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Heterophenomenology as Self-Knowledge

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We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
T. S. Eliot. *Four Quartets*, "Little Gidding," V.

This essay primarily concerns the introductory pedagogy of religious studies. Our discipline has no universally accepted paradigm and so pedagogical positions vary as widely as almost all other stances and definitions in the field. With that in mind, allow me first to outline my own personal position on teaching religious studies, without any intention to be prescriptive. My priority is accurately to teach about religion and critically to clarify its subject as a human behavior. Critical discussions of the dubious, and anyway social, construction of the category, while warranted, can be reserved for upper division study without invalidating the content of "Religion 101." I agree that "religious studies" and "religion" are themselves laden with ethnocentric theological and ideological implications. However, my conclusion is that the only invariant distinction between academic religious studies and theological studies is that the former draws from the totality of traditions whereas the latter restricts itself to a supposedly "singular" tradition regarded as authoritative. The effects of "the ideological or theological determination of descriptive or historical truth" (Smart 1996, 177) are specifically reduced in academic religious studies by this deliberate reference to all of human-

ity's "variegated and developing religious life" (W. C. Smith 1959, 55). Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's observation that "the larger the group with which one identifies, the closer to ultimate reality one gets" resonates here (1993, 59). Yet it seems an irresistible urge of rational agents to justify and propagate their own world view, so religious studies remains ideologically laden as well as analytically ill-defined. That said, I cannot agree that any other discipline or sub-discipline has managed to evade this condition. In fact it is characteristically theological to claim that one's own position is informed by some privileged access to the "real truth" (which is arguably the most laden term of all). All disciplines suffer from the ubiquitous condition of language. A great number of the terms already employed ("accurately," "critically," "clarify," etc.) are problematic, and simply pointing that out is neither constructive nor valuable scholarship and is particularly unhelpful to the beginning student. As long as the media and the general populace continue to use the term, "religion," specialized scholars have a duty to try critically to clarify it—even though we cannot avoid its ideological baggage.

"World Religions" courses are necessarily heterogeneous. Different schools have different cultures and different students have different needs. In a typical liberal arts environment there will be many students who have no commitment to a prolonged study of religion, but on the other hand, some classes may be composed entirely of students majoring in the field. Thus I offer the following observations

mainly as a descriptive statement. I would be gratified to find that some of my colleagues agree. I would be honored if anyone were influenced by this statement and adopted some elements of my approach. However, I would be more disturbed than either gratified or honored if anyone were to suggest that this approach should be adopted exclusively.

Given these general assumptions, then, I use what I have called a “phenomenological” approach. A derisive chorus from certain quarters often greets the very mention of phenomenology. What *is* the phenomenology of religion or the so-called “phenomenological method”? Particularly since Hans Penner’s critique and the claims that (a) the phenomenology of religion names no consistent methodology, and (b) the phenomenology of religion lacks a phenomenal object, the whole category has become apparently dubious (Penner 1989). Husserlian phenomenology’s endeavor to attain some “eidetic vision” seems questionable, if not potentially dangerous, if used to validate unsubstantiated personal interpretations of religious data. However, the phenomenology of religion is far from defunct (see, for example, Sharma 2001, Kamppinen 2003, Allen 2004, and Jensen 2004). For my initial purposes, the term phenomenology can be used simply to restrict the study of religion to the study of phenomena. We are restricted to texts in the broadest sense of empirical entities that appeal for interpretation, and thus must eschew metaphysical speculation and claims to any special, intersubjectively unavailable, revelation. In a paper first given at the AAR and published in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, Kocku von Stuckrad insisted that “there simply is no escaping the fact that the only thing scholars of religion have as a basis for scrutiny is visible and *expressed* religion, i.e., religious propositions that are communicated in sentences, signs, and symbolic action” (2003, 263).¹ An insistence on phenomenology in this general sense amounts to a recognition of our restriction to these bases of scrutiny. This emphasis on the object of the study of religion as expressed communication will become central to my argument.

It is also important for my purposes that the phenomenology of religion *can* be seen as in some way consistent. A clear explanation of this occurs in C. J. Arthur’s “The Phenomenology of Religion and the Art of Story-telling: The Relevance of William Golding’s *The Inheritors* to Religious Studies” (1992).² Arthur’s point is that, despite the variety of its *means*,

there is a consistent *end* to the phenomenology of religion, and that end is “imaginative re-experiencing”; the reconstruction of the perspective of the believer. Based on an impressive survey of the field Arthur concludes,

The catalogue of statements portraying phenomenology of religion as an exercise in imaginative re-experiencing could be continued at some length, and the current of thought which advocates such deliberate and disciplined use of our imagination in the attempt to understand religion, extends beyond those who actually talk about phenomenology or term themselves phenomenologists. (1992, 151–150)

Arthur is aware of the difficulties of such an undertaking, and he invokes the “if I were a horse” fallacy identified by E. E. Evans-Pritchard: we are not horses, and so it is fallacious to imagine that we understand how horses “feel”—the internal subjectivity of the animal. On the other hand, Arthur offers the example of Golding’s novel. This is a work of fiction revolving around a confrontation between Cro-Magnon *Homo sapiens* and *Homo neanderthalensis* and involving a deliberate and powerfully evocative attempt to “imaginatively re-experience” the condition of the Neanderthal. This can be compared to the more recent theorizing of, for example, Denis Dutton, who describes the way in which the observation of artistically wrought representations gives a sense of access to the mind of the original skilled observer who is now the representing artist (2009, 55).

Arthur’s analysis makes it apparent that a dual exercise is required for effective “re-experiencing”; first, a “painstaking reconstruction of available evidence” (1992, 154), and second, the scrupulous self-restraint from “the fabrication of erroneous details” (1992, 157). The latter prohibits especially the insertion of familiar associations into contexts where they do not belong, and corresponds to the phenomenological *epochē*. The final implication is that, since, for example, a Hindu is not a horse but *Homo sapiens* like the scholar, the endeavor is not finally impossible, only difficult and demanding.

This whole concept of “imaginative re-experiencing,” if it is based on the internal reproduction of the subjective state of the other, appears hopeless rather than merely difficult. However, I hope to justify a version of it, drawing from, among others, the scrupulous materialist philosopher, Daniel Dennett.

In *Consciousness Explained* (1991), Dennett considers “what it must have been like for a Leipzig Lutheran churchgoer in, say, 1720, hearing one of J. S. Bach’s chorale cantatas in its premier performance” (1991, 387). He points out,

There are probably no significant biological differences between us today and German Lutherans of the eighteenth century; we are the same species, and hardly any time has passed. But, because of the tremendous influence of culture ... our psychological world is quite different from theirs, in ways that would have a noticeable impact on our respective experiences. If we want to imagine what it was like to be a Leipzig Bach-hearer, it is not enough for us to hear the same tones, on the same instruments, in the same order; we must also prepare ourselves somehow to respond to those tones with the same heartaches, thrills, and waves of nostalgia It is not utterly impossible to prepare ourselves in these ways. A music scholar who carefully avoided all contact with post-1720 music and familiarized himself intensively with the traditional music of that period would be a good first approximation. More important ... it is not impossible to know in just what ways we would have to prepare ourselves whether or not we cared to go to all the trouble. So we could know what it was like “in the abstract” so to speak, and in fact I’ve just told you: the Leipzigers, hearing the chorale cantatas, were reminded of all the associations that already flavored their recognition of the chorale melodies. It is easy enough to imagine what *that* must have been like for them—though with variations drawn from our own experience. . . . We can’t do the job precisely, but only because we can’t forget or abandon all that we know that the Leipzigers didn’t know. (1991, 387–88)

So the task of “imaginative re-experiencing,” or “heterophenomenology” as Dennett calls it, is not simply an uncritical and unattainable ideal assumed by certain misguided members of the religious studies academy. It is a respectable undertaking and can be further justified. In the above-mentioned paper, von Stuckrad championed a “communicative turn” in the study of religion (2003, 263). Drawing on the work of the German sociologist, Niklas Luhmann, von Stuckrad argues that the study of religion is concerned primarily with communication. He indicates the narrative structure of religious identities, which

are shaped by means of communication. (It should be noted that “communication is not limited to the sphere of language” [2003, 264], but is expanded into non-verbal communication, social systems of signs and symbols, and other discursive processes.) Von Stuckrad suggests that “religions ... serve as instruments in the communicative formation of identity and provide people with a concrete script of action” (2003, 269). (For another useful introduction to Luhmann’s thought, see Beyer 2009.)

I would add that Dennett has also said “there is no reality of conscious experience independent of the effects of various vehicles of content” and that the self is “a center of narrative gravity” (Dennett 1991, 132, and 1992, *passim*). This affirms that there *is* no consciousness of identity, no self-consciousness, without some expression or communication (some “vehicle of content”). Narratives expressing personal identity—what the “self” is taken to be—narratives which define the very essence of personhood (soul, psyche, *nafs*, *ātman*, *tzu*, etc.) serve to “locate” the self. They orient self-consciousness in a narrated matrix of hypothetical entities related by stable functions. Such narratives define space and time and locate the self in relation to them in a recursive and reciprocal process.

This dovetails with the idea of religion as communication and implies that there can be no self-conscious identity without its expressed communication. Religious communications involve self-expression that shapes the identity in the act of its expression. Thus, while the “the believers’ inner states of mind ... fully escape scholarly verification” (von Stuckrad 2003, 268), heterophenomenology—the attempt to understand the self-consciousness of the believer—turns out not to be some “eidetic” experience of a subjective state but the apprehension of a location in narrative space or construction of the self, mediated and communicated by religious expression. As the understanding of a communication it is thus no more inexplicable than any other language event. Rather than attempting to *experience* the religion of the other as the other experiences it—the sort of thing that Dennett implies to be impossibly difficult (1991, 388)—we are more reasonably seeking to understand the identities of others as constructed by and communicated through their traditions.

Of course, it is not “religious” narrative alone that functions in the construction of the self. National, local, political, literary, and personal narratives are

also involved, once again blurring and problematizing the distinction between religious and non-religious phenomena. The restriction of such a study of human self-identifications to any single and purely “religious” tradition can only create a limitation on the accuracy of our self-understanding. Luhmann’s work indicates that “religion” as a clearly differentiated and self-contained entity is a very specific product of the modern West (1984, xxxv, 6; 2000, 236).

At this point it must be conceded that the term “re-experiencing” is, therefore, somewhat misleading and appears to spring from the failure of early phenomenologists of religion to appreciate the rationality of their goal. “Heterophenomenology” is a more appropriate term. From this point of view it would simply be wrong to claim that *The Inheritors* is an example of academic religious heterophenomenology. It is a useful demonstration of certain prerequisites: no reliable understanding of the other can neglect the commitment to a painstaking reconstruction of evidence and to phenomenal *epochē*. However, Neanderthals have left us little by way of recorded communications of self-expression, and we cannot hope to pursue genuine heterophenomenology in respect of Neanderthal self-understanding. Golding’s fictional exercise surpasses the academic limitations of this textual, and therefore historical and humanistic, undertaking as a work of fantasy surpasses the boundaries of academic historiography.

Harold Shapiro, one-time president of Princeton University, stated that “to achieve a sympathetic understanding of those who are different from us” is part of the required characteristics of a liberal education (1999). In this way, religious studies constitutes a very significant contribution to any liberal arts education. However, this heterophenomenology is not, for me, the final end of religious studies (as Arthur recognizes, 1992, 166)—but an important intermediate stage. I take the further end to be critical *self-knowledge* consistent with the Confucian ideal of the *ru* or scholar for whom learning is for the sake of cultivating the self, and also with Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s aim of religious studies as “corporate critical self-consciousness” (Tu 1984, Smith 1981, 59). Once again, this blurs the religious/non-religious boundary. Both religion and self-knowledge are transformative, and Arthur recalls Eliade’s insistence that to the extent that you understand a religious fact you change (1969, 61–64).³

The constitutive task of religious studies as I con-

ceive it, in both research and teaching, concerns understanding something difficult but not impossible to understand in other cultures (concerning understanding, see Rennie 2000). Possibly at their most profound, and certainly at their most poetic, elliptical, and obscure, religious traditions express and form personal identity through communications embedded in cultural traditions. So we can attempt, with some hope of success, to understand others as they understand themselves (their selves). It is important to note that understanding others is always a demanding task, no matter how close to us they may be. In fact, Dennett considers that “the theoretical problem of self-interpretation is at least as difficult and important as the problem of other-interpretation” (1992, 104). The final end of this task is not just to apprehend the self-understanding of the other, but to return to this task of self-interpretation—“to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” After all, in a humanistic discipline it is axiomatic that the scholar is simply one example of the human condition, prone to similar forces as other humans. If religion is an important source of identity formation, as a significant body of scholarship indicates (see bibliography), then the study of religion can meaningfully be proposed as a source of self-knowledge. By inspecting the expressions involved in identity formation in alternative traditions, we come to understand our own selves more accurately as instances of ubiquitous processes.

It might be asked how, explicitly, can the study of the other be made to encourage critical self-consciousness? How can the study of the strategies of self-location of other cultures induce awareness of the limitations and flaws of one’s own strategies? I confess that in responding to the challenge of this paper, I have penetrated more deeply into the implicit bases of my own pedagogy than I had previously done. In fact, in the classroom I have allowed the understanding of the other to do its work tacitly rather than directly requiring any demonstration of self-knowledge, and perhaps I should make this goal more explicit. I have encouraged the material to induce this end by requiring students to perform two associated functions. One is the standard repetition of acquired information. The other is the speculative consideration of the perspective associated with that information. To give some examples of the kind of questions I ask:

- There are five practices commonly seen as fundamental to Islam. What are these? Discuss the possible personal experience associated with their practice.
- According to the *Book of Rites*, sacrifice is “not a mechanical means for manipulating spirits but a means of developing the self.” Discuss the importance of this concept of self-development for Chinese religion.
- How could the experience of suffering lead to a strong expression of self identity? Give examples from Judaism or Christianity.
- Recount the legend of the life of the Buddha. In what ways can this be seen to be a model of human experience?
- Karma, artha, dharma, and moksha are seen as traditionally acceptable aims or ends of Hindu life. What are these? Try to suggest what kinds of lived experience may have led to their organization in this hierarchy?
- Identify some of the common features of non-literate creation myths. What common human experiences may be expressed in them?

Such questions grow from the assumed end of heterophenomenology as self-knowledge. Identifying with the other, knowledge of the other becomes knowledge of the self. This provides an underlying organizational principle for my courses. It provides a motivation that does not interfere with the accurate transmission of acquired information about religions, but permits an organization to the chaotic deluge of data, a relevance to the information, and, hopefully, a firm basis for growing self-awareness.

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Notes

1. I must thank Kocku von Stuckrad for his work. I have used his words to support my own understanding, which should not be attributed to him. All inconsistencies in the application of his observations in this paper are my own responsibility.

2. Of course, this paper was published twenty years ago now, and Professor Arthur's views have no doubt developed over the years. I take full responsibility for my own interpretations of his article.

3. Frederick Streng's working definition of religion, to give another example, was "a means of ultimate transformation" (1969, 4). Socrates, of course, held knowledge to be transformative. However, the recognition of an improvement of self-awareness as a contingent good does not necessarily imply the existence of any condition of perfect or fully realized self-knowledge identifiable with a state of grace, salvation, or nirvana. Thus the religion/non-religion distinction, while blurred, can be maintained.

Experiments in the Analytical Study of the Bible: Burton Mack as Pioneer¹

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The analytical study of religion is gaining in influence and importance. The work of Russell McCutcheon, William Arnal, and Hector Avalos, to name but a few is generating a number of discussions within the discipline. In biblical studies the issue has also generated some confusion, as biblical scholars are often on the forefront of method in the discipline of religion. From literary methods in the 1960s to structuralist methods in the 1970s and 1980s to post-modernist approaches in the 1980s and 1990s, biblical scholarship has often been ahead of the curve in trying these new methods. And yet the question is whether such methodological advances constitute truly analytical work in biblical studies. The scholars I have mentioned above would argue it does not, and that the parameters of analytical study of the Bible in particular are still in the process of definition.

If, then, we seek to define an analytical approach to the study of the Bible, there are many names that have made tremendous contributions. In New Testament studies, one name, however, is mentioned more frequently because of the length and persistence of his work: Burton Mack. In this article I want to try to map the boundaries of the analytical study of the Bible. To do this, I will look backward instead of forward and examine what we have learned from the work of Burton Mack.

If one looks at Mack from the beginning of his career, that his name should be mentioned in the same breath as analytical methodologies would come as

a surprise. A student of Hans Conzlemann and an ordained Presbyterian minister, one might expect him to take the same well-worn path as the other academic children and grandchildren of Rudolf Bultmann—solid, often brilliant New Testament work, but always with an eye towards making the text relevant to the Christianity of modernity. But Burton Mack broke out from the pack and forged a new direction.

One can see this in his early work. In his dissertation *Logos und Sophia* (1973) and in the English article which is based on it, "Wisdom, Myth and Mythology," (1970) Mack sets out to make historical sense of the wisdom tradition in Hellenistic Judaism. The contemporary reader of Mack's work might register some surprise reading these early works. Mack uses the term "theology" (a term rarely used in his later work) and sees the wisdom tradition as wrestling with theodicy. But even here what comes through, in nascent form, is a developmental understanding of religious tradition (the wisdom tradition here) and a grounding in historical events as the catalyst for such development. The wisdom tradition then does not develop through spiritual reflection or divine inspiration for Mack; rather it is an attempt to make sense of real-life events using categories that are available. One can see already points of connection with J.Z. Smith's 1975 article "Wisdom and Apocalyptic" in which the same sort of intellectual labor in light of historical events is now traced between wisdom and apocalyptic. What we should not pass



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