COMPARATIVE RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

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By now, you may feel, as I do, that discussions about "religious studies vs. theology" are beginning to look like those interminable academic debates that stimulated the classical pragmatists to be pragmatists.[91] I am thinking of

[91] Since at least the 1970's, a great number of such debates have been displayed in journal articles, conferences, and books. For example:

Sample Essays

Charles W. Kegley, "Theology and Religious Studies: Friends or Enemies?" in *Theology Today* 35/3 (Oct. 1978): pp. 273-284; Robert Wilken, "Who Will Speak For The Religious Traditions," AAR 1989 Presidential Address, in *JAAR* 57/4: pp. 699-717. Here is a classic statement of the debate within the AAR. Speaking the religious studies side, Wilken expresses concerns about Enlightenment models of what I will call "colonialism writ small." Speaking to the theology side, he draws attention to the place of critical intelligence within medieval theological discourses.

Ishmael Law, "The Politics o Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy," in *Theology Today* (Oct 2001). A critical review of the book by Donald Wiebe (see below).

Sample Books

Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies*, New York, Palgrave-MacMillan 2000. An argument against the persistence of confessional theology as a primary orientation of the AAR; Linell Cady and Delwin Brown, *Introduction to Religious Studies, Theology, and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain*, SUNY Press, 2002; Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, Oxford University Press (new edition) 2003. Fitzgerald argues that the theology-religious studies debates are circular, since they are defined by a priori categories that are imposed on the empirical phenomena. The category of "religion" itself lacks empirical warrant and represents the interests only of a form of liberal Protestant thought. He believes that, when freed from these imposed categories, religious studies shows itself to be a form of anthropology; Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, 2004. Stout's pragmatic alternative to both anti-religious liberalism and what he calls the "new traditionalism" is a resource for this essay's effort to locate a pragmatic alternative to the conflict between mutually delegitimating versions of religious studies and theology. Some differences may be detected in the difference between an "Emersonian" pragmatism and this essay's reliance on Peirce's more relational, realist, and textual variety of pragmatism; *Fields of*

the arguments of Peirce, James, and Dewey– most readably presented by James– that interminable debates go nowhere because they mask and fail to address the actual, societal conflicts that have given rise to them. This is not the Kantian claim that we are dealing here with metaphysical antinomies that arise out of error: the mistake of mixing characteristics of things in themselves with those of phenomenal appearances. The error here is not to have thought errantly, but to have gotten confused about the relation of thinking to everyday practice. And the consequence of the error is not some illusion about ideas, but actual suffering: not that it hurts to debate on and on (to the contrary, academics may enjoy this too much), but that the time and effort fine minds put into such debates deflect their and a broader public's attention away from something really amiss in the underlying, inter-personal world.

The (classical) pragmatic method for resolving interminable debates was to re-read them as symptoms of societal-behavioral crises that call for immediate attention. This is to read their interminability as a formal sign that

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Faith: theology and religious studies for the twenty-first century, eds. David F. Ford, Ben Quash and Janet Martin Soskice Cambridge University Press 2005. Offered in honor of Nicholas Lasch and emerging out of a conference held at Cambridge University in 2000 (see below); *What is Religious Studies? A Reader in Disciplinary Formation, Critical Categories in the Study of Religion*, ed., Steven J. Sutcliffe, Equinox, 2006. Of particular interest are such chapters as: James Thrower, "Teaching Theology and Religious Studies: Is there a problem?", Gavin D' Costa, "The End of 'Theology' and 'Religious Studies'," and Linell E. Cady, "Territorial Disputes: Religious Studies and Theology in Transition."

Sample Conferences

2000. "'It Has Been Taught,' A Consultation on the Future of the Study of Theology and Religions in Honor of Nicholas Lasch," Cambridge University, September. The focus was on how to avoid reductionist approaches to theological and religious studies.

2002: "Convergences and Divergences: Theology and Religious Studies in Asian Pacific America: Pacific School of Religion." "This panel [was] a discussion on how the "theology vs. religious studies" debate plays out for Asian American religious life/experience/studies."

2006. "Theology and Religious Studies and Theology vs. Religious Studies." July 6-7. St Anne's College, Oxford University. Sponsored by the School of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Leeds, and featuring Gavin D' Costa (Bristol) and Kim Knott (Leeds) as keynote speakers. "This two-day conference sponsored by the Subject Centre offers participants the opportunity to explore the evolving relationship between Theology and Religious Studies and to consider the challenges of, and strategies for, teaching both."

the debates point beyond themselves to a crisis of a different order, and to read their detailed content as indirect evidence about what the crisis may be. To read that evidence is to reason genealogically, from the debate back to what are no more than educated guesses about what the crisis may be. It is then, per hypothesis, to propose some line of action that might resolve the crisis. Without taking time to display the genealogical reasoning that has led to it, I'd like to offer this recommendation: that we read the general form of our debates as pointing to the still unresolved relation of the western academy to the civilization(s) it ought to serve and that we read the specific content of our debates as pointing to the academy's still-colonialist relation to our civilization(s)' folk-or-wisdom traditions, "religious" traditions in particular. This second point means that, still echoing colonialist behaviors we otherwise disavow, our religious studies disciplines may still tend to remove "religious phenomena" from the contexts of their societal embodiments and resituate them within conceptual universes of our own devising. In the present decade, this colonialist tendency is also displayed in relation to biblically based traditions– perhaps because we tend to see these as competing sources of interpretive theory rather than as the kinds of folk practice we are in the business of studying.

Let me clarify some of what I mean by the academy's "colonialist" tendencies and how they may be illustrated in academic inquiries and debates about religion. With justification, the contemporary university (late 20th century and after) may credit itself with having articulated the errors of modern western colonialism, of political and economic imperialism, and of a variety of more subtle ways of imposing its conception of the "all" (or *totalité*) on others.[92] Often, however, these errors are attributed to "them," as if the totalizing tendencies of the west were reified in some isolable, albeit very widespread, aggregations of power, rather than some characteristic of the culture in general, including therefore the discourses of the critics. Without presuming to defend the choice in such short space, I would rather assume the latter: that we who are nurtured in the modern west bear some totalizing "gene," so that the objects of criticism ought, reflexively, to include the critics as well. At the same time, following Charles Peirce, John Dewey and

[92] Many cultural criticisms come to mind, such E. Levinas' critique of totalizing thinking, to F. Lyotard's critique of "master narratives, and so on.

their pragmatic ilk, I'll suppose that critics can at least distinguish between two dimensions of their own reasoning: the problematic one (here, the totalizing one) and the one they hope will prove reparative, so that academic critics may include themselves in their criticisms. If so, we might ask what "colonialism" would look like when "writ small" in our critical intellects. Following Ludwig Wittgenstein– whose *Investigations* is, in many ways, a logic of pragmatism[93]– I believe it would look like our modern tendency to assume that the subjects and predicates of standard propositional logic correspond to elemental features of our natural and social worlds: so that, for example, we have good reason to expect that the world really is peopled with the kinds of entities we name "they" or "we" or "it" and that they may really have the kinds of attribute we identify as "good" or " troublesome" or "interesting." We may read Wittgenstein's move from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations* as a sign of his having– not only on logical and epistemological but also on ethical grounds– rejected any presumption that the elements of our propositions mirror elements of the world. We may, furthermore, read his critique as anticipating Levinas' critique of the "logic of the same": that is, of our modern tendency to impose categories of our own language (and society and personality) onto others who enter our field of vision rather than allowing those categories to be shaped by our experiences of, or dialogues with, these others. For Levinas, the logic of the same is the logic of unselfconsciously and un-self-critically reading our habits of knowing onto the world, so that the world becomes just more of us.

In these terms, I suggest we identify the logic of the same with "colonialism writ small," since, writ large, this would be the logic of imposing the institutions as well as epistemic categories of our social, political and economic orders on others around us, transforming them, should we succeed, into instruments of who we are and what we want. This sort of colonialism would extend the logic of propositions into an instrument of world-ordering, since it not only re-reads but also institutionally re-defines what we encounter in the world into the "subjects" we believe we see, bearing the traits we predicate of such subjects. If applied in this way as a

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[93] Gilbert Ryle has suggested that Wittgenstein spent at least some of those years after the *Tractatus* reading Peirce's "pragmaticism," which teaches a realist version of the lesson that "meaning is use."

model of the actual world, propositional logic would breed three other tell-tale traits of a "logic of the same": binarism, over-generalization, and intellectualization or spiritualization. It would breed binarism, because what is the same "knows" only two values: what is, because it is more of the same, and what is not, because it either negates or falls outside the categories of the same. It would breed over-generalization, because its fundamental method of knowing the world is to generalize its own categories of knowing into categories of being itself. It would breed intellectualization, because the same exists only in idea (in the sense of *eidola* and *doxa*, not *eidos*), that is, only in what we perceive and imagine the other to be rather than in the actual consequences of our lived interactions with the other. To preserve the same therefore requires continually re-imagining these consequences according to what we want to see or, in this sense, what belongs only to our own intellects and spirits rather than to the other. In the case of colonialism writ large, we may recognize these traits in colonialist Manicheanism (dividing the world between the intrinsically good and sacred, or what belongs to us, and the profane, or what does not yet belong to us), imperialism (seeking to extend what is ours and, thus, what is good), and re-narration of the world (continually re-describing the world in the terms we desire).

In the case of colonialism writ small, we may, somewhat more controversially, see these traits in what might be dubbed "modern academic colonialism," or the modern academy's tendency, unselfconsciously and un-self-critically, to impose its own propositional calculi onto the world around it. Such a tendency would hard to detect, since the academy is more likely to advertise its dominant practices as forms of cultural criticism and as aimed, in particular, against colonialism writ large. But if, for the sake of argument, we imagined that the academy did, in this way, "sin" against its own dominant ethos, then we might expect the sin to appear as colonialism writ small: that is, as an unselfconscious tendency to apply its cultural criticisms according to a propositional logic, and thus a logic of the same. Do any academic critics actually show this tendency? Readers interested in finding out could apply the following tests[94]:

[94] A more technical test would be to diagram samples of the authors' writings to see if their arguments reduce to standard propositional calculi.

- See if the critics apply subject-object distinctions to what they criticize: Are they, as authors, the undesignated subjects of their writings, so that they offer, as it were, an intellectualized or disembodied "view from nowhere" and so that they remain outside the reach of their own criticisms? Do they reify the objects of their criticism, as "those people" and "those institutions" out there, so that, once again, these objects are wholly independent of the critics themselves? In this way, do they divide the world pretty sharply into the good and the bad?
- See if the critics tend to over-generalize: See if you can restate their argument as the application of a certain, finite set of ideas as grounds for criticizing any practice whatsoever (or overly large domains of practice). These might include such models of the good as "the self-disclosure of Christ as gift" and "equality," or such models of evil as "the error of secularism," and "the error of capitalism," or even the pragmatists' pet mottos, such as "it is true if it works" or "meaning is use" (for, yes, pragmatists can also be guilty of overgeneralization, unless they are careful to present their criticisms as context specific applications of a civilization's self-criticism.)

Authors who test "positive" may be guilty of criticizing colonialism in one explicit place and re-asserting it, unconsciously, in another.

The center of my thesis is that the modern academic disciplines of both "religious studies" and "theology" may nurture tendencies like these. If so, debates between proponents of "religious studies" and of "theology" may prove to be interminable, since each side may (consciously or unconsciously) tend to enter the debate simply as a means of extending its logic of the same onto the other: not to open its normative and epistemological categories to change-through-dialogue, but only to perceive and judge its opponent in terms of fixed categories.[95] In typical debates, for example, one side may

[95] These tendencies may be difficult to discern, let alone to repair, because they may, in fact, be strengthened rather than ameliorated through efforts to "do the good" when such efforts are, themselves, advanced through a logic of the same. If, for example, I desire *not* to over-generalize my pragmatic values, I may, without knowing it, simply replace a single, binary tendency by a pair of them, now operating dialectically: so that, one moment I over-assert my pragmatic values and the next moment I either over-inhibit them or over-assert whatever I take to be non-pragmatic. The problem is that, in either case, my action affirms the

argue that theology is confessional and therefore inappropriate in the academy, while the other side may argue that religious studies applies foreign, western epistemic categories to the analysis of religious traditions that are informed by other sorts of categories. These arguments may be valid if they applied to specific cases, rather than as general rules. Certain theologians may indeed use the classroom as an instrument for extending their religious logic of the same into the lives of their students, and certain religious studies scholars may indeed prosecute their science of religion as a way of measuring all religions by the single grid of some modern western practice of reasoning. There is, however, no *prima facie* warrant for presuming, in general, that theology must be practiced according to the alternatives "either confessional (subjective) *or* academic (objective)" nor that religious studies lacks the capacity to study religious traditions in their own terms. Critics who make such presumptions display their own commitments to a "logic of the same," which means that they share in the same logical errors they attribute to their opponents.

I doubt that I am the only member of AAR who has, at one time or another, worked in a religious studies program or a seminary whose faculty tended to divide itself in general into competing camps of more confessionally oriented theologians and more scientifically oriented religious studies scholars; or, for the matter, where theologians were themselves divided into comparably warring camps, and religious studies scholars as well. And I doubt that I am the only one who finds this kind of binarism intolerable, not because, in each case, we need to find some mushy middle ground, but because each case introduces "colonialism writ small" into our programs, which is, independently of the contents of theological or religious studies, to make our programs agents of an outmoded and destructive feature of modern western civilization. Following the pragmatic arguments introduced earlier, I believe that, when practiced according to the binary logic of the same, scriptural theology is as much an agent of the logical form of western colonialism as is, say, Marxist criticism or what we might call "old

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underlying logic of the same (here, "I think X' and therefore "X is Y"), rather than, at the very least, opening my assertions of the same to being reshaped in relation to whatever I encounter.

style phenomenology of religion" (the kind that used a few categories of modern philosophy as instruments for comparing "universal" and "non-universal" features of "religious experience"). When over-generalized as tools for identifying and measuring the indigenous categories of any religious practice whatsoever, then the epistemic categories implicit in "rabbinic Judaism" or in "the Gospel of John" are as "colonialist" in their employ as are the categories of old style phenomenology or, for that matter, of any modern European nationalism. I am not, therefore, recommending any old "return to indigenous religious categories (including scriptural categories)" as a self-evident solution to the problem of modern western binarism, since this binarism can also live a very vigorous and destructive life *inside* those indigenous categories. But, drawing on the pragmatic arguments offered above, I admit that I am particularly worried about the way scriptural religions may be treated in the AAR today and in the near future. Is the AAR entering an epoch in which reactions against "scriptural fundamentalism" or "scriptural colonialism" in the world today breeds a comparably colonialist prejudice against studies of scriptural texts and traditions? Or a tendency to legitimate only certain styles of scriptural studies, such as those self-described as "critical studies?" And I am equally worried about how to ask this question without having it play into yet another round of mutually delegitimating debates.

What to do? The easy answer to my worries is that the AAR should help nurture logics of religious studies inquiry *other than* the modern logic of the same. It is not too difficult to frame these alternatives in an abstract way. We might recommend, for example, that any perennial debates in our field– including but not limited to the theology/religious studies debate– will succeed only if advocates from either side are prepared to loosen their conscious or unconscious reliance on logics of the same and, thus, on what they presume the "same" to be, both in their own practice and in that of their opponent. Without loosening their commitments to what they believe (academic commitments entail belief as much as religious commitments), they might come to such debates less cock-sure about how their beliefs get defined and clarified in the academic and social worlds and, therefore, more open to surprises about what may happen on the borders between their beliefs and those of their apparent opponents. We may find that different beliefs have their own ways of entering into dialogue, one with the other, as

long as we sit back and let them work a little more on their own. And we may find that dialogues of this kind are not extra-logical: that is, that the alternative to propositional logics is not non-logic, but other kinds of logic and that these other logics may emerge from *out* of social exchanges rather than appearing to us, *a priori*, as weapons or safety-nets to carry with us into debate. With more space, it would be easy to talk about alternative logics like these, or alternative philosophies and methods of communication. The hard part would be figuring out how to institutionalize such practices in our academic programs and in our work together at the AAR.

One practical proposal. I'll close with a practical proposal for one way to institutionalize one alternative to "colonialism writ small" in our programs of religious studies-and-theology. It is to imitate one of our major practices at the University of Virginia– to be labeled, for this occasion, "comparative religious traditions." This is to teach a variety of religious traditions, side by side, by examining how they are practiced and how they tend to describe and account for their practices. (The biblical traditions "count" here as much as all the others. This means, for example, that "Patristic theology" is as appropriate a topic of indigenous practice as "Tantric yoga.") This is also to offer several different contexts for "comparing" traditions: Jewish Kabbalism and Islamic Sufism, for example, or Ghanaian and Korean Methodism.

The paradigmatic context is dialogue**:** to offer, on occasion, single, co-taught courses that ask how each of two traditions characterizes the other and to develop a vocabulary for comparison from out of the terms of dialogue. If no dialogue has in fact taken place, then two options are either to provide an environment for such a dialogue or to desist from comparison (without a dialogue, what is the reason for comparison?). For example, I co-taught a graduate seminar with Gavin Flood (now Director of the Oxford Center for Hindu Studies) on "Scriptural Reasoning: Abrahamic (Jewish, Christian, Muslim) and Hindu." We began with plain-sense studies of selected texts from each scriptural tradition, illuminated by way of traditional commentaries, historical-critical scholarship, and then by other methods of interpretation emphasized by each tradition. To begin the second half of the course, we introduced students to some methods of semiotic and of phenomenological analysis used in the academy today. Under the rubric of "nurturing an environment for dialogue," we structured the final third of the

semester as a doubled set of exercises in comparison. On one level, we sought to bring one scriptural discourse at a time into epistemic "dialogue" with at least one interpretive discourse (semiotics or phenomenology). This led us (students and teachers) to the surprising hypothesis that Abrahamic scriptures tended to "speak" more effectively by way of semiotic analyses, while the Upanishads spoke more effectively by way of phenomenological analysis. On a second level, we then hosted a formal "dialogue" between what the class dubbed "Abrahamic semiotics" and "Hindu phenomenology." Our last step was to release the formal dimension of this dialogue and see if we had, in some ways, been able to "hear" the Abrahamic scriptural texts in terms of the Upanishads and the Upanishads in terms of the Abrahamic scriptures.

Another context for comparing religions is pragmatic: to offer courses that examine religious communities in conflict, asking what each one appears to contribute to the conflict and what each might contribute to a resolution. One illustration is a course on "Abrahamic Religions in Conflict" that we developed with a committee of undergraduates (supported by a grant by UVA's *Center on Religion and Democracy*). Enriched by visits from colleagues in politics, international relations, and the history of religions, the course addressed several case studies in conflict: including Christian-Muslim relations in the former Yugoslavia, Jewish-Muslim-Christian relations in Israel/Palestine, Catholic-Protestant relations in Ireland, and so on. The first half of the course offered introductions to the Abrahamic religions and to the relation between recent political theory and the study of religions. The second half of the course focused on the students' individual research papers, each one on one aspect of one regional conflict. The course concluded with rather dramatic panel discussions, in which groups of students shared conclusions about "sources of peace and war in the Abrahamic traditions" with guest scholars in international relations.

A third context for comparison is to offer theory-driven courses that examine how academic inquiry may serve as host to these first two contexts. One component of such courses is a history of religious and theological studies. How does any tradition of belief and practice come to *reflect on itself?* How does it, for example, come to narrate histories of itself, or stories about its practitioners, or descriptions of its beliefs (or "theologies"), or registers of

its practices, customs, and laws? Another component is a history of the "academic" study of religions and theologies. To what traditions of belief and practice do our academic studies belong? How are *these* traditions narrated, described, and regulated? This component may make a double-edged contribution to theology/religious studies debates. This component should show, on the one hand, how our discipline is itself a collection of several traditions of belief and practice in the West and, on the other hand, how both theological and religious studies are indebted to such traditions, as long as we practice such studies in the university. A third component– one that I, for one, would consider pivotal– is a study of how academic and religious traditions relate, one to the other. "Comparative religious traditions" appears, here, as the claim that their relationship ought to be seen as "dialogic." This means that each study of religious traditions emerges as a particular dialogue between the epistemic categories implicit in some sub-tradition(s) of academic inquiry and in some sub-tradition(s) of religious belief and practice. Each set of categories bleeds a little bit toward the other. As an additional component, some scholars might want to re-evaluate recent philosophies of religion and of theology in light of the preceding reflections. Addressing discussions about "God," "virtue and the good," or "evil," for example– or perhaps about the relations of Karl Barth's hermeneutic to that of Franz Rosenzweig– they might want to ask what sub-traditions of the academy in relation to what sub-traditions of religious belief and practice have given rise to and warrant such discussions.

In sum: Our proposal is to nurture programs in "comparative religious traditions" that feature three elements: thick descriptions of the religious beliefs and practices (including textual practices) that characterize specific religious traditions; actual or imagined dialogues among these religious traditions (so that the dialogues, themselves, generate terms for comparing these traditions); and theoretical reflections on the academic inquiries that nourish such studies and on how these inquiries interact with the religious traditions themselves. Our hypothesis is that these programs would help

transform unhappy debates between theology and religious studies into constructive dialogues between two complementary poles of "religious and theological studies": the traditions of religious practice that we study (a.k.a.

"theology") and the way we study, slightly reconceived as a practice of thick-description, comparison, and self-reflection (a.k.a. "religious studies).

Against certain polemical assumptions, these programs should show, on the one hand, how "theology" can be practiced as a form of ethnography (disclosing emic categories of major religious traditions) and, on the other hand, how "religious studies" can be practiced as way of bringing theologies and other accounts of belief and practice into dialogue. Against certain prejudices, these programs should, moreover, show how practices like Patristic theology or rabbinic scriptural interpretation or Persian Sufism or Caribbean womanism or Tibetan Tantric yoga are all worthy subjects of ethnographic-like thick description and comparative study. This suggests that, in some cases, the theology/religious studies distinction should vanish altogether, since a careful reading of Barth's Church Dogmatics may illustrate studies in indigenous religious practice (here, in 20th century Protestant scriptural theology) as much as participant-observer studies of synagogue worship in the American South.

Stated in the terms of anthropological studies in "ethnoscience," ethnographic materials may also be re-examined according to the "etic" or cross-cultural categories of interpretive science. This essential feature of religious and theological studies is also the most dangerous, since it may be the most likely way that "colonialism writ small" enters our disciplines. As noted earlier, the typical route of entry is to identify etic categories with some view from nowhere, which is to mask the civilizational particularity of our categories of comparison. Our proposal mitigates the dangers by centering our etic studies in "comparative religious traditions." As suggested above, this can be conducted in several different ways, all of which seek out terms of comparison that emerge from out of "dialogues" among the traditions being compared. Often, such dialogues will be feigned for the sake of study: that is, classroom discussion and readings will serve as laboratories for introducing the epistemic categories of each tradition one to the other. There are several ways to do this, and the rule for all of them is to be flexible, self-corrective, and open to the unpredictable impress of each tradition and each community of students and scholars on one another. One may, for example, introduce formal academic discourses -- such as semiotics, phenomenology or literary analysis --- not as rigidly defined terms of comparison, but as "alphabets" for

articulating such terms. Earlier in the 20th century, the rabbinic scholar Max Kadushin followed this approach, adopting languages of process philosophy and semiotics to give voice to what he believed were indigenous categories of rabbinic scriptural interpretation. While imperfect, his efforts have, for example, enabled groups of Jewish and Christian and Muslim scholars to debate otherwise inexplicit units of meaning and reasoning in rabbinic, Patristic, and Qur'anic exegesis. The debates reshape Kadushin's terms, but his terms enable the debates to begin. Another approach would be to adopt the thicker discourses of historical studies as pathways of comparison among the "salvation histories" or "sacred narratives" of several traditions. When possible, of course, one may also host and have students observe actual dialogues among religious practitioners, and these may include other religious studies scholars who happen also to practice some religion and give voice to some of its indigenous vocabularies.