



REVIEW ESSAY

Words, Words, Words

Russell T. McCutcheon

The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion. Edited by John Hinnells. London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

A Handbook to Ancient Religions. Edited by John Hinnells. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism. Edited by Donald Lopez. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

A Companion to Philosophy of Religion. Edited by Philip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.

The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion. Edited by Robert A. Segal. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.

Critical Terms for Religious Studies. Edited by Mark C. Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

POLONIUS

What do you read, my lord?

—“Hamlet” Act II, Scene II

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OVER THE PAST DECADE, we have witnessed the arrival of a new generation of handbooks—as opposed to dictionaries (e.g., von Stuckrad 2005), encyclopedias (e.g., Jones 2005; Betz et al., 2006), and even essay collections on the field (e.g., Antes et al., 2004). These handbooks owe something to *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 1990; 2nd ed. 1995), a hard-hitting (though, admittedly, still largely “Western” in its focus) source for essays on such common lit crit topics as author, canon, discourse, text, etc. In turn, it is likely Raymond Williams’s *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, first published just over thirty years ago ([1976] 1983; Bennett et al., 2005), that lies in the background of this genre’s recent emergence. For those unfamiliar with it, *Keywords*’ succinct entries not only trace the history of usage but also consistently inscribe terms such as aesthetic, elite, history, popular, etc. within a coherent theoretical approach (in his case, Marxist literary/culture theory). Despite the obvious difficulties of accomplishing such coherency in any multi-authored work, *Critical Terms for Literary Study* is useful precisely because it unfailingly treats “literature” as a datum in need of theorization rather than an expressive gift whose meaning needs only to be interpreted and appreciated.

In the Fall of 1996, with these two works in mind, Willi Braun and I set about planning our own users’ manual to the field (though we preferred to see it in the tradition of a field guide [2000]).¹ At the time, we thought that developing such a resource in the study of religion was a novel idea; however, as with many good ideas, we soon learned that we were not the first to arrive at the party, for Philip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro’s *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* was then near publication (1997) and, not long after that, Mark C. Taylor’s *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (1998) appeared. Soon, we also learned that John Hinnells, who had already edited other popular reference works (e.g., [1984] 1997, [1996] 2003), was preparing a handbook of his own; after moving presses (something he mentions in his Introduction), it appeared as *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (2005); just this past year, his edited handbook on ancient religions was also published (2007). Then, just over a year ago, Robert Segal’s *The Blackwell Companion to the*

¹ Although for obvious reasons I will not be reviewing the *Guide* in this essay, I will occasionally make descriptive references to it. Also, for the purpose of this essay, I will treat all of these resources as instances of the handbook genre, despite the fact that one could justifiably distinguish between the more idiosyncratic content of a word book (e.g., Taylor or Lopez’s volume) and the (at least ideally) more systematic, field-wide nature of a companion. Because the companions under review combine features of both genres (i.e., combining approaches and topics), I feel comfortable discussing all of these resources together as examples of the same genre.

Study of Religion hit the bookshelves (2006). So where there was once almost no up-to-date resource ready to accompany the student and the scholar of religion on their intellectual journey (which is why, perhaps—regardless what one thought of its structure and content—the publication of the first edition of Mircea Eliade’s *Encyclopedia of Religion* [1987] was such a landmark event in the modern field), readers can now choose from a variety of willing and able companions.² The question is: toward which destination are these various handbooks guiding us?

Given that the volumes under review have appeared over the course of a decade, this genre shows no signs of going away anytime soon. I say this because, given increased market pressures in academic publishing over the past decade, anyone who has recently pitched an idea to a press, or completed the marketing questionnaire when submitting a final manuscript for copyediting, knows that projects with possible classroom application grab the imagination of publishers now more than ever. Although they are hardly textbooks, from the point of view of publishers, these handbooks surely embody the best of both worlds: for while holding out the promise of attracting first rate authors to the press (authors who may individually return with future projects, thereby building a press’s stable of proven authors), these volumes can be marketed as both reference and course materials, thereby opening up sales possibilities that the average scholarly monograph would never hope to match.

For this reason alone, these handbooks constitute a genre worth considering, for their very existence is evidence that our field now has a sufficiently large buying public (i.e., students) to attract the sustained interest of so many different publishers. This surplus of resources therefore comprises a bit of a watershed moment for the modern English-language field; such volumes undoubtedly line the shelves of graduate students’ study carrels and have more than likely either been ordered by a number of instructors as auxiliary or even main texts for any number of courses, or portions of which have been reproduced in course reading packages. Moreover, with such new resources now so widely available, it appears that our need to rely on outdated or out-of-print phenomenological handbooks [e.g., the late Eric Sharpe’s pithy *Fifty Key Words: Comparative Religion* (1971)] has finally come to an end.³

² While counting it within this genre, it is important to note that Routledge’s *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* is, much like the many *Companions* published by Blackwell in its series (i.e., each on topics such as Protestantism, Hinduism, Judaism, Modern Theology, Political Theology, Christian Ethics, etc.), devoted mainly to a subfield, whereas the others are all aimed at the general study of religion itself.

³ Sharpe, also the author of a still important history of our field (1986), completed his essay—“The Study of Religion in Historical Perspective”—for Hinnells’s *Companion* just days before his death.

But, as any phenomenologist can tell you, appearances can be misleading. For, despite the general uniformity of the various volumes that comprise this genre (e.g., they are all mostly rather close in *size* [ranging between Chicago's relatively compact 200,000 words to Blackwell's roughly 330,000 words on philosophy of religion], in *organization* [e.g., whereas all focus on key words and/or concepts, some also include surveys of thematic issues, disciplinary approaches, and some of the world's religions], and sometimes even overlap considerably in *content* [e.g., essays on gender appear in three of the volumes, myth and/or ritual in three as well, modernity and/or postmodernity in four of them, etc.]), the differences among some of their articles are telling. For much like Sharpe's "compact and elementary work" (as he phrases it in his preface), which mainly focused on the descriptive categories that were once popular in our field (e.g., ancestor worship, animism, fertility, mana, tabu, etc., a number of which were simply generalized from their earlier usage within Christianity, e.g., eschatology, God, incarnation), some of these recent volumes reproduce, to varying degrees, this old vocabulary. We find major articles on such topics as liberation, pilgrimage, and sacrifice, not to mention essays on theology understood as but one more path open to the scholar of religion. It would appear, then, that, apart from adding more words to the sorts of entries we find in Sharpe's compact book, little may have changed since the earlier days of phenomenological handbooks.

Case in point: because of his always strongly argued advocacy for the study of religion as a non-theological, social scientific pursuit—in fact, distinguishing among these various approaches, and supporting the social scientific, constitutes the main topic of his volume's Introduction—it is worth stopping for a moment to consider Segal's inclusion of theology as being, in his words, one of the approaches or disciplines that has "contributed to the understanding of the phenomenon of religion."⁴ However, his Introduction indicates that, like Thomas Ryba's chapter on "The Phenomenology of Religion," the theology chapter's author, Ian Markham—who defines theology's task as "the attempt to arrive at a systematic account of God and of

As an aside, I should take this opportunity to say that only in writing this review essay did I come to realize the influential, though implicit, role his *Fifty Key Words* played in portions of my own introduction to the field (2007).

⁴ It is unclear whether, in his volume, theology is an approach or a discipline (both of which are placed in his opening section); likely, Segal considers it to be a discipline since the essay on the comparative method is the only item in this section of the book that seems to qualify as an approach (though, of course, for some, Comparative Religion may justifiably be, or have once been, a discipline).

God's relations with the world" (194) and who identifies himself as a theologian with "a positive view of the task of theology" (195)—will document how theology has incorporated "various cultural influences," not the other way around (xviii). In highlighting this point, Segal seems to be suggesting that the chapter is more of an ethnography of theology, inasmuch as elite religious discourse may rightly constitute an instance of data for the scholar of religion—that is, historicizing theology by demonstrating that it has been shaped by sources other than so-called religious inspiration. This, however, seems at odds with the chapter's placement in the opening "Approaches" section, which suggests instead that theology is not data but, instead, one among the viable methodological options for a scholar of religion—"none of which," Segal informs his readers, "is likely to exhaust the subject" (xvii).⁵

Unlike in Segal's own writings, in which theological discourse (much like those behaviors that we commonly term rituals and the narratives that go by the name of myths) clearly constitutes but one among the many *topics* that a scholar of religion might study, theology's place in this volume is therefore rather ambivalent, given that it numbers among such other disciplinary options as anthropology, psychology, sociology, etc. Perhaps Segal's aim in including a chapter devoted to Christian theology ("although," as Markham promises, dividing the world into two common but no less curious halves, "links will be made to *non-Christian* traditions" [195; emphasis added]) is merely intended to represent the current field accurately, rather than, as in his own work, to prescribe the shape that it ought to be taking. After all, the field is still largely populated by theologians and humanists and the editor of such a handbook might wish to take that into consideration. If so, it is unfortunate that an opportunity to help shape the future field, with a forward looking resource, resulted in a mere portrait of the current field's odd shape. Or perhaps Segal's longtime position in the U.K accounts for theology's inclusion as but one more disciplinary option in the modern field; for, as Hinnells writes in his volume's Introduction, "in America there are indications of a growing difference, whereas in Britain the two [i.e., theology and religious studies] appear to be coming closer together" (1)—something evident in his volume's theology chapter, written by

⁵ With the placement of articles in mind, one wonders why Garrett Green's article "Hermeneutics"—defined initially simply as "the theory of interpretation"—appears in the "Key Issues" section of Hinnells's volume, whereas "Phenomenology of Religion" is a "Key Approach." While some scholars could easily be persuaded that both constitute issues—going so far, perhaps, as to see them as problematics or even as outright problems!—and not methods to be used in the academic study of religion, it is odd to separate them in this manner.

David Ford (himself a Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge), which clearly treats theological method as being among the many resources available to the scholar of religion, inasmuch as it focuses mainly on *academic* Christian theology “as pursued in universities and other advanced teaching and research institutions, especially in settings variously called departments of religion, religious studies, theology and religious studies, theology and divinity” (61). Accordingly, theology is understood as a pursuit that “seeks wisdom in relation to questions, such as those of meaning, truth, beauty and practice, which are raised by, about and between the religions and are pursued through engagement with a range of academic disciplines” (62), as well as the process of “seeking wisdom through fundamental questions in the context of dialogue between radical commitments” (78). Despite the recognition of the largely Christian nature of not only the term but also the goal of theology (i.e., “the term ‘theology’ is often considered suspect among Jewish thinkers” [73]), after detailed sections on the history of Christian theology, its place in the modern university, and its many types (I was intrigued to learn that there are in fact five [69–71]), the chapter nonetheless includes short sections on Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist theologies (or, as Ford rephrases it, each of their respective “intellectual traditions of thought” [76]), before closing with some thoughts on the future of Christian theology within the academy. I would be remiss if I did not draw attention to the fact that only a liberal form of theology occupies this chapter, inasmuch as one of its main contributions within the academy seems to be the promise theology supposedly holds for increased dialogue through our shared search for wisdom—not something that Type 5 holds out (i.e., Fundamentalism), inasmuch as, in Ford’s words, it involves “a radical rejection of other frameworks and worldviews” (70). Why such “radical rejection” swims against the stream of the search for wisdom is not explained.

Keeping in mind the odd placement of theology in some of these volumes, let me step back and use Chicago’s volume as representative of how books in this genre are arranged: the editor’s Introduction opens each book,⁶ making a number of general claims about the field, its boundaries (or lack of), its object of study, its historical development, etc., and closes by offering some suggestions on how to use the volume. *Critical Terms* then proceeds with twenty-two substantive essays (on the high end, there are almost eighty in *A Companion*

⁶ An excerpt of Taylor’s Introduction can be found at <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/791572.html>

to *Philosophy of Religion*), in its case all exclusively devoted to key concepts in the field—e.g., body, image, performance, transformation, etc.—with each chapter between 5000 and 6000 words in length and arranged alphabetically (though all of the other volumes are arranged thematically, some with essays on methods as well as topics or key terms [see Table 1]). Only Blackwell's and Continuum's volumes conclude with a complete bibliography; the other volumes append reference sections and/or recommended readings to each chapter.

Concerning the chapter topics, the curious mix of first order phenomenological categories (e.g., God, liberation, relic, and sacrifice) with second order analytic categories (e.g., culture, modernity, and territory) is evident in almost all of the volumes under review. Case in point: despite its opening chapters devoted to the place of philosophical discourse in seven of the world's religions,⁷ Blackwell's philosophy of religion volume makes the field's unbleached roots in the Protestant seminary model immodestly apparent, with chapters on a host of familiar Systematic Theology (a.k.a. Modern Religious Thought) topics, for example, incarnation, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, miracles, petitionary prayer, the problem of evil, and the trinity, not to mention entire chapters devoted to each of the traditional proofs for the existence of God.⁸ Of course, I ought to add that Paul Griffiths contributes a closing chapter in this volume, on "Comparative Philosophy of Religion," though it is exclusively concerned with surveying the so-called Western intellectual sources for strategies to help answer the question: "what might it mean to think of philosophy of religion as comparative." Whereas his brief essay provides possible rationales and approaches for doing comparative philosophy of religion—rationales steeped in but one of the various philosophies that may, or so Griffiths suggests by way of a conclusion, benefit from such a comparison—it does not actually do any comparative philosophy of religion. As this volume therefore makes evident, shifting from reproducing elite participant (almost always theologically and politically liberal Christian) discourses—and thereby authorizing them inasmuch as traditions of

⁷ Much as the way a sports fan can become disoriented when the league expands, I admit to never being quite sure how many world religions there now are, since the current spate of world religions textbooks puts the number rather higher than seven; for example, one of the (if not *the*) best selling world religions textbooks in our field, *Living Religions* (Fisher 2005) now includes chapters on twelve (as well as a CD); for more on "world religions" as a category, see below.

⁸ Charles Taliaferro, one of this volume's co-editors, is also the author of the philosophy of religion essay in Segal's volume—a chapter that offers pretty much a summary of this largely Christian approach to the field, focusing on topics such as eternity, the goodness of God, the proofs, theodicy, and the challenges and opportunities of religious pluralism.

TABLE 1. HANDBOOK PARALLELS: SHOWING STRUCTURE, CONTENT, AND AUTHORS FOR THE FOUR FIELD-WIDE HANDBOOKS

<i>Critical Terms for Religious Studies</i> (1998)	<i>Guide to the Study of Religion</i> (2000)	<i>The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion</i> (2005)	<i>The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion</i> (2006)
Introduction (Taylor)	Prologue	Introduction (Hinnells)	Introduction (Segal)
Belief (Lopez)	Religion (Braun)	Why Study Religion? (Hinnells)	
	Description	The Study of Religion in Historical Perspective (Sharpe)	
Body (LaFleur)	Definition (Amal)		
Conflict (Lincoln)	Classification (Smith)		
Culture (Masuzawa)	Comparison (Martin)	Key Approaches	Approaches
Experience (Sharf)	Interpretation (Penner)	Theories of Religion (Segal)	Anthropology of Religion (Bowie)
Gender (Boyarin)		Theology (Ford)	The Comparative Method (Roscoe)
God (Schyssler Fiorenza/Kaufman)	Explanation	Philosophy of Religion (Vardy)	Economics of Religion (Stark)
Image (Miles)	Cognition (Lawson)	Religious Studies (Wiebe)	Literature and Religion (Prickett)
Liberation (Surin)	Deprivation (White)	Sociology of Religion (Riesebrodt/ Konieczny)	Phenomenology of Religion (Ryba)
Modernity (Benavides)	Ethnicity (Mackay)		Philosophy of Religion (Taliaferro)
Performanc (Bell)	Exchange (Alles)	Anthropology of Religion (Hackett)	Psychology of Religion (Main)
Person (Winquist)	Experience (Fitzgerald)	Psychology of Religion (Merkur)	Sociology of Religion (Davie)
Rationality (Stoller)	Gender (Warne)	Phenomenology of Religion (Allen)	Theology (Markham)
Relic (Schopen)	Intellect (Pals)	Comparative Religion (Paden)	
Religion, Religions, Religious (Smith)	Manifestation (Ryba)		
	Myth (McCutcheon)	Key Issues	Topics
Sacrifice (Robbins)	Origin (Masuzawa)	Gender (Juschka)	Body (Roberts)
Territory (Gill)	Projection (Guthrie)	Insider/Outsider Problem (Knott)	Death and Afterlife (Davies)
Time (Aveni)	Rationality (Stark)	Postmodernism (Heelas)	Ethics (Davis)
Transformation (Lawrence)	Ritual (Grimes)	Orientalism and the Study of Religion (King)	Fundamentalism (Munson)

Transgression (Taussig)
Value (Wyschogrod)

Writing (Tracy)

Sacred (Anttonen)
Social Formation (Mack)

Stratification (Benavides)
Structure (Sinding
Jensen)
World (Paden)

Location

Modernism (Wiebe)
Romanticism (McCalla)

Postmodernism (Wolfart)
Discourse (Murphy)
Culture (Lincoln)
Colonialism (Chidester)
Ideology (Lease)

Epilogue

Play (Gill)

References

Secularization (Fox)

Mysticism and Spirituality (King)
New Religious Movements (Fox)

Fundamentalism (Munson)

Myth and Ritual (R. Segal)
Religious Authority (Gifford)
Hermeneutics (Green)
Religious Pluralism (Barnes)

Religion and Politics (Moysen)
Religion and Geography (Park)
Religion and Science (Dixon)
Religion and Cognition (Martin)
Religion and Culture (Hulsether)
Religion and the Arts (Hinnells)
Migration, Diaspora... (McLoughlin)

Heaven and Hell (Russell)
Holy Men/Holy Women
(Cunningham)

Magic (Benavides)

Modernity and Postmodernity
(Campbell)

Mysticism (Kripal)
Myth (Segal)
Nationalism and Religion
(Jurgensmeyer)

New Religious Movements (Dawson)
Pilgrimage (Coleman)
Ritual (Bell)
Secularization (Bruce)

Consolidated Bibliography

participant reflection set the terms by means of which they will be studied—to redescribing (i.e., theorizing) these discourses as instances of human data that stand out as significant only in light of a scholar's curiosities and interests, is *not* something consistently carried out across the books that comprise this genre. Their various contributors therefore do not seem to intend their words to accompany people embarking on the same journey.

Sticking for the moment with these volumes' contributors, an observation worth mentioning is the surprisingly non-incestuous nature of these resources: unlike some other academic fields, even when judged internationally, ours is not all that large, yet the number of authors who reappear across these volumes is surprisingly low. By my count, of the 181 authors whose work appears in these books (representative of a host of different institutions and national contexts, though North American and European scholars clearly dominate the pages), only a handful pop up in more than one of the volumes. In alphabetical order, they are: Catherine Bell, Gustavo Benavides, Sam Gill, Bruce Lincoln, Luther H. Martin, Tomoko Masuzawa, William Paden, Thomas Ryba, Robert Segal, Jonathan Z. Smith, Rodney Stark, Charles Taliaferro, and Donald Wiebe. This strikes me as quite a positive thing, since authoring handbook essays, to whatever extent, likely sets an agenda for a subfield, and the last thing we likely need is a small number of voices repeatedly driving home the same point concerning, say, the once popular, though not widely criticized, secularization thesis. For precisely this reason, it struck me as somewhat odd to see that four of the authors in Hinnells's *Routledge Companion* appear twice in the same volume (i.e., Hinnells himself [quite apart from his Introduction, that is], as well as Judith Fox, Richard King, and Robert Segal), one of whom (Segal) then edited his own handbook volume with a chapter of his own there as well (on "Myth")—a recurrence that, although possibly an editorial necessity (what with the difficulty of securing commitments from already busy authors to deliver their chapters on time), strikes me as less than desirable. This small repetition notwithstanding, the overlap in some of these volumes' structures is certainly not present in their lists of contributors.

The best of the essays in these volumes can be read by relative newcomers to the field; they nicely survey the origins, development, current use, and possible future (e.g., a category's continued use or its long overdue retirement) of the topic or term in question, often drawing on a wide array of ethnographic and historic data to demonstrate either the application or limitations of the term/method. Picking just the Chicago volume for the moment, I could easily cite Smith's "Religion, Religions,

Religious” as a suitable example of what these articles, at their best, can accomplish, inasmuch as it problematizes the philosophical idealism that usually drives our field; it does so by making plain the manner in which ancient notions of piety (from the Latin term, *pietas*, naming a quality thought to result from proper performance of rituals of deference that marked social place) morphs, beginning sometime around the seventeenth century, into what we today understand as our modern sense of an internal sentiment or pre-social experience. But instead of Smith’s essay, I will focus briefly on two other essays in that volume: “Experience” by Robert Sharf and “Belief” by Donald Lopez. Anyone still clinging to the once popular notion that scholars of religion are limited to studying the symbolic manifestations of a private, pre-linguistic and thus asocial thing called “religious experience” or “belief” *must* read these two essays carefully, along with, for example, Sharf’s essay on Zen and Japanese Nationalism in Lopez’s edited volume from over a decade ago, *Curators of the Buddha* (1995).⁹ Read together, they comprise a powerful critique of the work once represented by early scholars such as William James—a tradition for which “meaning” or “intention” lurk somewhere in pristine originary moments that are nestled deep within either the human head (i.e., beliefs represented in creeds) or heart (i.e., feelings one can express), moments that can only be exhibited externally in some secondary manner, embodied within derivative public media, such as the still popular triumvirate of myth, symbol, and ritual.¹⁰ While what we might call the neural or electro-chemical events (which hardly constitute what we commonly understand as meaningful experiences) that lie behind reports of such internal states might be explained by appeal to the work going on in the now vigorous field of cognitive psychology of religion (Andresen 2001), Sharf and Lopez do not set out down that road, but neither are they content with mere phenomenological descriptions of participant disclosures. Instead, they each offer a social redescription—to borrow a phrase from Smith (1975)—of their key term, thereby retooling “experience” and “belief” as

⁹ Although she is not cited, Sharf’s critique shares a great deal with the work of the historian Joan Wallach Scott; see for example, her influential article, “The Evidence of Experience” (1991). For a critical response to Sharf’s, see Gyatso (1999); although drawing on a Tibetan literature on experience as evidence that such Buddhist discourses are not simply cultural imports (as Sharf argues), Gyatso nonetheless leaves in place Sharf’s main point: rhetorics of experience are devices for maintaining social boundaries.

¹⁰ The early (and for some, continuing) popularity of the hermeneutical model is thus apparent, for, much as a nineteenth-century anthropologist tried to reconstruct the original context in which a “survival” must have once made sense, hermeneutics seemed the only way to reconstruct the long lost meaning that the dead symbol must have once had.

thoroughly interpretive and therefore always political artifacts of prior social situations that challenge actors to *make* (the active verb is used intentionally) sense of the settings in which they find themselves—a sense-making that is a thoroughly public form of action. For, as Lopez makes clear, “the statement, ‘I believe in...’ is sensible only when there are others who ‘do not’; it is an *agonistic affirmation*” (33; emphasis added). Rephrased, we might say that participants do not walk around spontaneously disclosing their beliefs, even if they have “them” prior to their public articulation (and this is itself not entirely evident, for beliefs seem not to arise spontaneously; they are part of a system of knowledge acquired by immersion in a social group). Rather, the formulation of a coherent position on some topic is itself the residue of a previous, observable social moment, likely one that prompts feelings of estrangement from interests that, once bumped into, turn out not to be shared—such as when the proverbial Other arrives on the scene, such as a scholar with a notebook, asking about what you believe.

In fact, this position on the behavioral and institutional causes of beliefs is well in line with the empirical findings of sociologists such as Rodney Stark (himself a contributor to Continuum’s [“Rationality”] and Blackwell’s [“Economics of Religion”] handbooks), whose earlier work on conversion (co-written with William Sims Bainbridge [e.g., 1980]) persuasively demonstrated that changes in social affiliation do not occur *because* prior inner beliefs propel common collective behaviors. Thus, despite the conviction with which it might be reported, the participant disclosure “I converted to X because of doctrine of Y” is more than likely a hindsight rationalization; although certainly telling you about how this person now understands his or her own past behavior, it helps little in shedding light on the actual causes of the behavior. Instead, new beliefs were found to result from changes in what Stark and Bainbridge referred to as “interpersonal bonds” (1980: 1376)—changes surely brought about by a host of different, mundane reasons, such as increasingly developed feelings of affinity and shared interests (what they refer to as “the affective bonds that constitute social networks” [1394]) that result from, for example, happenstance associations in the workplace that lead to opportunities to dine out with one’s colleagues, which produces invitations to someone’s home, followed by attendance at little league games, more potluck suppers, a chance invitation to a bible study, participation in a worship service, etc. Redescribing the social causes of faith, belief, and experience in this manner, we are able to ascertain the empirical in rhetorics of the invisible; then, as that old Depeche Mode song once put it, scholars are actually able to “reach out and touch faith,” inasmuch as disclosures of belief and faith turn out to

be evidence of prior, observable social worlds. As aptly phrased by a student of mine whom I asked—to illustrate this very point—why he grew up to *believe* that he liked the University of Alabama’s football team: “Coz my grandpa told me to.” This shift toward seeing things such as identity, piety, faith, experience, and belief as the eventually internalized remnants of prior, contingent public events (i.e., membership in social networks, which comes with certain behavioral expectations that one must learn, at first coercively) is also well in line with the work of recent scholars outside our field, such as Slavoj Žižek,¹¹ who nicely captures this social redescription of supposedly interior dispositions when, in reference to a hypothetical person kneeling during a worship service, he writes (tipping his hat to both Louis Althusser and Blaise Pascal): “kneel down and *you shall believe that you knelt down because of your belief*—that is, [as if] your following the ritual is an expression/effect of your inner belief; in short, the ‘external’ ritual performatively generates its own ideological foundation” (12–13). There may be no better example of than this difference between a theory of the mundane origins of participant disclosures, on the one hand, and a mere repetition of what so-called believers are already saying about themselves, on the other.

Despite the manner in which some of these essays further such theoretical developments, the more troublesome articles in these volumes are either pitched far too high for many readers or (as indicated at the outset) openly engage in local theological and humanistic speculations written by and for “religionists”—as Segal refers to this group of authors and readers in the Introduction to his volume (xiv). Such entries are out of place for a number of reasons; for one, they undermine the cross-cultural applicability of these essays and, related to this, it seems entirely arbitrary that we find no conservative or evangelical theological speculations in these volumes—let alone equally context-specific theological topics found elsewhere in the world. Somehow, these books’ editors seem to know that articles discussing, say, the precise order of apocalyptic events, let alone debating exactly how many *kalpas* are yet to go in the current cycle of *sanatana-dharma*, are

¹¹ For some, citing Stark and Žižek to support the same point will surely appear odd. Although it cannot detain us here, it may be worth considering changes in the causal role played by the category “belief” in Stark’s work, notably in his more recent writings in which the beliefs of participants, expressed in their authoritative doctrines, are understood to motivate their behavior, e.g., his conclusion that the beliefs of early Christians motivated what he understands as their superior behaviors, thereby allowing Christianity to win out in the competitive Hellenistic religious economy. In his words: “central doctrines of Christianity prompted and sustained attractive, liberating, and effective social relations and organizations” (1996: 211).

obviously out of bounds in a Religious Studies handbook. Perhaps this is why there is no entry in any of these volumes under, say, “Sinners,” “Heathens,” or “Infidels,” let alone “Karma” and “Jiva”—for these no less theologically local signifiers seem to make reference to the wrong local.

In planning his volume on critical terms used in the study of Buddhism, Lopez (2005) was more than aware of this issue. After listing a series of Anglicized Asian technical terms from within Buddhist discourse (e.g., dharma, karma, lama, sutra, etc.), followed by a selection of English terms that are often used in descriptions and translations of Buddhism (e.g., compassion, emptiness, insight, liberation, rebirth, and wisdom), his Introduction states the following:

Neither of these types of terms has been included here, although both figure importantly in the fifteen essays in this volume. To make Asian-language terms the focus of the volume would run the risk of it becoming an expanded glossary.... To make the English “Buddhist” terms the focus of the volume would result in a similarly informational work, with the normative tradition, and especially its doctrine, largely determining the content of its chapters (4–5)

Apart from (borrowing Clifford Geertz’s term) the experience-near term “Buddha” (“near” at least when judged by the people studied by Buddhologists), whose essay is written by Lopez and which appropriately opens the volume, this book’s fourteen other “critical terms” are all etic, experience-distant, and thus higher order concepts, such as “Art,” “Economy,” “Gift,” “History,” “Practice,” and “Sex.” What is noteworthy is that, although such terms are undoubtedly useful in the study of Buddhism, they are also useful in the study of any other social movement, which indicates that the goal of Lopez’s volume is not to authorize any one local, emic discourse. For there is a difference, of course, between the study of a movement’s varied pasts and presents, on the one hand, and, on the other, the effort to authorize but one component of this movement as if it were natural and thus normative; unlike Quinn and Taliaferro’s philosophy of religion volume, Lopez’s book clearly aims to avoid the latter.

So where we *do* find the inclusion of articles on local theological topics, such as, say, heaven and hell—as in Jeffrey Burton Russell’s chapter in *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion* (which is quite apart from Douglas Davies’s essay on “Death and Afterlife” in the same volume), or Jonathan Kvanvig’s similar article in the Blackwell’s philosophy of religion volume—their presence ought to pique our

curiosity. As might be guessed, we often find that they are written neither in the tradition of a *Religionswissenschaftler*, who would surely take the opportunity to survey different groups' conceptions of their supposedly final destination (i.e., using the phenomenological and comparative methods), nor in the voice of a conservative theologian, who would probably elaborate on the actual characteristics of both places (if they thought such places even existed) or itemize who might be heading to each. Although the latter approach is, of course, ruled out of bounds in our field, Russell's generalized characterization of heaven as "being in enduring joy" and hell as "being in enduring misery" nonetheless favors a more theologically liberal reading of these two signifiers. For instance, he writes: "on a deep level they are eternalizations of the good or evil characters that people form for themselves in this life" (271). Heaven and hell as mere metaphor? Not so for many of the people who employ these terms in their daily discursive acts. As for Kvanvig's chapter, it actually criticizes some conceptions of the afterlife as logically indefensible or not unified enough: "a better approach [than positing the existence of limbo] ... would be to address the defects in one's conception of hell then to introduce new and indefensible metaphysical dimensions to the afterlife" (565). But whether it includes the liminal state of limbo, could one not assert that the very conception of an afterlife of any sort is defected inasmuch as it is founded upon "indefensible metaphysical dimensions"? My point? On what basis can Kvanvig dismiss a particular afterlife belief while yet working to retain "a philosophically adequate conception of heaven and hell" (568)? The moral of this little excursus: when it comes to the frequent inclusion of normative theology within the academic study of religion, a generally unaddressed problem remains, one well known to the more curious-minded Calvinist: why do only some metaphysics get to count among the elect?

Now, to be sure, there is a degree of arbitrariness to selecting any list of items, as well as contributors, to be included in volumes such as these (though Blackwell, Continuum, and Routledge's books each exhibit rather transparently their editors' rationales for the selections they have made, with the first and last overlapping considerably)¹²

¹² As evident from the previous table, Hinnells's and Segal's volumes are organized around the same two part division: the first devoted to disciplinary approaches and the second concerned with either issues (e.g., new religious movements, religion and science, religion and culture, in the case of Hinnells's), and topics (e.g., heaven and hell, magic, nationalism and religion, in the case of Segal's). In fact, the overlap between these two volumes is the greatest among those in the genre, with seven of each book's opening nine essays being on the very same items (i.e., theology, philosophy of religion, sociology of religion, anthropology of religion, psychology of religion,

therefore, editors are hardly to be criticized too strongly for either including or ruling out this or that term, this or that author.¹³ Although, as already evident from this very review, assessments of such comprehensive resources are equally idiosyncratic, I happen to think that the rationale and implications for the *types* of terms included—and the sort of work that the term does or does not allow its user to do—does need to be addressed; for if we follow Taylor, writing in the Introduction to Chicago's *Critical Terms* volume, and understand any scholarly field's lexicon as "an enabling network of constraint" (17), then we should press further to inquire into what sort of field these volumes enable—and, in doing so, what is being constrained?

Unlike the thematic organization of Blackwell's *Companion*, Continuum's *Guide*, and Routledge's *Companion*, the alphabetical order to *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* seems to exhibit no one theoretical approach or rationale. Although the volume, like all in this genre, is ostensibly unified by its authors' concern to study this thing called religion, across its essays readers will find a substantial difference of opinion as to just what aspects of the world fall within the scope of this slippery designator. Lacking a unifying framework or shared conception of what is or is not our object of study, the volume is—ironically, perhaps—a pretty accurate depiction of the amorphous shape of the late twentieth and early twenty-first-century field. In contradistinction to the three essays from this volume discussed earlier (i.e., Smith, Sharf, and Lopez), consider its essay "God," by Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza and Gordon Kaufman. According to them, the "wide range of approaches" that characterize the modern study of God are: historical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, linguistic, comparative, feminist, ethical, aesthetic, philosophical, and theological (154). Setting aside the already-mentioned problem of determining whose theology gets to count as

phenomenology of religion, and comparative religion [though called comparative method in Segal's volume]). Although writing an overview of each of these subfields presents a challenging opportunity for any author, it is not clear that reading more than one such survey provides one with anything more than insight into authors' inevitably idiosyncratic views of their methodological home.

¹³ One could, however, raise an objection to the use of the virtually limitless (and thus arbitrary) "religion and" rubric, most evident in *The Routledge Companion*, in which we find essays on "religion and...": the arts, cognition, culture, geography, Orientalism, politics, and science. With the newly expanded annual program for the AAR in mind, one can easily come up with a host of other "religion and..." topics that likely deserve a place as much as any of those already included in the book. For instance, consider that the AAR's 2006 program units include "religion and...": the social sciences, lesbian-feminist issues, person and culture, disability studies, ecology, popular culture, film and visual culture, holocaust and genocide, medicine and healing, social conflict and peace, science and technology, animals, childhood studies, colonialism, sexuality, media and culture, and public policy and political change. For a critique of the unregulated nature of the "religion and..." rubric, see McCutcheon (2001: 179–199).

theology (for today, theology on the “wrong” topics ends up being classified as either radical politics of fanatical ideology¹⁴), might one not inquire whether the last few items in their list constitute instances of data for the first few in their list?

This “come one, come all” view of the field—which often goes by the name of inter- or cross-disciplinarity—has long persisted, likely because it so efficiently allows deeply committed religious liberal, as well as liberal humanistic, scholars who are alienated from more doctrinaire institutional settings, to describe, compare, sometimes criticize, but more often celebrate things such as myths, symbols, rituals, experiences, justice, and truth, all the while conceiving of each as just the tips of deeply significant icebergs of pan-human, trans-historical meaning. The trouble here is that the still popular cross-disciplinary effort seems driven by the assumption that the object of study pre-exists or transcends the tools used to study it, thereby preventing one from reducing—as the old saying goes—religion to any of its supposed constituent parts. This debate over reductionism has hardly been settled but, at least for the past few decades, the *détente* that has been reached between theologians and humanists, on the one hand, and social scientists, on the other, goes by the name of cross-disciplinarity.

But, as Hans Penner and Edward Yonan argued thirty-five years ago in a classic article, this big tent view makes no sense “because the use of different tools presupposes the formulation of different tasks that often lead to a basic contradiction in understanding the field” (1972: 109). Rephrased, we could say that different methods accomplish different tasks, that they are used in different institutional settings and, or so I would argue (pressing Penner and Yonan further than they might have intended), constitute different theoretical items as objects of study—which suggests just why it is so problematic to assume, as Segal apparently does (in a previously quoted line from his Introduction), that methods as varied as sociological and theological have all “contributed to the understanding of the phenomenon of religion.” Put simply, there may be no such things as a trans-methodological *phenomenon* (a surprising, but possibly rather telling, technical term Segal uses) that predates the differences in the tools we use and the interests that drive them. Yet glossing over just those differences may prove very useful, as in the previously mentioned essay “God,” in which the authors repeat that they are interested in sorting out the “nuances and *complexities* of

¹⁴ The normative, political engine that drives such classifications is the topic explored throughout McCutcheon 2005.

meaning that are intricately bound up in” the symbol “God” (154; emphasis added). The problem here is that one is never really sure whether the authors are simply talking descriptively about the diverse uses of a particular socio-linguistic device (i.e., “God”) or, like the already cited author of the article on heaven and hell, normatively judging the *adequacy* of “the images and metaphors used to *express* the divine” (149; emphasis added). Taking the widespread belief in what Schüssler-Fiorenza and Kaufman aptly name “*expressing* the divine” (the difference between this idealist phrasing and what we could imagine coming from someone in the Smith–Sharf–Lopez tradition is significant)—as simply given, they are therefore content with chronicling the many different conceptions of God (and it is just these many differences that add up to the “complex” part), mainly in Judaism and Christianity—although there are two paragraphs toward the end devoted to the relation between “God” and what we might as well term other people’s “gods.” It comes as no surprise, then, that *explaining* the fact of these sorts of beliefs has no place in the study of religion as exemplified in this particular essay for, as the phenomenologist might have once phrased it, the essence is an intangible given and our interest therefore involves chronicling the different ways in which it presents itself.

It appears, then, that repeatedly asserting that the topic of “God” is complex and then listing in great detail the varied ways in which a monotheistic being is envisioned misses the point of the academic study of religion. In fact, although it is surely not intended by these authors, their rhetorical use of “complex” is rather reminiscent of the notion of “irreducible complexity” in Intelligent Design discourses, for in both cases it nicely undermines naturalistic explanatory attempts.¹⁵ However, should one adopt the position advocated by the field’s increasingly influential cognitive theorists, then belief in immaterial beings who possess traits other than those that we normally associate with physical beings is indeed a *highly complex* topic, but—and here is the key difference—its underlying causes are *not* too complex to explain satisfactorily (e.g., Pascal Boyer’s thoughts on just how memorable are slightly counter-intuitive ideas about agents). Sadly, this essay’s hermeneutical emphasis on what this or that religious topic *means* constrains the field considerably by excluding any and all such explanatory work.

¹⁵ Interestingly, Taylor himself uses this phrase concerning the complexity of our technical terminology: “but even when lines of definition seem to be clearly drawn, terms remain irreducibly complex” (16).

Unlike some who understand the study of religion as exhibiting a cross-disciplinary character, one that sees theology as a viable method for studying religion in the public university (as increasingly exemplified in the AAR's own structure and content, in which "*Theology and Religious Studies*" [emphasis added] has somehow become the normalized rubric over the past decade), I agree with Penner and Yonan: this "more the merrier" position is symptomatic of a deep confusion that apparently still exists, a confusion as to which human institutions offer tools and, depending on which tools one uses, what will comprise one's data. But unfortunately, this cross-disciplinary attitude is apparent in several of the handbooks, such as the Chicago volume's Introduction where, in the first few pages, we learn a number of things about religion (e.g., the "it" that we name "religion" does not disappear even when it seems absent, there is now a resurgence of religious belief, religion has something to do with spiritual concerns, it is a tool of resistance against hegemonic forces, it has something to do with the individual's private interiority), only then to be told that "there happens to be little consensus about precisely what religion is and how it can best be studied" (6). There is a carnivalesque side to this Introduction, not because of some Bakhtinian sophistication, but because the old carnie game of bait and switch is being played: first you see religion under one shell and then, after some deft sleight of hand, it disappears altogether.

But Taylor is not alone in playing this game; although I would not have expected it, I find a related attitude in both Segal's and Hinnells's Introductions—respectively: "none of the approaches is likely to exhaust the subject" (xvii) and "religions might be compared to diamonds; they have many facets; they can be seen from many angles, but the pictures are too complex for any one writer to see the whole" (19)—which suggest to me just this sort of disappearing realism, as if the things we group together and classify as religion are self-evidently related to each other in the natural world but prove elusive when it comes to our various approaches to their study. I am reminded here of the old Sunday school story of the four witnesses all watching the same traffic accident, yet from four different corners of the same intersection. The moral of this tale is that none of their perspectives can exhaust the actual event, since they each saw only a part and all we have is the parts that they saw. As useful as this may be for teaching a specific theological view of the relationships between the synoptic Gospels (I have long heard this story used in much the same fashion as the three leaf clover is used to illustrate the doctrine of the trinity), I am not sure that a naïve realism that posits a god's eye view (for how else would we, stuck as we all are on an intersection of our own, know that there was some

actual event, out there in the real world, that was larger than our limited view?) is all that useful in the academic study of religion.

Instead of drawing the reader's attention to such rhetorical sleight of hand, these Introductions keep our gaze firmly on the object that apparently is not really there, despite being everywhere. We are all scholars of religion, readers are told, but we cannot agree as to what we actually study. (Hence the alphabetical organization of Chicago's volume seems to be a pretty reasonable response, indicative of the volume's understanding of the field.) In what other field would this lack of consensus be a selling point? Where else could one be told—within a page of Taylor recounting the importance of Smith's insight that the taxon "religion" is an invented scholarly tool that does not have a one-to-one correspondence to something in the real world, and soon after his positive reference to Lincoln's work on how religious discourses authorize disputes over everyday material resources—that

when religion is explained in terms of nonreligious factors...the veracity of religion is called into question.... For many individuals who remain personally committed to religious belief and practice, the insistence that the origins and causes of religion are nonreligious involves a pernicious reductionism that must be steadfastly resisted (10).

In the midst of informing readers of Smith's and Lincoln's work, their editor gives the impression of deauthorizing it by going on to describe how some of the people studied by such methods find it to be troublesome; no doubt many of the people studied by scholars find scholarly redescriptions of their lives to be incorrect, harmful, perhaps even insidious. But what is not clear in Taylor's text is just why such judgments are of relevance to the scholar.¹⁶ Juxtaposing these two viewpoints, as if participant claims are self-evidently relevant to assessing the scholarly merit of an argument, takes away with one hand what was given by the other (i.e., positive assessments of Smith and Lincoln's work).

Something akin to this is also apparent in Hinnells's Introduction to *The Routledge Companion*; after acknowledging that "many scholars have questioned whether there is any such 'thing' as religion," suggesting

¹⁶ I am reminded here of Lincoln's fifth thesis on method: "Reverence is a religious, and not a scholarly virtue. When good manners and good conscience cannot be reconciled, the demands of the latter ought to prevail" (1996: 226); for a critique of the mere "appearance of critical discourse analysis" in Lincoln's often-quoted theses, see Fitzgerald's point-for-point rebuttal of "Theses on Method" (2006) and Lincoln's reply (2007).

that there may only be religions,¹⁷ Hinnells presses the case further by briefly highlighting the fact that “some have gone further and questioned the value of the term ‘religion’”—though readers do not learn why such questioning has taken place. Such unelaborated critiques of the category “religion” notwithstanding, he then informs his readers “that the word ‘religion’ is useful, but should be used with caution” (2)—or, as he phrases it not long after, “all ‘labels’ have limitations and those must be accepted, so ‘religion’ is a useful but potentially misleading term” (7). But if such fundamental criticisms of our primary categorical tool are worth mentioning, are such critiques not worth considering in detail? Moreover, why might we conclude that this possibly flawed and misleading term still remains useful? In fact, given that utility is a relational concept, we really ought to ask: “useful to whom and for what purpose?” In other words, if the criticisms are worth considering, then some persuasive justification for the assertion of continued utility would be rather helpful. For without elaborating on the limitations, readers have no idea what sort of caution should attend this term’s usage.

To be fair, Hinnells’s own opening chapter, “Why Study Religions?,”¹⁸ more than likely ought to be consulted on such substantive issues, for there is only so much that an editor can accomplish in a brief Introduction. But, despite a section near the opening, entitled “Defining Religion,” its readers are, sadly, no further ahead. For although they learn once again that “there is no such thing as ‘religion,’ there are only religions, i.e., people who identify themselves as members of a religious group, Christians, Muslims, etc.” (6), they are no closer to finding out what it is about things such as Christianity and Islam that naturally makes them members of the same class of objects. We do get

¹⁷ This is a common move that we see in the modern field, that is, distinguishing between the singular and plural noun (sometimes taking the form of distinguishing between the singular noun “religion” and its adjectival form, “religious”), which really adds nothing to theoretical debates. For if there are only religions—empirically observable instances that, following the still influential lead of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, many of us refer to simply as traditions—then of what are they instances? That is, what do they share in common that justifies their being named the same thing? And where does that commonality reside—in the so-called traditions themselves or in the mind of the person doing the classification? Without clarification on just these questions, the plural/singular issue is simply a distraction.

¹⁸ The answer to the title’s question turns out to be that “the study of religions is a key to understanding other cultures” (19). If we survey how Departments of Religious Studies justify their existence or portray themselves on their Web sites and in their promotional literature, we will find that this is a common enough reason to study religion. For instance, see the AAR-supported/Lilly Endowment funded Website, “Why Study Religion?” where, on the opening page, we learn that we study it because “*religion has always been with us*. Throughout history, it has expressed the deepest questions human beings can ask, and it has taken a central place in the lives of virtually all civilizations and cultures” (<http://www.studyreligion.org/why/index.html>).

a little closer when we learn that “to understand a religion, it is essential to have an awareness of the different sets of values, ideals, customs and ethical values” (9)—but what is the relationship between these things we are grouping together as religions and those things that soon after are called “principles, values, and ideals” and, later, termed “values, ideals, and priorities” (19)? To pick but two possible answers—answers that each take us down very different investigative paths—do these institutions create and embody them or do they merely authorize values that pre-exist them, by “clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic”—as Geertz so famously put it in his now classic essay, “Religion as a Cultural System” (1973: 90). That is, are religions all about their content and their meanings (as most scholarship on religion seems to assume) or is the content arbitrary and what really matters is the form and structure?

Now, if Taylor and Hinnells were simply describing the way others study religion—were Taylor’s comments on “pernicious reductionism” simply an account of how some others feel and if Hinnells’s lack of elaboration was an example of how others get around the usual scholarly requirements of argumentation and evidence—then their Introductions would be helpful descriptions of the current anti-theoretical atmosphere in which scholars of religion do their work. But this does not seem to be the case, for the reader learns from Taylor not only that “critics of theology often embrace the methods of social sciences ... with an enthusiasm bordering on the religious,” but also that an emphasis on method and theory is merely an attempt to replace theology with methodology as the queen of the sciences. And as for Hinnells, after informing his readers that “there is no ‘right’ way to study religions” (2–3), he asserts that there nonetheless happens to be a wrong way, what he calls dogmatism, which, he informs his readers, does not appear in his volume. However, lacking any elaboration for what dogmatism signifies and why the proposed right way ought to be considered correct, this ban seems, well, dogmatic.

So, what is the message to the readers of these two Introductions? It is that theologian and scholar of religion are colleagues toiling in the same field. While I certainly am not persuaded of this, I must admit that the Routledge Introduction (perhaps unintentionally) does seem to constitute but one piece of evidence in favor of Taylor’s position, for although it seems acceptable for scholars to dogmatically assert “religion” to be self-evidently useful (i.e., we have no need to elaborate on *why* it is useful, despite recognizing criticisms of it), other people’s

stated self-evidencies are understood as dogmatic and thus unjustifiable. Apparently we *are* all doing the same thing.

But should not scholarship constitute something other than dogmatic assertion? For in the undefended assumption, there resides a number of issues deserving of further study. For example, recalling Hinnells's continued use of "religion" despite his recognition of an ill-defined problem with the category, consider one of the articles in Blackwell's companion to philosophy of religion. There, in an essay entitled "African Religions from a Philosophical Point of View," Kwasi Wiredu informs readers of the following:

Not only is the word "religion" not an African word...—but also ... it is doubtful whether there is a single-word or even periphrastic translation of the word in any African language. This does not mean, of course, that the phenomenon itself does not exist among Africans. One might have something without being given to talking about it (34).

There may be no more succinct example of the widespread failure of historical consciousness among contemporary scholars—what I have already termed the old bait and switch. For while acknowledging that the *word* "religion" is a contingent element introduced into a social world from outside, the *concept* (or, as we once used to say, the *phenomenon* to which the term supposedly points, thereby signaling a specific sort of metaphysic) has no such history, for it somehow pre-dates language and culture. Interestingly, we see much the same equivocation in Hinnells's own opening essay, "Why Study Religions?," in which readers learn that there are indeed groups of people whose languages do not have the term (his example is ancient Sanskrit [7], though I would hazard a guess that, taking far more seriously the Latin roots of "religion" and the history of its spread on the coattails of colonial administrators, we ought to multiply examples considerably¹⁹), as well as groups for whom "a modern West-imposed label" is little more than anachronistic (his example here is naming "a plethora of different groups, beliefs, and practices across a large continent" as all being all

¹⁹ I have written elsewhere of the troubles of assuming that, for example, the ancient Arabic term "din *means* religion" (2005: 38–40); a useful example of the problems associated with reading modern categories backward in time, as if they capture some essential feature, is provided by Hinnells when he writes: "in the case of Zoroastrianism 'religion' is appropriate since there is a term (*den*) that it is reasonably to translate as 'religion'" (7). Why it is reasonable we are not told, nor are his readers informed of just when, why, and according to whom "Zoroastrianism" was classified as a distinct zone known as a religion.

one thing, “Hinduism” [7]). Nonetheless, our rule of thumb for defining religion is that:

an act or thought is religious when the person concerned thinks they are practicing their “religion”. Organizations are religious when the people involved think they are functioning religiously.... An act is a religious act when the person involved believes it to be associated with their religion (6–7).

Although this deference to the so-called indigenous naming practices seems, at first glance, to avoid the imperialism of using “our” term to name “them,” upon closer examination it is evident that all this strategy does is to dodge the problem. For if not everyone has the concept “religion,” then they are hardly using “religion” when they engage in acts of self-designation. Some posited “they” are therefore not naturally thinking that they are functioning religiously or that certain of their beliefs, behaviors, and institutions have an inherent link that separates them from other beliefs, behaviors, and institutions in their social world—at least these particular linkages are not made until they are told that they are being religious by someone already armed with the concept and the means to distinguish it from other designators (e.g., culture, politics, etc.)! For only those whose languages and cultures have been directly impacted by ancient Latin language and culture, along with those who have, over the past few centuries, become accustomed to this category by means of their (in most cases, uninvited) political, economic, and military contact first with Europe and now North America, will spontaneously think themselves into being religious. Thus, despite the possible well intention that drives Hinnells’s criterion, taking other people’s word for it efficiently naturalizes a category that is hardly found in nature.²⁰

It seems that such scholars assume an extra-discursive, Platonic realm to exist, which enables them (i) to acknowledge the historicity of the term “religion” while yet (ii) concluding that those who do not possess the word, nonetheless “are pre-eminently religious, not even knowing how to live without religion” (as Wiredu phrases it in his article on African religions). That the scholarly category “religion,” once used as a local European indicator of an ever-changing sense of social affinity/distance with newly encountered peoples (a point argued

²⁰ There may be some benefit to resurrecting the nineteenth-century term “natural religion,” but retooling it, so as to name this position that posits an authentically religious, pre-discursive sentiment that nonetheless predates its naming as religion.

persuasively by Chidester [1996]), took off so successfully outside of Europe's academic hallways—such that today we cannot help but find people worldwide using it as a preferred self-designator for some supposedly authentic, indigenous essence—is precisely what ought to be attracting our interest, and what the editors of these handbooks ought to be bringing to their readers' attention. For just because the English language, the U.S. dollar, and the Gregorian calendar are now found worldwide does not mean that they are neutral or naturally occurring global systems of signification. So too with the taxon "religion."

Taking this point to heart, we might say that, rather than studying the spread of religions, perhaps we ought to consider studying why naming part of the social world *as* religion has caught on so widely among diverse human communities, each with their own prior systems of self-designation, in just the past few hundred years. The difference in these two research projects is significant and amounts to the difference between, say, Tomoko Masuzawa's (who is a contributor to both Chicago's and Continuum's volumes) genealogical effort to trace the eighteenth and nineteenth-century development of the concept "world religions" (2005) on the one hand and, on the other, Stephen Prothero's (2007) widely publicized call for Americans (well, more accurately, I should say Christian Americans²¹) simply to get on with the business of using this classification even better in creating knowledge about the place of themselves and others in the contemporary geo-political world.²² Unfortunately, Prothero seems either uninterested in, or unaware of, the fact that this now commonplace category was not always taken-for-granted, for it was originally derived from the German *Weltreligionen*—meaning that small number of religions that were judged by late nineteenth-century scholars to have transcended their merely local, ethnic, or national origins (i.e., *Landesreligionen*), making them truly "world class," if you will (Masuzawa 2005: 107 ff.). It is therefore no coincidence that that with which those scholars were then familiar—for example, German forms of Christianity, understood as a faith (*Glaube*) that had long outgrown its local and thus limited origins in ancient Palestine—served as the prototype for this classification (with

²¹ I say this, in part, because on a surprising number of occasions Prothero uses what probably strikes many scholars of religion as the long outdated theological phrases "Christianity and other religions" as well as "non-Christian religions" (e.g., 6, 14, 17, 23, 143)—a usage that nicely reinforces his intended reader's assumptions concerning just what occupies the normative center.

²² As someone who has done some thinking on the implications of the scholar of religion as public intellectual, it seems to be that—with Prothero and, not long before him, Bart Erhman in mind—there is surely a study to be written on the significance of scholars of religion appearing on "The Daily Show with John Stewart."

Buddhism initially being the only other undisputed occupant of this category). Accordingly, those who toiled in colonialism's intellectual workshops developed "world religions" to distinguish, and thereby rank, "us" over some posited "them" who were unable to do as we apparently did.

But for those with an interest in such historical matters, the development and continued popularity of the "world religions" concept constitute a case study in how power and identity are negotiated by means of classification. In support of this thesis we might consider how, in a chapter from *The Routledge's Companion to the Study of Religion* (439–440) the once popular but long since discredited categories of "universal (or universalizing) religions" versus "ethnic (or cultural) religions" (a subtype of which is "tribal [or traditional] religions") are surprisingly revived in an essay on "Religion and Geography"—as if this nineteenth-century way of dividing up the pie was a self-evidently useful descriptor of actual states of affairs.²³ That the author admits from the outset that—much as with those who used these very categories centuries ago—his essay has "a particular emphasis on Christianity" (439; evidence of which is found in his recommendation that "the most useful collection of statistics on contemporary religious distribution" is David Barrett's *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Study of Churches and Religions in the Modern World, AD 1900–2000* [1982; Barrett et al., 2001]—churches and religions, no less) provides persuasive evidence that the link between discourses on, and typologies of, "world religions," on the one hand, and assertions of identity and power, on the other, are hardly to be found only in the colonial past (perhaps prompting us to reconsider Prothero's prescription for the religious illiteracy problem that he diagnoses among Americans). For the ease with which the *World Christian Encyclopedia's* "comprehensive survey of the branches of Christianity" turns out, upon further examination, to be a thinly veiled attempt to overcome potentially dangerous fragmentation and difference within the seemingly uniform "Church," so as to ensure that a picture of "the faith" emerges in which "diversity ... is not

²³ The lack of utility for such categories is evident in the author's definition for tribal, or traditional, religions: they "involve belief in some power or powers beyond humans, to which they can appeal for help. Examples include the souls of the departed, and spirits living on mountains, in stones, trees, or animals." Apart from the problem of this being a poorly disguised reworking of the nineteenth-century notion of animism as constituting the most basic or archaic form of religion, it is only the presumed authority of the Christian message (evidenced, I presume, in its "universalizing" success) that enables Christianity to avoid being designated as a tribal religion, what with such seemingly classic traditional features as its notion of God, intercessory prayer, the incarnation, and the afterlife.

divisiveness,” and in which “global Christianity emerges as a single whole, even as the Body of Christ” (1982: v; this is reproduced in the second edition), ought to alert readers to the political goal of a resource that underlies an essay on the seemingly benign topic of “Religion and Geography.”

Sticking with the study of Christianity for the moment, a useful example of the manner in which terminology and classification betray prior interests is also evident in *A Handbook of Ancient Religions*. Before turning to its table of contents, readers might justifiably wonder about what is included in such a volume, given that antiquity provides an awfully large pool from which to select one’s topics. That is to say, we need some way of governing the unregulated economy of the past. A criterion used in this volume is the inclusion of religions that continue to exist versus those that do not, which helps to account for why there is a chapter on things such as ancient Egypt and the civilizations of the Aztecs and the Incas. However, this criterion—which distinguishes between living and, one supposes, dead religions—does not help to explain all of the choices that were made, for, as we learn from Hinnells’s Introduction, “although Judaism is a living religion it was decided to include ancient Israel, in part because of the link with other ancient Near Eastern civilizations” (6). Although other religions that are alive and kicking, such as Confucianism, also occupy a place in some of the other essays (as in the chapter devoted to “The Religions of Ancient China”)—indicating, presumably, the manner in which these seemingly uniform modern traditions actually change significantly over time and place (hence the common habit of distinguishing priestly, temple-based “ancient Israelite religion” from rabbinic, synagogue-based “Judaism”)—Christianity (or what we might call early Christianity) somehow eludes this criterion. For a tradition that might accurately be understood as a social movement of antiquity—a religion of the Hellenistic era which was born and rose to initial prominence in the Roman empire—is certainly *not* considered a Roman religion in this volume. Instead, although Christianity is mentioned periodically throughout the chapter on “Religions in the Roman Empire,” its historical origins are left unexplored and therefore seem to lie outside the world of the Roman Empire; instead, the chapter is concerned with the so-called pre-Christian trends within that thing we today know as paganism—a term the author J. A. North admittedly laments using because, as readers learn in a footnote, “the term ... was apparently used by the early Christians as an unfriendly term for those who had persisted in the old pre-Christian religious ways” (360). Despite making plain that the designator was polemical from the outset, the author somehow goes on to

suggest that “the word ‘pagan’ ... *has become* a pejorative term for religions of which the speaker disapproves” (emphasis added). Although its replacement “would be desirable,” none is proposed and “pagan” is used throughout the article.

The reason for not replacing such an apparently polemical term is difficult, though not impossible, to imagine. Given the manner in which early Christianity, which, historically speaking, is coterminous with other social movements included in the volume, is *not* investigated in any real detail suggests to me that there is an implicit assumption that this thing we call Christianity either has no history or at least not the sort of history that other mass social movements have (i.e., perhaps Christianity has the sort of history that a Hegelian *Geist* might, as it is incrementally realized in history). It is just this sort of exceptionalism that is evident in such seemingly inconsequential asides as “Christianity *emerged* into the awareness of pagans as a variant version of Judaism” (357; emphasis added)—the use of the passive voice is important here, I think, for it is hard to imagine many other social formations whose earliest phase could be adequately theorized as merely “emerging”—especially social movements with which the writer is in disagreement, for in that case their very existence would more than likely have to be accounted for in detail. Rather, much as I recall Smith once drawing on Edward Said’s useful distinction between the metaphysics of origins discourses and the historicist underpinnings of discourses on beginnings (Said 2004), we may see here the tip of a *sui generis*, origins argument, in which some independently arising Christianity, some semi-autonomous social movement that originates of its own volition, simply happened *to* people (i.e., passively emerging into their minds) rather than a historical movement that was a happening *of* people (who have bodies and desires and not just minds). If this is the case, if this is the assumption that protects Christianity from inclusion in this volume as but one more religion in the ancient world that somehow survives to this day (aside: is this not the assumption that has long kept the study of early Christianity from constituting but one subfield of a Department of Classics?), then it would be rather difficult—difficult because it undermines the case for exceptionalism!—to give up one of the rhetorical means by which members of this early movement naturalized the distinctions they perceived between themselves and their peers, that is, placing their social competitors on the margins by terming them pagan.

But even replacing the term “pagan” with a term more palatable to contemporary tastes would accomplish little because the issue is *not* the name or even its condescending jab at the unsophisticated country

bumpkins who lived on the urban outskirts (i.e., the Latin *paganus* refers to the inhabitants of the *pagus*, the rural country district).²⁴ No, the issue is *not* the term but, instead, the discursive boundaries authorized and continually policed by things such as this term—and, along with it, a whole series of interconnected social habits and networks as well as institutional arrangements—things that, after long periods of time, have made it not just possible but natural and even desirable to conceptualize this group *as* uniformly pagan and that group *as* distinctively Christian, as if their identities refer to internal traits of enduring value that can be tracked across history. Replacing “pagan” with some other term leaves this supposed naturalness untheorized—much as replacing the onetime common designator “Negro” with “Colored,” “Black,” and now, most recently, with “African American” does nothing to theorize why it is so common to categorize human beings based on such an arbitrary (yet portrayed as natural and self-evident) feature as the pigments in our skin. Instead, such terminological updates efficiently reauthorize this realism and naturalism, inasmuch as we all apparently know that there is some sort of deeply significant difference out there in the world that ought to be named. But this noteworthy difference could itself be understood as the result of the naming itself (and the social interests encoded in the name, motivating the need for a name) in the first place. As an example, consider the manner in which some authors who critique the term “religion” somehow still end up studying Hinduisim, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, Shinto, etc.—as if these things all have some essentially shared trait that demands that they be organized as a coherent family, regardless what we call them. Such an approach to naming fails to take seriously the link between our classifications, or interests, and our ability to imagine the world as being arranged whether in this or that manner.²⁵

All this is merely to say, in rather inelegant and far too lengthy prose, what Smith said so plainly twenty-five years ago: self-consciousness about our use of classifications, concepts, and categories ought to comprise a scholar’s primary expertise (1982: xi), for the knowledge we gain from putting the words in these handbooks into practice is premised on the assumption that but one culture’s folk category (i.e., the Latin-based term “religion”) can be effortlessly elevated to the status of

²⁴ For a further discussion of the socio-rhetorical utility of the term pagan, along with equally polemical terms such as provincial, heathen, and gentile, see McCutcheon (2003: xiii).

²⁵ I am indebted to Craig Martin for pointing out Edward Schiappa’s interesting volume on this topic (2003).

a cross-cultural universal, thereby naming an essential feature of all humankind. Now, of course, using some local *as if* it were universal, and doing so for *our* analytic purposes, to satisfy *our* own curiosities and *our* interests, is the inevitable situation in which we, as scholars, find ourselves, inasmuch as we, like everyone else, are situated human beings with no choice but to grapple with issues of familiarity and strangeness, similarity and difference, nearness and distance, etc., by means of the tools that are at hand. However, doing so because of our confidence in the universal reach of these purposes, curiosities, and interests—thereby assuming that, as previously phrased by Wiredu, “one might have something without being given to talking about it”—is, at least to my way of thinking, best understood as that form of ideology that might better go by the name of imperialism. And I think that we can find this in the work of those nineteenth-century predecessors, who we today so easily criticize for their imperialist work, *just as much* as we do in the work of those today who strive to recover the timeless authentic that we just happen to call religion.

If we see such attempts to study religion as if the term named something real behind its manifestation as nothing more or less than thinly disguised criticisms of treating some human beliefs, behaviors, and institutions as thoroughly human doings, then we would not be surprised to read Taylor, writing in the Introduction to the Chicago volume: “in order to *appreciate* the richness and complexity of religious life, it is necessary to deploy a variety of *interpretive* strategies” (13; emphasis added). To my way of thinking, such a study of religion has little to do with *explaining* forms of human behavior (including our ability to concoct and reproduce systems of signification in the first place); instead, we are here to appreciate, understand (no doubt in the old sense of *Verstehen*), maybe celebrate, and always to interpret this disembodied thing that we call meaning or value—that rich yet elusive, ahistoric quality that dances unimpeded throughout history and culture, and which, somewhat akin to Eliade’s New Humanism, apparently falls squarely into the lap of the careful historian of religions. Given this rather traditional hermeneutical emphasis, there is little surprise, then, that some essays in these handbooks fail to distinguish between those phenomenological, or descriptive, categories of significance only to some indigenous maps of the world and those second order, self-consciously comparative and explanatory categories that are significant to a group of scholars who study all forms of human behavior as equally mundane, though nonetheless interesting, historical events.

Unless I am terribly mistaken, the lack of self-consciousness that leads to conflating these two otherwise distinct levels of cognitive and social

activity is characteristic of a previous generation's phenomenological handbooks. There is therefore a deep irony in evidence in some of our field's newer resources: everything old seems to be new again—an irony that reminds me of Eva Knodt's critique of Taylor's co-written work on media technology (Taylor and Saarinen 1994); according to her, the sort of critique that many scholars have recently brought to our field "feeds off precisely the nostalgia for a waning literary culture to which it wants to serve as an antidote" ([1984] 1995: x). For, despite some truly important individual essays in these collections, when taken as a whole, the handbook genre seems to suggest that, despite the many advances in the field these past two generations, before and behind our many words there is still something that eludes our grasp. Whether we call it power, the holy, or the sacred—as did our intellectual predecessors—or faith, belief, experience, principle, ideals, meaning, or value—as do many of our contemporaries; in the end, *c'est la même chose*. For, just as with the book read by that Danish Prince, whose words I borrowed for this essay's title—in which "the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards" ("Hamlet," Act II, Scene II)—many of our handbooks merely paraphrase commonplaces that we already know. But if these handbooks are indeed aimed at our classrooms, then perhaps such repetition is strategic, for just as with comedy, so too with many professors' classrooms: never alienate your audience. In fact, it is an old adage of advertising; as recently phrased by Don Draper (played by Jon Hamm), a 1960 New York advertising executive (i.e., ad man) and the protagonist of the recent American Movie Classics (AMC) television series, "Mad Men": advertising is all about making people happy. And you do that by making them feel that what they happen to think, what they happen to be doing, is what they ought to be thinking, ought to be doing: "that whatever you're doing, you are ok," as Draper phrases it in the series' opening episode.

The descriptive knowledge that we gain from some of the articles in these handbooks amounts to just that, for we learn that behind all of our contingent terminology and petty methodological disputes there is some necessary and universal thing that none of us can fully put into words, for the diamonds that we study have far too many facets to be seen by just one set of inquiring eyes. No doubt, confirmation that such a firm foundation lies behind the world's competing appearances is quite comforting to some. If so, then quoting Ludwig Wittgenstein, as does Lopez near the end of his essay "Belief"—when Wittgenstein writes that "the expression of belief, thought, etc., is just a sentence ... and the sentence has sense only as a member of a system of language; as one expression within a calculus" ([1958] 1965: 42)—turns out to be

more than just a little unnerving; for now the “thing” that we cannot quite put into words is not an inner feeling, faith, value, or experience but simply a word itself. In fact, all we may have are words, sentences, language, systems of signifiers, sets of rules, structures, all of our own making, all of which have a past and a limited shelf life (both of which are entailed in Said’s term “beginnings”). If, as scholars and teachers, we are doing something other than paraphrasing what our students already think they know, then maybe this is *precisely* the sort of disquieting news that we ought to be pressing in our research and in our classes, prompting both our readers and our students to be curious about what people do in those contingent situations that we call social life. If so, then it might be possible to look anew at both the things that we study in our classes and about which we write in our books, seeing them all not as the products of an intangible faith, the sites where the sacred manifests itself, or the spot where timeless principles and values are expressed, but, instead, as the results of all too tangible human actions and thus the ordinary residue of inventive but nonetheless contrived human institutions and situations.

Now *those* would be words worth reading.²⁶

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²⁶ My thanks to JAAR’s book review editor for very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

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