, distance, reason, conservation, accumulation, knowledge, and futurity – to those that Bataille puts forward in his theory religion: excess, experience, eroticism, expenditure, destruction, violence, and the present moment. I will argue that the (usually implicit) *values*

Biles and Kent Brintnall, eds., *Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

[4] Bataille's "religious sensibility" will be explained below.

[5] Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986). See especially the "Introduction," 11-25.

connected with these respective approaches must be discerned and considered in thinking about how to theorize religion. There is, I believe, much to commend thinking more frequently and intensely in a Bataillean experimental register.

I use the term "experiment" and its cognates advisedly in these pages, recognizing and playing upon its double meaning. Like the term "sacred," which, as Freud notes, evolves to contain antithetical meanings – holy and cursed, high and low – "experiment" has evolved in two apparently opposite directions.[6] In the domain of the empirical sciences, the context that grants one prevalent meaning to this term, "experimentation" involves an objective operation of distanced observation in which a scientist sets the conditions for replicable results, with the purpose of testing and ultimately arriving at a conclusion that then stands as verifiable knowledge. But "experimentation" is etymologically linked to "experience," and in this essay, I wish to place an accent on the firsthand, personal, experiential notion of experiment.[7] Moreover, experimentation, as I will characterize it in relation to Bataille, betokens existential risk – not an operation with the theoretical *telos* of security in stable knowledge undertaken with an attitude of detachment, but the disturbing rupture of the self in personal experience of the sacred.

---

[6] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in Sander Gilman, ed., *Psychological Writings and Letters* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

[7] This meaning is preserved in the French for "experiment": *expérience.*

To advocate for a mode of scholarly study and theorizing under this Bataillean construal of experimentation may strike some readers as counterproductive, contradictory, or utterly nonsensical. Such concerns would not be without reason, for Bataille critiques productivity, embraces contradiction, and solicits a certain kind of nonsense – a peculiar quality of confusion – in his frequently violent, scatological, pornographic, and quasi-mystical writings. Yet his theoretical works on economics, eroticism, art, and religion frequently attain unmatched, nearly searing lucidity. It is this intense and tensive calibration of lucidity and delirium, of intellect and passion, of scholarly systematicity and visionary excess – so many evocations and affirmations of contradictory elements – that the rationalist attitude of thought cannot countenance. At once employing and working against the tools of discursive reason and rational intellection, Bataille's attitude at once *includes* and *exceeds* rational, scientific thought. And it is here, in the violent fomentations of a mind seized by desire, convulsed by passion, and unrestricted by exclusive allegiance to scientific thought and method, that one should locate the profundity and potency of Bataille's writings – writings undertaken through an experimental, erotic mode of thought and theorizing that the "scientific attitude cannot reach."[8]

[8] Associating religion and eroticism, Bataille writes, "I believe that eroticism has a significance for mankind that the scientific attitude cannot reach." *Erotism*, 8.

Scholarship and the Sacred

1. From Eliade to the Ordinary

A separation between the "serious things of life" and "dreams" does not correspond with reality.

Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols*

The connections between theory and life have, of course, been contemplated by many figures in western thought, from ancient times through the present.[9] These include theorists of religion. But the most prominent modern theorist of religion to consider scholarship and theorizing about religion not only as a product of rational thinking but also as a technology of the self and encompassing form of life is Romanian novelist, philosopher, and historian Mircea Eliade.[10] Eliade's scholarship, life, and legacy have been written about extensively, so need not be rehearsed here. Rather, I want to focus on the fact that Eliade's monumental, multifarious, and momentously influential

[9] For a discussion of the relations between (philosophical) thinking and life, see Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, Arnold I. Davidson, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

[10] I am borrowing the term "technology of the self" from Michel Foucault. See, for example, Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

output as a novelist, journalist,[11] and historian of religions made him something other, and perhaps more, than strictly an academic. Eliade constructed himself as a quasi-prophetic figure, seeking not only to *interpret* religions, but also to *renew* the forces of the sacred in the modern secularized world through scholarly investigation of the world's religious traditions.

So what is the sacred, according to Eliade, and how does scholarly work enable experience of the sacred? Following the work of Roger Caillois and Émile Durkheim, Eliade defines the sacred in contradistinction to the profane, claiming that "the first possible definition of the *sacred* is that it is *the opposite of the profane*"; exceptional and extraordinary, the sacred is distinguished from the homogeneity of everyday life.[12] Borrowing terminology from Rudolf Otto, Eliade goes on to characterize the radically heterogeneous sacred as "numinous" and "wholly other […] something basically and totally different."[13] Beyond the confines of strictly rational conceptualization, the sacred provokes ambivalent responses of attraction and repulsion, fascination and fear: the "*feeling of terror*,

[11] Eliade was a journalist in two senses: he contributed articles to journalistic publications (newspapers and such); and he maintained a journal published in several volumes in English translation by the University of Chicago Press.

[12] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1987), 10.

[13] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 9-10.

before the awe-inspiring mystery […] *religious fear* before the fascinating mystery." The sacred is moreover "equivalent to a *power* and, in the last analysis, to *reality*. The sacred is saturated with being."[14] For Eliade, the sacred is a real, eternal presence, transcending profane historical time. And although Eliade recognizes what is often referred to as the ambivalence of the sacred – its high and low or "right" and "left" aspects – he subsumes the sacred as such under its "right" aspect: beneficent, orienting, rejuvenating, empowering.

Though opposed to the profane, natural world, the sacred yet manifests *within* the profane. This revelation or manifestation – the "irruption" of the sacred into profane life – Eliade famously terms "hierophany." In all hierophanies,

> we are confronted by the same mysterious act – the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world.[15]

Thus every hierophany, every instantiation of the sacred within the profane, is a "paradox" – a notion central to Eliade's conception of the sacred.

> It is impossible to overemphasize the paradox represented by every hierophany […] By manifesting the

[14] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 12.
[15] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 11.

> sacred, any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain *itself*, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu.[16]

Hierophanic manifestations have the further effect of orienting human beings, bringing order to disorder, making cosmos of chaos. Hierophanic irruptions may establish a *center*, a stable *axis mundi* around which human life is oriented and organized.

Centralizing, eternalizing, potent, and paradoxical, the sacred not only manifests a higher order of reality that produces extreme affective and cognitive responses (terror, fascination, awe, respect); it indicates an existential modality – one that can be accessed not only through techniques drawn from religious traditions and practices (e.g., yoga), but also through the hermeneutical activity of scholarship in the history of religions. According to Eliade, the sacred and the profane represent "different positions man has conquered in the cosmos"[17] or "two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of history."

For Eliade, the techniques of scholarship, of the self, and of the sacred coincide. His interpretive endeavors are thus about more than establishing intellectual understanding and acquiring historical knowledge of religions across times and cultures. Influenced by the techniques of Freudian psychoanalysis, and inspired

[16] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 12.
[17] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 15, 14.

by the surrealists whom he admired,[18] Eliade's "hermeneutics of the sacred" was to be undertaken to cultivate a general attitude of thought oriented toward transformative renewal of the self and, ultimately, the world. In *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, Eliade proposes that

> by attempting to understand the existential situations expressed by the documents he is studying, the historian of religions will inevitably attain to a deeper knowledge of man. It is on the basis of such a knowledge that a new humanism, on a world-wide scale, could develop.[19]

Likening religion to literature and art, Eliade teaches that the exegesis of religious texts – scriptures, myths, rituals – addresses both "*individual experiences*" and "*transpersonal realities*," and as such opens up transformative possibilities on both personal and collective, even cosmic, levels.[20]

Religious "data" (Eliade places this scientific term in quotes) are thus privileged insofar as they speak both to the entire human being – mind, body, spirit – and to the entirety of humanity. "*Homo religiosus*," he writes, represents the 'total man.'" The study of religion must therefore

---

[18] See, for example, Eliade's "Foreword" to *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 9-25.

[19] Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 3.

[20] Eliade, *The Quest*, 6. Italics in original.

> become a total discipline in the sense that it must use, integrate, and articulate the results obtained by the various methods of approaching a religious phenomenon.[21]

"Using all the possible tools of scholarship," the historian of religions discerns and in a real sense activates the "*spiritual creation*" of the religious tradition being studied, seeking to "decipher its message" much as one deciphers a dream.[22]

Eliade's multifarious *oeuvre*, comprising scholarship, criticism, fiction, letters, journalism, autobiographical diaries, etc. – exemplifies, on a broad scale, the kind of transdisciplinary eclecticism he endorses within the domain of scholarship more strictly. Taken together, his writings also model the scholar or theorist as the "total" person – someone for whom writing and living, cogitation and feeling, theorizing and experiencing, are integral. He believes that scholarship and experience should be inseparable, and that each stands to be enhanced by the other. In some ways, then, Eliade embodies the vision of scholarship that Jeffrey J. Kripal has articulated more recently in his work on mysticism. Kripal believes

> not only that professional scholarship and personal religious experience can be mutually enlightening, but more radically, that our modernity and now post-

[21] Eliade, *The Quest*, 8.
[22] Eliade, *The Quest*, 6-7, 8.

> modernity demand an honest and unflinching uniting of the two.[23]

For Eliade and likeminded scholars,

> to 'return to religion' was to recover religion's essence: those symbols and myths that connect with the 'depths' of the human spirit. This was not simply a matter of identifying and understanding something about religion, to remind us of its splendor, but to reestablish it as a vital cultural force.[24]

The sacred stimulates a transformative experience that can be both *analyzed* and *advanced* by scholarly method. In this sense, then, scholarship is, in Eliade's terms, a "technique of the sacred," a way of discerning, accessing, and activating the sacred. By this imagining, hermeneutical procedures not only examine but also *produce* transformative spiritual experience, thereby linking scholarship with life, theory with liveliness. Studying, thinking about, and theorizing the sacred is of a piece with a lived reality pervaded by the sacred.

---

[23] Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 14. Though I have points of disagreement with Kripal, the present essay resonates broadly with Kripal's scholarly sensibility, and takes inspiration from his vision. Like Eliade, Kripal desires a union of scholarship and religious experience. In considering the matter of theorizing religion, I mean to commend a related idea: that theorizing religion might be approached as a kind of technique of the sacred.

[24] Tyler Roberts, *Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism After Secularism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 7.

By this account, the existential impetus and effects of scholarship in religion are momentous, and its stakes of the highest order. For the study of religion promotes the resacralization of life and of the universe itself. Eliade's conception of religious studies puts the historian of religion at the center of a cosmic drama, a struggle to renew or "conquer" an existential mode evincing contact with reality or being as such. It thus constitutes a critical, dramatic, lived response to the desacralization ushered in by "modernity's instrumentalism, rationalism, and historicism."[25] In this way, Eliade's mode of scholarship aims to convert the profane student into *homo religiosus*, thereby rectifying the "errors" of "*living in a descaralized world*."[26] "In fact, man's becoming aware of his own mode of being and assuming his *presence* in the world together constitute a 'religious' experience."[27] Studying religion is itself a form of religious experience; *theorizing* religion is a mode of *living* religiously.

However innervating and enticing (not to mention gratifying to the scholar's ego) Eliade's account of the historian of religion's endeavors may be, his construal of the sacred along with his comparative method have come under devastating attack over the past thirty years. He has been criticized for overemphasizing similarities among traditions in the interest of

[25] Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 13.
[26] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 16-17.
[27] Eliade, *The Quest*, 9.

establishing broad "patterns" of religion; he has been faulted for failing to produce a systematic methodological statement;[28] he has been deemed a crypto-Christian as well as a crypto-fascist; his notion of the paradox of the sacred can be said to lack coherence and cogency; and his nonreductive "ontological" or "substantive" construal of the sacred, which casts the sacred as a real force in the world rather than the effect of some underlying cause – psychological, economic, social, etc. – has been largely abandoned in favor of constructivist accounts that have emerged in line with the scientific paradigm.

It is on this latter point – the "ontological" construal of the sacred – that Eliade has been singled out for particular scorn. Along with his colleague, the theologian Paul Tillich, Eliade has been excoriated for his complicity in advancing a "theological" approach to the study of religions, an approach that, according to some scholars, uncritically assumes the reality (and basic "goodness") of the sacred.[29] (Recall that Eliade places a strong accent on the "right" aspect of the sacred.) According to Eliade's and Tillich's critics, it is imperative to maintain "the boundary separating secular *academic* thinking about religion from *religious*

[28] Wendy Doniger has described Eliade's method in this way: "Read everything, remember everything you read, and be very, very smart."

[29] See Tyler Roberts's discussion of critics who claim that for Eliade and company, "religion is basically 'good.'" *Encountering Religion*, 9.

thinking about religion."[30] As Steven M. Wasserstrom remarks of the work of Eliade and company, "here the subject and object of the study were confused, conflated, confounded."[31] For thinkers opposed to this "slippage between religion and the study of religion," Eliade's conflation of academic study and lived experience "needs to be eliminated." Eliade's paradigm, his main concepts, and, by extension, his lived example "deter scholars from studying, for example, the ideological dimensions of religion […] or the dangerous and violent dimensions of religion."[32]

Such critiques of Eliade's stance, centering on his ontological sacred, thus betoken a related revaluation of the sacred as a scholarly category. If, under Eliade's influence, a generation of students sought to discern in myths and sacred texts a way of connecting thought to existence, conjoining theory and scholarship to living and being, the critical response to Eliade announces the re-assertion of the scientific paradigm and an insistence on scholarly detachment – the separation of the subject from her object of study. This scientific approach has therefore sought rigorously to divorce the existential experience of religion from the theorization of religion, eschewing notions of the sacred as the "wholly other," and proceeding through a "naturalistic, historical, and

[30] Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 4.
[31] Wasserstrom cited in Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 9.
[32] Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 9.

social approach to religion" that insists on construing the sacred, and religion more broadly, as, in Russell McCutcheon's words, "utterly ordinary."[33]

This "appeal to the ordinary" as opposed to the extraordinary, the natural as opposed to the numinous, and the everyday as opposed to the wholly other, is, as Tyler Roberts explains,

> a disciplinary move: it allows [scholars] to distinguish between the proper object of study for scholars of religion (ordinary activities of social formation) and the improper (extraordinary religious states or experiences).

For the scholar of religion, the sacred as an extraordinary existential reality should remain strictly taboo – both as object of study and as a subjective experience accessed through the activity of scholarship. In addition, Roberts notes, the appeal to the ordinary "is a reductive move, one in which," for McCutcheon and company, "'ordinary' means 'natural.'"[34] Divorcing, rather than entwining, theory and life, this move is intended to redress Eliade's "problematic conceptual apparatus," which has "prevented scholars from addressing religion in all its complexity and from taking a properly academic stance on it."[35] Theory must separate itself from experience.

---

[33] Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 10. The phrase "utterly ordinary" is Russell McCutcheon's, cited by Roberts.

[34] Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 10.

[35] Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 9.

2. Jonathan Z. Smith and the Domestication of the Sacred

It's all out there, it's plain, it's ordinary,
it's largely uninteresting… .

Jonathan Z. Smith

In his appeal to the ordinary, and his zeal for shoring up the boundary separating scholarly study from the experience of the *tremendum*, probably no figure in the modern study of religion so exemplifies the "properly academic stance" as Eliade's former colleague, Jonathan Z. Smith. In classic Oedipal fashion, Smith, in a series of lectures and essays, mounted a trenchant and multifaceted critique of his "master."[36] Smith's critique focuses on Eliade's central category, the sacred, and related ideas: cosmos/order, hierophany, centers, and the like. Taking issue with "Eliade's sacramental and incarnational view, signaled […] by the reiteration of the term 'hierophany,' and his use of eucharistic vocabulary" (e.g., transfiguration, contact, sacrality), Smith "reject[s] Eliade's conceptual frame" and it foundational presupposition – the "reality" of the sacred.[37] The overarching thrust of

[36] Jonathan Z. Smith, "When the Chips Are Down," in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 13. Smith here explicitly names and discusses his major "preoccupations" and theoretical suppositions.

[37] Smith, "When the Chips Are Down," 82.

Smith's criticism lies in his insistence that the sacred is not a "positive religious force," not a substantive or ontological "reality."[38]

Smith elaborates this basic critique across several major points. He believes that Eliade's enthusiasm for establishing patterns and emphasizing similarities across religions in his comparative enterprise comes at the expense of discerning and contending with important *differences*, *discrepancies*, and *incongruities*. "Comparison requires the acceptance of difference as the grounds of its being interesting."[39] Thus, notwithstanding his emphasis on the "otherness" of the sacred, Eliade's tendentious selectivity in treating mythological texts eschews difference and discrepancy in order to maintain his conceptual framework, rendering heterogeneous religious phenomena within familiar terms.[40] Smith further believes that Eliade's emphasis on sacred orientational centers diverts attention from what happens in the *peripheries*.[41]

In a related manner, according to Smith, Eliade's treatment of the sacred as a creative force of order eschews the manner in which religions engage *chaos* toward creative ends.[42] Eliade's overarching treatment of ritual as an orienting, organizational repetition of

[38] Smith, "The Topography of the Sacred," in *Relating Religion*, 103, 110.
[39] Smith, "When the Chips Are Down," 20.
[40] See, for example, Smith, "The Wobbling Pivot," in *Map Is Not Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
[41] Smith, "The Wobbling Pivot," 99.
[42] See Smith, "The Wobbling Pivot," 97.

mythic origins, placing humans spatially and temporally in touch with the sacred, is critically reviewed by Smith, who theorizes religious phenomena as "locative" and "utopian" maps. The model of religion as locative corresponds to Eliade's emphasis on the conservative, orientational function of religion; it denotes religious myths and rituals that maintain order and establish place. Utopian maps, by contrast, refer to the "religious impulse […] not to preserve but to escape from a given order or designated place."[43] Smith's embrace of "discrepancy" and "disjunction" counters Eliade's locative impulses. Finally, Smith clearly stands opposed to Eliade with regard to the attitude of thought animating and directing scholarly work in the field of religious studies. For Smith, scholarship is not a spiritual practice but a mode of "scientific detection."[44]

Effecting a major theoretical shift, Smith advances the terms of his own conceptual framework in a manner that refocuses the study of religion in a scientific register.[45] He displaces Eliade's ontological sacred with his own constructivist account; far from treating the sacred as a basic, irreducible "reality,"

[43] Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 25.

[44] Smith, "A Matter of Class: Taxonomies of Religion," in *Relating Religion*, 161.

[45] Not all of these criticisms discussed here are directed exclusively or explicitly at Eliade; some are addressed to Eliade's scholarly progenitors. Nonetheless, all apply to Eliade's work and form the basis for a deep and general suspicion of Eliade's project. See Smith, "The Topography of the Sacred," in *Relating Religion.*

Smith interprets the sacred as an anthropological construct, the product of a "quite ordinary mode of human social labor."[46] Smith's position announces the stance he takes to be proper to the academic study of religion; it consists of rejecting the sacred conceptualized in terms of experience, presence, revelation, manifestation, transcendence, and mystery, and reconceives the category in terms of expression, representation, "arbitrary" emplacement, ordinariness, and the work of earthly, human intellection.[47] For Smith, Eliade's treatment of the sacred as a substantial, living reality is so much romantic hokum, a symptom of "scholarly fantasy" rather than *Religionwissenschaft* properly conceived in contradistinction to theology.[48] The *experience* of the sacred as revelation, as presence, as *tremendum*, is bracketed, set apart from the academic study of religion, or reduced to ordinary terms.[49]

---

[46] Smith, "Domesticating Sacrifice," in *Violent Origins: Walter Burkhert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 222.

[47] Intellection and imagination. As we will see, "imagination" is synonymous with rational thought in Smith's lexicon.

[48] Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 198.

[49] As we will see below, on the one hand, Smith *refuses* the *tremendum*, as a matter of scholarly principle, saying the historian of religion is best served by considering religion as an "ordinary" category of human experience. This refusal coincides with his intellectualist *reduction* of the *tremendum* to "natural" or "ordinary" terms. As Hugh B. Urban notes, according to Smith, "the study of religion is born from and continues the Enlightenment's relentless quest for *rational understanding*, the drive to render everything, even the most seemingly irrational

Whereas Eliade seeks contact with and renewal of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* through scholarship aimed at transformation of self and society, Smith believes religious studies must be undertaken as a rational enterprise enhancing the "health of academic discourse."[50]

What is "constant," then, across Smith's works is the

> argument that religion is not best understood as a disclosure that gives rise to a particular mode of experience. To the contrary, religion is the relentlessly human activity of thinking through a 'situation.'[51]

There is no revelation, no disclosure, only what Smith calls "application," the social labor and intellectual activity of "thinking through a 'situation.'"[52] One might extrapolate from this statement to say that for Smith, the scholar's primary activity involves the profanation of the sacred and the sacralization of the profane. That is, religion must be conceived in the very terms of the profane (ordinariness, labor, intellection, social construction, etc.) even as reason – the modality of thought proper to the sphere of the "profane" – is privileged, sublimed to "sacred," sacrosanct status.

---

phenomena, intelligible to the scholar." Urban, "Making a Place to Take a Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith and the Politics and Poetics of Comparison," in *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 12 (3): 363. In Smith's work, this reduction amounts to a refusal of the *tremendum*.

[50] Smith in the "Discussion" of "The Domestication of Sacrifice," in *Violent* Origins, 222.

[51] Smith, "When the Chips Are Down," 32.

[52] Smith, "When the Chips Are Down," 32.

By the same token, for Smith, the *experience* of the sacred is certainly not part of the activity of scholarly research and writing; thinking about, theorizing, and "imagining" religion is a preeminently rational undertaking. To be sure, Smith's imagination of religion is intended to stand in stark opposition to the religious imagination as understood by Eliade. Indeed, "imagination" is conceived by Smith in explicit opposition to the religious imagination, such that it becomes synonymous with the faculty of reason, with rational intellection itself. Thus, in the first lines of the brief but provocative methodological statement that introduces his book *Imagining Religion*, Smith effects a strategic rhetorical slippage that resonates with the conceptual shift he carries out in response to the Eliadean paradigm:

> If we have understood the archeological and textual record correctly, man has had his entire history in which to imagine deities and modes of interaction with them. But man, more precisely western man, has had only the last few centuries in which to imagine religion. It is this act of second order, reflective imagination which must be the central preoccupation of any student of religion.[53]

The "reflective imagination" of religion commended by Smith is eminently reasonable; it is, in fact, reason itself. By Smith's understanding, the "academic

[53] Smith, "Introduction" to *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.

imagination of religion" displaces the religious imagination of the sacred at the same time that it displaces Eliade's mode of theorizing the sacred.

This dynamic of inversion, in which the sacred is profanized and reason is elevated to a preeminent, "sacred" status, characterizes a pervasive strategy in Smith's work. Across his corpus, Smith approaches religion not only from a position he takes to be firmly grounded in reason (the "reflective imagination"); at the same time, he privileges the profane, locating in that sphere his most cherished values: rational thought or intellection, ordinariness, labor, etc. The elevation of reason as preeminent – an article of "uncompromising faith," ironically, in Smith's own words[54] – characterizes Smith's broadly "intellectualist understanding" of religion, and coincides with his overarching project to profane or "domesticate" the sacred, theorizing religion not in terms of the *tremendum* and such, but in terms of the ordinary.[55]

> *The academic study of religion is a child of the Enlightenment.* […] It is the mood, the exemplary Enlightenment attitude toward religion that concerns me. To put the matter succinctly, religion was domesticated, it was transformed from *pathos* to *ethos*. At no little cost, religion was brought within the realm of common sense, of civil discourse and commerce. […] [T]he Enlightenment impulse was one… which

[54] Smith confesses to an "uncompromising faith in reason and intellection," in "Discussion" of "Domestication of Sacrifice," 206. My essay should be read as an attempt to challenge Smith's faith.

[55] Smith, "When the Chips Are Down," 19.

> refused to leave any human datum, including religion, beyond the pale of understanding, beyond the realm of reason. It was this impulse, this domestication, that made possible the entrance of religion into the secular academy.[56]

The Enlightenment or scientific "attitude," based on the privileging of reason, is of unquestionable value for Smith; it is, in this sense, sacrosanct. It is *the* fundamental value, determining the basic presuppositions that govern his overarching treatment of religion, as well as the adjunct values that attach to it (the privileged position of academic discourse, and others that will be addressed in the case study below). It also presumes a highly debatable anthropological vision of human beings as creatures of reason. As Hugh Urban has written, Smith is "very much rooted in a kind of neo-Enlightenment, highly intellectual and rationalist view of human beings as essentially pragmatic, utilitarian, rational agents who cannot tolerate incongruities and who constantly search for order and coherence in their worlds."[57] Whereas Eliade's mode of scholarship sought to resist what he took to be the detriments of "domesticating" religion, Smith's ratio-scientific Enlightenment "mood" or "attitude" poses a

[56] Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones," in *Imagining Religion*, 104. Emphasis in original.

[57] Hugh Urban, "Making a Place to Take a Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith and the politics and poetics of comparison," in *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 12 (3), 342-343.

counter to Eliade's "theological" mode of theorizing, thereby rationalizing religion.

Smith's scientific attitude, his "appeal to the ordinary" and bracketing of the extraordinary, augurs his fundamental scholarly and methodological principles. In *Imagining Religion*, Smith frames this matter in terms of a "dilemma of choice confronting the student of religion":

> Does one focus on those things which "excite horror and make men stare," or does one concentrate on "common stories," on "what we see in Europe every day"? It is a tension between religion imagined as an *exotic* category of human experience and expression, and religion imagined as an *ordinary* category of human experience.[58]

Smith, of course, opts for the second position, stating that "it has been my continued presupposition that the latter choice for imagination" – religion as an ordinary category – "is the more productive for the development of history of religions as an academic enterprise."[59]

But here it is crucial to note that this choice for Smith does not only entail bringing the tools of reason to bear on the interpretation of religious phenomena, as any scholar must. Nor does he simply exclude from study the experiential aspect of the *tremendum*, that which, threatening to exceed rational conceptualization, would remain beyond the "pale of understanding," in

[58] Smith, "Introduction" to *Imagining Religion*, xii.
[59] Smith, "Introduction" to *Imagining Religion*, xiii.

favor of the "ordinary." Nor yet again does he merely profane the sacred and elevate reason to sacred status. Beyond all these, *Smith consistently interprets myths and rituals themselves as rational discourse – as modes and examples of reasoning,* or "thinking through a situation." What Smith says of the Ceramese myth of the Hainuwele may be generalized to apply to his treatment of myth and ritual more broadly; it is a "preeminently […] rational and rationalizing enterprise, an instance of the experimental [i.e., scientific] method."[60] In Smith's hands, religion is not just *studied* from a rational stance, from within the scientific attitude; *religious phenomena are themselves interpreted as exercises in reasoning*, as "experiments" in the scientific sense of the term.

Smith's interpretations of religious phenomena as instances of rational intellection derive from the methodological preoccupations and presuppositions attendant upon his rationalist attitude. Though a critical examination of Smith's major preoccupations – particularly his taxonomic proclivities and his theorization of religion as "locative" and "utopian" maps – is beyond the scope of this essay, I do wish to

[60] In various ways, Smith's studies repeatedly make Levi-Strauss's point that rituals are "good for thinking." See, for example, Smith, "When the Chips Are Down." See also Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual," where he concludes that the paleo-Siberian bear hunt he examines indicates that animals "are both 'good to eat' and 'good to think'", 65.

call attention to some salient features of his broad theoretical framework, suggesting that the scientific attitude that underlies it also limits his ability to grapple with *excess*. Here I am extending Tyler Roberts's critical assessment of Smith as a thinker who, in his earlier work, exhibits a "thinking of excess" that is mitigated or suppressed in later work.[61] As Roberts suggests, although Smith's early work with "ideas about chaos and incongruity" contends with excess, his "intellectualist approach to myth" eventually "domesticates" these ideas.[62]

> Rather than a fundamental existential and linguistic incongruity that has the potential for distancing us from our ordinary common-sense reality and our ordinary efforts to place ourselves, Smith focuses on

[61] Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 33. I encountered Roberts's excellent book only after having already framed my argument concerning opposed modes of theorizing, and having sketched my basic critique of Smith on the point of his inability to contend with excess and (as seen below) his academicizing of religion. In this regard, one might say that my critiques of Smith have been retrospectively informed and confirmed both by Roberts's critical commentary on Smith, and his deep discussion of the relations between theory and life, including distinctions between "'cognitive' and 'existential' forms of inquiry." Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 53. My paper thus partakes of the general spirit and purpose of Roberts's project. At the same time, as I try to make clear above, I would go further than Roberts does in criticizing Smith's rationalist attitude. In addition, given Roberts's advocacy for a "thinking of excess" and his acknowledgment of Bataille, I find it curious that Roberts affords Bataille's work so little attention. The present essay attempts to push Roberts's thinking of excess forward through its turn to Bataille.

[62] Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 32.

> 'situational incongruity,' where experience and history present challenges that religious people try to explain and represent in and through the religious maps deployed in myth and ritual.[63]

I agree with Roberts that the general direction of Smith's work suggests a movement away from a thinking of excess. But I would go so far as to suggest that the very basis of Smith's work, emerging from and reaffirming a rationalist attitude, attests to a critical failure to think excess, for excess under various guises is what Smith's basic theoretical stance rejects as inadmissible or reinterprets in purely rational terms.

What, then, is meant by "excess" in this context? Roberts characterizes excess in terms of "boundlessness": Thinking of excess "has to do with a mode of taking one's place in world by engaging, reflecting on, and affirming, rather than repressing or thinking away, boundlessness."[64] For Roberts, this boundlessness includes the "existential," and not merely the "instrumental or intellectual," possibilities contained in religious myths, symbols, and rituals. In the terms that I have presented here, thinking of excess presumes an attitude of thought open to discerning in religious phenomena something other, and indeed more, than

[63] Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 33-34.

[64] Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 33. Though I appreciate Roberts's lucid discussion of "boundlessness," I want to note here that Bataille's approach to excess, discussed below, places its emphasis less on boundlessness as such than a *transgression* of boundaries.

ratiocination, something that instigates existential risk – the risk of self-loss and/or self-transformation on the part of the scholar of religion herself.

With this idea in mind, Roberts's assessment of Smith's limited ability to contend with excess can be extended, his critique deepened – for Smith's rationalist attitude determines the very presuppositions and preoccupations that inform his entire theoretical framework and methodological principles. For example, we have already seen that Smith confronts the student of religion with a "dilemma of choice"; the scholar must choose whether to treat religion as an ordinary category or an "exotic" one. In pronouncing the "ordinary" as "more productive" for historians of religion, Smith effectively forecloses consideration of a whole range of religious phenomena that he places in the category of the *tremendum*: extreme affective responses (the *tremendum*), elements of "sacred horror," irrational orgiastic expenditure, erotic effulgence […]. The fundamental decision to view religion as ordinary entails an inability to contend with the kinds of excess that so often characterize religious phenomena. It is for this reason that, as Smith admits, he has no theoretical apparatus for dealing with potlatch rituals, predicated on excessive giving.[65] Something crucial to understanding

[65] See "Discussion" of "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 214-216. René Girard asks Smith, "How would you deal with a potlatch," to which Smith replies, "Simple answer: 'René, you've got me,'" 214.

religion is lost when the experiential *tremendum* is disavowed.

A theoretical model that takes excess as a starting point, and that contends with the "accursed share" of religio-cultural systems, is needed in order to move beyond the limits imposed by Smith's attitude of thought. Georges Bataille offers such a theory, engaging, rather than suppressing, excess. In approaching Bataille, I wish to turn to a theoretical case study that will demonstrate that Smith's rationalist attitude is doubly problematic: the theory to which it gives rise lacks the explanatory power Smith himself seeks in theorizing religion; and it bodies forth a set of values that I believe must be discerned and critiqued. Attempting critically to respond to Smith, I will summarize and apply Bataille's theory of religion to the case under examination. At once assuming and exceeding the scientific paradigm, Bataille's theoretical approach affords greater explanatory power and promotes an attitude of thought and set of values that merit further consideration in the study of religion.

The Sacrifice of Domestication: Bataille contra Smith[66]

Intimacy is violence.

Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*

Smith has remarked that a given scholar's explanation of sacrifice will contain in miniature his or her theory of religion.[67] Extending this observation to Smith's own theory of sacrifice, as forwarded in his essay "The Domestication of Sacrifice," grants insight into the problems of Smith's approach to thinking about religion. In that essay, Smith observes that "*animal sacrifice appears to be, universally, the ritual killing of a domesticated animal*."[68] This observation underscores Smith's belief that sacrifice "is, primarily, a product of 'civilization,'" and not a matter of "primitivity."[69] The

[66] This section has been adapted from a paper delivered at a regional meeting of the American Academy of Religion under the title "Affairs of the Editorial *Tremendum*: Dream Notes on Publishing in Religious Studies."

[67] "Any explanation of sacrifice is, in fact, a theory of religion in miniature." Smith cited in Jeffrey Carter, "General Introduction" to *Understanding Religious Sacrifice: A Reader*, Jeffrey Carter, ed. (London: Continuum, 2003), 1.

[68] Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 197. Emphasis in original.

[69] Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 202. Smith claims that "the issue of primitivity is without interest" for him. "Someone else," therefore, "will have to provide" a "lengthy monograph to review critically all the putative evidence that has been adduced for the primitivity of animal sacrifice and to cite the evidence for

scholarly preoccupation with the primitivity of sacrifice, according to Smith, has to do with the tendency to romanticize sacrifice; by and large, western scholars of religion have found in sacrifice a "dramatic encounter with an 'other,' the slaying of a beast," he writes. This interpretation of sacrifice, claims Smith in a line from which I have already quoted,

> has allowed the scholarly fantasy that ritual is an affair of the *tremendum* rather than a quite ordinary mode of human social labor. It has allowed the notion that ritual – and therefore religion – is somehow grounded in 'brute fact' rather than in the work and imagination and intellection of culture.[70]

---

the stark assertions" made in his essay. Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 202. Rather than confront the very issue upon which his theory rests, he chooses to lay the formidable task of producing the evidence that would confirm or deny that theory at the feet of another scholar: "I would propose J. van Baal" to undertake the task, "though I share none of his presuppositions." Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 202. The strategy here seems to be one of evasion. On a similar note, it is baffling that Smith, whose pedagogical agendum includes promoting transparency in the classroom (see, for instance, his "The Necessary Lie: Duplicity in the Disciplines" [2003]), backs away from writing monographs and opts instead for essays, which, in his own words, "makes [him] more elusive and indirect." "Discussion" of "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 206. This will to evasion would seem to stand in tension with Smith's stated pedagogical aims of transparency and demystification. One may therefore be led to wonder to what degree this kind of tension characterizes Smith's scholarship more generally - a matter I hope to investigate in future work.

[70] Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 198.

It comes as no surprise that Smith, the touted rationalist, seeks to counter what he takes to be romantic scholarly fantasy, endeavoring, as the title of his essay indicates, to *domesticate* sacrifice, to read ritual as "no big deal" – not an affair of the *tremendum*, but an everyday mode of social labor.[71] He therefore goes on to argue that animal sacrifice is a "meditation on domestication," claiming that ritual "killing is an act of precise discrimination with an eye to the future," and therefore "*an elaboration of the selective kill, in contradistinction to the fortuitous kill*."[72] Sacrifice, in other words, is "an exaggeration of domestication," a "meditation" keyed to the virtues and values of a world of "futurity and planning" that rewards "delayed payoff."[73] If ritual, as Smith argues elsewhere, acts as a focusing lens,[74] sacrifice focuses on the utilitarian perfectibility of animals through breeding. Thus the title of Smith's essay, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," should be understood in two ways: sacrifice both domesticates and is domesticated.

Smith's goal is to disenchant or profanize sacrifice, to show ritual's practicality, to demonstrate the

[71] Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 195.

[72] Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 199, 200. Emphasis in original.

[73] Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 200.

[74] Smith claims that a temple "serves as a *focusing lens*, marking and revealing significance." A ritual extends this function, being "*an exercise in the strategy of choice*." He concludes that "*ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment*." Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual," 54, 56, 63. All emphases in original.

absence of the *tremendum*. His theory of sacrifice is thus consistent with, and demonstrative of, his rationalist attitude; it does away with the *tremendum*, reinterpreting it in terms of the ordinary, and conceives of sacrifice as a mode of "reflective imagination," or reasoning – thinking through a situation. With its attention to the discrepancy[75] between the purported "brute facts" of sacrifice – the "preoccupation" with "primitivity" and the ancillary notion that sacrifice is "a dramatic encounter with an 'other,' the slaying of a beast" – and the observation, based on an extensive study of ethnographic data, that sacrifice deals not with wild beasts but domesticated animals, Smith "rectifies" the scholarly categories that have prevailed in scholarly imaginings of religion; he shifts the terms of theorization from wildness, primitivity, otherness, and the *tremendum* to selectivity, breeding, civilization, culture, and intellection.

But when asked by scholar Robert Jewett to explain why, if sacrifice is about selective killing toward domestication, "the best rather than the worst animal is in fact killed" – why the best animal is not *preserved*, as one might expect in the context of selective breeding – Smith replies that it

[75] Here I am applying Smith's broad principles concerning discrepancies in data to Smith's theory itself.

> could be that we simply have an odd characteristic inversion […]. I'm afraid that, frankly, I'm not interested enough in the question to worry about it.[76]

Smith's reply is problematic (not to mention frustrating) on several levels.[77] It indicates, first, a kind of performative contradiction at the (meta)theoretical level. For though Smith, across numerous writings, commends grappling with discrepancy and embracing incongruity for its cognitive power (recall that Smith claims that difference and incongruity are precisely what afford interest in comparative endeavors, for they "give rise to thought"), here he fails to meet the challenge occasioned by incongruity. The discrepancy that should have been, according to his own principles, of primary interest is dismissed as a matter of no interest. Rather than reformulating his theory in light of Jewett's question, Smith refuses engagement, thereby abandoning the very principles that he so insistently commends. (It is telling, in this connection, that Smith republished this essay without significant revision, so far as I can discern, in his collection

[76] Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 223. It is true that Smith claims to be forwarding his theory of sacrifice only as a "tentative suggestion." Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice,"196. As I mention in a note below, whatever reservations Smith may hold about his theory, they do not keep him from reprinting the essay in his celebrated collection *Relating Religion*, with no acknowledgment of the "strange characteristic inversion" he hypothesizes in responding to Jewett's question.

[77] Not only does Smith's dismissive non-reply bespeak his place of security and privilege within the academy (surely no graduate student would be permitted to get away with this kind of thing).

Relating Religion. And it appears in that volume without the ensuing discussion, published in an earlier volume, in which Jewett raises his question.)[78]

In addition, and more damningly, Smith's reply to Jewett's question also indicates that *Smith is no less guilty of indulging in scholarly fantasy than those who are*

[78] In the "Discussion" of "The Domestication of Sacrifice," Smith declares, "I just don't happen to believe my own theory! Nor would I care whether it were true or not," 213. This lends further credence to my claim in the next paragraph that Smith is no less guilty of scholarly fantasizing than those he critiques. On what grounds, then, is Smith's critique ultimately founded? If the foundational principles on which his own theoretical work rests - e.g., treating religion as ordinary - leads to theories that he seems (almost) to acknowledge are not any more "true" than the fantasies of the romantic theorists he criticizes, what basis do his critiques of those theorists really have? Addressing this matter, Sam Gill argues that Smith's scholarship is best understood as self-conscious and ultimately groundless "play" (see the following note). "One of Smith's favorite and most stimulating tasks is to show the absurdity of the places on which scholars stand to profess their knowledge… . Smith has the audacity to hold that 'The historian has no [place to stand]. There are no places on which he might stand apart from the messiness of the given world." Gill, "No Place to Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith as *homo ludens*: The academic study of religion *sub specie ludi*," in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*,1998: 66 (2), 302-303. And yet, as Gill acknowledges, "in contrast to his own dictum, [Smith] has a very firm place on which to stand." Gill, "No Place to Stand," 304. My contention is that Smith's "play" is less self-conscious and self-critical than one might hope, and that Smith's critiques of others' stances might be revealed as less cogent in light of this fact. And by Smith's principles, what precisely constitutes the kind of "responsible discourse" that he claims as a primary concern? See "Discussion," of "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 222.

the target of his critique.[79] Indeed, in an instance of the dynamic we have observed above, Smith disenchants sacrifice to the degree that he enchants theoretical discourse within the academy. Another essay by Smith on sacrifice, "The Bare Facts of Ritual," underscores and elaborates this point. There Smith claims that

> *ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things*.[80]

By this account, theory works like ritual, and ritual works like theory.[81] Sam Gill notes that in Smith's

---

[79] In his insightful essay on Smith's scholarship - his "perspective and the accompanying academic operations" - Sam Gill offers an account of Smith's ludic attitude, seeing his theorization as a mode of self-conscious "play." "Smith's approach to religion," writes Gill, "can be considered *sub specie ludi*." Gill, "No Place to Stand," 283, 285. As Hugh B. Urban points out, however, Gill's essay is "primarily laudatory and contains few critical comments as to Smith's possible failings". Urban, "Making a Place," 342. Urban further notes that Smith "remains strangely ambiguous and unreflective regarding *his own scholarly interests and political motivations*." Urban, "Making a Place," 361. Whereas Urban turns his critique of Smith toward establishing grounds for the scholar of religion, I am more concerned with revealing the incoherence of Smith's stance and what I take to be the dangers of the rationalist attitude. But as with Urban's paper, one point of my essay is to *critique* what Gill so skillfully *reveals* about Smith. In my characterization of Smith's theorization of sacrifice as indicative of fantasy, I mean to put a more critical spin on what Gill describes as Smith's play.

[80] Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 63. Emphasis in original.

[81] René Girard gestures toward this point in his conversation with Smith and company following Smith's "Domestication of Sacrifice": "Would the minimalist," as he calls Smith, "really be a

writings, "myths, rituals, and experiences of transformation are structurally parallel to academic theories and methods."[82] I mean to suggest a related but different point – not simply that religion and theory are structurally parallel, but that the academy is the privileged model upon which religion is imagined by Smith. In other words, theorizing religion allows Smith to *fantasize* religion as it "ought to be": religion becomes a version of the privileged locus of the academy, and ritual is an instance of academic discourse. In this way, Smith's imagining of religion is eminently "locative": the academy is the space in which theorization of ritual is performed in a manner that also idealizes the ritual, doing away with its apparently incongruous, excessive aspect – in the present example, the apparently *irrational* impulse to slay the "best" animal.

Thus Smith's theory of sacrifice confirms what we have already noted about how he theorizes religion, and thus how he *fantasizes* religion – namely, that religion and its theorization are rational enterprises devoid of any experiences of the *tremendum*, any aspect of the irrational, any dimension of excess. Smith's basic theoretical stance, as he articulates it, is against the

---

kind of latter-day ritualist, with academe as a replacement for organized religion?" I believe that the academy not only replaces religion for Smith, but that the obverse is also true: religion is interpreted as academic discourse.

[82] Gill, "No Place to Stand," 286.

notion of a "primal moment of ontic 'seizure,' a 'revelation,' a 'direct cognition.'"[83] In this way, Smith's stance imagines religion not only as a rational enterprise, but as one modeled on the academy itself. In the context of discussing "The Domestication of Sacrifice," Smith makes a remarkable claim confirming this idea, and rendering explicit key values associated with it: "I have no interest in the continued existence of our species," he says. "I have a deep interest in the continuing existence of the academy. What I'm interested in is the health of academic discourse."[84] This statement raises both logical and methodological problems, for Smith is interested neither in the continuation of the species upon whose existence academic discourse necessarily depends, nor is he interested in responding to the potentially devastating critique of his theory of sacrifice indicated by Jewett's question. And yet he is intensely interested in academic discourse, so much so that he fantasizes religion upon a model of just that.

Taking these matters into account, I want to suggest that Smith's scholarship, his overall imagination of religion, betrays what must be recognized as a *rationalist bias* that, ironically, coincides with an academic *fantasy* of religion.[85] And this bias,

[83] Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 196.

[84] Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 222.

[85] And this rationalist bias, I believe, makes of Smith a supremely "locative" thinker, notwithstanding his own purported engagement with the creative aspects of chaos, discrepancy,

this fantasy of religion, has embedded within it a set of values that demand critique. According to Smith, religion is largely uninteresting, ordinary, no big deal; his insistent rationalization of religion – his endeavors to counter the Eliadean and Tillichian ontological sacred – sees religious ritual not as an affair of the *tremendum*, but as an ordinary mode of labor, and thus a means to an end, keyed to *futurity*. "For the domesticator," Smith writes in relation to sacrifice, "killing is an act of precise discrimination with an eye to the future. It is dependent on the social acceptance of a 'delayed payoff.'"[86] By Smith's imagining, religious ritual, at least in the form of sacrifice, is not only academicized; it is read according to an Enlightenment understanding of the human agent as "essentially rational." Moreover, sacrifice by Smith's construal exhibits a capitalist logic that rewards delayed payoff in the form of accumulation and stability over expenditure and enjoyment in the present moment.[87]

---

peripheries, and difference. On a related but somewhat different note, Roberts writes, "It seems to me that locativists" - Roberts's Smithian term for scholars who "try to establish the study of religion on more 'legitimate' academic grounds" than, say, Eliade's, "by drawing clear boundaries between religion and the secular study of religion," thereby "attempting to securely locate themselves" - "are driven by a secularist overreaction to Eliade and others that has warped the understanding of both religion and the academy." Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 15, 52.

[86] Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 199-200.

[87] For a discussion of Smith's thinking in relation to global capitalism, see Urban, "Making a Place," 365ff.

Smith's basic sensibility, as evidenced in his theory of sacrifice, is informed by, but also reconfirms, the academic study of religion in which religion is academicized. It also exemplifies a move away from the ontological construals of the sacred à la Tillich and Eliade, in favor of constructivist conceptualizations of the sacred. Smith's stance, I now want to argue, is problematic for at least two reasons. First, the theory of sacrifice that emerges from it fails; it is unable to account for why the best animal is killed. Second, it indicates a kind of will to rational organization and reasoning that, in accord with the capitalist sensibility, privileges stability, futurity, and acquisition (of goods in the form of knowledge) over transformation, expenditure, and experience in the present moment. Smith's imagining of religion is an expression and extension of instrumental reason, and it is this logic that requires critique and demands resistance.

A critical corrective both to Smith's theory of sacrifice as well as his rationalist bias may be found in the work of Bataille. Fraught with intermingled sexuality and violence – those most excessive aspects of human existence – Bataille's writings display an obsession with religion, especially in its sacrificial, mystical, and orgiastic expressions. Taking excess as central to religious phenomena and what he calls the "religious sensibility," Bataille's theorization of sacrifice and the sacred contains resources for resisting Smith, without falling back upon onto-realistic construals of the sacred.

Bataille develops his conception of the sacred in terms that recall, but are also distinct from, Eliade's. Adapting and extending insights from Durkheim and Caillois, Bataille, like Eliade, opposes the profane to the sacred. For Bataille, the profane is the sphere of everyday, rational, calculative activity centered upon individual life – existence as separate, largely atomistic or "discontinuous" selves. It is defined by the predominance of rational utility and instrumental reason, and structured through taboos or prohibitions that keep in check human tendencies toward excess, particularly forms of violence and perverse (non-procreative) sexuality.

The sacred, by contrast, is "wholly other" to the profane. The sacred is characterized in terms of excess – experiences that exceed or transgress the boundaries of the profane, of the individual self as configured and constrained by the prohibitions of everyday life. The sacred involves experiences of those extraordinary, heterogeneous, nonrational, and nonutiliatrian moments of dissolution of self and intense social fusion. Whereas the profane indicates a sphere of social order and self-interest, the sacred is linked to a transgressive urgency and intimacy; it "entails a breaking down of established patterns…of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as

defined and separate individuals."[88] "The sacred," Bataille writes, echoing and intensifying Durkheim's notion of "collective effervescence," "is only a privileged moment of communal unity, a moment of the convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled."[89] The experience of the sacred is inextricable from excess – the bursting-through of social and psychological barriers in "convulsive" profusions of energetic expenditure. In this sense, excess, as that which issues from but also exceeds the limiting boundaries of the profane self, is transgressive "otherness." Again extrapolating from Durkheim, Otto, and Eliade, Bataille observes that the sacred partakes of an internal ambivalence – the beneficent, vivifying, and alluring "right" aspect, and the corruptive, deathly, and terrifying "left" aspect.

Although some of Bataille's terms thus echo and overlap with Eliade's, his concept of the sacred has little to do with Eliade's substantive, onto-realistic conception. Not a transcendent or otherwordly force, but an immanent or "inner" experience, the sacred, Bataille writes, "could never have been a *substantial* reality."[90] The sacred is not an enduring substance

[88] Bataille, *Erotism*, 18. Bataille is speaking of erotic experience in this passage, which he links to religious experience.

[89] Bataille, "The Sacred," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 242.

[90] Bataille, "The Sacred," 241.

indicative of a metaphysical reality beyond the earthly realm.

> The opposite of a *substance*, that which withstands the test of time, [the sacred] is something that flees as soon as it is seen and cannot be grasped.[91]

Thus, whereas for Eliade the sacred as such is subsumed under its right aspect, for Bataille the genuine sacred is the left sacred – those excessive moments that corrupt the profane self, rupturing the individual in experiences of social continuity, erotic fusion, passionate effulgence, intense joy and sorrow. Here we should note that what Bataille writes of the right sacred characterizes Smith's theoretical work; reason is "divinized," giving "the intelligible world" the status of the divine, the unassailable.[92] By Bataille's account, the right sacred is the profane elevated to the status of the sacred; it is rationality and instrumental reason, and the individual, self-preserving aims they serve, given a sacred aura.

Bataille's conception of the sacred is borne out in his general theory of religion. Though he opposes the sacred to instrumental reason, Bataille believes that religious impulses co-originate with humans' use of tools. Whereas animals, unaware of themselves as "discontinuous" individuals in the world, are "*in the world like water in water*," distinctly human consciousness

[91] Bataille, "The Sacred," 241.
[92] Bataille, *Theory of Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 71, 73.

emerges with the use of tools, thus instigating the divide between subject and object.[93] "Insofar as tools are developed with their end in view, consciousness posits them as objects, as interruptions in the indistinct continuity" that characterizes animal life. Moreover, oriented toward future ends, tools are used to accomplish some goal, and thus project a more or less distanced *telos*. The use of tools therefore fosters a perception of reality divided according to distinct objects, while also projecting enjoyment and consumption into the future, deferring experience from the present moment.

The separation of subject and object, and the emergence of consciousness oriented toward futurity and duration, gives rise to a sense of discontinuous individuality – seeing oneself as distinct, separate from the general "continuity" of the universe. Individuals are set apart from their surrounds and from other objects in the world, including other human beings. Instrumental reason – emerging from and oriented toward a conception of the world in terms of the subject/object distinction, and keyed to futurity – fosters a sense of the individual as a discrete self, a self set apart from other humans and from the world. With the emergence of recognition of discrete selves comes anxiety about death. Following (but adjusting) Freud, Bataille believes that civilization evolves in response to this anxiety, as a set of prohibitions on violence and

[93] Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 19. Emphasis in original.

non-procreative sex intended to protect the individual and prolong the life of self and species. What is suppressed with the emergence of this profane realm of reason, utility, prohibition, and concern for the future is *intimacy*, the sense of erotic and communal unity that is contingent upon the rupture of the boundaries that define the civilized, profane self.

The "essence" of religion, according to Bataille, is an overcoming of this isolating sense of discontinuity; religion is "the search for lost intimacy."[94] But unlike Eliade's nostalgic view of the sacred as a reconnection with pristine, divine origins beyond history, Bataille's theory of religion envisions the sacred as a return to an experience of continuity as *immanent* experience. And this "inner experience" of continuity, whether in the form of erotic fusion or mystical communion (closely linked in Bataille's thought), is contingent upon excess. It is in excessive moments of self-loss – the "little death" of orgasmic explosion, the mystic's assumption within the divine totality, or other experiences that destroy the self-contained character of the individual in her everyday, profane life – that the sacred moment of intimate continuity is achieved. Such experiences thus have a sacramental character, for each of them involves a sacrifice of the profane individual, driven and enclosed by self-interest and the desire for enduring existence. Death of the self in moments of excessive experience defines the sacred.

[94] Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 57.

Such experiences are, in other words, *sacrificial*; sacrifice, in various forms, is the quintessential operation for experiencing the sacred. In this way, Bataille's distinctive theory of sacrifice is antipodal to Smith's. Smith's theory casts sacrifice as a proto-capitalist feat of utilitarian, instrumental thinking toward domestication – a rational operation undertaken with an eye toward the future in the interest of self-preservation. It is an ordinary act of social labor. Bataille, by contrast, theorizes sacrifice as a nonrational operation of *expenditure* whose power lies in destruction. And as we will now see, it also responds to the question that Robert Jewett poses to Smith: why is the best, rather than the worst, animal invariably put to death in ritual sacrifice?

Bataille's theory of sacrifice provides a cogent response. He notes that ritual sacrifice destroys the utilitarian *thingness* of its victim. Reducing an animal to its utility makes of it a profane object, a mere tool – "subjugated, domesticated, and reduced to being a thing."[95] In ritual slaughter, death restores the animal to the realm of the sacred, beyond all utilitarian function:

> The principle of sacrifice is destruction, but though it sometimes goes so far as to destroy completely…the destruction that sacrifice is intended to bring about is not annihilation. The thing – only the thing – is what sacrifice means to destroy in the victim… . It draws the victim out of the world of utility and restores it to that of unintelligible caprice.[96]

[95] Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 50.
[96] Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 43.

The most perfect animal is destroyed precisely because it is also the most perfectly domesticated animal – the animal rendered useful, a mere tool: profane. Thus, in contrast to Smith, by Bataille's account *sacrifice is the mechanism by which domestication is not produced but destroyed*. In terms that provide a dramatic counterpoint to Smith's theory of sacrifice as a kind of profane, proto-capitalist endeavor – labor with an eye toward production, accumulation, and futurity, and driven by self-interest – Bataille claims that

> sacrifice is the antithesis of production, which is accomplished with a view to the future; it is consumption that is concerned only with the moment… [O]ne sacrifices *what is useful*.[97]

Though a review of the relevant ethnographic material would be necessary in order to evaluate Bataille's account completely, we may at least observe here that Bataille's theory of sacrifice exhibits greater explanatory power than Smith's; it accounts for the fact that it is the best animal that is slaughtered, for the best animal has been bred for utilitarian ends, and in this way turned into a thing in the profane world. It is precisely the thingness of the victim that is destroyed in sacrificial immolation. At the same time, "the individual identifies with the victim in the sudden movement that restores it to immanence (to intimacy)."[98] The sacrificial ritual thus has existential

[97] Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 49. Emphasis in original.
[98] Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 51.

import; it not only returns the domesticated, useful animal – a *thing* – to the realm of the sacred; at the same time, in identifying with the victim, the participant is afforded an experience "at the level of death," as she is drawn, for a time, out of the world of the profane into an experience of self-loss and a sense of intimacy with other participants. Rather than reconfirming the social order that encloses and isolates individuals, sacrificial death "disturbs the order of things" that "holds us."[99] It stimulates an excessive, ambivalent response, a death of the self in a violence at once fearful and ecstatic, a liberating rupture of the civilizing prohibitions that have kept the profane individual intact.

Accounting for, rather than banning, excess, and assuming, rather than excluding, human passions, Bataille's theory exceeds Smith's in its explanatory power. But it also bodies forth a set of values that counter those implicit in Smith's rationalist account. Whereas one might take Smith's theorization of sacrifice not only as presuming but *promoting* the rational values of self-interest, individualism, and accumulation (Smith's elevation of reason to the level of the sacred emphatically commends this reading), Bataille's theory condones the values of *intimacy* and *generosity*, and in this way provides a much-needed *ethical* response to the ascendancy of the scientific attitude. Across his oeuvre, Bataille is consistent in his

[99] Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 52.

quest for intensifying human intimacy and generosity in the face of the rampant individualism and greed that characterize so much of modern life in the west, and that too often culminates in catastrophic violence.[100] For Bataille, these problems devolve on a failure to deal with excess.

Why is excess such a problem, and how does it relate to violence? In his monumental work of economic theory, *The Accursed Share*, Bataille notes that the sun exudes a superabundance of energy upon the globe. "Energy is always in excess," he writes. Developing the entailments of this insight, Bataille inverts traditional economic theories, which take *lack* of goods as their starting point. These traditional theories treat what Bataille calls "restricted" economies, limiting themselves to the circulation of energy and goods within local economic systems (individual societies, villages, countries, etc.). By contrast, Batialle posits excess – and specifically its *disposal* – as the central problem for his economic theory. One way or another, excess energy, and the wealth and goods in which it condenses and accumulates, "must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically."[101] One of Bataille's aims in this work is to develop a theory of a "general economy" that will not only admit and grapple with the problem of excess, but also imagine ways for avoiding the

[100] See Bataille, *The Accursed Share,* Vol. 1 (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 21.

[101] Idem.

"catastrophic" disposal of excess, for example in acts of war. Bataille therefore imagines and encourages "glorious" and sacrificial acts of destruction or "expenditure" – the intimate violence of erotic sexuality, artistic profusion, and radical gifting inspired by potlatch rituals, for example. In this way, Bataille's theory involves a "reversal of thinking – and of ethics."[102]

For Bataille, unlike Smith, thinking and ethics are ineluctably intertwined.[103] Bataille's theory of sacrifice provides grounds for a "reversal" of Smith's attitude of thought and of the values implicit therein. In terms starkly opposed to the rational instrumentalism embraced by Smith, Bataille writes that

> to sacrifice is not to kill but to relinquish and to give […]. What is important is to pass from a lasting order, in which all consumption of resources is subordinated to the need for duration, to the violence of an unconditional consumption […]. This is the sense in which [sacrifice] is a gift and relinquishment, but what is given cannot be an object of preservation for the receiver.[104]

Operating from a general economic view, Bataille thus sees sacrifice, which is keyed to *expenditure*, *disorder*, *giving*, and *intimacy*, in opposition to Smith's restricted economy, with its rationalist-capitalist sensibility, and

[102] Bataille, *The Accursed Share,* Vol. 1, 25.

[103] Smith claims that the "ethical implications" of a theory are not "helpful to a science of religion." Smith, "A Matter of Class," 162. I take this point to indicate a need to move beyond a "science" of religion.

[104] Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 49.

its advocacy of production, accumulation, organization, and individualism.[105] And though the sacred is, for Bataille, a real force, it is neither Eliade's ontological sacred, nor Smith's relational, constructivist sacred. Rather, the sacred is, within and beyond the context of sacrifice, a shared experience of self-loss; it is the dissolution of the boundaries that separate individuals in their everyday lives, restoring them, for a fleeting moment, to a sense of continuity predicated on a transgression of the prohibitions and attitudes that define profane life.

Re-imagining Religion

[F]or anyone to whom life is an experience to be carried as far as possible, the universal sum is necessarily that of the religious sensibility… .

Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*

The attitude of thought that Bataille's theory evidences is "experimental" in the sense I adumbrated at the outset of this paper. It exemplifies and condones

[105] Whether contemporary global capitalism can be said to operate according to the rational pursuit of economic gain at the origins of capitalism as described by Max Weber in his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is, of course, far from certain. As many theorists have noted, today's capitalism, with its colossal risks and monumental waste, is a far cry from its origins. For a critical discussion of Bataille's economic theory and contemporary capitalism, see Jean-Joseph Goux, "General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism," in Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, ed., *Bataille: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.), 196-213.

> an experimentation in which we work on ourselves and that takes place at the interstices of mind and body, knowledge and desire.[106]

Bataillean experimentalism uses the tools of reason and the discoveries enabled by rational, scientific thought without being limited by the kinds of presuppositions that define Smith's scientific stance. As Bataille writes, "the scientist speaks from outside […]. My theme is the subjective experience of religion."[107] Bataille writes from *within* what he writes *about*; his scholarly and theoretical work is pervaded by the "inner experiences" that he theorizes. In this way, Bataille's experiments in writing about religion at once assume and counter the scientific attitude; his theory of religion reasons in a way that exceeds reason.[108] Bataille not only theorizes religion, but also promotes a mode of life and experience that engages the excesses eschewed by rationalists like

---

[106] Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 82. For other studies exploring the possibilities for thinking religion at the intersection of mind, body, knowledge, and desire, see *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies*, ed. Jorge N. Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

[107] Bataille, *Erotism*, 32.

[108] Bataille, to be clear, does not dismiss the findings (or language) of science, as the title of Part One of is *Theory of Religion* suggests: "The Basic Data." But neither does Bataille allow a scientific attitude to obfuscate theoretical insights that are available only thanks to an openness to and engagement with the kinds of excesses that Smith's attitude seeks to exclude or render in "ordinary" terms. A future study would compare what Gill describes as "Smith's approach to religion… *sub specie ludi*" - as a kind of "play" - with Bataille's writings in "mythological anthropology," where he "plays" with scientific facts "as if they were toys." Bataille, "The Pineal Eye," in *Visions of Excess*, 82.

Smith. Bataille thus attempts to analyze but also to *generate* modes of thinking that exceed the limits of the self, inspiring experiences of intimacy and generosity that might rightly be called sacred. In this way, theorizing becomes a sacrificial activity; it uses the tools of reason to destroy the products of reason, turning its tools back upon itself so as to remain *open* to excess, rather than seeking to abjure it or enclose it within a definitive order or system. Conceived as a "counter-operation," like a form of expenditure from the perspective of a "general economy," Bataille's mode of imagining religion is a self-conscious response to the dangers attendant upon the scientific attitude: the reduction of persons and subjects of study to mere "thinghood." Bataille's is a theorization that works against the limits of restricted, rational economies that foster self-interest, acquisition, accumulation – the tendency to conserve, tame, or domesticate the wild energies, wealth, and goods that must be expended, lest they bring catastrophe.

Bataille's theorization of the sacred would, and should, trouble scholars like Smith, who seek to render the boundary defining religious studies ever more stark and strong, much as they shore up the boundaries between self and other(ness) in their work, both implicitly and explicitly.[109] Rather than *defining* the

[109] I want to take this occasion briefly to mark out an itinerary for future critiques of Smith and constructive work toward retheorizing religion. This work would address the issue of interdisciplinarity in the study of religion. The thrust of the

scholar through a dilemma of choice, perhaps emphasis should be placed on *transforming* the scholar, envisioning scholarship as critical spiritual practice, inseparable from life.[110] Eliade encouraged students to envision the academic study of the history of religions

---

concluding remarks to the present essay affirms Roberts's point that "it is ironic that scholars of religion who see themselves as 'transgressors' are also among those who argue most vehemently for strict boundaries for the study of religion and the academy more generally, boundaries, moreover, that are based on a rather conservative and narrow view of what should count as 'academic' or 'knowledge.'" Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 81. For evidence of Smith's anxious concern for delineating boundaries among and within academic disciplines, see, for example, Smith, "Tillich('s) Remains," in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 2010, 78 (4): 1139-1170. Here Smith lays blame at the feet of Tillich for having given grounds for establishing what were once called "dialogic fields" - Religion and Literature, Religion and Society, and the like. He notes that by 1971, "the same sort of project was recognized by the AAR which added a new section, 'Arts, Literature, and Religion,' to its previous list of nine, more traditional program areas." Smith, "Tillich('s) Remains, 1159. What bothers Smith about the dialogic fields seems to have something to do with his fixation on taxonomy and the way in which the conjunction "and" in these dialogic fields upsets disciplinary boundaries. My strong impression is that Smith feels that groups like Arts, Literature, and Religion are less amenable to coherent theorization than are the "traditional" areas within religious studies. What Smith takes as problematic "indices of disarray," however, I regard as sources of creative potential. Smith, "Tillich('s) Remains, 1140.

[110] As Roberts suggest, scholarship might "transform the scholar by challenging his or her sense of human possibility. This transformation is more than a matter of accumulating knowledge; it entails that one's own world is, to some degree, defamiliarized." This is "criticism as spiritual exercise." Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 114, 143.

as a "total discipline," one that might transform the "total" person. The transformative aim of this vision might be preserved without remaining beholden to Eliade's right-handed version of the sacred.[111] However contradictory it may sound, perhaps a mode of theorizing that allows for investigation of "the whole of human experience" – an approach to religion as part of a general economy of scholarship, open to "universal humanity" in all its violence and perversity – will lend itself to the cultivation of those values of intimacy and generosity that are mortified by pretenses to pure rationality.[112]

Condoning an experimental attitude that seeks to engage the sacred does not entail falling back on the problematic "romantic" fantasies and "theological" concepts evident in the work of Eliade and Tillich. Rather, one may put reason to use in a way that is not strictly confined by the detached, objective, ratio-

[111] Whereas Eliade's theory has, as we have noted, been faulted for obfuscating problems of ideology and violence in religion thanks in part to its approach to the sacred as basically "good," Bataille's theory of the sacred recognizes the full amplitude of the sacred, both its right and left aspects, and is better equipped to fund ideological analysis and the like. This fact is borne out by Bataille's own critical writings on the relations between power, politics, and the sacred. See, for example, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," in *Visions of Excess*, 137-160. See also the writings by Bataille and colleagues in *The College of Sociology (1937-1939)*, Denis Hollier, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). For treatments of the interplay of myth, ideology, and scholarship, see Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[112] Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 110.

scientific attitude, which bans a "thinking of excess" in its endeavors to domesticate religion. Bataille's left-handed path of theorizing seeks contact with the excessive, irrational, violent, and perverse aspects of human experience – the *tremendum* in its various forms – that Smith's scientific attitude cannot countenance. It is an attitude of thought animated not by the aim of securing knowledge and establishing enduring order, but rather by a spirit of existential risk and a will to self-transformation. Non-rationalistic but far from uncritical, this attitude supports a mode of inquiry that is self-reflexive, an "*open* movement of reflection" indicating a "sovereign self-consciousness that […] no longer turns away from itself."[113] Such a stance would evidence and advance an *ethic* of scholarship in which the personal and the professional are united by a "religious sensibility": an intimacy and a generosity predicated upon those excesses that cannot, must not, finally, be contained by reason.

Bibliography

Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share, Vol.1* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

Bataille, Georges. *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986).

Bataille, Georges. "The Sacred," in Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 240-245.

[113] Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 119, 111.

Bataille, Georges. "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," in Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess*: *Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 137-160.

Bataille, Georges. *Theory of Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992).

Biles, Jeremy and Kent Brintnall, eds., *Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

Carter, Jeffrey. "General introduction," in Jeffrey Carter, ed., *Understanding Religious Sacrifice: A Reader* (London: Continuum, 2003), 1-11.

Eliade, Mircea. *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

Eliade, Mircea. *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profan*e*: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1987).

Ferrer, Jorge N. and Jacob H. Sherman. *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

Foucault, Michel. *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny," in Sander Gilman, ed., *Psychological Writings and Letters* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

Gill, Sam (1998). No place to Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith as *homo ludens*, The academic study of religion *sub specie ludi*." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66 (2): 283-312.

Goux, Jean-Joseph. "General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism," in Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, eds., *Bataille: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998), 196-213.

Hadot, Pierre. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, Arnold I Davidson, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

Hollier, Denis, ed. *The College of Sociology (1937-1939)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

Lincoln, Bruce. *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Roberts, Tyler. *Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism After Secularism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

Smith, Jonathan Z. "The Bare Facts of Ritual," in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 53-65.

Smith, Jonathan Z. "The Devil in Mr. Jones," in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 102-134.

Smith, Jonathan Z. et al. "Discussion" of "Domesticating Sacrifice," in Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, ed., *Violent Origins: Walter Burkhert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 206-235.

Smith, Jonathan Z. "The Domestication of Sacrifice," in Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, ed., *Violent Origins: Walter Burkhert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 191-205.

Smith, Jonathan Z. "Introduction" to *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi-xiii.

Smith, Jonathan Z. "A Matter of Class: Taxonomies of Religion," in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 160-178.

Smith, Jonathan Z. "The Necessary Lie: Duplicity in the Disciplines," in Russell T. McCutcheon, ed., *Studying Religion: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 73-79.

Smith, Jonathan Z. "The Topography of the Sacred," in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 101-116.

Jonathan Z. Smith, "When the Chips Are Down," in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1-60.

Smith, Jonathan Z., "The Wobbling Pivot," in *Map Is Not Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 88-103.

Urban, Hugh B (2000). "Making a place to take a stand: Jonathan Z. Smith and the politics and poetics of comparison," in *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 12 (3): 339-378.

Author's Bio

Jeremy Biles resides in Chicago, where he teaches courses in philosophy, religion, and photography at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

He is the author of *Ecce Monstrum: Georges Bataille and the Sacrifice of Form* (Fordham University Press, 2007) and co-editor (with Kent Brintnall) of the volume *Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion* (Fordham University Press, 2015).

His essays, reviews, and other work have appeared in such places as the *Journal of Religion*, the *Chicago Review*, the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, *Material Religion*, and *Performance Research.*

His drawings have appeared in group shows at the Adds Donna gallery and 4th Ward Project Space, Chicago, and he has done curatorial work at the Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago.

Conflicting Methodological Metaphors Pertaining to Sameness and Difference: Eliade and Deleuze in Dialogue

Carl OLSON

In the preface to his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Friedrich Nietzsche discusses the tight-rope walker who performs on a rope stretched between two towers over the market square of a town. As the tight-rope walker reaches the center of the rope, a brightly attired buffoon arrives and rapidly traverses the rope. With a devilish cry, the buffoon leaps over the tight-rope walker, who is disturbed by this occurrence, loses his balance, plunges into the market square below, and lands near the prophet. When the fallen man regains consciousness the prophet tells him that there is no devil or hell to fear because the soul of the tight-rope walker would be dead before his body. The man thinks that if the prophet is right he would leave no legacy. Zarathustra replies that danger has been the calling of the tight-rope walker, and he has been faithful to his calling. The riskiness of walking a tight-rope is also shared by someone engaged in hermeneutics within the field of the history of religions.

The hermeneutist runs the risk, for instance, of misinterpreting his/her subject. Sometimes, the interpreter runs the risk of distorting his/her subject by using inadequate, deficient, or inappropriate hermeneutical tools. It is easy to jump on the theoretical bandwagon of the latest fad and ride it until it fizzles out, but it is another matter to be a discerning consumer and retain one's balance on the tightrope of interpretation.

In this paper, I propose to examine the postmodern challenge to hermeneutics exercised by historians of religions by using the hermeneutical method of Mircea Eliade as an example of an approach that has been used in Religious Studies scholarship. This hermeneutical method is compared to the postmodern approach of Gilles Deleuze and special attention will be focused on the importance of difference among postmodernists. We will witness that Eliade's approach to the study of religion is shaped by fundamentals of Enlightenment philosophy and its representational mode of thinking that is evident in his use of the phenomenological method, intentionality, intuition, morphological classification, and his stress upon order over chaos instead of the simulacra discussed by numerous postmodern thinkers. It is possible, of course, to also find romantic thinking and the influence of Eastern Orthodox religiosity on Eliade's thinking, but such considerations can be suspended for another paper. The phenomenological

aspects of Eliade's method presuppose a metaphysical stance and a coherence theory of truth, which are diametrically opposed to the overall postmodern position of Gilles Deleuze and his emphasis on difference. Moreover, this paper is narrowly focused on Eliade's morphological classification expressed by the metaphor of a tree, which is compared to Deleuze's rhizomatic method and its reliance on the metaphor of the root. This essay also compares the two thinkers on the problem of time and history because of their relationship to the hermeneutics of the two thinkers. Moreover, this paper examines the presuppositions of both positions and the advantages and disadvantages of these approaches for the future study of religion.

The decision to compare Eliade, arguably the leading historian of religion in the twentieth century, and Deleuze, arguably the most creative postmodern thinker of the past century, might seem to some readers an odd choice because their basic methods are the exact opposite of each other with the former stressing sameness or commonality and the latter emphasizing difference. Unlike Eliade, Deleuze is opposed to the static world of Enlightenment thinkers, and seeks to subvert this type of thought by stressing becoming, contingency, and choice. Eliade's work demonstrates an attachment to the Enlightenment enterprise, whereas Deleuze wants to break free of this philosophical tradition and its advocacy of a representational mode of thinking. According to some

authors, there is a "crisis of representation."[1] The representational mode of thinking can be defined as a mode of cognition that assumes a correspondence between appearance and reality that is supported by a metaphysical edifice. By comparing Eliade and Deleuze, this so-called crisis becomes very evident.

Before proceeding, it seems wise to clarify what is meant by the term "dialogue" in the title of this essay. What is intended by the use of the term "dialogue" is a hermeneutical discussion that serves as a methodological tool in comparative thought. The comparative nature of this endeavor is risky because the facilitator of a dialogue must enter the margins between oneself and one's subjects, which forms an open arena of mutual dialogue and questioning. This approach suggests that the two subjects encountering each other in a comparative dialogue rely on a third figure (the author/ interpreter) to bring the contending figures into dialogue with each other. The third person wants to avoid being dogmatic, polemical, or political. Moreover, the three parties are involved in a process of negotiation. The author of the dialogue within this triadic relationship is engaged in a mode of thinking and operating that is by nature of the enterprise something relational.

[1] See Tim Murphy, *Representing Religion: Essays in History, Theory and Crisis* (London, Oakville: Equinox, 2007) and Carl Olson, *Zen and the Art of Postmodern Philosophy: Two Paths of Liberation from the Representational Mode of Thinking* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

The dialogue is not intended to lead to absolute objectivity or to a definitive philosophical position. The dialogue between the major participants is always in a state of flux; it is continually unfolding, developing, or transforming the ideas of the participants. As a result, there is no definitive interpretation or dialogical exchanges that are possible, suggesting the incomplete nature of the dialogue that points to the necessity for continued exchange. Nonetheless, there are some lessons that a reader of the dialogue can encounter. The comparative nature of the dialogue can also lead one to create more precise distinctions. Moreover, if one is on the margin, this situation provides one with a unique perspective and freedom that one might not enjoy in ordinary life.

Metaphors and Hermeneutics

Eliade and Deleuze utilize different types of metaphors in their methods of interpretation that distinguish their approaches to the art of hermeneutics with the former favoring a hierarchical tree metaphor and the latter using an arboreal metaphor connected to his rhizomatic method. Why is this difference with respect to metaphors important? According to American philosopher Richard Rorty, visual metaphors play a major role shaping a person's philosophical viewpoint. If we consider the role of the mirror, for instance, in Western philosophy, Rorty argues that

> It is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions. The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror [...]. Without the notion of the mind as a mirror, the notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation would not have suggested itself.[2]

A counter thinker could object that metaphors do not possess a precise meaning. But Rorty retorts that metaphors function as new and useful ways of speaking and writing that can arguably produce an effect that steers a safe course between the hazards of realism, idealism, and skepticism in addition to enabling humans to express something else because of a perceived resemblance or kingship between two or more elements. Majesty, royalty, and regal splendor are, for example, associated with the metaphor of the "throne of God" with a metaphor adopted from ordinary life and applied to God.

Influenced by new research in cognitive science, the American philosophers George Lakoff and Mark Johnson examine metaphors by which humans live, and identify primary metaphors that are conventional, entrenched, and fixed aspects of the human conceptual system. They identify "life is a journey," for instance, as a primary metaphor that operates as a foundation for new metaphorical combinations that can be used

[2] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 12.

for reasoning. Such a primary metaphor links human subjective experiences and judgments to human sensory motor experience. The aptness of metaphors is measured by their ability to play a role in structuring a person's experience.[3] Humans acquire metaphorical modes of thought automatically and unconsciously, which implies that humans have no choice whether to use them or not. Overall, what Lakoff and Johnson claim is the following: There is a system of primary and complex metaphors that are an essential part of the cognitive unconscious to which humans have no direct access or control over the manner in which it is used over a period of time. From a practical perspective, metaphors define abstract concepts that make abstract scientific theorizing possible. Moreover, a metaphor possesses the ability to embody a form of truth that originates in the unconscious of an embodied human.[4] Whether or not Lakoff and Johnson are correct, they, at the very least, emphatically suggest the importance of metaphors for human thinking.

[3] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 72.

[4] Ibid., p. 107.

Eliade's Heremeneutics versus Deleuzean Difference

Eliade understands himself as a historian of religion, although such a scholar must exceed the intellectual grasp of an ordinary historian who attempts to reconstruct a historical event. The intellectual reach of the historian of religion surpasses the common historian because the former "must trace not only the history of a given hierophany, but must first of all understand and explain the modality of the sacred that that hierophany discloses."[5] Thus, Eliade's approach is not merely concerned with historical accuracy, but he is also involved with understanding and explaining the material. Besides being historical, the methodological approach of the historian of religion must be as encyclopedic and as all-encompassing as possible in its scope, which renders the discipline impossibly difficult because a practitioner must know everything, refer to other disciplines for help, and always seek genuine sources.[6] Although one needs to consult a specialist on a given topic that one is investigating, Eliade strongly emphasizes going back to the original sources such as primary texts.[7] Wanting to ground his method on the

[5] Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1968), p. 5.

[6] Idem, *Journal II. 1957-1969*, trans. Fred H. Johnson, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 45.

[7] Idem, "Autobiographical Fragment," in *Imagination and Meaning: The Scholarly and Literary Worlds of Mircea Eliade*, ed. Norman J.

historically concrete, Eliade thinks that it is necessary to examine all the manifestations of a religious phenomenon, not merely to discern its message, but the historian of religion also "attempts to decipher whatever trans-historical content a religious datum reveals through history."[8] Any attempt to interpret a trans-historical message proves problematic for some of Eliade's critics.[9]

Where Eliade sees unity within archetypes that he finds in history Deleuze recognizes instead a meta-physical position and need for a multiplicity of

---

Girardot and Mac Linscott Ricketts (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), p. 144. Mircea Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth: Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet*, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 114-115.

[8] Idem, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series LXXVI (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), p. xv.

[9] See some of the following critics and their works: John A. Saliba, *Homo Religiosus in Mircea Eliade: Anthropological Evaluation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976); Ioan Petru Culianu, *Mircea Eliade* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1977); 1977; Ninian Smart, "Beyond Eliade: The Future of Theory in Religion," *Numen* XXV, Fasc. 2 (1978): 171-183; Robert D. Baird, *Category Formation and the History of Religions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971); Guilford Dudley III, *Religion on Trial: Mircea Eliade and His Critics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997); Ivan Strenski, *Religion in Relation: Method Application and Moral Location* (Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 1993); Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse of Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

difference.[10] In place of an archetype, a single universal principle, or multiple archetypes that tend to be abstract, static, or all-encompassing natures, Deleuze wants to stress the specific, particular, and singular because no words, phenomena, or events have a multiple sense for him. From the Deleuzean perspective, the most common feature of phenomena is difference, which refers to differences that are incapable of identifying their nature except by means of differentiation, a focus on difference to the extent of excluding any possible unity between sameness and difference that is common with representational thinking.

In sharp contrast to representational thinking that is typical of Eliade's method, Deleuze proposes to think difference, which he envisions as both a positive and disruptive process. By thinking difference, one affirms surfaces or planes not as something derivative or secondary but as surfaces constituting a fluxuating series that forms them. Deleuze wants everyone to conceive of concepts as a series of waves on a plane of immanence that lacks depth.[11] According to Deleuze, concepts are concrete, whereas a plane is both abstract and a horizon of events. The plane, an indivisible milieu, is populated by concepts that it continuously links together. There are no pure concepts devoid of empirical content, which allows Deleuze to stress

[10] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

[11] Ibid., p. 36.

immanence without any foundation beneath it and to reject all forms of transcendence. In summary, Deleuze thinks from the surface in order to think difference, which necessarily involves thinking on and affirming the surface, becoming a primary rather than a secondary mode of focus for a thinker.

From Deleuze's perspective, Eliade's brand of representational thinking subsumes religious phenomena by means of their resemblances, a procedure that presumes the continuity of the sensible intuition in a concrete representation that assumes the form of an archetype. Deleuze also indirectly criticizes Eliade's taxonomic categorizations of religious phenomena because they cannot capture the salient differences between phenomena. In addition, Deleuze not only rejects Eliade's imposition of a system of organization over items that are dynamic and different, but he also discards Eliade's quest for essences.

Nonetheless, the history of religions represents a total hermeneutics for Eliade because it is "called to decipher and explicate every kind of encounter of man with the sacred."[12] This total hermeneutics reaches beyond understanding and interpreting religious phenomena because it is concerned to think about the religious facts in a potentially creative way, which can lead to the creation of new cultural values. This creative hermeneutics possesses the potential to change

[12] Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 58.

us, to stimulate us, to nourish us, and to revitalize our philosophical thinking. By creative hermeneutics, Eliade means more than a method of interpretation, because it is also "a spiritual technique that possessed the ability of modifying the quality of existence itself."[13] Thus, hermeneutics, a never-completed task, is creative in a dual sense: It is creative for the particular interpreter by enriching his/her mind and life, and it is creative because it reveals values unavailable in ordinary experience. This type of awareness is liberating for Eliade. Besides its potential ontological implications for the individual interpreter, the study of unfamiliar religions more than broadens one's horizon of understanding because one encounters representatives of foreign cultures, which results in culturally stimulating the interpreter.

For Eliade, hermeneutics is also a risk and an adventure because the historian of religions is confronted with numerous strange situations during the course of her investigations that are extremely complex and need to be interpreted in order to be understood. The various boundary situations that are opened before our hermeneutical gaze often challenge us to rethink our own ontological situation. By learning as many boundary situations as possible from different religious cultures, the interpreter is able to abstract the structure of the different kinds of behavior that she encounters.

[13] Ibid., p. 62.

Eliade understands this search for symbolic structures as a form of integration into a larger whole or system and not a form of reduction. But it is insufficient to discern the structures of religious phenomena or behavior; it is also necessary to understand their meaning. If religious phenomena reveal new and unexpected perspectives by means of which they can be grasped and articulated into a pattern or system, Eliade claims that

> [t]his makes possible not only the intuition of a certain mode of being, but also the understanding of the 'place' of this mode of being in the constitution of the world and of the human condition.[14]

Eliade implies that he followed this type of approach because the dialectic of the sacred, a tendency to indefinitely repeat a series of archetypes, demand it. Due to the fact that hierophanies repeat themselves and inherently seek to reveal the totality of the sacred, it is possible for us to distinguish religious facts and to understand them.[15] This process implies a comparative approach to the study of religious phenomena.

If meaning becomes obscured, it is possible to restore it by means of comparison and exegesis.[16] Moreover, Eliade claims in his journal the following:

---

[14] Idem, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1959), p. 100.

[15] Idem, *Shamanism*, p. xvii.

[16] Idem, *Journal*, II, p. 162ff.

> [I]n the history of religions, as in anthropology and folklore, comparison has as its function to introduce the universal element into 'local,' 'provincial' research.[17]

With respect to the use of comparison, Eliade makes a distinction between the historian of religions and the strict phenomenologist. According to Eliade, the phenomenologist rejects using comparison because such a scholar confines him or herself to finding the meaning of a particular phenomenon.

> Whereas the historian of religions does not reach a comprehension of a phenomenon until after he has compared it with thousands of similar or dissimilar phenomena, until he has situated it among them; and these thousands of phenomena are separated not only in time but also in space.[18]

This does not mean that the historian of religions is content to compare elements in her typology or morphology, an apparent invention by Goethe around 1795. The historian is also aware that religious phenomena are not exhausted by history, although she needs to remember that religious phenomena develop within and reveal their meanings within history.

Eliade's use of phenomenology, history, intentionality, intuition, morphological classification, rationality, and the necessity of order are all rejected by Deleuze as aspects of representational thinking. By adhering to his representational mode of thinking,

[17] Ibid., p. 298.
[18] Idem, *Shamanism*, p. xv.

Eliade subsumes religious phenomena by means of resemblance, a procedure that falsely presumes continuity between a sensible intuition in a concrete representation and an archetype. According to Deleuze, this type of taxonomic categorization of religious phenomena cannot possibly capture differences between phenomena. What Deleuze perceives Eliade doing is imposing a system of organization over phenomena that are dynamic and different, transforming these phenomena into something static. Deleuze proposes to substitute a plane of experimentation on which a person can map an immanent plane with its extensive relations and intensive capacities, an experiment that rejects Eliade's assumption that a scholar can find essences.

Eliade's method of integrating elements into his system of morphological classification and his emphasis on an encyclopedic approach to the history of religions suggests that he uses the encompassing type of comparison that operates by placing different instances of a phenomenon

> at various locations within the same system, on the way to explaining their characteristics as a function of their varying relationship to the system as a whole.[19]

This suggests that the encompassing type of comparison commences within a large structure or process, and Eliade's morphological classification of myths and symbols in his work the *Patterns in Comparative Religion*

[19] Ibid., p. 83.

is a good example of the use of this type of comparison.[20] When using this type of comparison, the scholar can select particular locations or phenomena within the structure or process and explain similarities or differences between them as a result of their relationship to the entire structure. If the encompassing type of comparison is historically grounded, it can assist the scholar to explain large structures or processes, connect these explanations to the temporal and special context, and enhance our understanding of the overall structures or processes and better understand their particular parts. Thus, whatever type of comparison a scholar chooses to employ it possesses the potential to enhance our understanding of religious actions and phenomena.

Eliade's method is grounded in rationality, but Deleuze advocates, for instance, that desire, an anti-rational force, replace the role of reason. From Deleuze's philosophical perspective, the hidden metaphysical aspects of Eliade's position are an example of arbo-resent thinking that is shaped by arboreal metaphors.[21] By using his pragmatic method of rhizomatics, Deleuze is concerned with what one can do, representing an intertwining of unity and difference that concentrates on the surface and the connections between diverse

[20] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 94.

[21] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 16.

fragments. Deleuze borrows the notion of the rhizome from biology to oppose origins and foundations and to emphasize that the rhizome is both proliferate and serial, and functions according to principles of connection and heterogeneity. Since the rhizome represents a multiplicity, it seeks to overcome the binary subject/object structure of Western thought.

In retrospect, Deleuze subverts the methodological approach of Eliade by stressing planes of immanence because these planes tend to desacralize the world and human existence. The result of these planes of immanence is a loss of all transhuman meaning. Deleuze also subverts Eliadean archetypes and the world of representation with his stress on eternal return, making identity, similarity, analogy, and even opposition only surface effects. Furthermore, it is impossible for unifying forces or enduring structures to exist in Deleuze's thought because of the univocal nature of Being. Since there is nothing like an ontological principle for Deleuze, there is no unifying or guiding principle as is evident in Eliade's thought.

By offering an immanent materialist ontology, Deleuze does not provide any foundations because there is only ontological flux. Moreover, there are no universal and timeless truths to be discovered because everything is relative and indeterminate. Notions such as love and justice, for instance, have no depth or lasting value. In addition, Deleuze claims that society, culture, or history have no center and are opposed to any teleological order of existence.

These types of notions stand in total opposition to ontological, social, and historical claims made by variously different religious traditions. By adopting the Deleuzean philosophical position and attempting to interpret a foreign religion, a scholar would seem to clash with truth claims made by a particular religion. The Deleuzean and anti-Enlightenment thinker is unable to empathically study another religion because such a thinker is in bondage to the emphasis on difference common to postmodern modes of thought.

Metaphor of Terror

In an entry made in *The Portugal Journal* dated January 29, 1944, Eliade expresses a wish to write a book about the "terror of history" because of the terrible events unfolding in the world at that time in history, a wish that he finally fulfilled with the publication of *Le Mythe de l'éternel retour: archetypes et repetition* in France in 1949 before it was translated into English as *The Myth of the Eternal Return* in 1954.[22] In this work and other books, Eliade applies his hermeneutical method to historical time in which the other is hidden or camouflaged from the view of the religious scholar. It is, however, difficult to apply a creative hermeneutics to history because human beings have fallen into history, creating obstacles for humans

[22] Mircea Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series XLVI (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954), p. 104.

associated with an awareness of being historically conditioned, victimized by the unforgiving forces of history, and a secularization of work that turns a person into a prisoner of monotonous and routine labor.[23] The fall into history creates existential obstacles for humans because the drama of history is devoid of enduring meaning and value where people suffer without meaning, rendering profane history an absurd, cruel, and hellish place that only provokes human despair. This entire scenario is characterized by Eliade as the "terror of history," a fall also into disunity, forgetfulness, an ontological separation from the sacred, and a fruitless wandering search by humans for the center of their existence in the labyrinth of history.

The "terror of history," which functions as a time metaphor, can also be grasped by means of Eliade's dialectic between the sacred and the profane. Regarding oneself as a subject and agent only of history who refuses the possibility of transcendence, the profane person of history, leading a tragic mode of existence, is a product of self and world desacralization, which accepts no paradigmatic models beyond humanity and is convinced that he/she must kill the last remaining God in order to become free.[24] Forgetting that one is a product of religion, the profane person, who is irremediably identified with history and progress,

[23] Idem, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 37, 154.

[24] Idem, *Sacred and Profane*, p. 203.

loses any transhuman meaning because their world is empty of any religion, whereas *homo religiosus* lives in close proximity to the sacred. The profane person of history cannot consciously experience the sacred because such an individual is associated with the death of God and only their unconscious remains religious as they search the labyrinth of history for the center of their being. Within the context of this scenario, the historical person lives in a genuine hell on earth that is cruel and demonic. Unable to become a creator of history, a person becomes a victim of history without any hope of finding genuine meaning within the drama of history because these ever unfolding events are devoid of any transhistorical significance.[25]

From Eliade's perspective, the only adequate response to the "terror of history," a rapacious force of historical time, is a faith that is rendered meaningful by the Incarnation of Christ and enables a person to grasp the sacred, which Eliade identifies with Cosmic Christianity, a natural religion developed from the interaction between Christianity in Central and Western Europe and folk religion of rural areas. This is a religion that exists in harmony with cosmic rhythms, is focused on the worship of a non-historical Christ, and nature is perceived as a work of God and not a realm of sin.[26] Within this religion of harmony, the

[25] Idem, *Ordeal*, p. 128.
[26] Idem, *Myth and Reality*, pp. 172-173.

linear nature of historical time is overcome by the repetitive nature of sacred time.

Attempting to remain true to what he perceives as the intentionality of the sacred and the religious world, Eliade's hermeneutics represents a non-reductionistic, holistic, organic, and dialectical approach to his subject.[27] It can be added that his notion of a Cosmic Christianity is, moreover, an example of a theological nostalgia for Eastern European peasant or folk religion that is connected to the earth.[28] This need for an intimate relationship to the earth is a notion that is probably borrowed from Nietzsche, which is a point on which Eliade and Deleuze agree.

If Eliade offers a solution to the "terror of history," Deleuze is not inclined to think that we can solve such a problem in the foreseeable future, but Deleuze is more apt to determine how we can live with the problem of time by finding a new conceptualization of it. Rather than a representation of a sequence of moments to be synthesized within an active consciousness, Deleuze investigates a passive synthesis of time that includes the notion of repetition in each moment of time. If he is successful, this synthesis would overcome the representational mode of thinking that is contrary

[27] Douglas Allen, "Mircea Eliade's View of Religion as the Basis for Cultural and Spiritual Renewal," in *Changing Religious Worlds: The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade*, ed. Bryan Rennie (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 209.

[28] Carl Olson, *The Theology and Philosophy of Eliade: A Search for the Centre* (Houndmills and London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 56.

to real difference and is opposed to the eternal return. From Delueze's perspective, Eliade's notion of the repetitive nature of sacred time is a good example of a conception of time that culminates with identity, rendering time equal, flat, and featureless.

What Eliade refers to as sacred time is identified as mythical and seasonal time, which stands in sharp contrast to Deleuze's repetition of the same that is a succession of instants governed by an external law. Because the moments of the past, present, and future coexist in circular time for Deleuze, a person experiences the present as cyclically passing moments and its repetition is connected to habit, locating repetition in experience that creates expectancy in the subject because repetitions are synthesized in the present. A second synthesis of time conceives of it as a straight line in which the past coexists with the present, but acts as a past that has been present.[29] In other words, the present moment is already past; otherwise, it could not pass away. By passing away, a present moment becomes a past event for any future present. Within this second synthesis of time, repetition assumes an active sense because it repeats something in memory that was previously non-existent.[30] This implies that habit does not play a role because nothing returns, and thus is associated with memory or the past

[29] Deleuze, *Difference*, pp. 70-71, 76, 79.
[30] Ibid., pp. 74, 79.

by Deleuze. This understanding of time results in a radical bifurcation of the subject into the self of memory and of experience as repetition plays a role by repeating something in memory that did not previously exist.

According to Deleuze, if habit is associated with the present, and if memory is connected to the past, repetition is the eternal return, a final synthesis representing a pure and empty unfolding of time that is the time of the future. Pure repetition disturbs the recurrence of habit and memory along with the paradox of the co-existence of past and present, which is a disturbance related to the replacement of the linear succession of present moments and the cyclical recognition of revolving past moments by the eternal return of difference.[31] Not representing identity or the same, Deleuze conceives of repetition as a pure form of time that is related to difference in the sense that when beings are repeated as something other then their difference is revealed. Adopting Nietzsche's notion of eternal return, Deleuze perceives an advantage in this notion because it does not suppress difference by representing a return of becoming and difference even within a context of multiplicity, becoming, and chance, suggesting that the eternal return is the repetition of that which differs-from-itself.

From the perspective of Deleuze, repetition possesses the power to accelerate or decelerate time, although this is something that cannot be intellectually

[31] Ibid., p. 41.

grasped by an identity discovered in a concept or something similar in a process of representational thinking. Being identified by Deleuze with the power of difference, the event of repetition disappears even as it happens because repetition lacks an in-itself, even though it does possess the ability to alter the mind that encounters it.[32] Since repetition disappears as it appears, it is essentially unthinkable, incomplete, and cannot contain total reality. In short, repetition is analogous to a dice throw, a risky venture with an unknown result.

Overall, Eliade and Deleuze adopt the eternal return of Nietzsche's nightmare for different reasons. Eliade views the eternal return as an attempt to abolish history because it reveals ontology uncontaminated by time and becoming, whereas profane time represents an irreversible duration.[33] The profane time of history plays, for example, an important role in Eliade's novel *The Forbidden Forest* as when the character Biris is tortured by Communist police seeking information about an alleged conspiracy against the Communist rulers of Rumania. Or, when the leading character in the novel Stefan is portrayed as a representative of humanity wandering in a labyrinth of absurdity searching for the center of his being, looking for meaning within the cruel flux of time, and attempting to escape from the suffering within history.

[32] Ibid., p. 71.
[33] Eliade, *Eternal Return*, p. 99.

In contrast to Eliade, Deleuze embraces the eternal return because it enables him to assume an anti-Kantian philosophical stance that stresses becoming, contingency, irony, play, difference, repetition, and chance in order to arrive at a mode of thinking that is non-conceptual and non-representational. Advocating becoming a nomadic thinker with neither past nor future, Deleuze urges readers to become itinerant nomads undertaking an erring journey that leads to the embracing of difference and repetition. In sharp contrast to Deleuze, Eliade is not hesitant to make universal statements, absolute judgments about the human condition within history, and assertions about reality. The radical skepticism characteristic of Deleuze's thinking is much more subdued in Eliade's thought because the latter is more confident that we can know the other.

In very different ways, Eliade and Deleuze adhere to Nietzsche's prophet Zarathustra's request when he urges others to be faithful to the earth and not to fall prey to other-worldly hopes.[34] Eliade's response is represented by his advocacy of Cosmic Christianity, whereas Deleuze is opposed to any type of closed or total philosophical or religious systems. Because the vocation of philosophers is to create new concepts, Deleuze agrees with Nietzsche that thought is a matter

[34] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, ed. Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin and trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 6.

of creation, and truth is a creation of thought.[35] This does not mean that such concepts, which he defines as complex singularities and intensive multiplicities, represent the truth independent of their plane of immanence upon which they are constructed because they do not represent anything. From Deleuze's perspective, Eliade's Cosmic Christianity is nothing more than an illusion of permanence that must be destroyed. It is not a solution to any existential problem because Deleuze thinks that we must learn to live with a problem rather than falsely thinking that we can solve it within the flux of time.

For different reasons and with distinctive results, both Eliade and Deleuze are creative thinkers who demonstrate vivid imaginations. There are some critics who might find this a shortcoming, but this would be a mistake because the human imagination is a deep reservoir of creativity. Some critics might find the use of the imagination too subjective, making Eliade's method, for instance, inherently ethnocentric and an all-encompassing discourse that tends to engulf all others.[36] Eliade responds indirectly to such criticism by indicating that imagination expands creative

[35] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Grahman Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 2.

[36] Tim Murphy, "Eliade, Subjectivity and Hermeneutics," in *Changing Religious Worlds: The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade*, ed. Bryan Rennie (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 40, 43.

possibilities. Moreover, Eliade perceives a structural analogy between scientific labor and imagination by affording the mind free play and the ability to invent externally beyond the logical process.[37] Along similar lines of argument, Deleuze makes an even more emphatic case for imagination by arguing that "true repetition takes place in imagination."[38] The imagination is the locus of the roots or the tree metaphor that stresses the difference between the thought of Deleuze and Eliade.

The imagination is located, according to John Sallis, at the limits of philosophy where it is never fully appropriated or domesticated.[39] As a bringing to presence, it represents a force that gathers around the upsurge of presence:

> By force of imagination the horizons are drawn around the upsurge of presence, around in a sense irreducible to presence as well as to proximity inasmuch as it is determined by presence. In gathering horizon to image, nonsense to sense, imagination holds together what cannot be together.[40]

Possessing intentionality, making action possible, and dislocating all presence, Sallis' definition of imagination is a gathering that functions as a precondition for all

[37] Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1986), p. 155.

[38] Deleuze, *Difference*, p. 76.

[39] John Sallis, *Force of Imagination: The Sense of the Elemental* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 43-44.

[40] Ibid., p. 139.

production and enabling something other to reveal itself and exceed nature. By means of its association with the self-revelation of things, imagination represents a pure gift.[41]

In comparison to Sallis' notion of imagination, Deleuze disagrees about its ability to bring things to presence because everything remains in flux for Deleuze, whereas Eliade agrees that it brings things into presence. Eliade also agrees with Sallis that to imagine is to begin and gather together things perceived or narratives told. Moreover, Eliade equates the imaginative with the non-historical because the imagination is unavoidably devaluated in a non-rational and non-coherent manner,[42] whereas Sallis stresses the temporality of the imagination by affirming that imagination constitutes time "there in the self-showing of things themselves."[43]

Reflections on Comparison and Difference

According to Jonathan Z. Smith's criticism of Eliade's method, the use of comparison reflects a recollection of similarity; explained as contiguity, constructed on contagion, a subjective experience, and represents an invention and not a discovery because the latter implies

[41] Ibid., p. 146.

[42] Bryan S. Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York State, 1996), p. 221.

[43] Sallis, p. 191.

finding something, whereas invention is an unintended realization of novelty. Smith concludes that comparison is an impressionistic matter of memory and not a sound method, although Smith does think that a limited or controlled use of comparison is useful if it is limited to cultural items that are spatially and temporally contiguous.[44] Moreover, since comparison enables the scholar to bring differences together within his/her mind, it is the scholar who makes possible their sameness, which suggests that comparison does not inform us how things are but rather how they might be conceived.[45] From the perspective of Smith, a consequence of the use of comparison is that difference tends to be forgotten, which leads him to call for a discourse of difference.[46]

Responding to such a call is not without its dangers. If one's method for the study of religion has been shaped in part by neo-Kantian philosophy and its representational type of thinking, as is the case for Eliade, it is possible to witness that he shares with neo-Kantian and Enlightenment philosophical traditions a number of convictions such as the following: the universe is intelligible, and truths are fixed, uniform, permanent, absolute, and universal, while religion is a

[44] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 21-24.

[45] Idem, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 51-52.

[46] Ibid., p. 42.

sui generis reality that is unique and irreducible. Depending on one's point of view, both the dangers and potential for liberating the mind from representational modes of thinking are reflected especially in the early philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, who attempts to develop a philosophy of difference. Without going into great depth, Deleuze wants to restore difference to thought just as Smith wants to restore the importance of difference in the comparative method, but it is first necessary to overcome the tendency to represent "difference through the identity of the concept and the thinking subject."[47] Within his philosophy, we have noted that Deleuze rejects notions such as the one, universal being, the multiple in general because such terms are too all-encompassing or abstract. In place of these kinds of terms, Deleuze stresses the specific, particular, and singular. Difference is an aconceptual notion for Deleuze that undermines the certainties traditionally associated with rationality in the West. Since difference eludes reason, Deleuze finds himself at the limits of the Western philosophical tradition, whereas a more conservative scholar such as Eliade is more symbolically and ontologically comfortable at the center. At these limits of philosophy, the radical nature of difference becomes even more apparent when Deleuze claims that difference inhabits the *Aion*, a past and future with no present, which means that difference is always past or about to be future. From

[47] Deleuze, *Difference*, p. 66.

Eliade's perspective, this type of approach makes it impossible to make comparisons and to ultimately understand religious actions, beliefs, and phenomena. This is also not the type of discourse about difference that Smith would appear to favor because he wants to preserve at least a limited role for comparison. If Deleuze's philosophy of difference undermines hermeneutics and the comparative method, is there another alternative that is sympathetic to both Eliade and Smith and does not neglect difference?

There is another hermeneutical option, which involves altering and expanding one's understanding by remaking its forms and limits. Normally, we understand without articulating what or how we comprehend something, a pattern of behavior or unawareness that shapes our judgments. By means of past experiences, prior decisions, and previous modes of understanding, we develop an inarticulate and unaware mode of comprehension that is akin to a kind of pre-understanding, which shapes our mode of understanding without our being cognizant of its operation. This makes it very difficult, if not impossible, and even undesirable to enter into the viewpoint or worldview of another person. If it is extremely difficult or impossible to get into the mind of another, we should, then, not foolishly think that we can rise above or transcend our own point of view.[48] We must also recognize that our understanding can

[48] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), p. 238.

change over the course of a period of time. Life experiences cause us to adopt, for instance, different modes of understanding our own behavior or that of another person depending on one's stage of life and experiences prior to the moment of interpretation. An interpreter's state of mind during the process of interpretation can also unconsciously shape his/her interpretation. This alternative hermeneutical option is more than a self-conscious examination or a mode of becoming aware of our pre-understanding.

Concluding Remarks

If we are to interpret the religious actions and beliefs of another person or community, it must be acknowledged that other-understanding changes our personal self-understanding. This implies that by attempting to understand the religion of another culture we must also become aware that our understanding is a single possible mode of understanding among other possibilities. To a greater or lesser degree the scholars discussed in this essay exhibit some form of ethnocentrism. Although it is very difficult to completely eradicate one's ethnocentrism in practice, it is at least theoretically possible to begin to overcome it by becoming aware that our individual understanding possesses limits and of how it fits within a wider context of attempts to understand the other. Furthermore, there is always a comparative component to other-

understanding: "This is because we make the other intelligible through our own human understanding."[49] Within the context of this comparative process of recognizing, identifying, and articulating differences, we liberate ourselves by increasing our self-awareness, and we liberate the other by letting them be who they are. If we can recognize the differences between their understanding and our own, we are on our way to the termination of interpreting the other through our personal mode of understanding and allowing them to stand, undistorted by our understanding, in their own authentic mode of being. Thus, by contrasting and comparing, we can make progress understanding the other, strive to escape our ethnocentrism, and transcend our previous personal understanding.

This does not mean that our newly discovered or acquired understanding will be without limits. The philosopher Charles Taylor makes this clear:

> When we struggle to get beyond our limited home understanding, we struggle not toward liberation from this understanding as such (the error of the natural science model) but toward a wider understanding which can englobe the other undistortively.[50]

This implies that our prior narrowness is overcome, while ethnocentrism is conquered by inclusiveness, which suggests understanding the other within the

[49] Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 150.

[50] Ibid., pp. 150-151.

context of his/her own world. Therefore, the role of the comparative method in understanding possesses an important value by elucidating cross-cultural misunderstandings and distortions, which represents a way to not only liberate oneself but also the other. It is thus not necessary to embrace the philosophy of difference espoused by Deleuze in order to emphasize the importance of difference and committing the error of neglecting or not recognizing similarities. Smith is justified to criticize Eliade for neglecting difference and emphasizing sameness, but this does not mean that the method of comparison does not have a viable and useful role to play in cross-cultural hermeneutics. Although it is probably not totally possible to overcome one's ethnocentrism, the comparative method does have a useful hermeneutical role to play in understanding the religious beliefs, actions, and phenomena connected with the other when it is used in such a way that sameness and difference are kept in creative tension with each other within an overall historical context. This suggests that the metaphor of the hierarchically structured tree represented by Eliade's morphological classification and Deleuze's rhizomatic or root metaphor need not cancel each other, but can be embraced in a creative tension, preserving both similarities and differences.

Bibliography

Allen, Douglas. "Mircea Eliade's View of the Study of Religion as the Basis for Cultural and Spiritual Renewal," in *Changing Religious Worlds: The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade*. Ed. Bryan Rennie. Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 2001, pp. 207-233.

Baird, Robert D. *Category Formation and the History of Religions*. The Hague: Mouton, 1971.

Culianu, Ioan Petru. *Mircea Eliade*. Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1977.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, Helen R. Lane. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Grahman Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press. 1994.

Dubuisson, Daniel. *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths. Knowledge and Ideology*. Trans. William Sayers. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

Dudley III, Guilford. *Religion on Trail: Mircea Eliade and His Critics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997.

Eliade, Mircea. "Autobiographical Fragment," in *Imagination and Meaning: The Scholarly and Literary Worlds of Mircea Eliade*. Ed. Norman J. Girardot and Mac Linscott Ricketts. New York: Seabury Press. 1982.

Eliade, Mircea. *Journal II. 1957-1969*. Trans. Fred H. Johnson, Jr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1977.

Eliade, Mircea. "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbols," in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*. Ed. Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1959, pp. 86-107.

Eliade, Mircea. *Myth and Reality*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. New York: Harper & Row, 963.

Eliade, Mircea. *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Bollingen Series XL VI. New York: Pantheon Books, 1954.

Eliade, Mircea. *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*. Trans. Philip Mairet. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.

Eliade, Mircea. *Ordeal by Labyrinth: Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet*. Trans. Derek Coltman. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. 1982.

Eliade, Mircea. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. Trans. Rosemary Sheed. Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1968.

Eliade, Mircea. *The Portugal Journal*. Trans. Mac Linscott Ricketts. Albany, N. Y: State University of New York Press, 2010.

Eliade, Mircea. *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1969.

Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1959.

Eliade, Mircea. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series LXXVI. New York: Pantheon Books. 1964.

Eliade, Mircea. *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*. Ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1986.

Fitzgerald, Timothy. *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982.

Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.

McCutcheon, Russell T. *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse of Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1997.

Murphy, Tim. "Eliade, Subjectivity, and Hermeneutics," in *Changing Religious Worlds: The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade*. Ed. Bryan Rennie. Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 2001, pp. 35-47.

Murphy, Tim. *Representing Religion: Essays in History, Theory and Crisis*. London, Oakville: Equinox, 2007.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Ed. Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin and trans, Adrian Del Caro. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Olson, Carl. *The Theology and Philosophy of Eliade: A Search for the Centre*. Houndmills and London: Macmillan, 1992.

Olson, Carl. *Zen and the Art of Postmodern Philosophy: Two Paths of Liberation from the Representational Mode of Thinking*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.

Rennie, Bryan S. *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion*. Albany. N. Y: State University of New York Press, 1996.

Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1979.

Saliba, John A. *Homo Religiosus in Mircea Eliade: Anthropological Evaluation*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976.

Sallis, John. *Force of Imagination: The Sense of the Elemental*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000.

Smart, Ninian. "Beyond Eliade: The Future of Theory in Religion." *Numen* XXV, Fasc. 2, (1978), pp. 171-183.

Smith, Jonathan Z. *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Smith, Jonathan Z. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Smith, Jonathan Z. *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2004.

Strenski, Ivan. *Religion in Relation: Method. Application, and Moral Location*. Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press. 1993.

Taylor, Charles. *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Author's Bio

Professor Carl Olson teaches Religious Studies at Allegheny College.

Besides numerous essays in journals, books and encyclopedias, his latest of 18 books published include the following: *The Different Paths of Buddhism: A Narrative-Historical Introduction* (2005); *The Many Colors of Hinduism: A Thematic-Historical Introduction* (2007); *Celibacy and Religious Traditions* (2007); *Religious Studies: The Key Concepts* (2011); *The Allure of Decadent Thinking: Religious Studies and the Challenge of Postmodernism* (2013); and *Indian Asceticism Power, Violence, and Play* (2015).

While at Allegheny College, Professor Olson has been appointed to following positions: Holder of the National Endowment for the Humanities Chair, 1991-1994; Holder of the Teacher-Scholar Chair in the Humanities, 2000-2003; Visiting Fellowship at Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, 2002; and elected Life Member of Clare Hall, University of Cambridge 2002.

History of Religions and Cultural Fashions Revisited

Jerry CULLUM

In *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*,[1] Sigmund Freud famously wrote that humanity had suffered three wounds to its narcissism – Copernicus had demonstrated that humanity did not dwell at the center of the cosmos, Darwin had demonstrated that humanity had descended from the same line of speciation as the primates, and Freud had demonstrated that the vaunted individual self was subject to unconscious forces. Donna Haraway has recently proposed that the possibility that human intelligence can be not only supplemented but supplanted by digital technology constitutes a fourth narcissistic wound.[2]

The Darwinian and Freudian wounds have transmuted and merged in recent decades through the flood of unsettling discoveries and hypotheses being presented by evolutionary psychology and neuroscience of the brain. This information has been spread to a

[1] Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, tr. James Strachey (Liveright: The Standard Edition, reprint 1989), p. 353.

[2] Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 12.

broad audience, bit by bit, via digital media and occasionally by mass-market print publications. The news has transformed popular culture even when it has been treated with indifference by the larger part of the population. In the United States, it has frequently been received with open hostility.

We are thus at a moment in history in which the "narcissistic hurts" – even the Copernican in some cases – are denied by a substantial percentage of the earth's population, ignored by perhaps an even more substantial percentage, and thought of simplistically by most of the rest. In spite of that, sufficient evidence has now been assembled for a fresh debate on the nature of humanity.

The difficulty is that few if any cross-disciplinary scholars have a sufficient grasp of the constantly shifting state of research and of the broad sweep of the human achievement in art, literature, and religion across something like 40,000+ years of human creativity and across the entire planet. The academic discipline of the history of religions is intrinsically interdisciplinary, and perhaps in a position to contribute particularly useful insights to the dialogue across academic boundaries.

This essay is intended to present a very thin slice of cultural responses to our contemporary condition, and to suggest a few possible resources for analysis of them.

The Romanian Pavilion of the 2015 Venice Biennale is dominated by a suite of paintings by the celebrated Cluj–, Berlin–, and London-based artist Adrian Ghenie, titled *Darwin's Room*. This body of work focuses on Darwin's figure and surroundings, and has as its conceptual background Ghenie's belief that while currently regnant neoliberal ideologies of unrestrained competition can be traced back to Darwin's picture of the struggle for existence, other models of human society and the human condition may be arising in today's competition between modes of thought.[3]

These paintings, and Ghenie's related installation *The Darwin Room*,[4] exhibited in London in 2014, are only the latest additions to a long list of artworks indebted to or paying homage to Darwin's legacy. Also in London in 2014, Koen Vanmechelen's *Darwin's Dream* is derived from a 15 year, 18 generation experiment of cross-breeding chickens to produce the same sort of spectacular diversity of plumage that Darwin produced in pigeons. A curators' note in the exhibition catalogue describes the purpose of this collection of photographs and sculptures evoking the findings of a decade and a half of work as

[3] http://darwinsroom.ro/project/, accessed July 30, 2015; Adrian Ghenie, *Darwin's Room*, Hatje Cantz, 2015.

[4] http://www.pacegallery.com/london/exhibitions/12671/golems, accessed July 31, 2015.

> suggest[ing] a substantial sense of human-animal shared destiny that emerges where through this symbolic partnership, man can acquire answers to adaptive needs.[5]

More importantly for the purposes of this present essay, the University of Ghent professor Rik Pinxten wrote in the accompanying "Koen Vanmechelen: Art and science,"

> Both science and art are wonderful and indeed powerful forms of human invention and creativity. Personally, I think that this may probably be the ultimate, although gradual, distinction between humans and other animals: by means of the faculty of fantasy and imagination we add a dimension to the determinacy of nature.[6]

Both these exhibitions were focused on the work that led to Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. But Darwin postponed his most explosive proposals until some years later, when *The Descent of Man* placed human beings firmly among the primates.

Thus primatology has long been concerned with contemplating and researching the origins of human behaviors by studying primate behaviors. Some years ago, the aggressiveness of bands of chimpanzees was

---

[5] James Putnam and Jill Silverman van Coenegrachts, "A Word from the Curators," *Darwin's Dream*, Guy Pieters Gallery, 2014 (on the occasion of an exhibition at the Crypt Gallery, London, November 15 - December 14, 2014), p. 10.

[6] Rik Pinxten, "Koen Mechanlen: Art and Science," *Darwin's Dream*, p. 73.

taken to explain the innate human tendency to compete and engage in violent combat. More recently, the discovery that the closely related bonobo engages in cooperation and erotic reconciliation after conflict has led some primatologists to observe that humanity shares genes with both chimpanzees and bonobos, derived from a common ancestor that may have been more complex than previously imagined.

Frans de Waal's 2011 book *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates* recounts experiments that indicate that bonobos are capable of making judgments of fairness (including fairness to a partner) and expressing empathy to an injured or wronged member of the species. More controversially, de Waal extrapolated from this evidence to questions regarding human morality and religion. Suggesting that religion may be well nigh selected for by evolution, he imagined what a bonobo might tell a fervidly evangelizing atheist if the two were able to engage in a dialogue. (As translated by de Waal, the bonobo's remarks would be a witty summation of the major points of de Waal's book, beginning with an admonition to stop "sleeping furiously," in bonobo metaphor, and be less superfluously upset by a being that the atheist regards as nonexistent.)[7]

[7] Frans de Waal, *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates,* W. W. Norton, 2011, p. 236.

The notion of a dialogue is not total fantasy; while de Waal carries out his own research at the Yerkes Primate Center of Atlanta's Emory University, the Language Research Center of Georgia State University (also in Atlanta) has worked to create a type of linguistic communication between chimpanzees (and bonobos) and humans. Given a series of pictorial symbols that they are taught to manipulate to form sentences, the chimpanzee/bonobo test subjects have been able to express not only requests but pleasure and displeasure, often combining symbols in a sort of metaphoric reach that seems to indicate that they associate the images not just with objects but with emotions.[8]

The Atlanta artist Craig Dongoski "collaborated" (perhaps without the questioning quotation marks) with one of the test subjects on works of art that he insists offer insight into the origins of written language. Although the marks that the chimp named Panzee made in notebooks appear random, they were written in straight lines, separate and distinct rather than overlaid, and some of the marks resemble ideograms and the rudiments of an alphabet. Dongoski created his own artworks based on enlargements of these marks.[9]

---

[8] See: http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwlrc/3476.html for information on the Language Research Center's projects.

[9] For details of Dongoski's project, see Jerry Cullum, "Two Shows - Digital Collages and Primate Marks - Produce Artistic Meditations at Whitespace and Whitespec," ArtsATL, May 27, 2014,

Dongoski's art explored the behavior that may represent a precursor to symbol-making in more ways than one; the linear arrangement of the marks may be some version of the human propensity towards forms of compositional arrangement that is one root of aesthetic experience; another root, the form of aesthetic arrest that seems to connote either awe or emotional enchantment, leads to both art and religious experience – but is not the complete explanation of either. This latter "awe and wonderment at natural events," as de Waal notes, is almost incontestably present in the primates with which he works.[10]

The existence of what seem like metaphors in chimpanzee/bonobo-human communication suggests the possibility of the roots of storytelling among the primates. But there is, to my knowledge, no evidence of counterfactuals combined with the subjunctive ("if this were true, then that would be possible, but it isn't") – although the visualization of solutions to a problem never before encountered has been demonstrated many times, and not only in primate species. In any number of species, problem-solving involves something like picturing possible scenarios without the intervention of language; the roots of

---

http://www.artsatl.com/2014/05/whitespace-craig-dongoski-charlie-watts/. See also Whitespace Gallery's Dongoski page, "Exploration Between the Written and the Spoken Word," http://whitespace814.com/artists/craig-dongoski/, both accessed July 31, 2015.

[10] *The Bonobo and the Atheist*, pp. 199-200.

fantasy are in images rather than words. Whole dramas play out in our heads without language intervening, but those scenarios typically depend on prior knowledge imprinted through stories expressed in language. That dialectic between image and word is perhaps the only feature of humanity that still distinguishes homo sapiens from all other creatures on earth; bonobos may well make for themselves pictures of facts (I am making the joking reference to the English version of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* with full knowledge of the implications), but as far as we know, they have no mythology.

As far as we can determine, narrative is the distinctive feature of human beings. Many animals dream, and many play, even as adults. We now know that chimpanzees can learn symbol systems, and communicate not only requests but emotions to humans by using the symbols they have been taught. We can see the bases of metaphor and the ability to picture possible situations. But as far as we can tell, neither bonobos nor chimpanzees have anything like the ability to tell a sequential counterfactual story, or a factual one for that matter.

Narrative, as I've just said, can be visual and gestural as well as verbal,[11] and makes possible storytelling of types that range from folktale to religious mythology. The evolutionary leap has been explained by two

[11] Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 131.

diametrically opposed hypotheses: that storytelling confers such distinct evolutionary benefits that natural selection led to its creation and elaboration, or that storytelling came about as an accidental feature of other brain developments. As Jonathan Gottschall's recent popularizing book puts it, "[…] nothing so central to the human condition is so incompletely understood."[12] However it came about, it is generally recognized as deriving from a combination of language and play […] and it is obvious that it frequently leads to narratives taken with fundamental seriousness.

It also is both culturally specific and shaped by a common human biology, but recently it is difference that has been uppermost in scholarship in history of religions as in the other academic disciplines devoted to the human sciences or the humanities. The emphasis on cultural difference has, until recently, prevented any fresh attempts at the sort of comprehensive cross-cultural accounts undertaken half a century ago by Joseph Campbell in *The Masks of God* or Mircea Eliade in *A History of Religious Ideas*.[13] Campbell's attempt, in the opening pages of *Primitive Mythology*, to provide an evolutionary basis for myth is particularly dated, and in need of rethinking, though not necessarily of complete rejection.

---

[12] Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Mariner Press, 2012), p. xiv.

[13] *The Masks of God* was published in four volumes between 1959 and 1969. Three of the intended four volumes of *A History of Religious Ideas* were published in English between 1978 and 1985, although the French originals appeared earlier, beginning in 1976.

The trend towards difference is itself a cultural fashion that is now passing. The cross-cultural functions of story as shared human experience, however, have not yet been sufficiently explored anew by historians of religion. There are excellent reasons for this. However similar the overall impact may be in varying contexts, the forces of globalized economics and digital technology are received differently in each culture. In *Globalizing the Sacred*, an astonishingly ambitious survey of 21st-century religion across the Americas, Manuel A. Vásquez and Marie Friedmann Marquardt note that the premodern, modern, and postmodern (the last-named term already out of fashion as a descriptor) merge as well as collide, and in very distinct ways. Even a globalized "hybridity all the way down"[14] is not always the same hybridity. Difference makes all the difference, and the new realizations of commonality have not had anything like consistent effects in academic disciplines, any more than they have in the cultures that are insistently meeting, mingling, and mixing despite the best efforts of defenders of tradition or presupposed cultural purity.

It would be interesting, in a more comprehensive version of the course of action I am suggesting, to re-read a book like Robert N. Bellah's *Beyond Belief*: *Essays*

[14] Manuel Vásquez and Marie Friedmann Marquardt, *Globalizing the Sacred: Religion across the Americas* (Rutgers University Press, 2003), p. 60.

on Religion in a Post-Traditional World,[15] which contained disparate essays addressing the then-contemporary religious situation in East Asia, the Islamic world, and the United States, and contemplate the differences and similarities between how things were thought to be then and how they have turned out to be in the fifty years since those essays were written. It would be even more interesting to juxtapose Bellah's approach with the revisionary method of Vásquez and Marquardt, who attack the assumptions of various reductionisms while acknowledging their validity when considered differently; they write that it is their intent to "rematerialize the study of religion in a nonreductive fashion," making it

> possible to preserve Eliade's anti-reductionist impetus without denying that religion is inextricably entwined with social and historical processes,

so that what they study is

> how religion is imagined and experienced by individuals, groups, and institutions embedded in multiple realms of activity.[16]

I am proposing, somewhat similarly, that attitudes towards religion are being molded by new realms of knowledge according to the degree in which those realms of knowledge are disseminated, but that the reception of those realms of knowledge is affected by the prior cultural situation of the groups and individuals

[15] Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (Harper & Row, 1970).

[16] *Globalizing the Sacred*, p. 8.

receiving it. They interpret them according to cultural categories that vary enormously, even though the intrinsic similarities of human beings across the planet guarantee that the interpretations will often be in some ways even more similar than simplistic reductionism would lead us to expect, and in others even more different. Hence this essay proposes the value of studying cultural fashions, which are often both local and global, as one mode of entry to the problem.

Such longtime interpreters of shared cultural experiences as Marina Warner (whose *Phantasmagoria*[17] ought to be included in a longer contemplation of culture and consciousness) continue to offer adroit summaries of the multiple functions of such perdurable phenomena as fairy tales or the linked tales of frame-tale collections.[18] More recently, fabulists themselves, from Salman Rushdie to Neil Gaiman, have felt impelled to theorize upon the functions and nature of stories, and the reasons for their persistence across generations and centuries.

---

[17] Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, And Media Into the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford University Press, 2006). See also http://www.marinawarner.com/publications/book detailsnonfiction/ phantasmagoria.html, accessed July 31, 2015.

[18] See: Marina Warner, *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tales* (Oxford University Press, 2014), and http://www.marina warner.com/publications/bookdetailsnonfiction/onceuponatime.html, accessed July 31, 2015, and/or Marina Warner, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* (Harvard University Press, 2012), and http://www.marinawarner.com/publication,s/ book detailsnonfiction/strangermagic.html, accessed July 31, 2015.

Gaiman's fantasy stories, ranging from graphic novels to a classic re-imagining of religious history in the novel *American Gods*,[19] have established his reputation among a huge popular following as a typically ironic, sometimes cynical teller of both new tales and old themes updated for a bitterly skeptical era. It is thus particularly significant that he chose to bring the results of two and a half years of research to an online audience in the seminars of the Long Now Foundation with the lecture "How Stories Last." Since his research and speculation were both undertaken responsibly, much of what Gaiman had to say has been said previously by others. But his poetically expressed summations are noteworthy in and of themselves:

> Pictures, I think, may have been a way of transmitting stories. The drawings on cave walls that we assume are acts of worship or of sympathetic magic, intended to bring hunters luck and good kills, I keep wondering if, actually, they're just ways of telling stories: 'We came over that bridge and we saw a herd of wooly bisons.' And I wonder that because people tell stories – it's an enormous part of what makes us human. […] A lot of stories do appear to begin as intrinsic to religions and belief systems – a lot of the ones we have have gods or goddesses in them; they teach us how the world exists; they teach us the rules of living in the world. But they also have to come in an attractive enough package that we take pleasure from them and we want to help them propagate.[20]

[19] Neil Gaiman, *American Gods: A Novel* (William Morrow, 2001).

[20] Accessed July 31, 2015 at http://www.brainpickings.org/2015/06/16/neil-gaiman-how-stories-last/.

When one of the most popular storytellers in Britain and America feels impelled to explore the roots of story, it is indicative of how far the awareness of our nature as storytelling beings has permeated the culture. But awareness of epochal discoveries regarding our neurological makeup and our parallels with other species has also spread widely; and although the situation is less widely acknowledged, academicians have grown aware of the difficulty of examining the human condition with analytical tools that are themselves subject to cultural fashions and the limitations imposed by unconsciously received cultural stories. As the title of a memorable work by Atlanta-based photographer Beth Lilly has it, "The story is trying to tell the story."[21]

Telling the story of all the aforementioned stories is more than one essay can possibly accomplish. But a half-century-old lecture by Mircea Eliade (it was delivered on May 2, 1966) suggests a possible method of approach: The published version of "History of Religions and Cultural Fashions"[22] leaps in its 14 pages from the topic of a doubtfully true tale repeated throughout 19th century scholarship to the then-popular French magazine of fantastic realism *Planète* to

[21] See: http://www.bethlilly.com/wp-content/gallery/esoosits/beth-lilly_the-story-is-trying-to-tell-the-story.jpg.

[22] Mircea Eliade, "History of Religions and Cultural Fashions," reprinted in Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (Crossroad, 1985), pp. 17-31.

Teilhard de Chardin to structuralism, finding in all of the contemporary cultural vogues a shared "protest against the pessimism and nihilism of some recent historicists."[23]

Fifty years later, this judgment appears accurate even if one were to take issue with the lecture/essay's other characteristically Eliadean terminology regarding them. But it is the succinct and fast-moving quality of Eliade's argument that I wish to imitate, for I am attempting to deal with amorphous cultural transformations that are planet-wide and sufficiently immense to demand a lengthy, and probably unwieldy, book.

Eliade famously insisted that, as Robert Segal summarizes it, "religiosity is innate to human beings and, more, that it is as insatiable a drive as hunger."[24] Today, it is easier to argue that religion, art, and storytelling all derive from the same complex of innate biological predispositions modified by culture. As Gaiman's lecture indicates, it is difficult to find a human group completely indifferent to religion, art, and storytelling alike. It is, however, possible to find a cultural fashion determined to demonstrate their irrelevance to the human future, and I wish to begin my not quite arbitrary survey of a handful of cultural fashions by addressing the presuppositions and practices behind this impulse. Afterwards, I shall turn

[23] "History of Religions and Cultural Fashions," p. 29.

[24] Robert A. Segal, "Are There Modern Myths?" in Bryan Rennie, ed., *Changing Religious Worlds: The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade* (State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 25.

to a body of fiction that has been put to contrary uses by contending cultural fashions, then to contemporary and recent religious practices bound up with the problem of narrative, and an approach to the history of religions that attempts to meld an awareness of story with an awareness of all the other factors influencing the shaping of contemporary consciousness. I shall conclude with a brief discussion of a few provocative examples from contemporary art.

Apart from a few cases, the cultural fashions I shall be discussing are primarily American, even when they derive from other cultures. We live in a world of what Zygmunt Bauman calls liquid modernity, in which the world's cultures and communities are mingling with a rapidity that calls local pieties into question no matter where they are situated.[25] But the context in which structurally similar dramas play out, as I have said, is always local. I do not presume the universality of the cultural fashions I shall discuss.

The cultural fashion of transhumanism is by no means limited to Americans – after all, Yuval Noah Harari's best-selling book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind,* originally published in Israel in Hebrew in 2011, is finding a broad international audience. It concludes with a resonantly transhumanist affirmation that the evolution that began with the cognitive leap that transformed "an animal of no significance" 70,000 years ago has now led to a sentient creature who

[25] Zygmunt Bauman, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* (Polity Press, 2011).

> stands on the verge of becoming a god, poised to acquire not only eternal youth, but also the divine abilities of creation and destruction.[26]

But the Google director of engineering Ray Kurzweil has, for many readers, become the dominant voice of the movement,[27] and his insistent view that technology will soon transcend the human condition altogether bespeaks an optimism, perhaps excessive and/or based on arguable premises, that has always been part of the American character. Certitude regarding the trajectory of future events has been part of the American mythos almost from the days of the founding colonists. (Ironically, the Technological Singularity, the notion for which Kurzweil is best known, is a coming event horizon beyond which lie outcomes we cannot imagine. But Kurzweil is adamant that its imminent arrival is inevitable.[28])

---

[26] Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Harvill Secker, 2014), p. 415.

[27] The book with which Ray Kurzweil is most associated at present is probably *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (Viking Press, 2005), although *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (Viking Press, 1999) would run a close second. He has written five other books, the most recent of which is the much-criticized *How to Create a Mind: The Secret of Human Thought Revealed* (Viking Press, 2012). See, among other critiques regarding Kurzweil's "pattern recognition theory," Colin McGinn, "Homunculism," *New York Review of Books*, March 21, 2013, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/mar/21/homunculism/, accessed August 1, 2015.

[28] See the discussions, especially Ramez Naam's dissenting view, in "The Singularity," R. U. Sirius and Jay Cornell, *Transcendence: The Disinformation Encyclopedia of Transhumanism and the Singularity* (Disinformation Books, 2015), pp. 214-219.

Transhumanism is not a single consolidated doctrine, but the cultural patterns that characterize it form a set of shared interests that coalesce into an implicit story. "Story," however, is usually as of little interest to transhumanism as religion or aesthetics – by and large, cutting-edge transhumanists take pride in being indifferent to what they regard as the animal side of our nature, which is slowing down our computational intelligence. This emphasis on the computational function of the brain apart from emotional contamination is part of what Yuval Noah Harari described as "the decoupling of intelligence from consciousness"[29] but only part. As a perusal of the entries in R. U. Sirius' and Jay Cornell's playfully titled *Transcendence: The Disinformation Encyclopedia of Transhumanism and the Singularity* reveals, transhumanists explore the possibility of personal immortality through medical advances, the uploading of individual consciousness into endlessly replicable machines (this is one of the oldest dreams of transhumanism), simple performance enhancement through chemistry, and a multiplicity of other topics including "cosmism," which is

> a positive, far-reaching… attitude toward science, technology, life, the universe, and everything [*note that the joking allusion to Douglas Adams' novel demonstrates*

[29] Daniel Kahneman and Yuval Noah Harari, "Death Is Optional: A Conversation," March 4, 2015, http://edge.org/conversation/yuval_noah_harari-daniel_kahneman-death-is-optional, accessed July 30, 2015.

> *the punningly pseudonymous R. U. Sirius' systematically serious unseriousness*] … focused on enthusiastically and thoroughly exploring, understanding, and enjoying the cosmos, and being open to all the possible forms life and mind may take as the future unfolds.[30]

The encyclopedia also discusses "transhumanist TV, film, and games," along with "science fiction," although many transhumanists' fascination with the possibilities revealed in the plausible imaginary does not connote an interest in how the tales are put together. (Presumably the writers of these tales-for-transhumanists do worry about this, albeit probably more often on a practical rather than philosophical level.) Interestingly, although the *X-Men* series is among the films and fictions listed, "mutation" is not an entry in the encyclopedia; presumably an accidental enhancement of humanity or one not guided by human intelligence is of no interest to transhumanists except in the context of entertainment.

It may, however, not remain merely the imaginative province of persons with such preferences; on July 16, 2015 Dirk Breure suggested that transhumanism might become "the final religion."[31] Breure proposes that some of the hypotheses of transhumanists land them in

[30] R. U. Sirius and Jay Cornell, *Transcendence: The Disinformation Encyclopedia of Transhumanism and the Singularity* (Disinformation Books, 2015), p. 52.

[31] Dirk Breure, "Transhumanism: The Final Religion?" IEET: Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies, July 16, 2015, http://ieet.org/index.php/IEET/more/bruere20150715, accessed July 30, 2015.

regions previously cultivated only by Christian apocalypticists and Gnostics. (He seems unaware of the Jewish background of apocalyptic literature, but his degree, after all, is in physics. What counts is that a committed transhumanist is discussing such questions, concurrent with the spread of transhumanist topics into popular culture. Rick Searle's *Utopia or Dystopia* blog, utopiaordystopia.com, cited below, is rife with discussions of far more bizarre syntheses of transhumanism and religion.)

Transhumanism is far from the only movement beyond traditional humanism; David Roden's *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human* suggests at least three options: transhumanism in the present-day sense (which he regards as merely an extension of humanism, with a more powerful *anthropos* in the anthropocentric middle of things); critical posthumanism, which challenges the lingering philosophical claims to centrality of the human subject; and speculative posthumanism, which claims that "we have never been human," as Donna Haraway puts it in phraseology that imitates Bruno Latour's "we have never been modern."[32]

[32] Bruno Latour's *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Duke University Press, 2010) introduces neologisms that operate as strange puns: "fact" combined with "fetish" to form "factish," "icon" combined with "clash" instead of "-clasm" to form "iconoclash." Latour's treatment of religion and science together as sites in which fetishes are broken and then repaired and icons are set in motion and "freeze-framed" (as in movie stills) is vertiginous; everything we have inherited from the great narrative of modernity is being revealed to be inadequate at best, outright wrong at worst.

This last is less concerned with dethroning the human subject and more with examining the ways in which human beings have always been part of the system of an environing world, and are about to be plunged into a world in which humanity is subjected to thoroughly uncontrollable forces that humanity itself has generated.[33]

Roden's proposal, put this baldly, sounds remarkably like taken-for-granted suppositions in the natural sciences and human sciences; the insertion of humanity into the object-world around it has been accomplished long since in fields of endeavor not deriving from the traditions of Euro-American philosophy, even if the mind-body dichotomy has lingered in academicians' consciousness as what David Chalmers named as "the hard problem," a 1995 description that has had staying power.[34]

Given the evident comforts of story, it is not altogether surprising that while some humans bereft of religion have found consolation in the knowledge of the insignificance of human existence, others have found it in the realms of conscious fiction; in "The

[33] David Roden, *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human* (Routledge, 2014), pp. 9-11.

[34] Chalmers, D.J. "Phenomenal Concepts and the Explanatory Gap." In T. Alter & S. Walter, eds. *Phenomenal Concepts and Phenomenal Knowledge: New Essays on Consciousness and Physicalism* (Oxford University Press, 2006), cited in "The Hard Problem of Consciousness," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer-Reviewed Academic Resource*, eds. James Fieser, Bradley Dowden, et al., http://www.iep.utm.edu/hard-con/, accessed July 30, 2015. Tom Stoppard has written a thought-provoking play that combines the consciousness conundrum with the question of the existence of God: *The Hard Problem* (Faber & Faber, 2015).

Danger of Using Science as a God Killing Machine,"[35] Rick Searle writes that author Jennifer Percy abandoned the science that her father used as a way of fleeing from the "messy realm of human existence" whereas she, as she puts it,

> found the brutal immensity of the universe frightening. [The family home's reading matter consisted of] physics books and Stephen King books. Both were terrifying. So we had to choose what kind of fear we liked best – my brother chose Stephen King, and I chose Stephen Hawking.

However, she eventually abandoned a career in physics because

> the language of science was unsatisfying to me. Unlike a science experiment with rigid, controlled parameters, our lives are boundless and shifting. And there's never an end to the story. We need more than science – we need storytelling to capture that kind of complexity, that kind of incomprehensibility.[36]

---

[35] Rick Searle, "The Danger of Using Science as a God Killing Machine," March 30, 2014, http://utopiaordystopia.com/2014/03/30/the-danger-of-using-science-as-a-god-killing-machine/ This essay is found in Searle's blog *Utopia or Dystopia* under the tag "God" at the page for March 30, 2014, which as of July 30, 2015, was located at http://utopiaordystopia.com/category/dystopia/page/7/ under the category "Dystopia," a rapidly growing set of essay-length blog posts that, perused at length, is likely to alter the reader's consciousness in ways and directions that the reader never even remotely anticipated.

[36] Joe Fassler, "'Life Keeps Changing': Why Stories, Not Science, Explain the World" (interview with Jennifer Percy), *The Atlantic*, online edition, January 21, 2014, http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/01/life-keeps-changing-why-stories-not-science-explain-the-world/283219/, accessed July 30, 2015.

What sort of story, however, appeals to those for whom the rigor of controlled experiment or software code remains a way of life? Curiously, for many of them it might be a writer who was something of a hybrid between Stephen King and Stephen Hawking and an 18th-century rationalist, a once-neglected writer of fiction who, according to Victoria Nelson's admittedly personal impression in *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the New Supernatural*, was formerly the purview mostly of "an initially adolescent male culture of sensitive, literate boys who […] grow up to be scholars or filmmakers."[37] Today H. P. Lovecraft's stories have spawned, among many other things, a work of homage by one of France's most controversial novelists, a work of philosophy by an advocate of one of America's most contested philosophical movements, and a range of plush toys based on Lovecraft's monstrous alien creatures,[38] as well as multiple anthologies of the stories themselves in a welter of disparate formats.[39]

The fiction of Lovecraft had begun to spread beyond a minimal fan base as long ago as the 1960s, when, as Eliade noted in "History of Religions and

[37] Victoria Nelson, *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the New Supernatural* (Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 62.

[38] See, among an astonishing range of types and sales outlets, http://www.toyvault.com/cthulhu/index.html, accessed August 1, 2015.

[39] Among the astonishing variety of annotated editions and selective anthologies, the definitive imprimatur of cultural recognition is surely *H. P. Lovecraft: Tales*, ed. Peter Straub (Library of America, 2005).

Cultural Fashions," *Planète* dealt with, among other things, "H. P. Lovecraft and American science fiction."[40] So it is thus somewhat less surprising that Michel Houllebecq began his writing career with the 1991 book translated as *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (presented to American readers in 2005 with an introductory essay by Stephen King).[41]

Houellebecq celebrated, enthusiastically, Lovecraft's singularly alienated lifestyle, but for many contemporary American devotees Lovecraft's singularity inheres in the fact that, as Michael Saler puts it, "Following Nietzsche, Lovecraft enjoying piercing illusions even as he used them consciously to re-enchant the world."[42] As Erik Davis summarizes it, Lovecraft cultivated what Lovecraft himself called a "cosmic indifferentism":

> the metaphysical background of Lovecraft's tales is a 'cosmic indifferentism' rooted in the nihilistic and atheist materialism that Lovecraft professed at great length in his fascinating letters. This lifelong philosophical stance led Lovecraft to embrace the disillusioning powers of science, but also to pessimistically anticipate science's ultimate evisceration of human norms and comforts. His weird tales were imaginative diversions from this nihilism, but their horror reflected it as well.[43]

---

[40] "History of Religions and Cultural Fashions," p. 23.

[41] Michel Houllebecq, *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*, tr. Dorna Khazeni (McSweeney's Believer Books, 2005).

[42] Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 140.

[43] Erik Davis, "The Magick of H. P. Lovecraft," *The Occult World*, Routledge, 2014, posted at http://techgnosis.com/h-p-lovecraft/, accessed July 30, 2015.

Lovecraft constructed piecemeal what his devotees later chose to call the Cthulhu Mythos, in stories in which a protagonist or narrator slowly comes to understand that the Earth has once been ruled by great, horrifying alien creatures who now lie in subterranean lairs, largely powerless without the cooperation of humans who have throughout the ages regarded these creatures as gods and done their bidding. They range from the tentacle-faced Cthulhu to the Fungi from Yuggoth, sentient plant-like organisms from the then newly discovered planet Pluto.[44]

The point is that Lovecraft did not believe that any such history had ever happened, but that it was perfectly plausible to believe that something of the sort had happened or could happen – that material creatures from elsewhere in a fundamentally meaningless cosmos could arrive with malevolent intent, and manipulate humans to carry out intentions beyond human comprehension. This is an ironic pseudo-religion designed for skeptics, delivered in stories skillfully constructed to create a pleasurable sense of surprise and fright, and I must surmise that part of the pleasure for the irony-minded admirers of Lovecraft lies in extending the Mythos into such unterrifying genres as

[44] The Lovecraft mythos has passed into the scientific lexicon; a geographic feature on Pluto has been provisionally named Cthulhu alongside others designated by names taken from world mythology, but the name was proposed by members of the public, not scientists, who chose it for its memorable sound. See http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2015/07/14/new-data-reveals-that-plutos-heart-is-broken/ and http://www.nbcnews.com/science/space/mount-spock-new-horizons-pluto-name-list-includes-star-trek-n388091

children's plush toys, signifying that the myth always was only a game, like so much else in the world at large.

Other Lovecraft fans, however, take their Mythos seriously, and are uninterested in learning from Graham Harman's *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*[45] just how Lovecraft artfully arranges sequences of syllables and alluring metaphors to seduce the reader as compellingly as the creatures of the Mythos seduce their worshippers. Victoria Nelson divides these latter pursuers of fantasies that range from Lovecraft's Mythos to the imagined world of the film *Avatar* into Secondary Believers, "right at the edge of, if not erasing, that critical line between imagination and belief" as they act out aspects of their chosen fantasy, and Primary Believers who are "creating a spiritual practice or worship that attempts to connect to a nonmaterial dimension of reality."[46] As she notes,

> For those outside the pale of orthodoxy, Gothick pop culture products such as Great Old Ones, vampires, Klingons, and orcs offer the only easily accessible bridge to the transcendental. As the filmmaker Guillermo del Toro has said about watching horror movies, 'Believing in supernatural things allows you to actually have a spiritual experience in a time when you cannot do that in [an] uplifting way without sounding somewhat foolish.'[47]

[45] Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Zero Books, 2012).

[46] *Gothicka*, p. 58.

[47] *Gothicka*, p. 71. The del Toro quotation is found in Patt Morrison, "Guillermo del Toro: Monster Mash," *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 2010.

Nelson's whole study of the world of present-day Gothicka ranging from H. P. Lovecraft to vampires, zombies, and new genres of Christian fiction deserves extended critical perusal, along with Michael Saler's somewhat differently focused analysis quoted above.

I should point out in passing a delightfully funny but conceptually challenging contribution to the Cthulhu genre by a contemporary Atlanta-based artist, E. K. Huckaby, whose *Brer Cthulhu* sculpture outfits the monster in the work clothes associated with the imaginary African-American storyteller Uncle Remus, whom Joel Chandler Harris created as the vehicle for his retelling of traditional folk tales.[48] As in so much of Huckaby's work, the hybridization of different levels of historically transmitted story contains volumes of potential reflection on the changing function of narrative in an evolving society.

But the Lovecraft mythos was not the only one taking shape in the waning decades of the 20th century; in the American South, self-taught artists were birthing strange space creatures from visions as vivid as any of Lovecraft's dreams in the witch house or colors out of space in the similarly titled stories.

Eddie Owens Martin, who later renamed himself St. EOM, developed a hybrid mythology of Pasaquoyanism that owed a great deal to the books he perused in the

[48] Donna Mintz, "E. K. Huckaby - poet, saint of the obsolete, savior of the discarded: at MOCA GA," ArtsATL, November 12, 2014, http://www.artsatl.com/2014/11/review-e-k-huckaby-poet-saint-obsolete-savior-discarded-at-moca-ga/, accessed July 30, 2015.

New York Public Library before returning home in the mid-1950s to a rural part of the American state of Georgia, but still more to a visionary experience he had during an illness, in which a gigantic figure informed him that he would be permitted to recover if he could follow the figure's spiritual directives. He proceeded to build a remarkable piece of visionary architecture, which has been preserved, sometimes tenuously, in the three decades since his death.[49]

In the mid 1970s, a heterodox Baptist preacher and bicycle repairman further north in Georgia reportedly had a vision in which a face appearing in the paint on his thumb commanded him to "paint sacred art." Over the course of a quarter century, Howard Finster did so to the point of some fifty thousand individual artworks, accompanied by another piece of visionary architecture he named Paradise Garden. Many writers have published accounts of Finster, but most relevant for the purposes of this essay is *Envisioning Howard Finster: The Religion and Art of a Stranger from Another World,* a 2015 book by the historian of religions Norman Girardot, who documented Finster's art and his many reported subsequent visions over the course of a quarter-century.[50]

---

[49] Tom Patterson, "St. EOM," *BOMB* magazine 19, Spring 1987, http://bombmagazine.org/article/902/, accessed August 1, 2015. Tom Patterson, *St. EOM in the Land of Pasaquan* (Jargon Society, 1987).

[50] Norman Girardot, *Envisioning Howard Finster: The Religion and Art of a Stranger from Another World* (University of California Press, 2015). An extract from the book has been published as Norman

Girardot's book elucidates many previously unanalyzed aspects of this self-taught artist whose reputation was enhanced by appearances on national television and only slightly diminished since Finster's death in 2001. Not least of these is an in-depth discussion of Finster's hundred-page book *Howard Finsters Vision of 1982*. This allegory based on what Finster insisted were real visions – and indeed, John F. Turner once photographed Finster slipping into a trance, after which he described the planet he had been visiting[51] – recounts Finster's visionary travels on a spaceship through multiple planets, a trip requiring three generations to complete before the ship and Finster's descendants arrive in the Christian Heaven, where they and Finster are reunited.

This may well derive from a combination of 1950s science-fiction movies and Saint Paul's assertion in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 that he knew a man in Christ who was caught up to the third heaven – the multiple levels of heaven being an inheritance from mystical Judaism that is left unexplained in the New Testament. Whatever the sources, Finster was a shaman-like figure who was regarded as anomalous by his fundamentalist Christian neighbors, not least because of his willingness to greet all who might be in need of compassionate company. Unlike the fundamentalists

---

Girardot, "The Finster Mythos," *Raw Vision* 86, Summer 2015, pp. 22-27, http://rawvision.com/articles/finster-mythos, accessed August 1, 2015.

[51] *Envisioning Howard Finster*, p. 138.

around him, he never engaged in faith healing, but his acceptance of the troubled homosexual art student Robert Sherer led Sherer from the brink of suicide to an internationally recognized art career. More than simple charity, this act was a reflection of Finster's belief in the untapped inner potential of every person on earth:

> if the peoples on this planet Earth would bring out the hidden man of the heart, there's no tellin' what's in some of 'em. Some of 'em could have been a President and they've never been hardly anything because they never did bring out what was in them.[52]

In many ways (and Girardot discusses some of them), both St. EOM's and Finster's belief in otherworldly visions are fundamentally shamanic, if not Gnostic – even though Finster sought to win souls to Christ, his version of the Christian faith was far from orthodox in its reliance on immediate experiential inward knowledge.

All this is evidence for literary critic and sometime "religious critic" Harold Bloom's assertion that the true American religion is Gnostic – despite the widespread insistence on Biblical literalism in American culture, the distinctly American faiths have arisen from a belief in the acquisition of inward knowledge of the divine, or the intrinsic divinity of the self. Bloom, of course, does not assert that any of these faiths are aware of their kinship with the various Late Antique religions described as Gnostic, nor even of the divergence of their core beliefs from historic Christianity.

---

[52] *Envisioning Howard Finster*, p. 124.

> There are tens of millions of Americans whose obsessive idea of spiritual freedom violates the normative basis of what once was considered Christian doctrine. […] The larger irony behind this is that the American Religion, which is nothing if not a knowing, does not know itself. Perhaps that is a permanent and general American irony, which would have been much appreciated by Nietzsche; we may be uniquely the nation where the knowers cannot know themselves.[53]

Bloom's determinedly heterodox interpretation of American religion, like his unique re-reading of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, is the bane of more cautious historians, and Bloom has long been regarded as something of a contemporary cultural fashion himself.

And yet. There is something playful about Bloom's somber insistence on causing outrage, and definitely something playful about St. EOM's combination of ethnographically inspired architecture and performance art. Finster grew angry when it was suggested that he had "a good imagination"[54] but Girardot rightly suggests that Finster's entire life and revelation-inspired artistic oeuvre must be approached with neither

> feigned acquiescence [n]or flippant skepticism […]. Given the increased confusions about human consciousness and other possible paranormal 'ghosts in the machine' in the increasingly reenchanted post-postmodernist sense of things in the academy, such matters are more or less up for grabs."[55]

---

[53] Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (Simon & Schuster, 1992), pp. 263-264.

[54] *Envisioning Howard Finster*, p. 65.

[55] *Envisioning Howard Finster*, p. 66.

Girardot's deliberately idiomatic remark is based on a growing realization among anthropologists and historians of religion that the world of religious experience is open to multiple interpretations both by scholars and by the religious themselves. The anthropologist T. M. Luhrmann points out that the approach of American evangelical Christians to the experience of God is remarkably similar to "being engrossed in good magical fiction of the Harry Potter kind." The authors of a popular evangelical book, *The Sacred Romance*, actually embrace a fictional approach to an intimately loving God Who cannot be captured in human concepts anyway:

> 'If we try to relate to God as Author' – the being who is ultimately responsible for the misery and unfairness we see in our world – 'we will go mad or despair.' Instead, they say, you have to see God as a *character*, a hero in the story he has written.[56]

Luhrmann's experiences as participant observer in the communities she studied left her personally unsettled regarding the exact parameters of the phenomena she studied and explicated. Immediately after a discussion of how the experience of God her subjects of study have had might arise from the fact that "the radical technological innovations of our time have fundamentally altered the conditions of our perception and

[56] T. R. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (Knopf, 2012), p. 84.

the way we experience with our bodies,"[57] probably "mak[ing] us more comfortable with intense absorption experiences,"[58] she admits that

> I do not presume to know ultimate reality. But it is also true that through the process of this journey, in my own way I have come to know God. I do not know what to make of this knowing. I would not call myself a Christian, but I find myself defending Christianity.[59]

Luhrmann's evangelicals practice prayer for healing (with the attendant difficulties when prayers remain unanswered) but do not attempt the miraculous "signs following" that some (not all!) churches in Appalachia discovered just over a century ago – handling snakes and drinking poison to fulfill the prophecy of Mark 16:17-18, which also promises recovery from sickness for those on whom believers lay their hands.[60] (The passage was apparently a later addition to the original Gospel of Mark, but believers in scriptural inerrancy are unaware of this likelihood.) For that matter, Howard Finster never engaged in any of the practices associated with Appalachian religion except for fulfilling the prophecy of Joel 2:28 that "your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions." Finster claimed to be a man of visions from another world; he never claimed to be a miracle worker.

---

[57] *When God Talks Back,* p. 323.

[58] *When God Talks Back,* p. 324.

[59] *When God Talks Back,* p. 325.

[60] A classic study of this phenomenon is Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* (Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1995).

The history of mysticism, on the other hand, is full of miracles as well as visions. Historian Jeff Hollenback, like Luhrmann, believes in the testimony of observers of mystics, and ascribes bystanders' experiences to mystics' "imaginational empowerment,"

> a symbolic process that makes what was merely 'imaginary,' evanescent, and insubstantial into something more concrete, sometimes to the extent that peculiar kinds of psychosomatic or even paranormal mind-over-matter phenomena become manifest. Techniques of meditation or yogic concentration, methods of recollective prayer, trying to stay awake while entering the dream state, hypnosis, collective rituals that focus the participants' attention by drumming, dancing, clapping or singing – all these are various methods of generating trance-like states of highly focused attention that are especially likely to empower the imagination and generate mystical states of awareness.[61]

"Imaginational empowerment," if it exists, would be something more than individual hallucination, but even that exists in a neurological twilight zone (I put on the name of the once-popular American TV series telling ironic stories of supernatural occurrences) that contains unexpected depths of complexity. In his 2012 book *Hallucinations*, Oliver Sacks describes doublings of the self, loss of embodiment, and the appearance not only of absurd visual and auditory illusions, but of

[61] Jeff Hollenback, "What's Wrong With Symbols? Revisiting Mircea Eliade in the 21st Century," *Archaeus*, XV, p. 178.

vividly physical cautionary figures (including a guardian angel appearing to a child who had been raised atheist and who was thereafter terrified that the figure would return) that suggest, at the very least, that the unconscious mind is even more independent of our conscious wishes than we had supposed.[62] Most of Sacks' reported phenomena have lately been explained satisfactorily by neurological researchers, in studies that the popular-science writer Anil Ananthaswamy recently summarized in *The Man Who Wasn't There: Investigations into the Strange New World of the Self*.[63] Others apparently remain in the realm of speculation.

Now, of course meditational traditions in religions have long been aware of the existence of hallucinations – Buddhist masters warn novices of the obstacles to enlightenment posed by *makyo*, and Eastern Orthodox Christianity is full of cautionary tales about the hallucinations brought about by *prelest*. In both cases, what appear to be genuine instances of paranormal phenomena are also cited as annoying roadblocks on what poet Theodore Roethke called "the long journey out of the self."[64] Practitioners in shamanic traditions complicate the picture still further by acknowledging

[62] Oliver Sacks, *Hallucinations* (Vintage Books, 2013), pp. 216-217.

[63] Anil Ananthaswamy, *The Man Who Wasn't There: Investigations into the Strange New World of the Self* (Dutton, 2015).

[64] Theodore Roethke, "Journey Into the Interior," from "North American Sequence" first published in *The Far Field*, 1964. Available online at http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/journey-into-the-interior/.

the role played by fantasy in the accomplishing of preternatural intentions; anthropologists have recorded situations in which entire cultures are quite aware that the shaman employs tricks to give the illusion of miracles, but insist that the miracles that actually occur cannot happen unless the tricks are performed well.[65]

At least one neuroscientist has refused to rule out the possibility of miracles having some objective, even if misunderstood, reality. David Eagleman has famously declared himself a "possibilian," refusing to rule out all but the most ludicrous possibilities regarding the nature of reality when it comes to "ideas that we don't have any way of testing right now."[66] Writing in *The New Yorker* in 2011, Burkhard Bilger reported from his conversations with Eagleman,

> we know too little about our own minds and the universe around us to insist on strict atheism, he said. 'And we know far too much to commit to a particular religious story.'[67]

---

[65] Michael Taussig has developed an entire dialogical theory based on such anecdotes. See his "Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism: Another Theory of Magic," pp. 221-256 of Nicholas B. Dirks, ed., *In Near Ruins: Cultural Theory at the End of the Century* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998), published in revised form in Taussig's *Walter Benjamin's Grave* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 121-155.

[66] David Eagleman interviewed by Lynn Neary, "'Afterlives': 40 Stories Of What Follows Death," NPR *Talk of the Nation*, July 17, 2011, http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t =1&islist= false&id=100778241&m=100778231&live=1, accessed August 1, 2015.

[67] Burkhard Bilger, "The Possibilian," *The New Yorker*, April 25, 2011, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/04/25/the-possibilian, accessed August 1, 2015.

Story, as we have seen previously, is something of which we have become self-aware; in fact, novelists were writing self-aware fictions decades before neuroscience began to tell us how story might compose the sense of self.[68]

The popularity of Eagleman's book of short fictions, *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*[69] (translated into 27 languages and a bestseller in many of them) is in some ways a result of this altered function of storytelling and its discontents. Eagleman's fantastic visions of many incompatible possibilities of what happens in life after death implies, for many readers, that not only are these tales obviously untrue, but that just as Nietzsche believed, the entertainment provided by beautiful falsehoods known to be false allows us to avoid perishing of the ugly truth. This is not Eagleman's stance at all. Many fictions about what we cannot know remain possibilities, even if extremely remote ones. But given what we now know about the story of storytelling, what exactly is the function of fantastic stories like the ones he tells in *Sum*? Eagleman admits the satisfactions provided by his creative side but has chosen not to analyze them.

[68] See, for example, the novels of John Barth and Donald Barthelme, Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco, and… but the list goes on throughout the range of European languages and non-European ones as well.

[69] David Eagleman, *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives* (Pantheon, 2009).

Another historian of religion, Jeffrey J. Kripal, has analyzed the relationship between the fictional and real fantastic, including whether "fictional" and "real" have any substantive separation. His *Mutants and Mystics*[70] studies the dialectic between fantasy fiction and actually reported paranormal experience in the United States from early 19th century potboilers to present-day superhero movies, paying particular attention to the fascination with mutation as an explanation of superpowers in what he calls the American superstory. (This is an extension of his earlier encounters with the topic in writing his history of the Esalen Institute and reflecting on such nonfiction works as Michael Murphy's *The Future of the Body* – all of them intrigued by the possibility of evolutionary leaps in the physical body more than transhumanism's assumption that technology will be required to do the trick.[71]) "We are not who we think we are. At all," Kripal writes in his website survey of the meaning of his oeuvre.[72]

Kripal finally sees "theosis" or deification as the goal of humanity (but, interestingly, he doesn't seem to

[70] Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (University of Chicago Press, 2011); see also the press' descriptive blurb, http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/ chicago/M/bo5892347.html, accessed August 1, 2015.

[71] Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 2007); Michael Murphy, *The Future of the Body: Explorations into the Further Evolution of Human Nature* (J. P. Tarcher, 1992).

[72] Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Introductory Essay," Jeffrey J. Kripal website at Rice University, http://kripal.rice.edu/essay.html.

pay much attention to Eastern Orthodoxy's use of that term as the goal of humanity.[73]) "Like Foucault," he writes in his website's introductory essay, "I suspect that a new anthropology, a new form of mind, a new 'episteme' is taking shape, as the previous understandings of the human disappear, like figures written into the sand on a beach." Even though he has been known to use the word "transhumanism," his understanding of that new anthropology is almost diametrically opposed to the machinic models of the techno-transhumanists. For him, as for the founders of the Esalen Institute, the future of humanity lies in a transformed physical body, not in a digitized and uploaded mind.

Kripal quotes French philosopher Aimé Michel's suggestion that future humans, characterized by "*la pensée surhumaine ou non-humaine*" would find it as difficult to communicate with present-day humans as an owner communicating with his pet dog, or human beings

> trying to communicate with chimpanzees. The latter image is the closer analogy, he believed, since what appears to separate *la pensée surhumanine* from *la pensée humaine* of the present is an evolutionary leap.

[73] Even more interestingly, the Cypriot émigré professor of sociology Kyriacos C. Markides has spent decades investigating heterodox New Age mages and Orthodox monks and monasticism on Cyprus and Mount Athos, and produced a body of work that is simultaneously scholarly analysis and personal testament; his most recent report is *Inner River: A Journey to the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (Image Books, 2012). Markides approaches the topics Kripal is exploring from the standpoint of a skeptical believer.

But (leaving apart the recent advances in communicating with chimpanzees) this evolutionary leap does not seem to have much in common with the expectation that modified genetic structures will grant human beings immortality, or that an understanding of neurons will permit them to be replicated in non-carbon-based technological formats. In fact, according to Kripal they seem to be bound up with human sexuality, in ways that Freud no more than occasionally admitted.

Kripal has most recently incorporated this perspective into an introductory textbook, *Comparing Religions*,[74] that represents an attempt to make the point that the multidisciplinary practice of history of religions needs to be even more multidisciplinary – and that while, as it is currently in fashion to point out, religions meet the needs of societies and individual psychologies by providing stories and behavioral maxims, they also arise from extraordinary experiences that are far beyond the simple need to explain the workings of everyday natural occurrences. The truth of the origins of religious belief and practice is far more complex and subtle than the naïve suppositions of 18th-century Enlightenment savants that religions arose to explain storms, vivid dreams, and the movement of the stars, a mistake that was amplified by the invention of priestcraft to support the tyranny of kings – opinions

[74] Jeffrey J. Kripal, with Ata Anzali, Andrea R. Jain, and Erin Prophet, *Comparing Religions* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

that have remained constant for three centuries even as the terminology has been updated to reflect contemporary vocabularies. (Kripal doesn't deny that such things went into the making of the world's religions, but insists that, of the many strange and extraordinary events reported throughout religious history, some of them happened exactly as reported, whether or not we choose to reject their standard interpretation.)

There have been other voices in the history of religions that have dared to suggest that the discipline's turn towards the sociological and skeptical and away from an exploratory and open phenomenology may have been a turn that requires a return (or re-turn) to examine missed opportunities. Some of these opinions were expressed as early as 2001 in an anthology, edited by Bryan Rennie, of writings debating the legacy of Mircea Eliade.[75]

Eliade famously predicted that a new humanism would arise out of the cross-cultural encounter of postcolonial societies, and that this new humanism could and should be embraced and enhanced by historians of religion, who could bring unique perspectives to the encounter. His 1961 call for this was repeated in 1969 in a revised and expanded version of the essay in *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*.[76]

---

[75] Bryan Rennie, ed., *Changing Religious Worlds: The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade* (State University of New York Press, 2001), previously cited.

[76] Mircea Eliade, "A New Humanism," *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 2-11.

Writing of the possibilities of imaginative encounter "with the 'others' – with human beings belonging to various types of archaic and exotic societies," Eliade expresses confidence that this "meeting with [...] the unknown, with what cannot be reduced to familiar categories"[77] would be as productive for a creative hermeneutics of religion as the encounter with non-Western art or Freud's discovery of the unconscious was for modern artists.

Apart from the assault on almost all of Eliade's presuppositions over the past 30 years, the optimism of this document regarding the fruitfulness of cross-cultural encounter became less and less plausible, as a less reflective version of what Paul Ricoeur called the "hermeneutics of suspicion" became engrained in the culture at large. The phenomena we have discussed heretofore are symptoms of this pervasive sense of mistrust of all our inherited categories, including the notion of "the human," of the subject for whom a new humanism might be possible.

This sensibility is not, of course, dominant except among a minority of the global population – in fact, various simplistic literalisms are regnant in large parts of the planet. But the pure encounter that Eliade envisioned between hermeneuticians and the world's "creative acts of the spirit" has failed to occur. Ironically, the parallel between literary and religious

[77] *The Quest*, p. 3.

works that he cited – autonomous works that "*exist on their own plane of referenc*e"[78] is precisely what later scholarship was inclined to deny both in works of literature and "religious data."

The more recent return to the problem of narrativity and the recognition of neurologically founded psychological depth offer openings to the historian of religion that the discipline has scarcely begun to explore, much less exploit. Writing of the dubiously divergent aftermath of Eliade's call for a new humanism, Wendall Charles Beane suggests that

> if with all our scholarly monographs, we have not understood the species so much better, it may be because we have shied away from where the evidence has been leading us. Not willing to consider the possibility … that the term *sacred* refers to an experienceable Unknown, as well as the 'hierophanic' known, we have hesitated to make even tentative philosophical religious generalizations; not willing to consider that '*homo faber* was equally *homo ludens, sapiens,* and *religiosus'* (Eliade), we have shied away from making tentative philosophical-anthropological valuations of the nature of human nature.[79]

Eliade's neglected call to recognize that religious practice might reflect borderline experiences as well as the functional needs of society was taken up in a transgressive mode by Kripal, who took seriously

[78] *The Quest*, p. 4.

[79] Wendell Charles Beane, "Methodological, Pedagogical, and Philosophical Reflections on Mircea Eliade as Historian of Religions," in *Changing Religious Worlds*, p. 185.

Eliade's suggestion that, understood as an uncanny and paranormal mode of experience, "'the sacred' is an element in the structure of consciousness, not a stage in the history of consciousness."[80]

A continuing dilemma with any revision or re-visioning of religious experience or of paranormal experience is that the experiences cannot be reliably replicated under rigorous experimental conditions. This is not particularly unusual in the sciences; Frans de Waal points out that the much-discussed phenomenon of mirror neurons has not been demonstrated in human brains, and has been documented only in the brains of macaques. Researchers take on faith here the overlap between simian and human brains, because overlaps have been demonstrated elsewhere even though in this case "to confirm their presence would require inserting electrodes, which is rarely done."[81]

In similar fashion, choices of areas for research is grounded in prior assumptions that old-fashioned sociologists of knowledge would call plausibility structures.[82] In spite of having written an entire book about the state of research into the neurological construction of the self, Ananthaswamy confessed to radio interviewer Terry Gross that he had had no direct

[80] Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas, 1: From The Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries* (University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. xiii.

[81] *The Bonobo and the Atheist*, p. 135.

[82] See, for the original use of the term, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's classic *The Social Construction of Reality: An Essay in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Doubleday, 1966).

experience of any of the unusual neurological conditions under investigation, which made it difficult to enter into relationship with them in spite of their undeniable existence as phenomena in the world.[83] It is even more difficult to undertake research into topics that one's entire worldview denies *a priori*, and in his several books Kripal has had to expend considerable effort in trying to demonstrate why, even if most such experiences are demonstrably illusory, their structural underpinning should be investigated.

Popular culture, on the other hand, has no such difficulties. Mike Cahill's 2014 film *I Origins* is a thriller in which a thoroughly skeptical molecular biologist is led to investigate the unlikely possibility of the existence of reincarnation after his laboratory assistant remarks, regarding a set of "statistically insignificant" anomalous data, that if I drop a pencil vast numbers of times and it falls to the ground, but that once, just once, it hangs in the air for no apparent reason, the reason for that statistically insignificant anomaly is worth investigating.[84]

Other parts of American popular culture continue to churn out replicas of previously successful

[83] Anil Ananthaswamy interviewed by Terry Gross, NPR *Fresh Air*, July 28, 2015, http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2015/07/28/426753409/a-sense-of-self-what-happens-when-your-brain-says-you-dont-exist, accessed July 31, 2015.

[84] See such reviews as Michael O'Sullivan, "The Eyes Have It. Or Do They?" in the *Washington Post*, July 24, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/i-origins-movie-review-the-eyes-have-it-or-do-they/2014/07/23/4cd92818-11b1-11e4-8936-26932bcfd6ed_story.html, or Peter Debruge, in *Variety*, January 29, 2014, http://variety.com/2014/film/markets-festivals/sundance-review-i-origins-1201064458/, both accessed July 31, 2015.

variations on the theme of mutation: A 2015 television series, *The Messengers*, delivers a tried-and-true plotline, described as follows by *New York Times* reviewer Neil Genzlinger in an April 14 piece originally titled "Touched by a Meteor" (a pun on the long-running TV series *Touched by an Angel*):

> Disparate, geographically scattered characters who are touched by a supernatural experience gradually realize that they have changed somehow and are drawn together. In this case the transformation is wrought by a meteor that slams to Earth in New Mexico and sends out a silent blast wave that affects a scientist working nearby named Vera (Shantel VanSanten), as well as four other people who are far more distant. These five aren't sure what exactly has happened to them, but by episode's end they have begun to demonstrate that they now have extraordinary powers, and they seem destined to converge on Houston.[85]

Needless to say, there are artists who regard all of this as egregious nonsense. The Atlanta duo performing as Metatronic (a pun on the name of the angel Metatron) produce zines and events that satirize various forms of religion,[86] and their gallery represents an artist, Michael Germon, whose work is devoted to a somewhat more serious meditation on the paradoxes presented by religion,

[85] "Review: The Messengers," *New York Times*, April 15, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/15/arts/television/tv-review-cws-the-messengers.html?_r=0, accessed July 31, 2015.

[86] https://www.facebook.com/events/479082058917811, accessed July 31, 2015.

science, and occultism. His 2015 show "Archaeomancy"[87] featured a collage entitled *Our Lady of Enlightened Petrifaction* and a Ouija board in which the periodic table of chemical elements replaces the alphabet.

Another two-person artist collaborative, a Florida-based couple self-described as queer-feminist and working under the name MANDEM, is producing unsettling paintings that reinterpret religious themes in light of present-day gender instabilities and looming environmental apocalypses. Such works as *The Usury of God (Translating Theotokos)*[88] demonstrate the aptness of their self-description as "makers, rule-breakers, tricksters, and storytellers."[89]

It might well be assumed that all such artists are youthful, but the spirit of skeptically inquisitive play and utterly serious spiritual analysis is shared by an internationally recognized Atlanta book artist who began her career some 40 years ago; Ruth Laxson's 2008 *Ideas of God,* "an opuscule of tiny mirrors seeking a single grand image," contains such image-surrounded aphorisms relevant to our previously discussed cultural fashions as: "play is key… put play into play." "This study would be lop-sided if we don't include animals." "but hold on just a minute, we're all part of the matrix & (I'm) no more magnificent than a blade of

[87] https://www.facebook.com/pages/Mike-Germon-ARTIST/293521267365123, accessed July 31, 2015.

[88] http://mandemic.com/currentpaintings.html, accessed August 1, 2015.

[89] http://mandemic.com/, accessed July 31, 2015.

grass." "But at least now we know that knowledge does not necessarily need minds."[90]

A colophon in Laxson's unpaginated book reveals that it makes use of *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*[91] by philosopher John Gray, whom Rick Searle takes to task in his June 21, 2015 essay "John Gray and the Puppets of Gloom" for having oversimplified the problem of what Heinrich von Kleist, two centuries ago in "On the Marionette Theatre," named as "the last chapter in the history of the world": a denouément in which the decoupling of intelligence from consciousness would be fully accomplished – by ideal marionettes or by instinctual animal responses in Kleist's 1810 allegory,[92] and today by artificial intelligence that "as currently constructed… manifests intelligence more akin to puppet show illusions … than the intellect of a mind." Remarkably enough, Searle also states that Gray's 2015 book *The Soul of the Marionette*

---

[90] Ruth Laxson, *Ideas of God*, 2008, n.p. See also Jerry Cullum, "We Are Not Danes in Denmark: Displacement and the Liquid Self in Atlanta Art, 1961-2011," in Jerry Cullum, Catherine Fox, and Cinqué Hicks, *Noplaceness: Art in a Post-Urban Landscape* (Possible Futures, 2011), pp. 54, 80-81.

[91] John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007).

[92] Kleist's "On the Marionette Theatre" exists in multiple editions and translations; see, for recent English-language examples, Idris Parry's translation at http://www.southerncrossreview.org/9/kleist.htm, or Thomas J. Neumiller at http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/postgraduate/masters/modules/panromanticisms/kleist_marionette_thatre.pdf, both accessed July 31, 2015.

> makes the case that the philosophy behind much of modern technology is a modern form of Gnosticism. In this case Gnosticism means the belief that the world is somehow ill constructed and that through our knowledge and efforts we can fix it.[93]

In other words, it seems clear that the problems, symbols, narratives, and topical obsessions inherent in the various cultural fashions described in this essay remain lively memes, as the disciples of evolutionary psychologists have long called them – and they are evolving almost month by month in the United States and across many other parts of the planet. I do not venture to say "all parts" – William Gibson's almost overly familiar 2003 remark remains painfully true, "The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed."[94] But the spread of internet technology to all but the most inaccessible parts of the globe makes endless surprises possible when the dissemination of cultural fashions is the subject of investigation.

In 2014, the well-known French director Luc Besson (*La Femme Nikita*, *The Professional*) contributed to the transhumanist mythos in several different symbolic

---

[93] Rick Searle, "John Gray and the Puppets of Gloom," Utopia or Dystopia, June 21, 2015, http://utopiaordystopia.com/2015/06/21/john-gray-and-the-puppets-of-gloom/, accessed July 31, 2015. Searle's definition of Gnosticism recalls the definitions used by Eric Voegelin and other philosophers inclined to extend the reach of Gnosticism into political and social realms far past antiquity.

[94] Gibson made the remark orally sometime prior to 1992; see its probable history, with reported confirmation from Gibson, at http://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/01/24/future-has-arrived/, accessed August 1, 2015.

registers with *Lucy*, a film in which Scarlett Johansson and Morgan Freeman play out a drama in which Lucy, an unwilling drug mule for a Taiwan-based global dealer in biomorphic substances, mutates into a superwoman capable of using 100% of her brain's capacity.[95] (Besson exploits the commonly held misperception that we ordinarily use only a tiny percentage of our neural network for day-to-day affairs.) Johansson's character, Lucy, interacts with the neuroscientist played by Freeman in an improbable human-to-machine-to-information conclusion that reworks transhumanist tropes alongside evolutionary time travel. It is Kripal's American superstory at biochemical warp speed, and transferred to a global stage as Lucy's final transmutation carries her in moments from today's Paris to the American West of a century and a half ago to the Olduvai Gorge for a brief encounter with her namesake ancestor from whom all humanity is descended.

Astonishingly (given the lag time for film editing), the credits for *Lucy* roll to the accompaniment of a soundtrack that includes a song, "God's Whisper," that

[95] Xan Brooks, "Luc Besson's cerebral sci-fi is set to overload," *The Guardian*, August 23, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/aug/24/lucy-film-review-scarlett-johansson-luc-besson-morgan-freeman; Geoffrey MacNab, "Scarlett Johansson will blow your mind in Luc Besson's complex thriller," *The Independent*, August 22, 2014, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/lucy-film-review-scarlett-johansson-will-blow-your-mind-in-luc-bessons-complex-thriller-9684523.html, both accessed July 31, 2015.

a then 18-year-old Atlantan known as Raury had recorded and self-released only a few months before the film's release date. He subsequently released *Indigo Child*, commercially available but still available as a free download to those who attain a sufficiently high score on a video game on the website indigochildproject.com. This website assigns the player an Indigo Child[96] name ("Birdie Maison," "Moon's Pull" – the name is generated differently each time the site is accessed anonymously), appropriate to the song's claim of building a self-generated transcendent community of spiritual mutants. In a March 3, 2014 *Billboard* interview,[97] Raury explained,

> When they see a person like me, […] following through the school system, they look down upon me. They think I'm nothing. But they have something coming because I hear God's whisper. That means, my intuition,

[96] The title alludes to a common New Age meme, expressed in these terms at http://www.spiritscienceandmetaphysics.com/11-traits-of-indigo-children/, accessed August 1, 2015: "An 'indigo child' is a term used to refer to a special class of souls that incarnated here. They possess high degrees of intelligence and creativity, and have wisdom from beyond their years. […] Some many have what appear to be psychic and intuitive abilities, while others may suffer from social conditions and learning disorders. These children have nothing wrong with them, they just need a system that is better designed to harbor their creativity." Since the first trait of an indigo child that is listed on this site is "May be strong-willed independent thinkers who prefer to do their own thing rather than comply with authority figures/parents," the relevance to Raury's own biography and self-chosen mythology is obvious.

[97] http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-juice/5923066/raury-premieres-new-song-gods-whisper-talks-indigo-child-album, accessed July 31, 2015.

> my natural calling in life is what God's whisper is. When I say, 'I am the savior,' I'm spreading that message to others. You have that whisper to you. You have your intuition. You have your own natural calling that you have to trust and follow.

His remarks thereafter elucidate the chorus "I am the savior" in terms of revealing this intuitive truth to a generation ready to receive it:

> With us growing up with the internet, as kids we learn so much so fast. We're exposed to so many things to the point where we become more open-minded and naturally have tolerance for race, sex, gender […]. We aren't limited to our cities around us. I think those walls of regionalism are about to change.

Harold Bloom's American Gnosticism has entered the digital age in the person of an African-American youth from Stone Mountain. Signed to a contract that appears to accommodate his self-released mp3 downloads, he followed up "God's Whisper" with a cautionary, visionary "Devil's Whisper" that NPR *World Café* host David Dye praised on July 28, 2015 for its mind-bending lyrics and genre-bending intensity: "hip-hop is next to folk next to some kind of funk next to rock, and somehow it all makes sense."[98]

Mircea Eliade wisely wrote many years ago that "the scale creates the phenomenon";[99] it would be as

[98] http://www.npr.org/2015/07/28/423603470/heavy-rotation-10-songs-public-radio-cant-stop-playing, accessed July 31, 2015.

[99] *The Quest*, p. 7. Eliade is extrapolating from a maxim by Swiss physicist Charles-Eugene Guye.

foolish to interpret Raury in terms of simplistically mythic categories as it would be to reduce his work to mundane politics when it so clearly incorporates New Age tropes of vision-possessing indigo children as a mode of transformation for alienated youth. But as one of the newest manifestations of an unruly collection of diverse cultural fashions – of which I have here described only a few – his work cries out for history-of-religions interpretation.

Bibliography

Ananthaswamy, Anil. *The Man Who Wasn't There: Investigations into the Strange New World of the Self*. Dutton, 2015.

Ananthaswamy, Anil interviewed by Gross, Terry. NPR *Fresh Air*, July 28, 2015. http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2015/07/28/426753409/a-sense-of-self-what-happens-when-your-brain-says-you-dont-exist.

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*. Polity Press, 2011.

Beane, Wendell Charles. "Methodological, Pedagogical, and Philosophical Reflections on Mircea Eliade as Historian of Religions." in Rennie, Bryan, ed. *Changing Religious Worlds: The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade*. State University of New York Press, 2001.

Robert N. Bellah. *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*. Harper & Row, 1970.

Berger, Peter L. and Luckmann, Thomas. *The Social Construction of Reality: An Essay in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Doubleday, 1966.

Bilger, Burkhard. "The Possibilian." *The New Yorker*. April 25, 2011. www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/04/25/the-possibilian.

Bloom, Harold. *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*. Simon & Schuster, 1992.

Boyd, Brian, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009.

Breure, Dirk. "Transhumanism: The Final Religion?" July 16, 2015. IEET: Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies. http://ieet.org/index.php/IEET/more/bruere20150715.

Brooks, Xan. "Luc Besson's cerebral sci-fi is set to overload," *The Guardian*, August 23, 2014,

http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/aug/24/lucy-film-review-scarlett-johansson-luc-besson-morgan-freeman.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Masks of God,* four vols. 1959-1969.

Cave, David. *Mircea Eliade's Vision for a New Humanism*. Oxford University Press, 1993.

Chalmers, D.J. "Phenomenal Concepts and the Explanatory Gap." In Alter, T. & Walter, S., eds. *Phenomenal Concepts and Phenomenal Knowledge: New Essays on Consciousness and Physicalism*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

Covington, Dennis. *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*, Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1995.

Cullum, Jerry. "Two Shows - Digital Collages and Primate Marks - Produce Artistic Meditations at Whitespace and Whitespec," ArtsATL, May 27, 2014,

http://www.artsatl.com/2014/05/whitespace-craig-dongoski-charlie-watts/.

Cullum, Jerry. "We Are Not Danes in Denmark: Displacement and the Liquid Self in Atlanta Art, 1961-2011," in Cullum, Jerry, Fox, Catherine and Hicks, Cinqué. *Noplaceness: Art in a Post-Urban Landscape*. Possible Futures, 2011.

Davis, Erik. "The magick of H. P. Lovecraft." *The Occult World*, Routledge, 2014. Posted at http://techgnosis.com/h-p-lovecraft/.

Debruge, Peter. "Review: I Origins." *Variety*, January 29, 2014, http://variety.com/2014/film/markets-festivals/sundance-review-i-origins-1201064458/.

de Waal, Frans, *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates,* W. W. Norton, 2011.

Dirks, Nicholas B., ed. *In Near Ruins: Cultural theory at the End of the Century*, University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Eagleman, David interviewed by Neary, Lynn. "'Afterlives': 40 Stories Of What Follows Death." NPR *Talk of the Nation*. July 17, 2011. http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=100778241&m=100778231&live=1.

Eagleman, David. *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*. Pantheon, 2009.

Eliade, Mircea. *A History of Religious Ideas*, three vols. 1978-1985.

Eliade, Mircea. *A History of Religious Ideas, 1: From The Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries.* University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Eliade, Mircea. "A New Humanism." *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, pp. 2-11. University of Chicago Press, 1969.

Eliade, Mircea. "History of Religions and Cultural Fashions," reprinted in Eliade, Mircea. *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, Apostolos-Cappadona, Diane, ed. Crossroad, 1985.

"Exploration Between the Written and the Spoken Word," http://whitespace814.com/artists/craig-dongoski/.

Fassler, Joe. "'Life Keeps Changing': Why Stories, Not Science, Explain the World." *The Atlantic*, online edition. January 21, 2014. http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/01/life-keeps-changing-why-stories-not-science-explain-the-world/283219/.

Fieser, James, Dowden, Bradley et al, eds. "The Hard Problem of Consciousness." *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer-Reviewed Academic Resource*.

http://www.iep.utm.edu/hard-con/.

Freud, Sigmund, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, tr. James Strachey, Liveright: The Standard Edition, reprint 1989, p. 353.

Gaiman, Neil. *American Gods: A Novel*. William Morrow, 2001.

Ghenie, Adrian. *Darwin's Room*, Hatje Cantz, 2015.

Gibson, William.

http://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/01/24/future-has-arrived/.

Girardot, Norman. *Envisioning Howard Finster: The Religion and Art of a Stranger from Another World*. University of California Press, 2015.

Girardot, Norman. "The Finster Mythos." *Raw Vision* 86, Summer 2015, pp. 22-27. http://rawvision.com/articles/finster-mythos.

Gottschall, Jonathan, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Mariner Press, 2012.

Gray, John. *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals,* Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007.

Gray, John. *The Soul of the Marionette: A Short Inquiry into Human Freedom,* Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015.

Grusin, Richard, ed. *The Nonhuman Turn.* University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Harari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Harvill Secker, 2014.

Haraway, Donna. *When Species Meet,* University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Harman, Graham. *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*. Zero Books, 2012.

Hollenback, Jeff. "What's Wrong With Symbols? Revisiting Mircea Eliade in the 21st Century," *Archaeus*, XV, p. 178.

Houllebecq, Michel. *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*. Khazeni, Dorna, tr. McSweeney's, Believer Books, 2005.

http://darwinsroom.ro/project/, accessed July 30, 2015.

http://www.bethlilly.com/wp-content/gallery/esoosits/beth-lilly_the-story-is-trying-to-tell-the-story.jpg.

http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-juice/5923066/raury-premieres-new-song-gods-whisper-talks-indigo-child-album.

http://www.brainpickings.org/2015/06/16/neil-gaiman-how-stories-last/.

http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwlrc/3476.html.

http://mandemic.com/currentpaintings.html.

http://mandemic.com/.

http://www.nbcnews.com/science/space/mount-spock-new-horizons-pluto-name-list-includes-star-trek-n388091

http://www.npr.org/2015/07/28/423603470/heavy-rotation-10-songs-public-radio-cant-stop-playing.

http://www.pacegallery.com/london/exhibitions/12671/golems.

http://www.spiritscienceandmetaphysics.com/11-traits-of-indigo-children.

http://www.toyvault.com/cthulhu/index.html

http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2015/07/14/new-data-reveals-that-plutos-heart-is-broken/

https://www.facebook.com/events/479082058917811.

https://www.facebook.com/pages/Mike-Germon-ARTIST/293521267365123.

Kahneman, Daniel, and Harari, Yuval Noah. "Death Is Optional: A Conversation." March 4, 2015.

http://edge.org/conversation/yuval_noah_harari-daniel_kahneman - death-is-optional.

Kleist, Heinrich von. "On the Marionette Theatre." Neumiller, Thomas J., tr

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/postgraduate/masters/modules/panromanticisms/kleist_marionette_thatre.pdf

Kleist, Heinrich von. "On the Marionette Theatre." Parry, Idris, tr. http://www.southerncrossreview.org/9/kleist.htm.

Kripal, Jeffrey J. with Anzali, Ata, Jain, Andrea R. and Prophet, Erin. *Comparing Religions.* Wiley Blackwell, 2014.

Kripal, Jeffrey J. *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*. University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Kripal, Jeffrey J. "Introductory Essay," Jeffrey J. Kripal website at Rice University. http://kripal.rice.edu/essay.html.

Kripal, Jeffrey J. *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*. University of Chicago Press, 2011. http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/M/bo5892347.html.

Kurzweil, Ray. *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence*. Viking Press, 1999.

Kurzweil, Ray. *How to Create a Mind: The Secret of Human Thought Revealed*. Viking Press, 2012.

Kurzweil, Ray. *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. Viking Press, 2005.

Latour, Bruno. *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods.* Duke University Press, 2010.

Laxson, Ruth. *Ideas of God*. 2008.

Luhrmann, T. R. *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. Knopf, 2012.

MacNab, Geoffrey. "Scarlett Johansson will blow your mind in Luc Besson's complex thriller." *The Independent*, August 22, 2014, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/lucy-film-review-scarlett-johansson-will-blow-your-mind-in-luc-bessons-complex-thriller-9684523.html.

Markides, Kyriacos C. *Inner River: A Journey to the Heart of Christian Spirituality*. Image Books, 2012.

McGinn, Colin. "Homunculism." *New York Review of Books*, March 21, 2013. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/mar/21/homunculism/.

Mintz, Donna. "E. K. Huckaby - poet, saint of the obsolete, savior of the discarded: at MOCA GA." ArtsATL, November 12, 2014. http://www.artsatl.com/2014/11/review-e-k-huckaby-poet-saint-obsolete-savior-discarded-at-moca-ga/.

Morrison, Patt. "Guillermo del Toro: Monster Mash." *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 2010.

Murphy, Michael. *The Future of the Body: Explorations into the Further Evolution of Human Nature*. J. P. Tarcher, 1992.

Naam, Ramez. "The Singularity Is Bollocks: A Skeptical View," pp. 214-219 "The Singularity." Sirius, R. U. and Cornell, Jay. *Transcendence: The Disinformation Encyclopedia of Transhumanism and the Singularity*, Disinformation Books, 2015.

Nelson, Victoria. *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the New Supernatural*. Harvard University Press, 2012.

O'Sullivan, Michael. "The Eyes Have It. Or Do They?" *Washington Post*, July 24, 2014.
http://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/i-origins-movie-review-the-eyes-have-it-or-do-they/2014/07/23/4cd92818-11b1-11e4-8936-26932bcfd6ed_story.html.

Patterson, Tom. *St. EOM in the Land of Pasaquan*. Jargon Society, 1987.

Patterson, Tom. "St. EOM." BOMB magazine 19, Spring 1987. http://bombmagazine.org/article/902/.

Pinxten, Rik. "Koen Mechanlen: Art and Science." *Darwin's Dream*. Guy Pieters Gallery, Crypt Gallery, 2014.

Putnam, James and Silverman van Coenegrachts, Jill. "A Word from the Curators," *Darwin's Dream*, Guy Pieters Gallery, Crypt Gallery, 2014.

Rennie, Bryan, ed. *Changing Religious Worlds: The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade*. State University of New York Press, 2001.

"Review: The Messengers." *New York Times*, April 15, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/15/arts/television/tv-review-cws-the-messengers.html?_r=0.

Roden, David. *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human*, Routledge, 2014.

Roethke, Theodore. "Journey Into the Interior." http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/journey-into-the-interior/.

Sacks, Oliver. *Hallucinations*, Vintage Books, 2013, pp. 216-217.

Saler, Michael. *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

Searle, Rick. "John Gray and the Puppets of Gloom." *Utopia or Dystopia*. June 21, 2015. http://utopiaordystopia.com/2015/06/21/john-gray-and-the-puppets-of-gloom/.

Searle, Rick. "The Danger of Using Science as a God Killing Machine." March 30, 2014. *Utopia or Dystopia* http://utopiaordystopia.com/2014/03/30/the-danger-of-using-science-as-a-god-killing-machine/

Segal, Robert A. "Are There Modern Myths?" in Rennie, Bryan, ed., *Changing Religious Worlds: The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade*, State University of New York Press, 2001, p 25.

Sirius, R. U. and Cornell, Jay. *Transcendence: The Disinformation Encyclopedia of Transhumanism and the Singulari.* Disinformation Books, 2015.

Stoppard, Tom. *The Hard Problem*. Faber & Faber, 2015.

Straub, Peter. ed. *H. P. Lovecraft: Tales*. Library of America, 2005.

Taussig, Michael. "Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism: Another Theory of Magic." *Walter Benjamin's Grave*. University of Chicago Press, 2006.

"The Singularity," Sirius, R. U. and Cornell, Jay. *Transcendence: The Disinformation Encyclopedia of Transhumanism and the Singularity.* Disinformation Books, 2015, pp. 214-219.

Vásquez, Manuel and Marquardt, Marie Friedmann. *Globalizing the Sacred: Religion Across the Americas.* Rutgers University Press, 2003.

Warner, Marina. *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tales,* Oxford University Press, 2014.
http://www.marinawarner.com/publications/bookdetailsnonfiction/onceuponatime.html.

Warner, Marina. *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, And Media Into the Twenty-First Century*. Oxford University Press, 2006. http://www.marinawarner.com/publications/bookdetailsnonfiction/phantasmagoria.html

Warner, Marina. *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights*. Harvard University Press, 2012.

http://www.marinawarner.com/publication,s/bookdetailsnonfiction/strangermagic.html.

Author's Bio

Jerry Cullum studied with Mircea Eliade in the University of California at Santa Barbara's M. A. program in religious studies, and holds a doctor of philosophy degree from Emory University's Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts. A longtime art critic and freelance curator whose essays and reviews have appeared in *Raw Vision, Art in America*, and many other publications, he held several different editorial posts at Atlanta-based international journal *Art Papers*. He has continued to publish history of religions reviews and essays in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Material Religion, boundary 2*, and others.

Jainism and the West – An Overview

Melanie BARBATO

In the West, Jainism has been until some years ago largely unknown. This has several reasons. Jaina iconography is similar to Buddhist iconography, not least because Buddhism draws strongly on the older Jaina tradition or at least on common roots. Jainism is therefore easily confused with Buddhism or other better known elements of Indian culture. Robert Zydenbos noted that one recent book on Hinduism and modernity even featured the image of a Jain statue on its cover.[1] Traditionally the focus of Western interest in Asian religions was on Vedanta Hinduism and various forms of Buddhism. As Sherry Fohr has pointed out, even since the 1960s when the Indian spiritual traditions became widely popular in the West, "Jainism's strong emphasis on ethics possibly did not lend it the same attractiveness to the 'Beat' or 'Hippie' movements and their focus on alternative states of consciousness that are a stronger part of Buddhism and Hinduism".[2]

[1] R. Zydenbos (2006: 39).
[2] S. Fohr (2014: 113).

As Jaina monks and nuns are not permitted to travel overseas, they could not visit and promote Jainism in the West in the way some Hindu or Buddhist leaders, most prominently the Dalai Lama, are able to do. There was also little interest among those who represented Indian culture to the West to point out the distinct nature of Jainism, Even today, it is sometimes claimed by Hindu nationalists that Jainism is not a distinct religion but one of the countless traditions of worship that together form Hinduism. Going by the most common definition of Hinduism, this claim is not true because the authoritative status of the Vedas as sacred scripts is not accepted by Jainism, which has its own body of literature and which also differs from Hinduism in that it knows the caste system only for social reasons, not as part of its religious world view.

Another reason for the fact that Jainism has been relatively unknown is that compared to the two well-known religions of Indian origin, Hinduism and Buddhism, Jainism with its around four Million practitioners is a small religion. Even by generous estimates, in India Jains make up only up to one percent of the population.

Why then should we be interested in the Jaina tradition and its relations with the West? First, the numbers do not give an accurate picture of the importance of Jainism. Jains like Anju Jain, former co-CEO of Deutsche Bank, are influential in the world of business and trade. In India, Jains both male and female are much more likely to be literate than their

Hindu compatriots. The Jain tradition is rich and beautiful, both in the historical and contemporary perspective. Jains have made central contributions to Indian culture. In Indian philosophy they sought to position themselves in the middle ground between the "one-sided" views of other schools. For example, Jain philosophy takes personal identity to be dynamic and rooted in an equal reality of origination, persistence and destruction, thus offering a strong alternative to both Buddhist momentariness and Vedanta monism, both of which are difficult to bring in line with the common sense way people speak and think about personhood. From the perspective of philosophy and religious studies, Jainism is a fascinating subject because it aims at developing a highly ethical world view that is accessible to reason but anchored in a tradition of masters who have already managed to reach the highest goal of liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

Increasingly, the distinct nature of Jainism and its importance in India and beyond are being acknowledged. The last years saw a sharp increase in books on Jain related topics. This includes popular literature on world religions as well as academic books. While hundred years ago the question amongst academics was still whether Jainism constituted a religion separate from Buddhism, now dedicated academic centers study the texts and practices of the Jaina tradition.

From a Western perspective the study of Jainism is particularly worthwhile because it can challenge Western perceptions of success and the good life. As Jeffrey Long has pointed out,

> Jainism, more than any other Indic religious tradition, explicitly and dramatically embodies not only a rejection, a reversal of the values that are dominant in contemporary Western society – values which are increasingly global in reach.[3]

In his introductory book on Jainism, Long wrote about his personal experience of teaching Jainism to students:

> I have my student watch a video interview in my class of a wealthy Jain industrialist – in every way a success in the terms of American society – who expresses a sincere and heartfelt regret about the deaths of insects and microorganisms in his factories, as well as a deep desire to eventually give up 'all of this' once he retires. The class discussion that follows this video often raises uncomfortable questions about my students' career choices, and the environmental implication of their lifestyles. I once had a student comment that before studying Jainism, she thought she was a good person; but now she found herself examining all of the little ways in which she was bringing harm to others, human and non-human alike.[4]

Jainism is a challenging and worthwhile tradition to study from a Western perspective. As the paper will show, Jainism is however not just an exotic other but the Jain diaspora is a strong and productive community within Western culture. The relationship between Jainism and the West goes therefore both ways. The aim of this paper is to offer an introduction to the relations between Jainism and the West by giving a

[3] J. Long (2009: ixf).
[4] J. Long (2009: ixf).

short overview and by placing some highlights. The aim is not to give a comprehensive account but to show the multitude of possible topics and connections for future research.

After a short general introduction to Jainism this paper will discuss the Jaina community in the Western diaspora. The paper will present an overview of Jaina institutions, temples and cultural centres beyond India. The next section will show how Jainism features in exhibitions of art and culture. Then, the issue of interfaith dialogue between Jainism and other religions will be presented with a particular focus on the historical Parliament for the World's Religions in Chicago and the current dialogue between Jainism and the Catholic Church. Western converts to Jainism as well as the cultural influence of Jainism on the West will be the theme of another section, followed by a short discussion of the development of Western scholarship on Jainism.

What is Jainism?

The word 'Jainism' stems from the Sanskrit word '*jina*' (conqueror), which refers to those who have managed to rid themselves of lowly passions and karmic pollution. Jainism is one of the world's oldest religions. It has no founder but Jains believe that it is re-discovered and forgotten in very long cycles of time by holy men called tirthankaras. Jainism teaches its

adherents the knowledge and way of life required for breaking free from the cycle of rebirth. It holds a fundamentally dualistic view of the world and distinguishes between matter and the immaterial soul. The goal is to free the soul from polluting karmic matter and to achieve a natural state of purity and omniscience. The rules and the vows to be taken are significantly stricter for monks and nuns than for laypeople but non-violence in the form of non-killing is one of the central aspects of the Jain path. In fact, despite the rich history of the Jain tradition, many people, including also some Jains themselves, see Jainism first and foremost as the religion of non-violence and vegetarianism.

Jainism in the West is often known only through some of its more extreme practices. The first is the ritual fasting to death (samlekhana) which is believed to be very helpful in cleansing the soul of polluting karmic particles. Samlekhana, however, does not mean that Jains endorse suicide. The practice is only permitted under very specific circumstances, one of them being that the natural point of death is very close. Also, Jainism is often presented as austere, especially referring to the ascetic practices of Jain monks who have to regularly pull out their own hair. Yet today there are very few Jain monks compared to the number of lay people. In fact, the fast majority of Jains will for most people from the outside not be distinguishable from Hindus. This is also intentional – as a minority group the Jains have traditionally tried to keep a low profile.

Peter Flügel has observed that it

> may well be that we are presently witnessing the uncoupling of the doctrines of Jainism from the traditional institutional bedrock of Jain communities and the establishment of a universal religion of non-violence (ahimsa) embodied in a set of texts which, after their release from the vaults of the bhandaras and the monopoly of interpretation of the acaryas, gained a life on their own in the form of printed or electronic texts which are freely available to anyone anywhere. […] The consequences of the ongoing transformation of Jain lay religiosity from ritual to reflection for the future of the Jain tradition have to be seen.[5]

The Jaina Diaspora

Paul Dundas predicted that while the great majority of Jains is living in India, the Diaspora might be the place where a change or "modernisation" of Jainism is most likely to occur.[6] According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s statistics on the "Worldwide Adherents of All Religions by Six Continental Areas, Mid-1995", the total Jain population of 4.886.000 is distributed around the world in the following way: Around 4.804.000 in Asia, 58.000 in Africa, 15.000 in Europe, 4000 in Latin and Northern America each and

[5] P. Flügel (2008: 11f).
[6] See P. Dundas (2000: 21).

around 1000 in Oceania.[7] While in the past large-scale emigration of Jains from West India was mainly directed at East Africa for commercial reasons due to the historically strong trade links between these two regions, since the 1960s immigration has shifted towards the Anglophone countries, particularly the United Kingdom.[8] More recently, Jains have also managed to move into the professional sector in the United States and Canada, and are, though of course in smaller numbers, also engaged in the precious stone trade, in locations "as diverse as Antwerp or Kobe".[9] According to an article on the world's most successful diasporas that featured in World Business, one out of every ten diamonds sold in the world today has been handled by a Jaina.[10]

According to Kristi Wiley, Jains in the Diaspora differ significantly from those in India due to the strict regulations that prevent nuns and monks from travelling abroad:

> It is impossible for a mendicant to observe the mendicant rules of conduct to their fullest extent and travel abroad. Therefore, the Jain Diaspora community does not have close contact with the mendicants and it is almost exclusively a lay community.[11]

[7] See http://www.zpub.com/un/pope/relig.html

[8] See M. Banks (1992).

[9] See P. Dundas (2000:21).

[10] See http://www.worldbusinesslive.com/article/648273/the-worlds-successful-diasporas.

[11] K. Wiley (2006: 19).

Jains in the West have organized themselves in a number of national and international organizations. JIO, the Jain International Organization, understands itself as

> the Apex confederation of all Jains, spread around the world, having under it sixteen different organisations such as Jain International Trade Organisation (JITO), Jain International Doctors' Federation (JDF), Jain International Chartered Accountants' Federation (JICF), Jain International Advocates' Federation (JIAF), Jain International Women (JIWO), Jain International Youth Organisation (JIYO), Jain International Government Employees' Organisation (JIGEO) etc.[12]

In the United States, over seventy American Jain organizations are represented by the umbrella organization JAINA, the Federation of Jain Associations in North America, which was started in 1981.[13] This includes also groups for young Jainas as well as business oriented groups. According to Pierre Amiel, a French advocate of Jainism,

> each year since 1998, JAINA organizes a pilgrimage to India to visit temples and sacred places and gives its charitable support to social activities. It publishes a magazine '*Jain Digest*' that contains articles on various aspects of Jainism and reports on each of its communities. […] JAINA also sponsors seminars for young Jains and publishes matrimonial advertisements for its adherents' grooms and brides. It nationally

[12] http://www.jio.net.in/index.php/mentor/
[13] http://www.jaina.org/?page=AboutJAINA

> broadcasts TV programs about 'ahimsa' and consideration for fauna and flora. Its delegates take part to inter-religious meetings like '*the Parliament of religions*' and others. […] An '*International Summer University*' was created in 2005 to increase knowledge of Jainism by learned scholars all over the world.[14]

Jain Temples and Cultural Centres

Like in India, Jains in the West are not a uniform group. Temples and centers tend to be ecumenical, providing space for the different strands of Jainism under one roof. A good example is the Jain Center of America in Queens/ New York, the first American Jain temple, which houses under the heading "Unity in Diversity" shrines from different Jain traditions.[15] The fundamental division in terms of group membership runs for Jains between Digambaras and Svetambaras, but there are also groups following, for example, the heritage of Rajchandra Mehta, a Jain businessman and spiritual leader who had a profound influence on Mohandas Gandhi, and their tradition is also frequently represented at Western Jain shrines.

Besides New York, in the United States prominent centers or shrines are located in Phoenix, Chicago, and in the greater regions of Seattle and Atlanta. In 1983 Siddhachalam, a pilgrimage site spanning 120 acres, was opened in New Jersey by the International

[14] P. Amiel (2008: 247).

[15] http://www.nyjaincenter.org/About-Us/JCA-History

Mahavira Jain Mission. The compound comprises temples, meditation halls, housing for visiting nuns, monks and worshippers, a library and other community buildings in a peaceful and serene environment. The Siddhachalam website states that the founder Acharya Sushil Kumarji

> purified Siddhachalam through his austerities, study and meditation. As a result, Siddhachalam is called a Tirth (or "teerth"), a pilgrimage place. It is the only Jain Tirth outside India.[16]

In 1979 an old church in Leicester was converted into the Jain Center.[17] Marcus Banks has conducted an in-depth study of the Leicester Jain community.[18] There are also community centers in Manchaster, Leeds and at several other places, sometimes in conjunction with a bigger Hindu temple.[19] In 2001 the construction of the largest Jain temple in Europe was started in Antwerp for its small but wealth Jain community. In 2010 the sacred images were installed.[20]

---

[16] http://www.siddhachalam.org/about/about-siddhachalam/
[17] http://www.jaincentreleicester.com/index.asp
[18] M. Banks (1992).
[19] http://www.jainsamajmanchester.org/, http://www.jainology.org/resources/jain-temples-in-the-uk/
[20] https://www.facebook.com/pages/Jain-Cultural-Center-AntwerpJCCA/203998492984548

Exhibitions and Collections in Museums

Due to the historical connection of colonialism, many Jain works of art are on display in England. In 1995 a temporary exhibition "The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India" was held in London the Victoria and Albert Museum. At that time the Jain Art Fund that financially supports academics and museum experts studying Jain art was set up "as part of an ongoing project to increase understanding of the Jain religion and its artistic and cultural heritage".[21] In 2010 an exhibition of Jain manuscripts was organized at the Victoria and Albert Museum by the JAINpedia project, the opening of which was attended by the Prince of Wales.[22] The Victoria and Albert Museum displays on its website an illustrated manuscript of the Uttaradhyayanasutra which shows the nature of right sacrifice as well as several statues of fordmakers and a statue of the yakshi Ambika.[23] Another depictation of Ambika, on an inscribed 11th century stele, is presented on the website of the British Museum as one of the

[21] http://www.nehrutrustvam.org/jain-art-fund/history

[22] http://www.jainology.org/1209/the-prince-of-wales-visits-jainpedia-at-the-victoria-and-albert-museum/

[23] http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/j/jainism/. "Yakshi" is commonly translated with Goddess although this term is somewhat misleading in the Jaina context. Another translation is spirit, but this too carries misleading connotation so that I consider it best to use the original term.

museum's highlights.[24] In Antwerp an exhibition "Steps to Liberation" was held in 2000.[25]

In the United States, the Metropolitan Museum of Art holds several first class examples of Jaina manuscript painting.[26] In 2009/ 2010 a temporary exhibition "Victorious Ones: Jaina Images of Perfection" was held at the Rubin Museum in New York.[27] In 2014 a temporary exhibition "Pure Souls- The Jain Path to Perfection" was shown at the Asian Painting Gallery of the Boston Museum of Fine Art. The exhibition included "large and colorful maps of the cosmos, depictions of the lives of Jain saints, and images of sacred Sanskrit syllables used for meditation."[28] At the Nelson-Atkins museum in Kansas City a private Jain shrine is on special display until May 2016. The display of this "hidden treasure" was opened in June 2014 after over one year of restauration work.[29] In the German-speaking world, already in 1974 an exhibition "Kunst und Religion in Indien: 2500 Jahre Jainismus" was organized jointly by several Austrian and Swiss museums.[30]

---

[24] http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/asia/i/inscribed_stele_with_the_yaksh.aspx

[25] P. Flügel (2008: 10).

[26] http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jaim/hd_jaim.htm#slideshow1

[27] P. Granoff (2009).

[28] http://www.mfa.org/exhibitions/pure-souls

[29] http://www.nelson-atkins.org/art/Exhibitions/jain-shrine.cfm

[30] E. Fischer (1974).

Jainism at the Parliament of World Religions

The Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893 was the first large scale inter-faith event. At the parliament Jainism was represented by the Gujarati barrister Virachand Gandhi (not to be confused with Mohandas Karmachand "Mahatma" Gandhi). After the parliament Virachand Gandhi stayed in the United States for two years and lived in England for one further year before returning home to India on medical reasons. In countless speeches Virachand Gandhi taught the principles of Jainism to his Western audience, most of whom had never have heard of Jainism before. He was known as an eloquent speaker. The Morning Star, a newspaper from Pennsylvania, wrote that after hearing Gandhi's lecture on "'The Message of India to America', one is inclined to wonder if Indian missionaries to America are not in order."[31]

Before the Parliament, Gandhi addressed the audience not only a representative of Jainism but as someone opposing "sectarian spirit" from a higher vantage point. Gandhi was very well equipped for representing Jainism to a global audience. Not only did he speak as many as fourteen languages, he had also studied traditions other than his own, including Christianity and the esoteric Occultism that was at the time highly popular with Westerners.[32]

[31] A. Baldota (1964:42).
[32] A. Baldota (1964:10).

While Gandhi was in his speeches at all times polite and respectful, he spoke with authority and self-confidence and did not shy away from putting misconceptions about Jainism straight. He also defended the Jain view of reincarnation against the Christian notion of creation, even though he must have known that this would go against the expectations of much of his audience:

> That the soul is immortal is doubted by very few. It is an old declaration that whatsoever begins in time must end in time. You cannot say that the soul is eternal on one side of its earthly period without being so in the other. If the soul sprang into existence specially for this life, why should it continue afterwards? The ordinary idea of creation at birth involves the correlative of annihilation at death. Moreover, it does not stand to reason that from an infinite history the soul enters this world for its first and all physical existence, and then merges into an endless spiritual eternity. The more reasonable education is that it has passed through many lives and will have to pass through many more before it reaches its ultimate goal. But it is directed that we have no memory of past lives. Can anyone recall his childhood – Has anyone a memory of that wonderful epoch – infancy?[33]

Not only his speeches but also his self-presentation, right down to the dress he chose for appearing before the parliament, showed that he wanted to appear as

[33] A. Baldota (1964: 14f).

the representative of a tradition that was different from the West but of at least equal value:

> For his American sojourn, he had selected a dress, which added charm to his personality. He put on a royal purple robe and a gold colored turban. He had round his waist a white sash with a knot on the right and two ends hanging to his knees. He also wore oriental shoes. This make up created an oriental and hallowed atmosphere round him. He looked like a priest, sober, serene and peaceful, eager to achieve his object.[34]

While Gandhi came to the West to present an ancient tradition, he also had to invent the form in which he presented Jainism. The oriental costume Gandhi chose for his appearance at the parliament not merely taken from India, it was chosen and created with Western expectations in mind.

Interfaith relations

Jainas are very open to dialogue with other religions, and they are active in interfaith relations. In 2013 the financial support of Jainas contributed vitally to a campaign that raised $ 144000 in two weeks to help the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions, the successor organisation of the Parliament of the World's religion in Chicago.[35]

[34] A. Baldota (1964:10).

[35] http://www.religionnews.com/2013/04/16/parliament-of-the-worlds-religions-survives-financial-crunch/

The British Institute of Jainology, a charitable trust operating from London and Ahmedabad, states about its interfaith relations that it has

> participated in Universities in the UK and abroad to deliver papers on Jainism or Jain view on selected topics such as 'Religion and the environment'. Several universities in the UK have invited IoJ to present papers or a one day workshop on Jain topics. LSE, Atlantic College in Wales, Warwick University, Gregorian University in Rome, and Cambridge are some where IoJ have been invited. IoJ participates actively in Civic and Inter-faith organisations. Papers have been presented on many occasions in meetings and debates held by these groups. IoJ is also active with Home Office and other Government departments in providing the Jain view for decision making in legal matters. IoJ has a representative on the Educational Committee of the InterFaith Network UK.[36]

In particular, efforts have been made at Jaina-Christian interreligious dialogue. For example, in 2014 a Jaina delegate has spoken at a Vatican-organized international inter-religious colloquium on the complementarity of men and women.[37] In 2011, a Jain-Christian dialogue seminar was organized by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican, Catholic Bishops Conference of India, and Archdiocese of Delhi in Muni Sushil Kumar Ashram, New Delhi. The Jesuit Dr.

[36] http://www.jainology.org/education/universities-and-inter-faith/
[37] http://www.jainology.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Humanum_program.pdf

Vincent Sekhar S.J. presented a paper on "Avenues for Jain-Christian Dialogue".[38] He identifies the sanctity of life, the importance of following a prescribed code of (non-violent) conduct and the primacy of forgiveness and reconciliation as "three points of confluence" that could form fruitful topics for interreligious dialogue.[39] The Vatican also issues messages to the Jains, most recently in 2015 on the occasion of Mahavira's birthday. The message of Jean-Louis Cardinal Tauran, president of the Pontificial Council for Interreligious Dialogue, addressed the issue of how Jainas and Catholic Christians can work together to support adequate and dignified care for the elderly.[40] The Council also has a designated delegate that co-ordinates inter-religious dialogue with Hindus, Jainas and Sikhs.

Western converts to Jainism

Although conversion to Jainism is possible and Jains show a very positive attitude towards Westerners who claim inspiration from Jainism, Jains do generally not seek to proselytize. Compared to other Indian traditions the number of Westerners who identify as Jains is very small. Some of those to understand themselves as Jains may have little or no contact to

[38] V. Sekhar (2011).

[39] V. Sekhar (2011: 1).

[40] http://www.pcinterreligious.org/messages-for-the-feast-of-mahavir-jayanti_121.html

traditional Jain communities.[41] The most prominent lay convert to Jainism is probably the Italian singer Claudia Pastorino, who also promotes the typical Jain causes of animal rights and vegetarianism.[42] There are several groups open to Western esoteric seekers that understand themselves to be part of Jainism or state that they are strongly inspired by the Jain tradition. One relatively long-standing example is the movement started by Chitrabhanu, a former Jain monk from Gujarat and founder of the Jain Meditation Center in New York.[43] As Jain monks are not permitted to travel to other continents, he gave up his status as a monk to be able to follow the invitation of the Second Spiritual Summit Converence in Geneva and other invitations, predominantly to American universities. As Caroline Humphrey has pointed out,

> Chitrabhanu's movement in America […] shows the extent to which 'Jaina doctrine' is flexible when it makes converts. But the vast majority of of Jain reform movements do not seriously aim to convert non Jains. The aim and the idiom are to remind Jains of their own principles.[44]

Sadhvi Siddhali Shree, born Tammy Herbster, is according to her website now

---

[41] An example for such conversion based on self-study is Justin Lundee, an American man who first got interested in Hinduism and then, through reading about Jainism online, decided to convert to Jainism (http://jainismus.hubpages.com/hub/Justin-Lundeen)

[42] http://www.claudiapastorino.it/english.html

[43] http://www.jainmeditation.org/pages/gurubackground.html

[44] C. Humphrey (1991: 232).

> the Chief Disciple of living enlightened master Acharya Shree Yogeesh and the first American Jain monk. She was publicly initiated at the age of 24 in 2008, by Acharya Shree, making her the first Jain monk to be initiated outside of India.[45]

Acharya Shree Yogeesh, a successful spiritual teacher, was himself born into a Hindu warrior caste and believes that

> committed to the belief that the true wisdom of Lord Mahavira, Buddha, Krishna, Rama, Jesus, and other masters should be available and accessible to all peoples, regardless of nationality, language, color, or creed.[46]

This shows that Jainism, too, has been appropriated as a form of blended spirituality rather than organized religion, although to a much lesser degree than Buddhism and Hinduism.

There are also several Western-born academics who are referred to a Jainas, such as Patrick Krüger, head of the Center for Jaina Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin in Germany.[47] Converts tend to name the match between Jain ethics and their own views, as well as the attractiveness of Jain rationality and philosophy as the primary reasons for conversion.

[45] http://siddhalishree.com/

[46] http://siddhalishree.com/about/

[47] http://www.herenow4u.net/index.php?id=62442&tt_address_pi1[uid]=812&cHash=c926fddbfa

Jaina influence on Western culture

One of the public figures who acknowledged the influence of Jainism on their life was George Bernard Shaw, a vegetarian and advocate of animal rights. Shaw was also a strong supporter of the Indian independence movement and had visited India in 1933. According to Michael Holroyd,

> Shaw liked to say that all his 'globe-trotting' left little mark on his later plays except for the Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles, which he wrote in 1934. […The play was] imbued with Jainism 'the most tolerant religion in the world'.[48]

The influence of Jainism on Western culture was mainly indirectly through Mahatma Gandhi. Channeled through Gandhi's political activism, Jainism has impacted on the modern world extending indirectly, as Jeffrey D. Long has pointed out,

> to such figures as Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, César Chavez, Thich Nhat Hanh, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, an numerous others who have taken up the path of nonviolence in order to bring about positive social and political change.[49]

Gandhi was born in 1869 in what is now the Gujarat state of India, a region with a strong influence

[48] Michael Holroyd (2015), *George Bernard Shaw: the new biography*, Head of Zeus, ebook, 2015.

[49] J. Long (2009: xvii).

of Jainism. Although his parents where Vaishnava Hindus, his family belonged to a caste which had both Hindu and Jain members. Through his mother the young Gandhi also came in close contact with Jain holy men. His mother sought from them guidance in life and raising of her children. For example, when embarking on his studies to England, Gandhi was taken by his mother to a Jain monk to vow abstinence from sexual relations, eating meat and drinking alcohol. In England, Gandhi was deeply affected by British culture. He tried to assimilate and to appear as an English gentleman in manners and appearance, including a stovepipe hat. This of course stands in stark contrast to his later promotion of exclusively Indian garbs woven by hand and his campaign for Indian independence from British colonialism.

When Gandhi returned to India, he experienced a severe identity crisis. He addressed letters with philosophical questions to various spiritual authorities and found only the answers of the Jain Rajchandra Mehta as satisfactory. Gandhi wrote:

> I have tried to meet the heads of various faiths, and I must say that no one else has ever made on me the impression that Raychandbhai did. His words went straight home to me. His intellect compelled as great a regard from me as his moral earnestness, and deep down in me was the conviction that he would never willingly lead me astray and would always confide to me his innermost thoughts. In my moments of spiritual crisis, therefore, he was my refuge... .[50]

[50] M. Gandhi (1949: 75).

Most of all Gandhi was impressed by Rajchandra's tolerant approach that placed personal experience above doctrine and sectarian divides. Gandhi himself did not consider Jainism as distinct from Hinduism, but his campaign of non-violent resistance is strongly influenced by Jainism. As I have argued elsewhere, Gandhi's efforts to drive out the colonial powers can be compared to the Jaina's efforts to rid him – or herself of polluting karmons.[51]

But the influence of Jainism does not only have to be found in the past. In "Jainism: Today & Its Future" (2006) Zydenbos considers what Jainism can contribute to the world:

> Some aspects of Jaina doctrine that are of contemporary public, religious and intellectual interest are anisvaravada (the denial of a single dominant deity whose orders people are supposed to obey), its universality (Jainism has always been an open religion, not a way of life or social order that is reserved for any specific ethnic group), its doctrine of karma (by which psychological processes and also initial concrete circumstances of the individual life, with its differences from other individual lives, are explained) its theory of consciousness and its meaning for an understanding of the individual and of the meaning of life in general, and finally its ethical teachings.[52]

It should also be mentioned that Jains are contributing to Western societies by playing an active role in the

[51] M. Barbato (2015).
[52] R. Zydenbos (2006: 86).

promotion of peace, the protection of the environment, animal welfare and social causes, including "financial and material aids to victims of earthquakes in India, California and Japan".[53] In 1992 the "Jain Declaration on Nature" was handed to Prince Philip, who was at the time president of the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF).[54]

The academic study of Jainism

In 1975 the great Jain scholar Padmanabh S. Jaini gave a paper on "The Jainas and the Western Scholar" at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in which he pointed out that the academic study of Jainism lagged seriously behind that of Hinduism or Buddhism. In particular he criticised that scholars studying Jainism

> were interested less in the religion itself than in the linguistic peculiarities of the Prakrits and Apabhramsa in which Jaina works were written

and that

> [b]eyond this linguistic interest their religion was approached primarily as a tool for the comparative study of Buddhism.[55]

According to Paul Dundas, this

> largely textual orientation of the nineteenth century and subsequent western scholarship has also been

[53] P. Amiel (2008: 248).
[54] http://www.jainology.org/publications/jain-delaration-on-nature/
[55] P. Jaini (2000: 23).

> responsible for the creation of a distorted perspective on Jain society and its history,

with Jainism being presented either as

> colourless and austere or with reference to a few 'exotic' customs such as the wearing of the mouthshield (*muhpatti*) to avoid violence to minute organisms living in the air, a practice hardly universal within the religion.[56]

Also, those 19th and early 20th century accounts of Jainism by people who had been in contact with the Jaina community rather than knowing Jainism only through textual sources tended to show the author's colonial or missionary outlook. Most prominently Sinclair Stevenson, who had lived eight years among Jainas as a Presbyterian missionary in Kathiawar, concluded in her book *The Heart of Jainism* (1915) despite all sympathy for the Jainas that this heart was ultimately cold because Jainism did not place its trust in a universal creator and saviour.[57]

One of the first Western scholars to carry out research according to ethnographic standards was Markus Banks who in 1982 started to conduct fieldwork for his doctoral thesis to research the varieties of

[56] P. Dundas (1992: 8).

[57] S. Stevenson (1915). In his contemporary review of Stevenson's book, J. Pratt (1917: 304) stated: "Mrs Stevenson is a missionary, and she believes that Jainism is bound some day to yield absolutely to Christianity. This, however, does not prevent her from bringing to her study of the religion which she seeks to destroy a very considerable sympathy".

religious belief among immigrant Gujarati Jainas in Britain.[58] In 1992 Paul Dundas raised the point that

> Western scholarship […] has hardly begun to provide an adequate assessment of the Jain religion. Furthermore, despite the genuine achievement of figures such as Weber and, rather more recently in this century, Schubring, the west cannot be regarded as having in any serious manner retrieved Jainism for the Jain community or mediated the tradition to it.[59]

The last decades, however, have seen a strong increase in interest in Jaina studies. As Flügel notes, in

> recent years the focus of academic research has shifted from the earlier philological, archaeological and art historical endeavours to the study of Jainism as a living religious and philosophical tradition. The study of (post-canonical) Jain philosophy has been pioneered in India and in Japan, while studies of the anthropology and history of the Jains has been advanced in France, the U.K., and the U.S.A. from 1985 onwards. Most of the few sociological studies following the work of Sangave (1959/ 1980) have been written in India.[60]

Today there are in Europe two centers dedicated to Jaina studies. One in England at the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) at the University of London and one in Germany and one at the Freie Universität Berlin. Unlike Britain, Germany does not have a big Jaina community. Nevertheless, German

[58] M. Banks (1991: 241).
[59] P. Dundas (1992: 9).
[60] P. Flügel (2008: 11).

scholarship has made a strong contribution to the study of Jainism. Hermann Jacobi (1850-1937), who studied linguistics and Sanskrit is particularly known particularly for translating the Jaina sutras and other Jaina texts into German and English. Jainism is also today thought and studied at several German universities. Alone in Bavaria two Indology departments, Würzburg and Munich, employ specialists on Jainism and promote a regional focus on Karnataka, one of the Jaina strongholds in India. Since 2010 there is at the Miami International University a Jain Studies Program with a dedicated Bhagwan Mahavir Professorship.

Conclusion

The paper presented an overview of the relations between Jainism and the West. The aim was to show that there are many points of contact between Jainism and the West that merit further study. Although the last years saw a noticeable increase in academic Jain studies and popular literature, Jainism is still a relatively unknown religion. This means that in Jain Studies there are still many research opportunities to venture into uncharted land.

Historically, Jainism did not attract the attention of either Western spiritual seekers or academics as did the other Indian traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism. However, Jain laymen proved to be passionate spokespeople for their faith, most prominently

Virachand Gandhi at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago. Jain lay people in the Diaspora can be found in influential positions, mainly as business men in trade or banking. Jains are open to interreligious dialogue and interfaith relations are increasing due to efforts from both within and outside the Jain community. Because many Diaspora Jains are learned and wealthy, their activism and philanthropic activities in culture and the arts, but also support of the needy and maybe most typically the protection of the environment and animal welfare goes far beyond what would be expected going merely by the relatively low numbers of membership. In particular in the UK and the US, Jains are well organized and engage in many activities to keep their traditions alive and foster a non-violent society.

While the first encounters between Jainism and the West were within a framework of Christian and Western dominance, today the "West" is more characterized by its capitalist structures and a fluid, not membership-based spirituality. Jains are actively engaging in the global conversation about values and meaning that is taking place on the internet. Within the last years, the articles on Jain related issues have skyrocketed and Jains are actively discussing, promoting and defending their faith both inside and outside the community.[61]

[61] For a discussion of two Jaina related Wikipedia entries and other Jaina related websites such as Jainlist see Barbato (2015).

The global reach of capitalist structures, migration and modern means of communication means that old categories like East and West are becoming problematic even beyond the established strands of the Orientalism debate. In its 2014 review, the German foreign ministry has used for the first time not the usual Eurocentric map of the world but a dymaxion map which is arranging the land masses in ways that are not orientated on categories of North, East, South, and West.[62] In the study of philosophy, religion and culture, open-minded discourse about and with Jainism could help to transcend the old categories of East and West.

Bibliography

Amiel, P., *Jains Today in the World*, Parshwanath Vidyapeeth: Varanasi, 2008.

Baldota, A., *Selected Speeches of Shri Virachand Raghavji Gandhi: A Great Bharatiya Philosopher at the Congress of World Religions*, Godiji Jain Upshhraya: Mumbai, 1964.

Banks, M., "Orthodoxy and dissent: varieties of religious belief among immigrant Gujarati Jains in Britain", in Carrithers, M., Humphrey, C., *The Assembly of Listeners: Jains in Society*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1991.

Banks, M., *Organizing Jainism in India and England*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1992.

Barbato, M., *Anekanta through the Ages: The Jaina Teaching of the Infinite Aspects of Reality and Truth between Philosophy and*

[62] http://www.aussenpolitik-weiter-denken.de/en/topics.html

Rhetoric, doctoral dissertation submitted at LMU Munich, unpublished, 2015.

Fischer, E., "Kunst und Religion in Indien: 2500 Jahre Jainismus", *Museum für Völkerkunde*, Wien, 1974.

Flügel, P., "The Invention of Jainism: A Short History of Jaina Studies", in *International Journal of Jaina Studies*, Volume 1-3, Hindi Granth Karyalay: Mumbai, 2008.

Gandhi, Mohandas, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Phoenix Press: London, 1949.

Granoff, P. (ed.), *Victorious Ones: Jai Images of Perfection*, The Rubin Museum of Art, New York, 2009.

Holroyd, M., *George Bernard Shaw: the new biography*, Head of Zeus, e-book, 2015.

Humphrey, C., "New Jain Institution in India and Beyond", in Carrithers, M., Humphrey, C., *The Assembly of Listeners: Jains in Society*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 199.1

Jaini, P. S. "The Jainas and the Western Scholar" (1975), in Jaini, P.S., *Collected Papers on Jaina Studies*, Motilal Banarsidass: Delhi, 2000.

Pratt, J., review of *The Heart of Jainism* by Mrs. Sinclair Stevenson, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Jul., 1917), pp. 302-304.

Sekhar, V., "Avenues for Jain-Christian Dialogue", a Jain-Christian dialogue seminar held in Muni Sushil Kumar Ashram, New Delhi, on 13 November 2011, organized by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican, Catholic Bishops Conference of India, and Archdiocese of Delhi,

http://idcrdialogue.com/admins/Articles/avenues%20for%20jain-christian%20dialogue%20_vjtr%20april%202012%20and%20may%202012__60.pdf.

Wiley, K., *The A to Z of Jainism*, Vision Books: New Delhi 2006.

Zydenbos, R., *Jainism: Today & Its Future*, Manya Verlag: München, 2006.

Author's Bio

Melanie Barbato is a member of the *Cluj Center for Indian Studies* and an alumna of the *Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies*. She has completed her doctoral studies in Indology and Religious Studies at LMU Munich, Germany. Her doctoral research was about *anekantavada*, a central concept in Jain philosophy and religion. She holds a M.St. in Oriental Studies from the University of Oxford and a B.A. (Hons.) in Philosophy and Religious Studies from the University of Stirling.

Perspectives on Religious (In)Difference and (In)Tolerance

Mihaela GLIGOR

In every religion there is love,
yet love has no religion.

Rumi

"I'm different, you know. I don't judge people on criteria like color, religion, age, sex orientation or political views. For me, people are people. Yes, there are bad people and good people, but I believe everyone has a good side and you can learn something from every encounter".

I know so many people who think that way, but still when they act, they act differently. Not because they are bad people, but because they think generally, and act particularly. In theory, all is good. In practice, we find ourselves disturbed by so many things and we show indifference or intolerance without even realizing it. And we do this especially when it comes about religion, because we see the world through our own religious background. We were raised in a particular religion, so we have the tendency to look at other religions with some kind of superiority. Or indifference.

And this only because we do not know many things about other religions. The moment we learn something, we see things differently.

We often wonder: What are the limits of religious tolerance? Why can we be very open to the idea of tolerance, as a principle, and still, when it comes about our own family/actions, to be, in many cases, intolerant?[1] What is the difference between the idea of tolerance and its particular application? And why, so many times, we are tolerant in words, and intolerant in practice? Why does this difference occur? And why are we showing indifference when we should implicate ourselves and make a difference? Yes, we play with notions, but we actually do this in everyday life.

[1] On this subject, see, among others, the article of William Scott Green, "The "What" and "Why" of Religious Toleration", included in *Religious Tolerance in World Religions*, edited by Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, Templeton Foundation Press, 2008, pp. 3-11. To cite only an example, the interfaith marriages, Green writes: "The views on religious exclusivism do not correlate with attitudes on interfaith marriage. A majority of South Korean Christians, Hindus, and Jews disapprove of marriage outside their religion. Muslims, following Islamic teaching, approve of it for sons but not for daughters. American Catholics and Protestants, and Peruvian Catholics massively approve of interfaith marriage. It appears that the acknowledgment of the equality of the practitioners of other religions does not necessarily translate into a willingness to have them in one's family" (p. 6).
My interest in religious tolerance dates since 2012 when I participated in a conference and also published a short article: "The Peaceful Religious (In)Tolerance", *Religious Co-existence and Tolerance. Challenging Borders in a Global Context*, International Forum for Studies in Society and Religions (IFSSR), Kolkata, 2012, pp. 65-73.

In his *Vocabulaire philosophique*, Edmond Goblot, the founder of French sociology, wrote:

> *L'indifférence* en matière de religion ou de philosophie est l'état d'un esprit qui ne se prononce pas, qui n'affirme ni ne nie, soit par *insouciance*, soit par *scepticisme*[2].

We know that our indifference is a psychological state of mind. We clearly distinguish that from ignorance as from rejection, from acceptance as from desire, from affirmation as from doubt. The indifference is well connected with our beliefs. With what we usually call God.

In 1931, while speaking on the radio, in London, Mahatma Gandhi made a statement:

> There is an indefinable mysterious power that pervades everything, I feel it though I do not see it. It is this unseen power which makes itself felt and yet defies all proof, because it is so unlike all that I perceive through my senses. It transcends the senses. [...] That informing power of spirit is God[3].

From the beginning of time, people have thought that above them there is an external almighty force that writes their destiny and rules the known Universe. They called this force "God", and they attributed to this force all kind of names, images, and powers.

---

[2] Edmond Goblot, *Vocabulaire philosophique*, Librairie Armand Colin, 1901, p. 292. "*Indifference* in the religious or philosophical field is the state of mind which does not pass judgment, which does not affirm and does not deny, either out of *heedlessness*, or out of *scepticism*".

[3] Mahatma Gandhi, *On God*, Radio Lecture, London, October 20, 1931.

Old as the world itself, religious tolerance is a key concept in recent discussions about the globalised society and its distinctive characteristics. The others' thoughts and beliefs are important for us especially when the external behavior can bring us unwanted troubles. Because we are so different – in terms of gender, color, culture, language, religion – we have the chance to learn about each other and to pass beyond these differences. And in this process, tolerance – any kind of tolerance – stands as the right way to a harmonious coexistence. Yet, too many times, we learn about outrageous facts that happened in the name of God, and we cannot stop from wondering if hate and religious differences are only surface representations of something deeper, like a serious and rather figured complex of superiority – our God's superiority in front of the other's God.

As Nobel laureate Amartya Sen writes,

> freedom and tolerance both get support from Aristotle (even though only for free men – not women and slaves). However, we can find championing of tolerance and freedom in non-Western authors as well. A good example is the emperor Ashoka in India, who during the third century BCE covered the country with inscriptions on stone tablets about good behavior and wise governance, including a demand for basic freedoms for all – indeed, he did not exclude women and slaves as Aristotle did; he even insisted that these rights must be enjoyed also by 'the forest people' living in pre-agricultural communities distant from Indian cities. Ashoka's championing of tolerance

> and freedom may not be at all well known in the contemporary world, but that is not dissimilar to the global unfamiliarity with calendars other than the Gregorian[4].

As we have mentioned before, we have the tendency to see the world through the religion in which we were born. Doing this, we forget that the world is not only what we think it is, and the idea of "God" is larger than our own perception of God. We cannot see things in white and black, especially when there are so many gray nuances. Even in our own religion, things and doctrines are not always nice and calm. Let us just take Christianity, for example.

Under the name of Christianity we reunite both Catholicism and Orthodoxy, but also Protestantism and many different other philosophic or religious currents. And still, for someone from outside, all these people are Christians, even if they have different opinions about the constituting facts and dogmas, even if some have different Holidays or prayers; all of them are, for a Muslim or for a Hindu, Christians. And especially because we do not have an adequate knowledge about what the other thinks, sometimes we manifest an indifference towards the other's religion. We do not intend to offend or upset our neighbor; and even when we think we know, in reality, we do not

[4] Amartya Sen, "The Reach of Reason" in *The Argumentative Indian. Writings on Indian Culture, History, and Identity*, Penguin Books, India, 2005, p. 284.

know, or do not know entirely. And from here to indifference is just one small step.

> In many places, religious indifference loosely unites a large part of the population; in many others, religious differences sharply divide people.[5]

Does our indifference unite or divide us and, worse, does it make us hate each other? Many times,

> the West is seen […] as having exclusive access to the values that lie at the foundation of rationality and reasoning, science and evidence, liberty and tolerance, and of course rights and justice[6].

And because of this perception, the idea of tolerance is very important here.

The word "tolerance" applied to religion was one of the foundations of the Enlightenment. Back in the 17th century, after 300 years of war in the name of religion, several thinkers began to consider a better way for humanity. Among them, the English political philosopher John Locke who, living in exile in Amsterdam, wrote *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, which was published in 1689. In this letter he wrote:

> Neither Pagan nor Mahometan, nor Jew, ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the commonwealth because of his religion [...]. The Gospel commands no such thing [...] and the commonwealth which embraces

[5] See Rudolf C. Heredia, *Changing Gods. Rethinking Conversion in India*, Penguin Books India, 2007, p. ix.

[6] Amartya Sen, op. cit., p. 285.

> indifferently all men that are honest, peaceable, and industrious, requires it not.[7]

Or, as Amartya Sen puts it,

> [...] we can reason about the right way of perceiving and treating other people, other cultures, other claims, and examine different grounds for respect and tolerance.[8]

If we want to (try to) be equidistant regarding this subject, we could say that every religion is a way to God. Neither of these ways towards God can be considered superior to the other. However, depending on one's mental temperament and cultural background, one way might be better suited to him/her than another. This difference arises due to the variance in the temperament of the person and cannot be used to judge the general efficacy of a path. If we understand the differences and we respect the beliefs of that person, then we manifest what is called "tolerance". Within the word "tolerance" we can and have to recognise the differences (all of them, from skin colour

[7] For more details see John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, edited by Ian Shapiro, Yale University Press, 2003, pp. 211-255.

[8] Amartya Sen, op. cit., p. 276. In his analysis, Amartya Sen also mentions the fact that "Members of non-Western civilizations do not […] share some of the values, including liberty or tolerance, that are central to Western society and are the foundations of ideas of justice as developed by Western philosophers from Immanuel Kant to John Rawls"; "Values such as tolerance, liberty and reciprocal respect have been described as "culture-specific" and basically confined to Western civilization" (see p. 280).

to dress code or sexual preferences or ways of showing respect towards divinity), and when we do so and act according to the norms of equality and freedom, tolerance is what is happening.

On the other hand, each religious tradition includes a system of beliefs or worldview through which adherents understand the world and their place in it. A belief system is a way of perceiving and interacting in a society guided by a set of established moral rules. Our beliefs are an essential part of who we are and how we behave. A culture with a strong belief system is shaped by it. A religious worldview provides a view of the whole of things (beliefs about life and the cosmos) and of what is ultimately real. In those traditions with a historical founder and master figure, an important accent lies on the life and teaching of the foundational figure (for example, Buddha, Christ, Confucius, or Muhammad).

Then, we have to admit that "religion is not just a large and critical part of our culture, it is at the core of culture, especially in a society where popular religiosity is predominant and religious traditions central".[9]

For Mircea Eliade, the history of religions is "constituted by a great number of *hierophanies*, manifestations of the sacred realities"[10], and with each one of them we add different meanings to the unseen

[9] Rudolf C. Heredia, *Changing Gods*, op. cit., p. 359.

[10] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1958, p. 12.

entity. Moreover, if we are to connect ourselves to them, then we could attempt to do it through understanding and relating ourselves to whatever they would represent. These *hierophanies* – the manifestation of the sacred in a stone, or a tree, or, for a Christian, in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ – would have to reveal something beyond what they apparently seem to be – a stone different from all other stones, a tree being more than every other tree, a human being different from others, etc. What relates us to them could be our recognition of their special attributes of sacredness, as seeing them standing apart from the rest of the empirical profane realities. There would be hence, on one hand, the manifestation of the sacred and, on the other hand, us, who would attempt on understanding and relate to them. The idea of the religious identity seems to rise from this specific endeavor of understanding such a manifestation and from the specific relation we would posit ourselves concerning it. It is therefore not surprising that the concept of religious identity is shared by the individual as well as the groups of individuals. Individually, it is the construction of one's personal beliefs, practices, actions, and values.

Also central, for each and every religion, is a certain sacred place, and this place is the most important one because *in illo tempore* something sacred happened there and because of that the place is seen (in the respective religion or tradition) as the Centre of the world – or *axis mundi*. And there are many centres, as there are many religions. In each case, this *axis*

mundi can be seen as a direct connexion between Earth and Heaven; between humankind and the Kingdom of God. In Mircea Eliade's opinion, "every Microcosm, every inhabited region, has a Centre; that is to say, a place that is sacred above all."[11] In Canaanite tradition, Mount Hermon was seen as the *axis mundi*; for ancient Greeks, the oracle from Delphi was the most important place from the whole Earth, and Mount Olympus was the home of Gods; for Judaism, Mount Sinai and the Temple Mount are sacred landmarks; Mount of Olives and Golgota, for Christianity; Mecca and the Dome of the Rock, for Islam; Mount Kailash (identified with the mythical Mount Meru) is the home of Shiva, so the most important sacred space for Hindus and so on. Each and every religion has its sacred *axis mundi*, from where its known religious universe descends.

For Christians of the Crusader era, Jerusalem was the centre of the world. And it still is, in many ways, for three of the most important religions of our contemporary world: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Three different worlds coexist within the white city, Jerusalem, and three different calls for prayer are heard within the walls[12]. If those people did not practice tolerance, the holy city would be under an endless war.

---

[11] Mircea Eliade, "Symbolism of the Centre" in *Images and Symbols* (tr. Philip Mairet), Princeton, 1991, p. 39.

[12] For a complete analysis of the history of Jerusalem and the wars that happened there during the time, see Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem. The Biography*, London, Phoenix, an imprint of Orion Books Ltd., 2012.

The social character of a religion – of any relationship with the Absolute – is reflected in the name by which it is identified as a communal entity: the Christian *church*, the Jewish *synagogue*, the Hindu *temple*, the Buddhist *sangha*, the Muslim *umma*, and so on. Religion may dictate a set of acceptable standards and those who wish to remain in that society must adhere to those standards, within acceptable limits. For those who are unable to do this, there is the option of leaving the society or of belonging to another religion. But

> religious conversion can bring about an intensification of religious differences and antagonisms or it can be the occasion to review and solve them.[13]

As we could see so far, there can be no denying that the concept "religion" is complex, and the term is often taken to refer to a number of different concepts and practices. In many cases, religion is equated with religious institutions, and is identified with or rejected as a point of identification on that basis. Religion also defines the moral code, which gives guidance as to what is right and wrong in society. Identification may be based on whether or not one agrees with the particular (usually conservative) moral code which one identifies with the religious institution. Religion is one category of a multidimensional life, representing the extent to which religion is seen as a personal choice. For those embracing a religious identity, religion is often usually described as a sentimental feeling of goodness.

[13] Rudolf C. Heredia, *Changing Gods*, op. cit., p. 359.

The word *religion* comes from the Latin *religare*, which means "to bind back". We can say that the word reveals the fact that religion reestablishes one's connection to the origin. More than that, religion is understood as a key aspect of racial/ethnic identity, or as something related to the mystical and inexplicable, or supernatural, in life.

Each religion is a social and institutional entity with a set of values, and codes of conduct. Fundamental in all religions is the concept of a relationship. The relationship may involve one or more persons, it may be physical and/or spiritual and it may be real or imagined, dynamic or static. Within the ambit of this relationship, the persons involved used words such as "devotion", "respect", "faith", "holy", "sacrifice", or "enlightenment".

> India is supposed to be a religious country above everything else. I have frequently condemned [religion] and wished to make a clean sweep of it. Almost always it seems to stand for blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition and exploitation, and the presentation of vested interests. And yet I knew that there was something else in it, something which supplied a deeper inner craving of human beings.[14]

That "something else" mentioned by Nehru in his *Autobiography* is the tolerance; without it, India would

[14] Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (1936), Oxford University Press, 1989.

not be what it is. And regarding tolerance, India has a long lasting tradition. Even since the time of Akbar the Great, the Moghal emperor of India, this country embraced the diversity and managed to keep within its borders, in peace, almost all religious traditions of modern world.

> Taking note of the denominational diversity of Indians (including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Sikhs, Parsees, Jews and others), he [Akbar] laid the foundations of the secularism and religious neutrality of the state which he insisted must ensure that "no man should be interfered with on account of religion, and anyone is to be allowed to go over to a religion that pleases him"[15].

And, as Professor Sen continues,

> It is worth recalling that in Akbar's pronouncements of four hundred years ago on the need for religious neutrality on the part of the state, we can identify the foundations of a non-denominational, secular state which was yet to be born in India or for that matter anywhere else. Thus, Akbar's reasoned conclusions, codified during 1591 and 1592, had universal implications. Europe had just as much reason to listen to the message as India had. The Inquisition was still in force, and just when Akbar was writing on religious tolerance in Agra in 1592, Giordano Bruno was arrested for heresy, and ultimately, in 1600, burnt as the stake in the Campo dei Fiori in Rome[16].

---

[15] Amartya Sen, op. cit., p. 274. Amartya Sen cites here the book signed by Vincent A. Smith, *Akbar: The Great Mogul*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1917, p. 257.

[16] Ibidem, p. 287.

Tolerance is not just a word; it is a way of life, ultimately. In our contemporary world is, unfortunately more than ever, linked with intolerance. Religious intolerance. And this is experienced at all levels, from children's playground to politicians' campaigns. It is quite sad to see all these intolerant manifestations especially because the world is big enough for all traditions and religions and, more than that, this unity in diversity is what it is extraordinary about our world.

Bibliography

Dalrymple, William, *Nine Lives. In Search of The Sacred in Modern India*, Bloomsbury, 2010.

Eliade, Mircea, *The Sacred and the Profane*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1958.

Eliade, Mircea, *Images and Symbols* (tr. Philip Mairet), Princeton, 1991.

Gligor, Mihaela and Sabbarwal, Sherry (eds.), *Patterns in Philosophy and Sociology of Religions*, Rawat Publications, India, 2011.

Heredia, Rudolf C., *Changing Gods. Rethinking Conversion in India*, Penguin Books India, 2007.

Locke, John, *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. by Ian Shapiro, Yale University Press, 2003.

Keay, John, *A History of India*, Harper Collins, 2004.

Madan, T.N., *India's Religions*, Oxford UP, 2004.

Nehru, Jawaharlal, *An Autobiography* (1936), Oxford University Press, 1989.

Neusner, Jacob and Chilton, Bruce (eds.), *Religious Tolerance in World Religions*, Templeton Foundation Press, 2008.

Said, Edward W., *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Penguin Books, 2001.

Sebag Montefiore, Simon, *Jerusalem. The Biography*, London, Phoenix, an imprint of Orion Books Ltd., 2012

Sen, Amartya, *The Argumentative Indian. Writings on Indian Culture, History, and Identity*, Penguin Books, India, 2005.

Wood, Michael, *The Story of India*, BBC Books, 2007.

Author's Bio

Mihaela Gligor studied Philosophy at Babes-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, where she also received her PhD in Philosophy in 2006, with a thesis about *Mircea Eliade and the Romanian Right Extreme.*

Author of three volumes, editor/co-editor of other nine, Mihaela Gligor is a specialist in Mircea Eliade's life and work and interested in Indian culture and history of religions, as well as interwar period and intellectual history.

At present she is a Scientific Researcher in Philosophy at Romanian Academy, Cluj-Napoca, "George Baritiu" History Institute, Department of Humanities, and Chief of Philosophy Sector (from February 2013). http://gligor.humanistica.ro/ and (founder and) Director of *Cluj Center for Indian Studies*, opened in 2014 at Babes-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca: http://indian.centre.ubbcluj.ro/.

In 2009 she was a Fellow at the Department of Philosophy, Jadavpur University Kolkata, India, with an I.C.C.R. (Indian Council for Cultural Relations) postdoctoral scholarship.

Founder and Editor-in-chief of *International Journal on Humanistic Ideology*: www.socio.humanistica.ro/.

Between Colonial Laws and Religious Traditions: Hindu Women in the Nineteenth Century India

Maria-Daniela POMOHACI

In order to understand social reforms regarding women's rights in nineteenth century India, one needs to begin by taking a look at the ideas of "rule of law" and at the "rule of colonial difference", which animated legislation initiatives in the field of gender and discrimination in colonial India.

Rule of Colonial Difference

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the British had to deal with a unique case regarding the administration of their newly conquered territories in the Indian peninsula. The Indian colony differed greatly from the British colonies in North America and in the Caribbean, which were, according to Bernard Cohn, "an extension of the basic political and legal institutions of Great Britain".[1] While in these latter

[1] Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India,* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 57.

regions, the colonizing population was mainly British and their laws were the laws of Great Britain, in India the British acknowledged that there already was an ancient civilization with its own forms of local self-governance. In their Indian territories, it was impossible for the British to subjugate or relocate the native population in the way they had been able to do in North America, or in the Caribbean colonies. Bernard Cohn points out that one important difference between these two sets of colonies was that unlike in India, in the Western colonies the establishment of the British Empire had been preceded by the destruction of the indigenous population.[2]

Based on their experience in the colonies in the North America, the British understood the risk involved in the sharing the political power and including the colonized population representative institutions. In 1833, discussing the future role of the British in India, the British lawyer Thomas Babington Macaulay, who later became responsible for the codification of Indian law, pointed out to "England's greatest gifts to the people of India: a rule of law".[3] The following year, Macaulay came to India with the mission to codify and create an unique code of law for all the Indians across the regions conquered by the East India Company. According to Elizabeth Kolsky, the

[2] Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, p. 57.

[3] Elizabeth Kolsky, "Codification and the Rule of Colonial Difference: Criminal Procedure in British India" in *Law and History Review*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Fall, 2005), p. 631.

codification of the different existing forms of laws in India was both compelling and necessary to the colonial government at this point of time. She points out that India was seen by the British colonialists as "a laboratory for the metropolitan legislative experiments".[4] They were trying to find a better way of keeping under their control not only the conquered territories and the indigenous population of India, but also the non-official European community present therein. For the East India Company it was very difficult to control this non-official European community for many reasons. First, since it was composed neither of Indians nor of servants of the East India Company, they obeyed none of the existent laws in India. Second, this community was growing very fast and was formed by people of diverse nations who had come to India with different types of business, which were more or less legal. Their numbers had risen dramatically especially after the abolition of Company's trade monopoly in 1813. Therefore, the creation of a unified code of law that everybody in the domains of the Company would have to abide by seemed to be an administrative imperative.

Nevertheless, the process of systematizing and codifying the Indian law was a complicated one. The process started in 1833 and eventually transformed the Government of India's law-making structure completely.

[4] Elizabeth Kolsky, "Codification and the Rule of Colonial Difference", p. 635.

After centralizing all regional legislatures into an all-India Legislative Council with general and wider powers of legislation, the Company government realized that this new system was not only confusing, but also gave too much power to the judges. Elizabeth Kolsky quotes Macaulay as having claimed,

> What is administered is not law, but a kind of rude and capricious equity […] . The whole thing is a mere matter of chance. Everything depends on the temper of the individual judge. [5]

But this was not the only problem the British had to deal with. Besides unclear legislation sources and overlapping legislations, the problem with the non-official Europeans continued to remain unresolved. The Indians were being governed through native law, the Englishmen by English laws, while in Presidencies and in the *mofussil* the British had created parallel sets of laws and law courts, for both Hindus and Muslims. However, the non-official European citizens, who were neither "native", and nor English in many cases, refused to be judged by Hindu or Muslim laws. What this eventually lead to was a discrimination between the Indians and the non-Indians in legal matters.

Furthermore, during this period, the British were caught between their desire to modernize India and the fear that if they introduce their ideas too vehemently they might eventually risk a rebellion and losing their

[5] Elizabeth Kolsky, "Codification and the Rule of Colonial Difference", p. 639.

colony altogether. In his book *Nation and Its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee presents the concept of "rule of colonial difference".[6] According to Chatterjee, the difference between the colonizers and the colonized gave justification to the colonial authoritarianism.[7] Because the British emphasized on the difference between the "despotic orient" and the "modern, egalitarian West", their attempts to establish modern regimes of governance took a distinct path. Although the British administrators had claimed that colonialism will eventually eradicate these differences and thus the colonized people will become more "modern", they perfectly understood the risk of transforming the Indian subjects and British citizens into equals, at least in legal matters. Therefore, Chatterjee argues that the British, in order to keep their colony, insisted on the inherent difference between India and the West even while promising universal ideas and institutions.[8]

Nineteenth Century Social and Gender Reforms

The idea of "difference", repeatedly emphasized by the colonialists in order to justify their rule over Indian territories also had a significant influence on the gender legislation in the nineteenth century. If we take a look at the legal social reforms of this period, like the

[6] Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 16.
[7] Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments,* pp. 16-27.
[8] Idem.

abolition of *sati* in 1829, Widow Remarriage Act in 1856, and the 1891 Age of Consent Act, and see them through the lens of the twenty-first century, we could consider them progressive for their times. However, if one analyzes them in depth, and ask what their true meaning was in that specific historical context, what their implications were and who the agents involved in the debates were, one could observe that these social reforms were both modern and conservative in the same time. For instance, if we examine the abolition of *sati*, which was considered by many scholars to be a milestone in the history of gender reforms in India, one may observe that although the debate against the practice of widow immolation was initiated by colonial officials, their concerns were not articulated in terms of the cruelty and violence Indian women were subjected to, but to the revival and reinforcement of the "true Hindu traditions".[9] Let us look at this example a bit more closely.

The Abolition of *Sati*

The term *sati*, as Anand A. Yang pointed out in his article, is a misnomer. Initially the word, which is derived from the Sanskrit *sat* with the meaning of pure or chaste, later was used to define not only the immolation of a widow on the funeral pyre of her

[9] Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India', in *Cultural Critique*, No. 7, The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse II (Autumn, 1987), pp. 119-156.

deceased husband, but also the victim herself, instead of the original meaning of a "virtuous woman".[10] The origins of the practice of *sati*[11] are unknown. According to Andrea Major, the oldest historical evidence of this practice dates back to 316 BC, members of the invading armies of Alexander noted the immolation of the wife of a Hindu General named Keteus.[12] Although the practice of sati was practised all over India, most of the records from the colonial period indicate that it was more predominant in the states of Bengal and Rajasthan during this time. Anand A. Yang's work shows that sati was practiced by all castes and social groups, including Muslims.[13]

For many years the British officials refused to take any action towards abolishing this practice legally because of their fear that this might be interpreted by Indians as an interference in Hindu religious matters and may lead to a social outburst. One of their early compromises was to make a clear distinction between a "good" sati and a "bad" sati. The aim of the official

[10] Anand A. Yang, "Whose Sati? Widow Burning in Early-Nineteenth-Century India", in Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (eds.), *Women and Social Reform in Modern India*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008, p. 15.

[11] The anglicized form is *suttee.*

[12] Andrea Major, *Sati - A Historical Anthology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. xix.

[13] Anand A. Yang, "Whose Sati? Widow Burning in Early-Nineteenth-Century India", in Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar (eds.), *Women and Social Reform in Modern India*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008, pp. 15-37.

policy prior to abolition was to ensure the loyalty of this "colonial" conception to a "scripturally authentic" *sati*. One of the major problems of the British colonists when dealing with Hindu traditions was that unlike Christianity and Islam, Hindu tradition did not have a single supreme religious text, or even specific body of texts. The Hindu religious texts span over more than four thousand years and contain heterogeneous texts which, according to Andrea Major have gone through

> an ongoing process of codification and evolution, with the result that they are almost impossible to date with any degree of accuracy.[14]

Therefore, the colonial officials asked the *pandits* to consult the scriptures and to bring proof that the practice of widow immolation was actually approved by the Hindu sacred texts. However, the scriptures comprise a large number of texts composed at differents times and by different people. This body of texts includes the *Shrutis*, the *Dharmashastras*, and the *Smritis*, as well as their commentaries. Regarding *vyavasthas*, Lata Mani highlights the fact that two different *pandits* could come up with contradictory arguments, but both could be supported by different lines or different passages from the same text. Consequently, both the arguments might be considered right at the same time.[15] As a result of the information

[14] Andrea Major, *Sati - A Historical Antholology*, p. xx.

[15] Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India", in *Cultural Critique*, No. 7, T*he Nature and Context of Minority Discourse II* (Autumn, 1987), p. 133.

provided by the *pandits*, the British officials decided in 1815, to start collecting systematic data on the incidence of *sati*. Official representatives were requested to be present at each *sati* and the magistrates were asked to tabulate the information on each case, including personal data about the widow and her husband, date, place, time and mode of burning. Later details about the occupation and the caste of the husband were also to be recorded.

Eventually, the British officials decided not to forbid *sati* because according to the scriptures, it was supposed to be an ancient tradition of the Hindu society across class, caste and region. However, in 1813, 1815 and 1822, they released three circulars, which contained different sets of conditions under which a *sati* could happen. Among these conditions were the following: that the woman concerned must consent to the immolation, that she must be at least sixteen in age and not pregnant, and that she must not be menstruating, drugged or intoxicated. Also the widow must not leave behind children below the age of three, unless there was someone in the family who agreed to take care of them. British magistrates were obliged to be present at the moment of immolation in order to stop the process in case of any violation of the new regulations. Both Tanika Sarkar and Lata Mani underline the fact that although in the official annual records after 1813, the magistrates noted that in most of the cases the widows voluntarily sacrificed themselves,

there was a resentment of the police to either stop illegal *satis,* or a tendency to conceal the truth.[16]

Another interesting aspect about the official perception about sati, which Lata Mani discusses in her article, was that the British initially believed that the practice will gradually disappear with the "modernization" of Indian society. They thought that with the increase in education and the example of the high caste, educated, westernized Hindus would eventually make the practice unpopular. However, in reality, it was observed not only that sati was more spread among the higher-caste members, but also according to the annual reports of the first three years of data collection, the number of *sati* had tripled, from 378 to 839.[17] Some scholars link this rise in numbers to both government involvement, and to the growing popularity of the practice. Courtney Smith, the Nizamat Adalat judge, described the phenomenon as "a sort of interest and celebrity to the sacrifice".[18] In addition, in 1829, Lord William Bentinck admitted that the colonial government had impacted upon the practice negatively. He said:

---

[16] Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India", p. 135.

[17] Lata Mani, "Production of an Official Discourse on Sati in Early-Nineteenth-Century Bengal", in Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (eds.), *Women and Social Reform in Modern India,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008, p. 42.

[18] Lata Mani, "Production of an Official Discourse on Sati in Early-Nineteenth-Century Bengal", p. 42.

> It seems to be very general opinion that our interference has hitherto done more harm than good by lending a sort of sanction to the ceremony, while it has undoubtedly tended to cripple the efforts of magistrates and others to prevent the practice.[19]

Even though the debate around the abolition of *sati* lasted for nearly sixty years,[20] the number of the officials advocating further legislation gradually decreased, while the demands of the Christian missionaries who were lobbying in the British Parliament were mostly ignored. Nevertheless, over the 1820s the Hindu elite started to become more active, voicing their opinions regarding not only widow immolation, but also other reforms concerning women. Ram Mohan Roy was among the first Indian figures to take this issue to the public sphere and discussed it openly. Although, some have held him as "the first modern champion of women's rights",[21] some others like Janaki Nair and Lata Mani have criticized him for not developing a rational analysis of the practice of *sati*. Nair points out instead of fighting against *sati* by using Western secular reason, Ram

[19] A. Berriedale Keith (ed.), *Speeches and Documents on Indian Policy (1750-1921)*, London: Oxford University Press, 1922, p. 211.

[20] Tanika Sarkar, "Wicked Widows: Law and Faith in Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere Debates", in Charu Gupta (ed.), *Gendering Colonial India: Reforms, Print, Caste and Communalism*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2012, p. 89.

[21] Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on *Sati* in Colonial India", p. 144.

Mohan Roy continued to rely on religious texts and merely replaced the concept of *sati* with that of ascetic widowhood.[22] Roy managed to persuade the British officials to abolish widow immolation, only after he offered them evidence from *Manusmriti* for the fact that it was not compulsory for a widow to join her deceased husband in after life by being burned alive.

Although, many scholars have criticized Ram Mohan Roy for approaching the issue of *sati* through "sacred" texts like *Manusmriti,* which he actually considered as "the only safe rule to guard against endless corruptions, absurdities, and human caprice",[23] believes that operating within historical circumstances of his times, his choices were rather limited. If Roy would have chosen the path of Western rationality the results might have been very little due to these historical specificities. In order to contest the strong influence of the *pandits* upon the British officials, he had to bring evidence for his demands from the same type of sources as the Hindu orthodoxy. It is possible that by opposing widow immolation without taking into discussion ascetic widowhood Roy might have "lost the battle" in the field of social reforms in absolute terms. Moreover, by providing evidence from *Manu* and *Yajnavalkya*, he proved that the *pandits* are not the only ones who could read and consult the

[22] Janaki Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India: A Social History*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996, p. 57.

[23] Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India", p. 146.

scriptures, and that these religious texts open to different interpretations and conclusions could be very subjective. Most probably, Roy realized that his early realism, which he formulated in his Persian work, *Tuḥfat al-Muwaḥḥidīn* (*A Gift to Deists*), could not have the same impact on colonial officials and the Hindu orthodoxy, as the use of scriptural sanctions. As Janaki Nair observes, by 1830, Roy had moved from "a trenchant critique of religion to a strategy which argued for social reform in terms of the scriptural."[24]

Analyzing the official discourse on *sati*, Lata Mani highlights the fact that the primary concern of the British regarding the prohibition of this ritual was not related to the cruelty and the violence of practice. Also their concern for the indigenous population did not derive from Christian morality or from their desire for a more progressive India. On the contrary, the officials wanted to portray themselves as the keepers of the "true Indian traditions". For instance, Lord William Bentinck claimed in 1829 that:

> The first and primary object of my heart is the benefit of the Hindus. I know nothing so important to the improvement of their future condition as the establishment of a purer morality, whatever their belief, and a more just conception of the will of God.[25]

[24] Janaki Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India*, p. 58.

[25] A. Berriedale Keith (ed.), *Speeches and Documents on Indian Policy (1750-1921)*, London: Oxford University Press, 1922, p. 225.

Their mission did not seem to be the imposition of a new Christian moral order, but the revival and reinforcement of indigenous customs.[26] Lata Mani further argues that the women were caught right in the middle of this colonial discourse. According to her, the women were neither the subject nor the object of the discourse. They are denied any agency and they became a mere site on which legal reforms are debated.

Age of Consent Act

Following a similar idea, Tanika Sarkar discusses the debate around the 1891 law regarding the change of the age of marriage of Hindu women from ten to twelve. She argues that in the nineteenth century the woman was not yet seen as an individual, but only as a part of the family, community and caste, which had the right to decide her fate.[27] Furthermore, Sarkar underlines the fact that because the Hindu man was influenced by a foreign culture and education, the Hindu woman's body became a "deeply political matter - it alone could signify past freedom and future autonomy".[28] What is interesting about the Age of Consent debate is that in comparison to the other debates regarding gender legislation, one could observe in this case the

[26] Janaki Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India*, p. 127.
[27] Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001, p. 227.
[28] Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, p. 228.

beginning of mobilisation, mass meetings and demonstrations among Indians, the likes of which had never been seen in India before. It was during this period and around this debate that the first anti-colonial agitations took place.

Child marriage was a widespread social practice in India before the nineteenth century. Several social and economic factors were responsible for this. For instance, the family would prefer to marry a girl young, because that would mean she would move out of the house and the family would no longer have to provide for her. Another reason pertained to the responsibility of the family towards protecting her chastity. An unmarried daughter was thought to be a potential source of disgrace and stigma for the family. Marrying the daughter away young was thought to reduce her chance of falling in love, which could jeopardise her marital prospects. In addition, the husband's family would prefer a young daughter-in-law, who would be more malleable and would have less ties with her parents and other relatives of her natal family. Perhaps the most important concern behind the practice of child marriage was the reproductive lifespan. Marrying young, the wife was considered to have more time for giving birth to highly desired male offsprings.

Discussing the role of the colonial state in this debate, Sarkar points out that the British promised non-interference regarding personal laws, especially in

the matters concerning the sphere of belief, religion and domestic practices. These were left to the local communities, which could solve the issues by consulting scriptures, religious norms and customs. The community had the freedom to live by its own laws without offering any explanation about their measures or without being influenced by external norms.[29] Without governmental pressure, communities proved to be rather rigid when it came to social change. The laws could be made or changed only according to customs or scriptures. Nevertheless, Sarkar highlights that spread of modern conditions of communication, like the printed press, and vernacular prose led to a better circulation of alternative values, which eventually starting being argued and debated publicly.

Against this backdrop, in 1890, the rape case of a ten years old girl by her husband triggered a huge controversy in the public sphere. Because child-marriage was seen as a common custom and strongly recommended by religious codes, the state could not intervene in this directly. Therefore, the only thing the British officials decided to do was to raise the age of consent for marriage. As a result, cultural nationalists created a huge protest campaign, arguing that a higher age of consent would violate the *garbhadhan* ritual.[30]

---

[29] Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, p. 230.

[30] *Garbhadhan* is the first of the ten fundamental life-cycles rites for high-born Hindus. If the rule was violated the womb is polluted and her future sons will not be able to offer pure ritual offerings to ancestral spirits and the sin of foeticide will visit her father and her husband.

As a law, the Age of Consent Act pleased nobody. Besides the fact that the law was unclear and inept, the orthodox *pandits* and cultural nationalists argued that the tradition of *garbhadhan* had not been respected. At the same time, the liberal reformers pointed out that most of the girls menstruated after the age of twelve. In any case, because the girls were not prepared both physically and mentally for intercourse, they were continued to be exposed to brutal damage or even death.[31]

In her article Tanika Sarkar underlines the fact that even though the law was called Age of Consent Act, nobody asked the women about their consent. Neither did the government consult the opinion of the women, nor did they ask their Indian correspondents to discuss it with them. As Lata Mani points out, women in the nineteenth century represented a mere site for legislative debates and discourses. Around the Age of Consent Act, Sarkar identifies five levels of opinions. First was the trail of the Hari Maiti case, regarding the brutal rape and death of a eleven years old girl, called Phulmonee, by her husband. Second, there was the opinion of the medical establishment, mostly composed by Europeans, who exempt Hindu marriage custom from all the blame. Third was the opinion of the British administrators, who reported the conditions and problems of child-marriage and premature

[31] Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, p. 236.

cohabitation. While the medical staff focused on infantile bodies, the administrators reported that the custom of child-marriage was present among all castes and communities all over India. Fourth, there were statements from Indian men, whose opinion was asked by the government before a new law was drafted. However, the provincial legislative bodies had no Indian representation. Nevertheless, the government consulted the opinion of a mixed group of Indians, including political leaders from different associations, social reformers, lawyers, and *pandits*. Fifth, there was the debate raging in the public sphere, in the newspapers, journals, vernacular literature and so on.[32]

Another important aspect, which Sarkar highlights, is the distinction between the woman as a person and right-bearing individual, and the community as a culture-bearing entity.[33] According to the Hindu community, the woman was seen as the keeper of the "true traditions". However, this led to a paradox. Was she a bearer of culture or a bearer of individual identity? Following a similar idea, Partha Chatterjee discusses the paradox of the women's question in colonial India. He points out that while at the beginning and the middle of the nineteenth century the "women's question" was the central issue of many controversial debates around social reforms, after 1870 these issues suddenly disappeared from the public

[32] Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, pp. 236-240.
[33] Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, p. 235.

sphere.[34] Chatterjee tries to see if there was a connection between the politics of nationalism and the women's question. He gives as a reason for this disappearance of the women's question in the last decades of the nineteenth century nationalism's success in situating it in an inner domain of sovereignty, far from the colonial state. According to Chatterjee this inner domain of national culture was constituted in the light of the discovery of "tradition".[35] While the men had to overcome colonial domination and learn the modern techniques of organizing material life, it was necessary for someone to retain and strengthen their spiritual essence. Discussing the dichotomy between the inner and the outer (*ghar* and *bahir*), the Chatterjee explains that the nationalists saw the outer, the exterior world (*bahir*) as a material domain influenced greatly by Western culture. The inner domain (*ghar*), which was considered to be more important than the outer, needed to be protected from the influence of the colonialists and kept "pure" Indian. The outer, the external material world, was dominated by men, while the inner spiritual domain was assigned as the "home" of the women. For this reason, it came to be believed by Hindu men that the women should not be influenced by Western ideas. They believed that an Indian woman was culturally superior to a Western

[34] Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments,* p. 116.
[35] Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments*, p. 117.

woman. In the end she should remain a *bhadramahila*, and not become a *memsaheb.*

Hindu Widows Remarriage Act

In India as well as in many parts of the Europe, the situation of women in the nineteenth century was difficult due to the fact that they lived in a strictly patriarchal world. Because they were considered to be the keepers of the "true traditions", in India, most of their rights and liberties were limited. As Tanika Sarkar points out that the woman was subordinated to the man in all the stages of life. In childhood, the father would be in charge of her and her destiny; during married life, she was to listen to the husband; at old age her son was the one who would dictate her life. Such attitudes towards women were framed by scriptures written by people like *Manu*, who said that "On no account is she [the woman] to enjoy autonomy".[36] The women who suffered the most were the widows. Although, they had been saved from burning on the pyre of the husband, they faced a social death. A wife was considered the half-body of the husband, *ardhangini.*[37] With the death of the husband

[36] Tanika Sarkar, "Wicked Widows: Law and Faith in Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere Debates", in Charu Gupta (ed.), *Gendering Colonial India: Reforms, Print, Caste and Communalism*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2012, pp. 92-93.

[37] Tanika Sarkar, "Wicked Widows: Law and Faith in Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere Debates", in Anindita Ghosh (ed.), *Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007, p. 96.

not only would her sexual life end, but also her status in the society would change from wife into non-wife. Because she was seen as a threat to the family and the community, she had to suffer a series of transformations in order to maximise her unattractiveness. The widow had to wear only white clothes, no jewelry, was denied participation in religious and social celebrations, like weddings and *pujas*. She also had a very strict diet, being denied certain kinds of foods that might overheat her body and stimulate her desires. Sarkar highlights the fact that more than her sexuality, it was "her possible autonomy [that] made her dangerous to the domestic order".[38]

However, in the 1850s, during the widow remarriage debates, a new normative imperative was born. Sarkar points out that word "equality" became something like a taboo for the orthodoxy in discussions over gender reforms.[39] Initially the idea of allowing widows to remarry was rejected in 1837, but later in 1855 it was revived in official circles due to the initiatives of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. He approached Grant and Colville and offered them a scriptural citation in favor for widow remarriage. In comparison to the *sati* abolition debate, which lasted nearly sixty years, the widow remarriage was decided fairly quickly. By July 1856 the law was put into practice.

[38] Tanika Sarkar, *Wicked Widows*, p. 97.
[39] Tanika Sarkar, *Wicked Widows*, p. 87.

Legislators claimed that the purpose of the bill was rather modest, and in comparison to the Sati Act it would not impose a decision on any Hindu. Widow remarriage was optional for those who believed in the scriptures, which allow remarriage. Similar to the *sati* abolition, the legislators built a case for the law on scriptural arguments brought in by Vidyasagar, a Brahmin of legendary Sanskrit scholarship. The failure of the demands supporting widow remarriage in 1837 was due to both the absence of scriptural citation, and because it was brought into attention by a group of radical, defiant bohemians – the Young Bengal group. They were feared not only by the Hindu orthodoxy, but also by the British officials.[40] In comparison to them, and even to Ram Mohan Roy, Vidyasagar was a respected *pandit* with orthodox habits, therefore his importance for the state lay not in his liberal reformism, but in his image of a traditional Brahmin *pandit*. For his claims for widow remarriage he used a verse from *Parashara Samhita*, which recommended remarriages under a set of five conditions:

> if the husband was a ruined man, or dead, or a renunciate, or impotent or an outcaste, under such special circumstances, a woman is allowed to take another husband[41].

[40] Tanika Sarkar, *Wicked Widows*, p. 91.
[41] Tanika Sarkar, *Wicked Widows*, p. 97.

Conclusions

Many scholars have interpreted the social reforms in nineteenth century India as a part of a modernizing drive. However, it seems that the social reforms concerning women were more conservative than modern in nature. It is very difficult to analyze these reforms from today's perspective. One of the reasons is that the knowledge about colonial India is actually a colonial legacy itself. As Romila Thapar says,

> A major contribution in our understanding of the entire Indian past is that this understanding is derived from the interpretations of Indian history made in the last two hundred years.[42]

Moreover, when we look at these gender reforms, we must not forget the historical context in which they are placed. The British colonizers wanted to enforce their idea of "colonial difference" in order to straighten their dominance in India. They insisted on the inherent difference between India and the West, between traditional and modern, and between conservative and progressive. One believes that because of this idea of "colonial difference", the nineteenth century Indian social reforms, although seemingly modern, were also somewhat conservative at the same time. The debates on women, whether in context of *sati*, widows

[42] Lata Mani, "Production of an Official Discourse on Sati in Early-Nineteenth-Century Bengal", p. 39.

remarriage, or age of consent, were not only about women, but were also instances in which the "moral challenge of colonial rule was confronted and negotiated".[43]

By looking the abolition of *sati* debate, we have observed that although the British legislators forbade widow immolation, their concerns were *not* related to the cruelty and violence Indian women were subjected to. They revolved around an effort towards the revival and reinforcement of the "true Hindu traditions". The drive towards the abolition was not made on grounds of rationality and moral principles, but on religious ones. Even liberal Indian reformers, like Ram Mohan Roy, used sacerdotal sanction, and not rationality, in his arguments in favour of the abolition. Instead of fighting for a better life for the women, they actually replaced widow immolation with ascetic widowhood, which actually meant a different type of death – a sexual and social one – for women. Fought also on religious grounds, Hindu Widows Remarriage Act of 1859 offered women the means to escape this life of ascetic widowhood, but only by remarrying. This reinforced patriarchal power. It made sure that under no circumstances could a woman live alone and enjoy the freedom of choice as the man did. Even after the death of her husband she had to choose either to be an ascetic widow, which was seen by many women better

[43] Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India", p. 153.

than being dead, or to remarry. At least in some cases, the widows had the freedom to choose their own husbands and they could marry even out of love. In any case, the situation of Indian women did not improve that much during the nineteenth century because the Hindu patriarchal order was reinforced by the British one.

Bibliography

Chatterjee, Partha, *Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Cohn, Bernard S., *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: the British in India,* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Ghosh, Anindita (ed.), *Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007.

Keith, A. Berriedale (ed.), *Speeches and Documents on Indian Policy (1750-1921)*, London: Oxford University Press, 1922.

Kolsky, Elizabeth, "Codification and the Rule of Colonial Difference: Criminal Procedure in British India" in *Law and History Review*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Fall, 2005).

Major, Andrea, *Sati – A Historical Anthology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Mani, Lata, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India", in *Cultural Critique*, No. 7, The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse II (Autumn, 1987).

Mani, Lata, "Production of an Official Discourse on Sati in Early-Nineteenth-Century Bengal", in Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar (eds.), *Women and Social Reform in Modern India*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.

Nair, Janaki, *Women and Law in Colonial India: A Social History*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996.

Sarkar, Tanika, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001.

Sarkar, Tanika, "Wicked Widows: Law and Faith in Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere Debates", in Charu Gupta (ed.), *Gendering Colonial India: Reforms, Print, Caste and Communalism*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2012.

Yang, Anand A., "Whose Sati? Widow Burning in Early-Nineteenth-Century India", in Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar (eds.), *Women and Social Reform in Modern India*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.

Author's Bio

Maria-Daniela Pomohaci is a member of *Cluj Center for Indian Studies*. She graduated the Faculty of History within the University of Bucharest with a BA thesis on the political and religious evolution of the caste system in India. During her undergraduate studies she was offered 1 year scholarship to study history at Alpen-Adria Universität in Klagenfurt, Austria. Later, she continued her studies with a Master in the field of Sociology at the UNESCO Department for the Study of Intercultural and Interreligioius Exchanges (University of Bucharest). At the moment, she is studying Modern Indian Studies at Georg-August Universität Göttingen, in Germany.

* * *

The present E-book is the first of *Cluj Center for Indian Studies* Collection.

Many thanks to all contributors to this volume for accepting our invitation. Our sincere appreciation goes to the Romanian painter Adrian Ghenie, who welcomed our request and gave us the permission to use his work, *Charles Darwin at the age of 75*, 2014, on the cover of this volume.

We also thank to Bishwaroop Ghosh, for financially supporting this E-Book, and to Diana-Viorela Burlacu, for proof-reading the articles.

Cluj Center for Indian Studies (*CCIS*) is dedicated to the research of Indian traditions, philosophies, languages and religions that render India as one of the most interesting and exciting cultures of the world.

Web: http://indian.centre.ubbcluj.ro/
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/indian.center.cluj

Cluj-Napoca, October 15, 2015

I do not consider myself a historian of religions, but in the last 10 years I have come across the line many times, in my struggle to understand Eliade's legacy and to explain myself his theories. Reading his works on the history of religions I have understood that Religion has been a key component of all societies and remains an institution that has vital implications for human existence.

Mihaela Gligor

ISBN: 978-973-595-887-9