REVIEW ESSAY

RELIGION AFTER RELIGION, HISTORY AFTER HISTORY:
POSTMODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS

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Steven M. Wasserstrom, Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. ISBN 0691005397 (cloth); 0691005400 (pbk). $75.00 (cloth); $22.95 (pbk).
Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. ISBN 0521343283 (cloth); 0521357454 (pbk). $65.00 (cloth); $25.00 (pbk).
Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995. ISBN 0674069072 (cloth); 0674069080 (pbk). $50.00 (cloth); $21.95 (pbk).

The following essay reviews Steven Wasserstrom’s Religion after Religion—a partial history of the History of Religions—and three theoretical works on historiography: Hayden White’s Metahistory, Peter Novick’s That Noble Dream, and Robert F. Berkhofer Jr.’s Beyond the Great Story. As well as introducing readers to the argument of these works, the essay uses Wasserstrom’s book as an example of a “monovocal” style of the narration of the phenomenal past in opposition to the polyvocal style called for by the historiographers. The purpose of the essay is to indicate the degree to which monovocal representations can apparently justify singular viewpoints by concealing various agendas and lending authority to dubious conclusions. The essay challenges the elevation of a single authorial voice over the plurality of voices representing the plurality of phenomenal pasts and calls for a greater engagement with the pluralism and polyvocality of postmodern historiography.

Introduction

At the American Academy of Religion conference in November 1999 a session was held to discuss Steven Wasserstrom’s Religion after Reli-
Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henri Corbin at Eranos. Papers from that session were published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (June 2001) with the advice that “the issues discussed here should be of wide interest to JAAR readers” (427). One of the panelists writes “in appreciation … and in salutation” (Masuzawa 2001: 429). Another states that the book is “clearly one of the most important and original studies on the history of the history of religions published in recent years” (Urban 2001: 437). These facts alone justify a close inspection of this work, but there are further characteristics of Wasserstrom’s writing that make the book both worthy of close scrutiny and instructive in the development of historiography adequate to the study of religion.

*Religion after Religion*

I cannot assume that readers are familiar with Wasserstrom’s book, nor can I deal with all the issues and arguments of this complex work. So I must begin with a detailed summary while insisting that nothing can substitute for reading the work in its entirety.

The three eponymous scholars listed in the subtitle of Wasserstrom’s book were the specialists in religion who, between 1949 and 1978, attended Jung’s Eranos circle. Their influence was “perhaps the most dynamic and innovative discourse on ‘religion’ in the second half of the twentieth century” (Wasserstrom 1999: 6) and the History of Religions attained its status due largely to these three scholars (8). Wasserstrom concludes that “[t]he overarching theory they shared … was a shared idea of religion after religion … a non-religious religiosity, a secular antimodernism … some new form of religion after the expiration of traditional forms” (ix-x). These “Historians of Religions” differ significantly, but “share important, even fundamental features of their theory” (19). They used their scholarship “in a way that seemed somehow subordinated to a muted metahistory—if not to a covert theology” (24). They “retroject[ed] theosophy into the core of their respective traditions” (35) and “demanded acquiescence to the proposition that this esoteric core was

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1 Wasserstrom uses the term “History of Religions” to refer specifically to the thought of Eliade, Corbin, and Scholem as distinct from other historians of religions. For the purposes of this essay, I will adopt the convention of writing “History/ian of Religions” when I follow Wasserstrom’s usage.
the religious stuff of religion … this theosophical assumption, and the mystocentrism they derived from it, led them to certain conclusions about an autonomous reality for religious phenomenon” (36 [sic]).

Wasserstrom argues that both Corbin and Eliade “were involved with so-called speculative masonry, though by uncertain channels of influence” (38). “Reintegration”—crucial to all three scholars—was a technical term of René Guénon (47) and the “ultimate source” of the idea was Martines de Pasqually, who “was of Marrano ancestry” (39). J. F. Molitor, who made claims for “Christian Kabbalah” (269 n. 18), “had perhaps the single biggest impact on Scholem’s conceptualization of Kabbalah” (39) and “bequeathed not only to Corbin and Eliade but also to Scholem the concept of theosophy, a notion at the heart of their History of Religions” (39). Molitor translated Kabbalah “tradition” (40), and so Wasserstrom concludes that the category “tradition” in Scholem, like “traditional society” in Eliade, has its source in Christian Kabbalah (40). Although “it would … be patently absurd to consider Scholem an ‘initiated’ or ‘practicing’ Christian kabbalist” (41), it is “not at all implausible” that Scholem’s conceptions of Kabbalah have a Christian Kabbalistic source. Wasserstrom asserts that

Christian Kabbalah provided key terms, including “reintegration,” “tradition,” and “theosophy,” and a formative intellectual inspiration for Scholem; Eliade may or may not have been an initiate, but certainly traveled in close proximity with initiates (Evola, Guénon, Corbin, to name a few) … Corbin, quite unabashedly, and Eliade, at most obliquely, each portrayed himself to be a spiritual heir—initiate?—of this selfsame “tradition.” Scholem most emphatically did not; but … he remained dialectical … openly in conversation … with this tradition. (49)

So the “Historians of Religions” were religious even as they rejected esoteric modes of belief and practice. Their understanding of religion is a “religion after religion”, a paradoxical belief in the transcendent after that belief has been rejected as untenable, and Scholem and Corbin are “preeminent examples of the ‘religious study of religion’” (66).

However, with this paradoxical understanding of “a monotheism beyond esoteric ethics” their views of

Judaism and Islam … had passed through the looking glass of theosophy, emerging unrecognizable to most Muslims and Jews … their interpretation of religion is itself religious, even as it is post religious … It is itself a paradox—a purportedly “religious” study of monotheism that
religion after religion, history after history rejects monotheism’s fundamental emphasis on the transcendence of God and the demands of law. (63)

Under the influence of German Romanticism, Scholem and Corbin made mysticism rather than law the center of their own traditions and excluded law from their view of religion (58), which resulted in a “monotheism without law” (59).

Wasserstrom further argues that the strategies of the “Historians of Religions” were enabled by their ability to piece together original creations from historical data (98). Such creation is poesis, artifice, art rather than science, and he considers “History of Religions … a modernist art form” (100). Wasserstrom focuses most on Eliade’s “analogous dramaturgy” (104). Not only was Eliade “a fiction writer of some note” (101), but also he understood the power of magic and shamanism to be that of spectacle and drama, assimilable to all ritual theatre. This is “fictionally expressed in his 1978 novella, Nineteen Roses” (105), where “according the protagonist… the dramatic spectacle could become, very soon, a new eschatology or soteriology” (106, referring to Eliade 1989: 205-206). Such “aesthetic esotericism”, however, is no answer to the disenchantment of the world—“It was not designed to be a workable socio-religious program but rather an aesthetic critique” (109-110). Wasserstrom sees the work of art constituted by the “History of Religions” as “not so much a total work of art so much as it was a work of art about totality. The ‘real’ is the ‘whole’ in this conception. This unrealizable vision elevated a vision no one could actually see” (110). This gave each “Historian of Religions” his authority as the only one able to see the whole on which he centered his own work (of art). Along with the turn to Romantic philosophy was a turn to myth. Widespread from the late nineteenth century, this was even embraced by scholars such as Rosenzweig, Bloch, Cassirer, Buber, and by Martin Heidegger, who represented this “new thinking” according even to Rosenzweig. However, for the Weimar Jews “[t]he turn to myth was a turn to history … unlike proto-Nazi myth infatuation, their myth studies were not regressive” (114). Most Jewish thinkers who made this turn to myth “abandoned it after the National Socialist appeal to myth was actualized” (123).

For the three, ideas of renovatio and of nationalism were significantly linked since they “were importantly engaged in the nationalistic struggles of Iran, Romania, and Israel” (129). While Eliade’s nationalism was “different” from Scholem’s Zionism it was “perhaps equally vehement” (131), since Eliade, according to Wasserstrom,
“evoked the spiritual revolution of the Legion of the Archangel Michael in its own terms without the slightest criticism” (131). One of the central themes of the fascism typical of the Legion was that of the “new man” and this theme links Eliade’s pre- and post-war writings (132). Likewise, Corbin’s “persophilia” integrally involved the concept of rebirth and “articulated a certain spiritual nationalism” (133). The conception of Weltalter, among which the current aeon is the most decadent, lent itself to this theme. Wasserstrom states that “Eliade wrote throughout his career on the Hindu theory of world ages, which seemed to underpin his implied belief that we are presently living in an age imminently due for dissolution” (141). Out of this dark age the “Historians of Religions” apparently could hope to escape by renovatio (143). This could be a renewal of the existing order or a new creation after the destruction of the existing order. Although Eliade did not explicitly choose between the two, Wasserstrom concludes that his preference for the latter is revealed by several sources (Eliade 1977: 145: “the eventual catastrophic disappearance of humanity”; and Eliade’s Freud Lecture of 1974, “The occult and the modern world”, in Eliade 1976: 47-68; Wasserstrom 1999: 313 n. 112). For Eliade “collective renovatio will come after the annihilation of this stage of history” (143). Wasserstrom concludes that the apocalypse has already happened: “The apocalypse becomes the modern itself: Eranos is afterward as such” (144, emphasis original).

It is argued that Corbin’s understanding of religion “rested on his conception of the imaginal … [which] argued for the ontological reality of the objects of visionary experience” (148). Further, his theory of hidden authority is grounded in Shi’i imamology and the Occultation of the last Imam (149). Thus, Wasserstrom concludes, “Corbin was neither a historian of religions nor an academic philosopher … Corbin understood himself to be a prophet” who was “conducting a private war on reason”. His esoteric art of writing, derived from Schelling’s narrative philosophy, was, in fact, “a form of lying … covering half-truths in something exotic like camouflage, or heavenly deception, or higher truths”. Wasserstrom quotes Weber to the effect that “plain intellectual integrity” is the only relevant virtue in the academy, and affirms that “our work as historians of religion is pointless if it is not honest” (154).

While the book depicts Scholem as one who “championed historical research and the historical method”, Corbin’s “imaginal” and “prophetic” turn characterizes his anti-historicism and he developed
“the foundations for a full-blown metahistory” (159). He claimed that only some reference to a divine, extra-historical origin for past history rescues history from absurdity. The three “argued mightily that a metahistorical reality is involved”, which transcends time (160-161). Wasserstrom compares them in their response to “creatio ex nihilo”: Corbin repudiated it and Scholem “remarked rather pointedly on the distinctiveness of this Jewish concept” (164). However, all three “Historians of Religions” marginalized the concept and “instead of a personal God willing creation out of nothing at a moment in time, Corbin and Eliade preferred instead the recurring, cyclic process of birth and rebirth inside the divine life” (164). Furthermore, “the centrality of esoterism stressed by the Historians of Religions may have shunted aside the claims these monotheisms normatively made about themselves. In so nudging God from his role as creator within these traditions, they could shove into his place Nature, or Life, or the Cosmos. For this move they drew from Naturphilosophie” (164). Scholem saw this Naturphilosophie as “a smuggled sort of secularization” incommensurable with Judaism. Thus his “personal commitment forced him to part company, decisively, from Corbin and Eliade”. However, this commitment was not “to Judaism but rather to the theologico-political project of Zionism”. Scholem rejected a soteriology of nature and “alone of the three committed himself to identifying with and living publicly in a religious community”. He also faced “the real question: ‘Whether, when, and in what form will religion be an effective force in society.’ Corbin and Eliade chose esotericism, which by definition begs this question” (166). Theirs was a secularization, however, that permitted a salvation in history, an “apocalypse already” (144) or “Realized Eschatology” (167).

Wasserstrom further claims Eliade and Corbin “employed the myth of Ahriman-as-planetary-antagonist in ways that tended to blur into a kind of philosophical anti-Judaism” (177), that is, they either identified Ahriman with the Hebrew God or claimed that “the Jews were responsible for creating Satan out of Ahriman” (178). Corbin and Jung are said to have “agreed, in effect, on the fundamental (if esoteric) principle that the High God of the Hebrew Bible was in fact a monstrous demiurge, one of whose many names is Ahriman” (179). Wasserstrom employs a distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism here. The former indicates the racist bias against a cultural group, the latter a religious position created by inverting fundamental Hebraic themes. He is explicit that there is no evidence that Corbin
was anti-Semitic (179), although he must have been anti-Judaic—gnosticism is, in this sense, inherently anti-Judaic. Wasserstrom makes it plain, however, that he considers Eliade to have borne an “anti-Jewish animus” that went beyond “anti-Judaism” and more closely approached anti-Semitism.

This apparent equation of the High God of the Hebraic tradition with the gnostic demiurge and the evil Ahriman leads to a “Mephistophelean theory of religion” (203). For Eliade this promised to “reverse the direction of history, to follow the signals of myth back to original consciousness. Eliade’s History of Religions in this sense constitutes a *psychoanalysis in reverse*” (183), says Wasserstrom. “Freudian theory, like Marxist historicism, according to Eliade, was to be identified as a Jewish sin”; furthermore, “this is not the only animus towards Jews that stimulated Eliade’s reading of ‘history’ ” (185). Accordingly, the appreciation of the “Historians of Religions” for Jung’s *Response to Job*, “a post Holocaust assault on the God of the Jewish people” (177) and “an attack on the Jewish God so shortly after the Shoah” (324; see also 323) is seen as evidence of their collusion in that attack.

One final theme—that of the androgyne—much discussed by Jung, Eliade, and Corbin, implies to Wasserstrom a theory of religion that “presumed an eschatological totality with certain social consequences. A kind of theology of higher crime, analogous, perhaps, to de Sade’s ‘Society of the Friends of Crime,’ this theory evoked fantasies of release from the natural order—*Gender*—in order to elicit if not accelerate even more potent fantasies of release from the constitutional order—*Law*” (212). Thus, while the androgyne might represent the “whole man”, this “‘whole man,’ ... stands on a pile of corpses” (213). According to Eliade, “the Gnostic feels that he is freed from the laws that govern society: he is beyond good and evil” (1982: 374) and—as gnostics themselves—the “Historians of Religions” must similarly consider themselves beyond good and evil.

In conclusion Wasserstrom points out that the “History of Religions” is “on the decline in Religious Studies” and “it is the New Age to which much of the spirit of History of Religions has fled” (238). This spirit “may be most continually influential in the arts because it lies on the Arts side of the Arts and Sciences and on the romantic side of the classical/romantic dichotomy in the arts” (239). Although we cannot move beyond these scholars without understanding them, finally our relation to them must be one of *recovery*, in the sense of recovering from them as well as “rediscovering their legacy” (247).
There is much to commend about the book. It is informative and a gripping academic detective narrative. It constitutes an interesting account of “phenomenology” as it was practiced, particularly by Corbin (25-28), with the dangers inherent in any claim to reveal something otherwise inaccessible to the senses. That “these Historians of Religions effectively suspended ethics in favor of ontic depths” (225) is a salutary warning—any subordination of ethics to intellectual metaphysics is liable to distract us from the important realities of behavior by focusing on second order intellectual justifications of that behavior. Wasserstrom is rightly concerned “for the fate of the study of religion restricted to the visionary” and about the assumption that “what is ‘really religious’ … is something that turns out to fall under the rubric of mysticism” (240). He is rightly concerned that an esotericist study of religion has not “provided a wide enough program for postmodern History of Religions to proceed and thrive” (240-241). To advance “we also must find out what all sorts of believers have done as believers, in the public life of believers” (241). This is an admirable intent. It is appropriate that he historicizes his subjects, drawing our attention to socio-political influences all too often neglected. The historical connection among these scholars, the Eranos circle, and the Bollingen foundation’s financial subsidy of the former’s activities is an important observation (153). Corbin’s connections to Iran, its politicians, and the oil it produced constitutes another significant link between the Eranos circle and the three scholars. The invocation of Schelling’s “narrative philosophy” and “tautegory” are also admirable elements of Wasserstrom’s analysis (40, 57, 100, 124) and important issues in the historiography of religions. The recognition of the interweaving of German Romanticism in the history of religions is a valuable insight (54-55; see also Permenter 2000). The realization that the history of religions as practiced by these and other scholars is not only itself religious but also a “modernist art form” (100) is a potentially fertile observation, as is Wasserstrom’s insight concerning the imperative “to locate the History of Religions in the disciplines at large” (239). Finally, the bibliographic material is extremely useful. Few interested parties could read his work without finding some obscure but valuable textual references.

Despite these admirable elements, I have serious disagreements with both Wasserstrom’s conclusions and his method, specifically with his representation of history, which, especially in respect of Eliade, differs significantly from my own (see Rennie 1996; 2000;
2002), I cannot accept that the establishment of specific commonalities between two or more authors justifies the quotation of one of them as representative of another in some way other than those established. Wasserstrom’s indication of “resonant parallels” among Guénon, Evola, and Eliade in their antipathy to Freudian psychotherapy in no way justifies his citation of Guénon’s observation of a connection between Einstein, Bergson, and Freud through their Judaism and its “maleficent” aspects, as representing Eliade’s opinion (184 and 328 n. 14). The support for Wasserstrom’s accusation that “Freudian theory, like Marxist historicism, according to Eliade, was to be identified as a Jewish sin”, is a long footnote (328-329) in reference to Eliade’s analysis of history in *Cosmos and History*, which nowhere substantiates the claim that Eliade saw psychoanalysis as a “Jewish sin”. (Wasserstrom’s argument is similar to that of Dubuisson [1993] to which I have already responded [Rennie 1996: 86, 167].) Another example is the observation that Corbin’s description of narrative philosophy as “absolved of the dilemma which obsesses those who ask: is it myth or is it history?” (*Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, xii; cited in Wasserstrom 1999: 57). I agree that this constitutes a “liberating apathy”, a reprehensible independence from historical realities. However, its ascription to anyone other than Corbin himself is unwarranted, and Eliade is simply assumed to espouse an anti-historicism identical to Corbin’s. In fact, Eliade’s insistence that “every manifestation of the sacred takes place in some historical situation” (1958: 2) militates against that conclusion. Urban (2001: 440) is aware of Wasserstrom’s stretching to “see connections” in this way.

Similarly, Benavides (2001: 450) raises the question of “indictments by association”. One example would be that whenever Wasserstrom has cause to mention Julius Evola, a self-styled “superfascist” and one-time ideologue for Mussolini, he insists on the latter’s closeness to Eliade, who, he claims, was “a longtime colleague” (Wasserstrom 1999: 17, 77), even calling Evola “Eliade’s mentor” (101). Wasserstrom refers to his own work, “Eliade and Evola”, to support these claims (18 n. 65, 108 n. 57), but there are no further bibliographic references and this work remains unpublished.² That Eliade is fre-

² Although Wasserstrom has circulated the text privately and read from it at the 1999 New York University conference on mysticism, I cannot cite unpublished work. The proceedings of the aforementioned conference are currently in press as *The Unknown Remembered Gate* (Wolfson and Kripal 2002) and, when they appear, will give substance to my argument.
quotient, and exclusively associated with rightist authors such as Evola and Junger (87) supports Wasserstrom’s critical representation. However, it is a purely rhetorical device. Eliade’s other correspondence and friendships are suppressed to achieve this appearance. For example, the correspondence between Eliade and the liberal Italian historian of religions, Raffaele Pettazzoni, contains over 130 letters exchanged over a period of 33 years until Pettazzoni’s death in 1959 (Spineto 1994). The correspondence between Eliade and Stig Wikander, in Uppsala, Sweden, is comparable in its significance to that with Pettazzoni, and likewise shows Wasserstrom’s emphasis on the relatively minor correspondence with Evola to be misleading (Timu Dünya and Ciurtin 2000).

The endnotes often betray circularity and lack of support for the text. For example, “[t]hese esoteric influences on Corbin might imply an initiatic connections” (327 n. 54) remains a statement of bare possibility rather than evidence. A note given in supposed support of Guénon’s influence on Eliade cites Enrico Montanari’s article, “Eliade e Guénon” (273 n. 71). However, Montanari actually points out a series of significant disagreements between the two, and concludes that Guénon’s influence should not be over-emphasized (see Spineto 2001: 75). Wasserstrom says that “Corbin and Eliade … seem to have enjoyed initiatic warrants for their esoterism” (212) and a note refers the reader back to his own chapter two for support (339 n. 57). However, the strongest claim made there was that “Corbin, quite unabashedly, and Eliade at most obliquely each portrayed himself to be the spiritual heir—initiate?—of this selfsame ‘tradition’ [of Christian Kabalah]” (49). This is not evidence.

Wasserstrom is a master of a mosaic form of argument in which component parts appear to represent something that they themselves are not. He makes his work appear a coherent whole, but inspection reveals the mortar that binds the fragments to be largely in the subjunctive mood, made malleable with what “might”, “may”, or “seems to” have been, and even what “may be possible, perhaps” (163). For example, on the strength of nothing more than a “may perhaps” a whole paragraph actually describing Heidegger is applied to Corbin and, by mere association, to Eliade (173).

Many slippery slope arguments go from implying what might possibly seem to be the case to affirming that this is in fact the case, without evidence to warrant the transition. Eliade’s relation to Christian Kabalah begins with a vague connection to “speculative ma-
sonry” through “uncertain channels of influence” (38), moves through his use of the notion of theosophy (39), to his familiarity with Guénon (40), until (by page 43) it becomes a confident assertion of “Eliade’s lifetime infatuation with Christian Kabbalah”. The question of the three scholars’ “theosophy” proceeds by similar means: a real connection is established to the German Romantics, who embraced a self-styled theosophy; then this same theosophy is ascribed to the scholars whom they influenced, on the slender grounds that they show an interest in theosophy and use the term. Their understanding of religion is then “theosophical”, the German Romantic view being read back in to their thought as if it is identical with the personal beliefs of the scholars. Later it is simply stated as a matter of course that their understanding is a “hermeneutics of monotheistic theosophy” (67), the source of a “new logic” (nowhere actually described or explicitly embraced by the scholars—but as “esotericists” we can only expect them to hold beliefs they do not express). However, in his synopsis of recent work on Eliade and “traditionalism”, Natale Spineto concludes that the evidence is “not enough to justify a description of the Eliadean position as ‘esoteric’ ” (2001: 80).

The argument is proposed that the “Historians of Religions” overemphasize the mystical component of the history of religions at the expense of normative religion is increasingly widespread. However, does normative religion need to be “protected” from mystical religion as if they were somehow competitors? It is more reasonable to assume that religion involves both mystical and normative elements, comparable to Thomas Kuhn’s “revolutionary” and “normal” science. The former provides the “paradigm-shifting” insight and the latter consists of the “mopping-up” and “puzzle-solving” activities of those who accept the paradigm as their way of seeing the world. As historians of religions, one of our tasks is to determine how and why a normative tradition became normative. It is scarcely surprising, nor, I think culpable, that the scholars of the mid-1900s focused on the more dramatic and arguably more foundational mystical elements of human religious behavior. The question is, does this focus necessarily make them mystics themselves?

Throughout Wasserstrom’s work, the belief of the believer is ascribed to the scholar. This attribution is at the heart of the claim that the “History of Religions” is itself a religion after religion. Even accepting that the perspectives of these scholars (in fact the whole of the study of religion) should be studied as a religion as Benavides con-
religion after religion, history after history includes (455), this does not make their perspectives identical to the perspectives of the believers they study. This is an elementary fallacy in the history of religions. In the study of literature the comparable fallacy is that of identifying the views of a character or narrator as those of the author. (Wasserstrom employs that fallacy, too, attributing the views of Eliade’s character, Thanase, to Eliade [106].) The universe imaginare that Wasserstrom attributes to Eliade (245) may be more reasonably attributed to the believers Eliade describes. Similarly, the transference of Eliade’s understanding of the shaman’s performance and the dramatic function of the rope trick to his “self-understanding of his own performance” (104) is unsupported. Yet it is used, not only to justify the assertion that the “Historians of Religions” were themselves modern artists, but also to identify Eliade with the shaman who “pretends, at the height of his ritual, to be the Universal Sovereign” (105), implying massive hubris. In the same way, although the coincidentia oppositorum can “dissipate the power of ethical imperatives” (78), that is for the adherent of the tradition, rather than for the scholar, and actual evidence is needed to warrant the implication that this ethical ambivalence affected the scholars. Does the fact that “Eliade wrote throughout his career on the Hindu theory of world ages” actually “underpin his implied belief that we are presently living in an age imminently due for dissolution” (141)? Spineto brings to our notice that Eliade’s optimism regarding the creation of culture distinguishes him from the “traditionalists”, and this is not consistent with any such apocalyptic expectations.

It is by means of this unsupported contention that the scholars’ “religion” is identical to religions that they describe that many implications about their personal beliefs are warranted. Wasserstrom actually claims that his project “is not determined to reveal their ‘real’ religious identities. Besides being indiscreet, the answer to that question is in any event imponderable” (242). Yet he does so in very specific terms, telling us that they were gnostics in the specific sense of seeing the world as “a pit, a mistake, a foul abortion” (128) who “agreed, in effect, on the fundamental (if esoteric) principle that the High God of the Hebrew Bible was in fact a monstrous demiurge, one of whose many names is Ahriman” (179). Their belief was theosophical, resting on the concept of an eschatological renovatio. They were esotericists who “seem to have enjoyed initiatic warrants for their esoterism” (212), and “Corbin was Zarathustran through and through” (244). These are all specific claims regarding religious iden-
ity. Such inconsistency pervades the work. Despite a claim “neither to indict nor to uncover conspiracies” (11), he has variously drawn the three—especially Corbin and Eliade—as megalomaniacs with a messiah complex (168), anti-Jewish (177), fascist (155), and without ethics (213, 225), whose central concept of eschatological *renovatio* “stands on a pile of corpses” (213).

It is ironic that Wasserstrom complains of his subjects’ “promiscuous application of connections” (142) by which they “ pieced together original artifacts from the raw materials of history” (98). He is very close to his subjects in this way (“I must explicate connections between various seemingly unrelated texts” [203]). If there is a work of art here it is surely his skillful construction of such a solid-seeming edifice out of such tenuous connections. Certainly his description of the “Historians of Religions” as employing “extreme formulations, grandiose projects, and pyrotechnic displays of erudition” (216) applies precisely to his own work, as Urban (2001: 440) realizes.

*History after history*

Two questions unavoidably arise concerning my disagreement with Wasserstrom. First, is this a matter of objectivity and accuracy or one of alternative but equally justified interpretations? Second, if the argument of *Religion after Religion* is as flawed as I suggest, how has it achieved its success? I believe it necessary to acquire an understanding of the contemporary discourse on historiography both to give an informed response to these specific questions and to reap the benefits of work done by theorists in the field of academic historiography. To that end I have undertaken to review three major works. An introduction to these books will help us to understand the development and nuance of contemporary problems of historiography and the conflicts and solutions to which these problems have given rise. I will endeavor to allow each to remain what it was in context, keeping the editorial mortar to a minimum, maintaining the original ordering of selections, and thus encouraging the voices of the original authors. Again, no summary can be a substitute for reading the original works, but I hope to summarize these sources fairly in making my own points. Historians have already given much thought to the sort of problems that beset the history of religions and we have much to learn from them.
As we have seen, Wasserstrom is concerned with the thriving of a “postmodern History of Religions” (240-241) and his description of the “Historians of Religions” as “antimodernist moderns, whose modernism was defined by its opposition to modernity” (60) sounds almost like a definition of postmodernism. But what is postmodern historiography? Peter Novick has called Hayden White the “most radical representative of the epistemological avant-garde” (1988: 599), who insisted that “[h]istorical stories, like all others, were made rather than found” (1988: 600) and that there was no single correct view of any event or process, but rather many correct views, “each requiring its own style of representation” (White 1986: 487). Thus, White was a “central symbolic figure” of what might be called postmodern historiography (Novick 1988: 603). Although Novick insists that “the noncrusading nonmembers of this nonschool had no need of leadership … those who viewed the new mood with alarm required a symbolic embodiment of extreme ‘nihilistic relativism’ within the profession, and Hayden White was made to order for this role” (1988: 499). He is thus a suitable author with whom to begin.

Hayden White—*Metahistory*

White “consider[s] the historical work as what it most manifestly is … a verbal structure in the form of narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon of past structures and processes in the interest of explaining what they were by representing them” (2, ix, emphasis original; all references are to White 1973). In the nineteenth century, history as a “profession became progressively academicized. The professorate formed a clerisy for the promotion and cultivation of a socially responsible historiography; it trained and licensed apprentices, maintained standards of excellence, ran the organs of intra-professional communication, and in general enjoyed a privileged place in the humanistic and social scientific sectors of the universities” (136). However, appeals to methodological rigidity and non-partisanship were made without any clear idea how to achieve them (137). The “historical method” consisted of a willingness to go to the archives without any preconceptions whatsoever, to study the documents found there, and then to write a story about the events attested by the documents in such away as to make the story itself the explanation of “what had happened” in the
past ... The idea was to “tell the story” about “what had happened” without significant conceptual residue or ideological preformation of the materials. (141, 142)

White’s study of four “master historians of the nineteenth century”—Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, Burckhardt—indicates that “they all agreed that a true history should be written without preconceptions, objectively, out of an interest in the facts of the past for themselves alone, and with no aprioristic inclination to fashion the facts into a formal system” (142). However, “[w]hen ... they purported to be simply ‘telling what actually happened’ and to be explaining the past by telling its ‘story,’ they were all explicitly embracing the conception of explanation by description but were actually practicing the art of explanation by emplotment” (143). This is not so novel a claim: “Continental European thinkers—from Valéry and Heidegger to Sartre, Lévi-Strauss, and Michel Foucault—have cast serious doubts on the value of a specifically ‘historical’ consciousness, stressed the fictive character of historical reconstructions and challenged history’s claims to a place among the sciences” (1-2). White, for his part, aims “to establish the ineluctably poetic nature of the historical work and to specify the prefigurative element in a historical account by which its theoretical concepts were tacitly sanctioned” (xi). He argues that “in any field of study not yet reduced (or elevated) to the status of a genuine science, thought remains the captive of the linguistic mode in which it seeks to grasp the outline of objects inhabiting its field of perception” (xi). Among other things, he concludes that the possible modes of historiography (and philosophy of history)

are in reality formalizations of poetic insights that analytically precede them and that sanction the particular theories used to give historical accounts the aspect of an “explanation”; ... there are no apodictically certain theoretical grounds on which one can legitimately claim an authority for any one of the modes over the others as being more “realistic” ... as a corollary of this, the best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological ... the demand for the scientization of history represents only the statement of a preference for a specific modality of historical conceptualization, the grounds of which are either moral or aesthetic, but the epistemological justification of which still remains to be established. (xii)

The past is a “chaos of being” (144) from which the historian must creatively fashion a coherent narrative. Again, this is not new. White points out that “Gibbon, Hume, and Kant had effectively dissolved
the distinction between history and fiction on which earlier thinkers such as Bayle and Voltaire had based their historiographical enterprises” (48), but while, even in 1973, this may have been old news to literary critics and philosophers of history it was still disturbing to academic historians and has still today not percolated through to many historians of religions.

In the physical sciences, progress is made by way of agreement regarding what will count as problems and what form explanation will take. For historians, however, “no such agreement exists or has ever existed” (13), and so White concludes that there is “an irreducible ideological component in every historical account” (21), and “no extra-ideological grounds on which to arbitrate among the conflicting conceptions of the historical process and of historical knowledge appealed to by the different ideologies” (26). Faced with such critique, the problem of historical knowledge “had moved to the center of concerns of the philosophers” by the early nineteenth century (39). Historians were inspired “by the hope of creating a perspective on the historical process that would be as objective as that from which scientists viewed the process of nature” (39), but “the consistent elaboration of a number of equally comprehensive and plausible, yet apparently mutually exclusive, conceptions of the same set of events was enough to undermine confidence in history’s claim to ‘objectivity,’ ‘scientificity,’ and ‘realism’” (41).

Marx and Nietzsche contributed by historicizing objectivity and so bringing its very nature under question. For Nietzsche there were as many truths about the past as there were perspectives on it (White 1973: 332). Nietzsche implies that “historical wisdom … is dramatic insight, fabulation or … ‘emplotment’” (352) and, despite other disagreements with Hegel, he “took up and pushed to its conclusion an insight which underlay all of Hegel’s thinking about historical knowledge—that is, the extent to which the rules governing thought about history had their origins in linguistic habits and conventions” (374).

The Italian historian and philosopher of history, Benedetto Croce—“the most talented historian of all of the philosophers of history of the century” (White 1973: 378)—also subsumed history under the general concept of art (381). Croce’s critique of Hegel hinged upon the charge that Hegel, having failed to perceive the autonomy of art, had necessarily failed to understand the autonomy of history. … This permitted Croce to say that historiography could never be anything but “scientifically rigorous” in one of its aspects—that is, in
its preliminary gathering of data—even while it remained “a work of art” in the other—that is, in its narration of what it had found. (411)

White’s conclusion is that “debates over how history ought to be written [are] essentially matters of stylistic variation within a single universe of discourse” (427), since

no single linguistic protocol succeeded in carrying the day among the historians (or among the social sciences in general) in the way that mathematics and logic has done for the physical sciences from the time of Newton on. Since history resisted every effort to formalize discourse, historians were committed to the plurality of interpretative strategies contained in the uses of ordinary language. (428)

In the consideration of his own subjects, White

moot[s] the issue of which represents the most correct approach to historical study. Their status as possible modes of historical representation or conceptualization does not depend on the nature of the “data” they used to support their generalizations or the theories they invoked to explain them; it depends rather upon the consistency, coherence, and illuminative power of their respective visions of the historical field. (4)

From this viewpoint it is a matter of the internal characteristics of “consistency, coherence and illuminative power” of respective viewpoints that allow readers to adjudicate between conflicting readings of history, rather than external characteristics of accuracy or objectivity. This is the sort of postmodern position that threatens to paralyze the capacity to judge between competing interpretations that appear comparably consistent, coherent, and illuminative to a reader who does not possess the detailed information available to the competing authors. However, if there is any substance to White’s claims, then the question is not so much one of devaluing written histories as aesthetic confabulations, but of locating them within a field of human undertaking that is inherently aesthetic. Beyond that, however, remains the question of how to evaluate the respective significance of two or more “poetic insights”, which result in different representations of history, such as Wasserstrom’s and my own. Is one more objectively accurate than the other?

Peter Novick—*That Noble Dream*

Novick traces the idea of objectivity from the founding of the American historical profession in the 1880s and shows various reasons for
its establishment as the central norm of history and how a changing cultural, social, and political climate produced “historical relativism” which “put believers in objectivity on the defensive”. This led to “a new, somewhat chastened, objectivist synthesis”, which many factors caused to collapse, thus “the idea of historical objectivity has become more problematic than ever before” (Novick 1988: 16-17).

The concept of historical objectivity reached America from the wissenschaftliche Objectivität of the German academy, where history was one of the Geisteswissenschaften distinct from the Naturwissenschaften. Leopold von Ranke, “the father of modern historical scholarship”, was one of the most influential figures in this process. However, there was an “almost total misunderstanding” of von Ranke in the Anglophone academy. His ambition was to show the past “wie es eigentlich gewesen”, which has habitually been translated “as it really was” or “as it actually was”. In fact, it has been established that in the nineteenth century eigentlich also meant “essentially” and Ranke characteristically used it that way (28). For Ranke the historian’s task was to penetrate to “essences”. His epistemology was “naturalized” into an English empiricist idiom and read as meaning that truth was accurate representation, which might seem simple common sense in the English-speaking world, but is a view not held in Germany since Kant (30, 31).

In its passion to establish its authority, Anglophone historiography was “prone to scientific imagery, and the assumption of the mantle of science” (33) and it repudiated theorizing as anathema (38). Historians disparaged “history as literature” and “history as art” (40), and “the adjective ‘objective,’ when applied to knowledge, has many meanings and implications. One of the most problematic, but at the same time one of the most highly valued of its connotations, is ‘authoritative.’ Objective knowledge is knowledge which commands assent, which is clearly distinguishable from ‘mere [i.e., subjective] opinion’” (51). Assent was achieved by the professionalization of disciplinary history and “standardized technique was the foundation of ‘transpersonal replicability’—one of the most important and perhaps the most coherent definitions of objectivity”. But this reveals objectivity to be “a social phenomenon brought into existence by the establishment of methodological consensus … objectivity cannot be said to exist before professionalization” (52). Even that consensus was incomplete, and Novick traces “a descent of attitudes concerning objectivity: that it is easily attainable, that it is attainable with difficulty,
that it is unattainable but approachable, and that, at least in most common usages, it is an incoherent ideal” (101).

By the eve of the First War the relativity of historical knowledge was beginning to emerge. In 1910, Carl Becker—later to become president of the American Historical Association—questioned the very notion of hard fact (Novick 1988: 105-106). Fact, he wrote, was “almost impossible to distinguish from ‘theory,’ to which it is commonly supposed to be so completely antithetical”. He also “denied … the traditional distinction between (scientific) analysis and (interpretative) synthesis” (106). Even after its conclusion the war was “the subject of interminable historical controversy, undermining the faith that professional historical scholarship would converge on a consensual objective truth” (111) and contributing to the confirmation of Becker’s thesis.

Along with Becker, Charles Beard, another AHA president, composed the most influential front in the attack on historical objectivity in the inter-war years. These two were convinced that the goal of objective reconstruction was not only unattainable—the “Rankean” program of objectivity was inherently conservative. The process of deciding what was a fact depended on values. The approved professional posture of impartiality was (often unconsciously) dishonest—“the only way to play fair with the reader was to make one’s values and purposes explicit” (Novick 1988: 271).

World War II saw American culture turn toward affirmation and the search for certainty (281). Consequently, “the attack on moral relativism was part of an effort to rearm the West spiritually for the battle with the totalitarians” (282). It was argued that we couldn’t act passionately and with commitment unless we act out of a belief in the (singular) truth and the (singular) right (286-287). Both right and left, for different reasons, attacked relativism (288). It was held that doubts about the existence of objective truth figured prominently in the rise of fascism (289) and “claims that Becker and Beard’s relativism legitimized Nazi and Soviet historical practice multiplied from the late 1930s onward” (290). The denigration of ideology, characteristic of American culture in the cold war years, was directly related to claims that objectivity was the hallmark of thought in the Free World (299). Yet the denial that dominant thought is ideological is one of the greatest strengths of ideology—“the key move in the subordination of intellect to power. Postwar historians’ insistence that their
work was free of ideological taint was a textbook illustration of [this] point” (301).

Other factors provoking opposition to historical relativism were similarly explicable in socio-political rather than epistemological terms. As the Cold War set in, “fewer and fewer analytic philosophers of history defended the traditional norms of historical objectivity. The majority ... concluded that in selecting elements either of a description or an explanation historians had no choice but to make decisions based largely on their own values and intentions” (396). Many philosophers and historians who began as objectivists moved towards some species of relativism (396). Arthur Danto gave the phrase “noble dream” to the ideal of objectivity and claimed that “historical relativism will finally be vindicated ... we cannot conceive of history without organizational schemes” (397). Karl Popper, “in all other respects a determined antirelativist ... took what was, though not labeled as such, a very ‘relativist’ stance” concerning history (395) and “Becker and Beard were frequently acknowledged to have performed an important service in freeing historians from the belief that ‘the facts spoke for themselves’” (410).

From the 1940s to the 1960s there was a diminution of confidence that historians’ interpretations would converge on a singular Truth. Perspectival relativism was tolerated without abandoning the commitment to objectivity (415). However, in the late 1960s and 1970s, the emerging historiographical left agreed with Marx and Engels on “the objective and scientific character of Marxism” and of history (422), which rekindled the objectivity question (437). Subsequent re-appraisal was not all in favor of objectivity and “[i]n the last third of the twentieth century the wind has been blowing from quite a different direction, assaulting the old idea of objectivity with unprecedented force” (522). Thus,

in one field after another distinctions between fact and value and between theory and observation were called into question. For many, postures of disinterestedness and neutrality increasingly appeared as outmoded and illusory. It ceased to be axiomatic that the scholar’s or scientist’s task was to represent accurately what was “out there.” Most crucially, and across the board, the notion of a determinate and unitary truth about the physical or social world, approachable if not ultimately reachable, came to be seen by a growing number of scholars as a chimera. ...

There is no satisfactory term with which to describe the multiple but loosely convergent assaults on received notions of objectivity which
swept across the academic world from the 1960s onwards. The most common designation is “postmodern”. (523-524)

Despite Novick’s evident misgivings about the word “postmodern” he uses it (554, 567, 570, 573) as an umbrella term for the new assault on objectivity and he describes compellingly relativism and “postmodernism”, and their challenges to objectivism and scientism, in philosophy (537-541), literary criticism (541-546), the social sciences (546-555), the judiciary (555-558), and psychoanalysis (558-563). Despite these currents,

[t]he mater-of-fact, antitheoretical and antiphilosophical objectivist empiricism which had always been the dominant stance of American historians continued to be enormously powerful. For those in this group it remained taken for granted that truth was “out there”; something found, rather than made; unitary, not perspectival. Though interpretation was necessary, it was at bottom the facts that mattered. (593-594)

Yet there were too many examples of interpretative differences that could not be resolved by appeal to some neutral principle of disinterested scholarship (614). Demonstration of the “autonomy of the argument from details of the evidence” was too frequent for the naive objectivist stance to remain tenable (617). “The absolute certitude of historical fact” finally appears to be “a position both philosophically untenable and historiographically naïve” (620). Kuhn and Rorty had suggested a functional equivalent for objectivity—disciplinary consensus (626)—although this cannot satisfy demands for some extra-human or absolute warrant for historical certitude. With the fragmentation of the field over these internal disagreements, “[a]s a broad community of discourse, as a community of scholars united by common aims, common standards, and common purposes, the discipline of history had ceased to exist” (628).

Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr.—Beyond the Great Story

In 1995, then, Berkhofer’s Beyond the Great Story is a “history after history”, inspired by the fact that historicization has become so vital in so many disciplines just when its whole approach is being challenged in disciplinary history itself (Berkhofer 1995: ix). Berkhofer “treats some of the implications of the linguistic and rhetorical turns as incorporated in modern literary and rhetorical theory for the writing, reading, teaching, and reviewing of history” and “examines his-
tory and histories as forms of representation”. He “surveys the challenges now gathered under the rubric of postmodernism and how historians have responded [and] covers the diverse roles of narrative in the creation of historical facts and their synthesis into what is termed (a) history and the possibility of multiple stories” (xi-xii). He also treats the problem of “validating evidence, deriving facts, [and] producing a synthesis” considering the incompleteness of the sources and problems of political partisanship, moral judgment, and advocacy (139). Following literary theorists in discussing voice in texts, Berkhofer takes into account who speaks for whom, and to whom, recognizing the implied author who speaks in or through the text to be a convenient fiction (156), whose voice and viewpoint are those most compellingly represented.

The recent “historic turn” in the humanities “to many Anglophone historians ... appears to authorize their traditional practices. From their perspective, Anglophone empiricism has survived a period of attack and vanquished Francophone theorizing”. But “this self-congratulatory verdict seems not only premature but also unfounded, for it fails to consider how the linguistic and other turns have reinterpreted what any historic (re)turn could mean as methodology or practice. ... What is now called the postmodernist challenge to traditional history began as the crisis of representation raised by late modernist and structuralist theorists” (2, 3). The contemporary dilemma is this: advised to historicize and reveal the social and temporal location of thought, text, and action, our very ability to do so is simultaneously undermined. All of “the theorizing in the human sciences resulted in no single paradigm” and “multiculturalism ... queries whether the non-Western or the nondominant Other can be represented fully in any form resembling traditional history” (9). The most extreme challenge to the normal historical paradigm is the denial of “the separation of history as the past from history as writing about that past ... [which] denies the ability of historians to know the past as such. For all practical purposes, the past and written history are the same, for only as present-day text is the past constituted” (14).

The historian initially confronts a largely unconnected mass of material, and goes on to show that sense can be made of it by revealing certain pervasive themes (32). In normal historical practice,

historical methods usually refer to the ways in which historians derive facts from sources rather than how those facts are combined into a
larger expository synthesis. The standard handbooks discuss how to validate sources as evidence and how to derive reliable facts from such evidence, but they say little about how to connect those validated facts into a coherent narrative or other exposition. (29)

Despite this, the normal historical paradigm presupposes coherent narrative as the sine qua non of historiography; it is the way of describing the past (36). In fact, only by predicking that the plenitude and context of the past considered as history are comprehended from the viewpoint of a third person, an omniscient, or at least synoptic, narrator, can normal history practice be understood ... The Great Story ... applies both to the larger context of the partial histories and to the whole past conceived as history that justifies the synthetic expositions of normal historians. (38)

Such Great Stories “make sense of the grand sweep of history and illuminate human destiny itself”. While historians may be wary of such Great Stories, “it seems that they cannot do without them” (44). They serve as the context for histories both by connecting disparate elements and providing political and ethical grounding for history as text and discourse.

The problem is that Great Stories, while by definition presumed to be singular, are in actual practice plural. The “very premise of its singularity, and thus its superiority, supposedly supports one interpretive version against all others in the professional disputes among historians” (49), but past attempts to develop criteria for the identification of the “Single Right or Best Interpretation” have failed because the category itself is a “Fallacy” (50) that “denies multiple voices and viewpoints” (53). Berkhofer convincingly supports this argument with reference to earlier historians who demonstrated these theses. Lynn Hunt, he says, “concludes that histories do not have ‘an unproblematic ground of truth’”. Donald McCloskey, Berkhofer argues, demonstrates “that notwithstanding the explicit goals of econometric history to make it a science by writing according to the canons and rhetoric of science, much of that science was based upon tropes and metaphors, appeals to authority, and other devices of persuasion”. John Nelson, claims Berkhofer, “argues that rhetoric holds a place equal epistemically as well as practically to logic in the way scholars of the human sciences communicate among themselves and with the public” (75, 80, 101). From these and other sources Berkhofer concludes, “historical representation is an art of arrangement, whether as narrative or argument” (105). He agrees with Hayden
White that emplotment “transforms or configures a multiplicity of events, characters, and conditions into a narrative”; emplotment is the “anatomy” of the narrative (118). Thus historians need to investigate the shaping of historical discourse by literary and rhetorical conventions, which constrain the representation of history and the patterning of the past itself as history (135).

Berkhofer accepts that only by taking a point of view can historians “see” the past as history and thus create historical narrative. But author viewpoint “creates the biases that confound historical practice” (168): the text produced under the normal historical paradigm “is meant to be read from the same viewpoint that constructed it in the first place” (169). The challenge of dialogism in historical discourse lies in representing viewpoints other than that of the historian. Attempts to incorporate the Other into Western hegemonic history have maintained a singular (“best” or “right”) viewpoint under which the voices of the Others are subsumed (188) and have conceived reality according to a single viewpoint (190). The spectrum of historiography begins with this “single and univocal” point of view, and moves through histories in which polyvocality is contained by the historian’s own voice and viewpoint (198-99). The other end of the spectrum is not yet fully formed; “true experiments in polyvocality are rare because they challenge the normal historical paradigm of an ultimately single authorial viewpoint” (199). Examples of polyvocal histories include Richard White’s *The Middle Ground*, which depicts the Great Lakes Region as a world of multi-ethnic villages composed of tribal remnants and factions, European and American traders, and others, instead of the traditional discrete white and Native American social entities (123) and Judith Walkowitz’s *City of Dreadful Delight*, which offers two beginnings and four endings for one chapter. The book “as a whole has multiple beginnings and endings because … the same documentary artifacts have multiple readings in the present” (124).

Berkhofer concludes that “the practice of history as discourse ought to be reflexive” (243). “Reflexivity” is a problem posed by politics, epistemology, perspective, ethnocentrism, ideology, hegemony, and totalization, in which reflexivity works among mutually reinforcing elements of a single paradigm. However, on inspection of multiple viewpoints, competing paradigms reflexively deconstruct one another and “the very definition of history must take on a more reflexive meaning, one that shows its socially constructed nature, its
self-consciousness of its own creation, and the social conditions that allow such a practice” (7-8). Voice and viewpoint in histories are multiple, and so “the practice of history as discourse ought to be reflexive” (243). The reflexive stance may be a mixed blessing, entailing the very irony disparaged by Hayden White (266), yet a “reflexive contextualization tries to surmount the basic dilemma of representation itself by incorporating texts and counter texts, discourses and counterdiscourses into the same textualization” (268). Reflexive postmodern historiographies should seek to explicate both medium and message, to “operate in the conceptual spaces posed by the contradictions between textualism and contextualism” (266). They must engage all the problems of valuing diversity without uncritically privileging a single viewpoint, of multiple histories, multiple realities, metahistory, and the value of theory. Thereby they might “demystify and deconstruct” what goes into history as text.

The idea of multiple viewpoints suggests a multiplicity of times and histories (270). Julia Kristeva has considered “Women’s Time” as opposed to male time, which tends to emphasize its own linearly. Finally, “the idea of multiple times involves surrendering the idea(l) of a single past for many histories” (272). Postmodern historiography should “combine metahistory and history, Great Stories and historiography … historicizing itself as it historicizes its subject matter … conflicting discourses will result in different approaches for different purposes—but all, it is to be hoped, in reflexive dialogue” (275).

Religion after Religion after history after history

The general drift of these three historiographical works is clear: it is towards a painstaking self-awareness of the narrative construction of histories and towards a disciplined restraint of the singular authorial voice in the face of phenomenal polyvocality. Many works make no attempt to consider their own mode of representation or their textualization of time. The singular authorial voice, as in Wasserstrom’s case, assumes complete authority over its textual material, and it presents its own telling of history as a simple, objective description of part of the Great Story of history. No doubt Wasserstrom had no intention of producing a “postmodern” history and thus no intention of considering or extending the limitations of conventional historiography and he cannot be faulted for failing to do so. How-
ever, the conventional historiography Wasserstrom employs efficiently renders credible even conventionally flawed historical argumentation by conferring upon the singular voice of the author a singular position of authority. It conceals more effectively latent authorial agendas by presenting the singular narrative as the objective description of actual event. Novick draws our attention to questions that need to be asked in the light of the postmodern critique of historiography: what myths are at stake in any historical disagreement over interpretation? (453); for whom is the historian working? (513); and why construct this version of history? What is its use? (561). We can, and I would suggest that we should, disclose the answers to these questions explicitly in our work.

While appreciating postmodernism, Berkhof er does not reject the normal historical paradigm, which may be the “best way of policing and preserving their discipline in addition to being the best mode of historical practice” (228). Conventional historiography permits certainty despite relativism, distinguishes history from fiction, and legitimates history as an authoritative discipline (233-234). However, conventional historiography, as was seen at the outset of Hayden White’s analysis, “consisted of a willingness to go to the archives without any preconceptions whatsoever” (141) and it was not lost on either Hugh Urban (2001: 445) or Gustavo Benavides (2001: 454) that Wasserstrom’s approach, far from being free of preconceptions, is latently theological. Urban points out that “one might be tempted to accuse Wasserstrom of being a kind of ‘closet theologian’” (2001: 445). Benavides states in stronger terms that Wasserstrom “becomes a theologian, an advocate of Yahweh … and, more generally, of monotheism, his assumption being all along that monotheism is a good thing and that its rejection is fascist or racist” (2001: 454) and goes on to ask, “Is not this advocacy, insofar as it is not explicit, the mirror image of the esoteric advocacy of those he criticizes?” (2001: 454). Benavides reiterates the point, brought to our notice by Russell McCutcheon (2001) and Benjamin Beit-Hal lami (1999), that there is a tendency among scholars of religion to protect and defend the self-understanding of the religious believer, to become “caretakers” and “celebrators” of, and even “collaborators” with, the religions under study. Obviously, it is not the supposed religion after religion that is protected here; on the contrary, an apparently critical stance is adopted by attacking this quasi-religious phenomenon. It is a championship of nomocentric, ethical monotheism—specifically Judaism
—that is undertaken. The actual and widespread (although far from homogeneous) religion of nomocentric monotheism is placed throughout in opposition to a mystical, elitist, esoteric religion after religion. Despite the attempt to present his scholarship as objective, traditional religious beliefs clearly intrude at certain points. Esotericism is presented as “shunt[ing] aside the claims these monotheisms normatively made about themselves”, and “nudg[ing] God from his role as creator” so that Nature, or Life, or the Cosmos can takes his place (Wasserstrom 1999: 164). This is proposed as a self-evident fault, simply assuming the rectitude of the traditional belief. Further, it is claimed that Eliade and Corbin marginalized the creatio ex nihilo and “preferred instead the recurring, cyclic process of birth and rebirth” (164). Did Eliade and Corbin actually “prefer” the theory of cycles? Or were they rather describing a theory prevalent in the history of world religions? The more important question is, why should they prefer “a personal God willing creation out of nothing at a moment in time”? This is, after all, a specific religious belief, which they were under no compulsion to adopt. When Wasserstrom speaks of “retrojecting the current flaws of creation back into a unifying godhead”, his acceptance of the alternative traditional theological metaphysics is unquestioned (81). The juxtaposition of traditional normative belief to esoteric, gnostic, theosophists who conducted a “war on reason” (154) and “a post Holocaust assault on the God of the Jewish people” (177, 323, 324) serves to denounce Eliade and Corbin but, more importantly, it simultaneously serves to elevate that belief.

That it is particularly the Jewish tradition of normative monotheism that Wasserstrom champions is equally clear. It was the Weimar Jews for whom “[t]he turn to myth was a turn to history ... unlike proto-Nazi myth infatuation, their myth studies were not regressive” (114), and he identifies both Corbin and Eliade with the proto-Nazi version thus keeping the more acceptable version a matter of purely “Jewish thinking” (115). The Gentile (now equated with proto-Nazi) turn to myth was culpable and produced the Holocaust. The Jewish turn to myth was innocent, creative, and almost lost in the bloodbath. However, such a presentation neglects the fact that the original source of this turn to myth in German Romantic thought showed none of this Jewish/Gentile polarization. That Wasserstrom should equate the historical/ahistoric distinction with a Jewish/non-Jewish distinction is disconcertingly biased in favor of the Jewish tradition.
Of course, most Jewish thinkers who made this turn to myth “abandoned it after the National Socialist appeal to myth was actualized and the Nazi myth became reality”, and thus “Jewish thinkers wrestled the daimon of history without losing social consciousness” (123). Just as clearly, a great number of non-Jewish people lost their social consciousness, with horrific consequences, but to construct a “Jewish thinking” which alone survived the turn to myth with conscience intact is scarcely credible. In order to maintain an appearance of credibility, Wasserstrom has no choice but to insist that neither Corbin nor Eliade could have survived the turn to myth morally intact—and to exonerate Scholem from the faults of the others at almost every turn.

Let me be quite explicit here. I agree that it is crucial maintain a conscientious critique of all intellectual expression that can justify unethical behavior. Furthermore, I have no objections whatsoever to a positive presentation of Jewish theology. As one among many theological positions, and one that has arguably suffered more from and contributed more to human civilization than any other, its voice fully deserves to be heard. However, to present that voice as the voice of objective historical fact, and to elevate it by attempting to disgrace alternative positions, whilst at the same time pleading that intellectual integrity is the only relevant virtue in the academy, and that “our work as historians of religion is pointless if it is not honest” (154) is, to say the least, a dissimulation. Crusading on behalf of a specific tradition should be done openly and honestly and with full self-consciousness and with respect for both one’s subject and one’s audience, not as a concealed agenda with tendentious and misleading representations of historical interpretations. Urban recommends that “we should instead render our [ethical] positions as up-front and explicit as possible” (2001: 445).

In the light of the preceding discourse on historiography my purpose in pointing out the flaws of Wasserstrom’s argument is to indicate the degree to which the monovocal narrative of conventional historiography can conceal agendas and authorize extremely dubious conclusions. While Berkoher concludes that “full disclosure” is problematic and finally inadequate to the problems of historiography (1995: 146), it is, I feel, necessary as a starting point, especially in the history of religions where personal commitment can hardly but influence our historiography and must be treated with scrupulous honesty. However, when the authorial voice is presented as the narrator
of the “One True Story”—the voice of complete objectivity—it is an attempt to speak from the singular, true point of view, which comprehends the plenitude of the past from the viewpoint of an omniscient, or at least synoptic, narrator (Berkhofer 1995: 38). In such a mode of discourse the personal commitments of the author can only be presented as self-evident facts. To voice interpretations other than one’s own is thus not only a matter of a postmodern insistence on representing the Other, but equivalent to the standard practice of testing hypotheses by entertaining alternatives thus allowing the reflexive deconstruction and reconstruction of competing viewpoints. Exclusive emphasis on the authority of the singular authorial voice, its tacit presentation as equivalent to objective reality, and the refusal to allow others to speak with their own voices vitiates other significant insights and conceals agendas even from authors themselves.

Berkhofer, the most recent of our postmodern historiographers, points out that “an extreme view of the postmodern project produces its own reflexive problems. If postmodernism is a self-consciousness of a culture’s own historical relativity with the consequent loss of the absoluteness of any Western account of history, then what about the history assumed in the Great Story of postmodernism?” (1995: 226). Postmodernism paradoxically seems to become its own metanarrative. I suggest, however, that the postmodern “metanarrative” is a self-consciously local mythology. Metanarratives and myths are both exemplary narratives. The modern world sought the hegemony of its own metanarratives as absolute realities and thus sacred truths—myths in the sense preferred among scholars of religion. The final failure of these metanarratives to achieve hegemony leads to the denial of all metanarratives as absolute truths and the resurgence of particular local narratives as myths in the self-consciousness of their limited and constructed nature. Hence the appearance of Christian “radical orthodoxy” and Eugene Borowitz’s “postmodern” Jewish theology (Batnitzky 2001).

Probably every holder of a bachelor’s degree in the US, and many elsewhere in the Western world, have take an “Introduction to Philosophy” course in which they were taught, without significant critical challenge, that philosophy began in Ionian Greece with men such as Thales, Anaxagoras, Anaximander, whose great innovation and great leap forward was to seek unity in diversity. This innovation is presented with little or no question as a salutary move, the beginning of “real thinking” and the origin of the Western Culture. On the
other hand, in many native and non-Western traditions the dualism of the One and the Many, with the concomitant elevation of the One, is resisted in favor of a non-dual integration of one and many. It is this elevation of the one over the many, or, more accurately, the concept of some privileged access to a singular but plenary viewpoint, authorizing a singular Great Story, which is challenged here.

Berkhofer raises, but does not attempt to answer, the question of whether events inherently possess plot and narrative structure or receive these through their constitution as story. I suggest that the plot and structure of narrative representation must in some way model phenomenal event in order to have any claim to verisimilitude. However, every potential plot is enfolded within an infinity of detail which must be omitted (chipped away like all the marble that was not the finished statue) to bring out the particular narrative. No doubt the monovocal narratives that the majority of scholars produce derive from the pre-existing structure of our lived experience and are, to that extent, accurate. However, when one presumes to speak with the voice of simple objectivity one unavoidably represents one’s own metaphysical assumptions as reality. Wasserstrom has his own totalizing viewpoint, invokes a metaphysical reality, is both religious and aesthetic, and subordinates consistency and illuminative power to the authorization of his singular authorial voice. In Religion after Religion, the presentation of that voice as the singular truth relies on too procrustean an omission of detail to be finally credible. The history of religions is characterized by the conflict of different narrative representations of the real, and simple humility and honesty call for the pluralism and polyvocality of postmodern historiography.

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References


