

"Negotiating the Boundaries in Theological and Religious Studies"
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Last year, two scholars of American religious history – Robert Orsi, who teaches at Harvard, and Stephen Prothero, who teaches at Boston University – were involved in a rather heated exchange over the ethical stance that the scholar of religion ought to take relative to the people or subject matter that he or she studies. Orsi argued that the scholar of religion ought to adopt “a posture of disciplined attentiveness,” cultivating an ability to “stay in an in-between place” in which one suspends the impulse to locate the other securely in relation to one’s own point of view.¹ Prothero responded rather sharply to Orsi’s formulation, which he took to entail an endless suspension of judgment, arguing that scholars of religion need to be more forthcoming about what they really think, not less.² In thinking over that debate, I was struck by the extent to which differing views of the history of the academic study of religion shaped the debate and the extent to which their disparate views were nonetheless still caught up in the discipline’s continuing efforts to distinguish itself from theology.

In the exchange, Prothero associates the academic study of religion with the suspension of judgment – a procedure often referred to as bracketing or detachment and associated with a neutrality – and identifies it as one of the key ways scholars of religion have marked the boundary between religious and theological studies. In advocating that scholars of religion speak more forthrightly about their own views, Prothero implies that they need no longer hold back endlessly for fear of being confused with theologians. Orsi, by way of contrast, views the academic study of religion “as very much the theoretical enforcer of a normative and unchallenged liberal Protestant and Western religious modernity.” Among other things, he claims, “[t]he critical apparatuses of the

field have long been (and to some extent remain) deeply anti-Catholic, identifying characteristic Roman Catholic religious bodily idioms as lesser forms of religious practice on an unexamined but widely authorized hierarchy of religious forms.”³ The stance that Orsi encourages the scholar of religion to adopt -- an attitude of open, disciplined, and engaged attentiveness -- is analogous in some ways to processes of spiritual formation and practice with which many of you are undoubtedly familiar. Yet Orsi does not explicitly refer to any such literature, positions himself firmly within the academic study of religion and, indeed, openly declines to position his work in relation to the study -- much less the practice -- of spirituality.⁴

Although both Orsi and Prothero teach at universities with theological schools (Harvard Divinity School and BU School of Theology), both identify primarily as scholars of religion rather than theological educators. Those of us who teach in theological schools and identify as theological educators occupy a complicated institutional middle ground between the academy and religious communities, a location that has been marginalized to some degree as religious studies departments attempted to assert and establish their own distinctive identity within the humanities. Nonetheless, in theological schools, we routinely ponder the theoretical and practical meaning of established distinctions between theological studies and religious studies, the classical disciplines and the arts of ministry, the study of spirituality and spiritual formation. We often try to make sense of these distinctions, when we are not trying to throw them over altogether, by pointing to dichotomies -- such as insiders and outsiders, theory and practice, detachment and engagement -- that ostensibly inform them. In applying these distinctions, however, we typically get lost in endless intellectual snarls as these simple

dichotomies simply refuse to make adequate sense of the complicated realities we are negotiating.

The anthropologist Kirin Narayan wrote a wonderful essay some years ago in which she discussed parallel difficulties that anthropologists face in making the distinction between “native” and “regular” anthropologists. Regular anthropologists, of course, are those who fit the traditional paradigm of outsiders who “study Others whose alien cultural worlds they must painstakingly come to know. ... ‘[N]ative,’ ‘indigenous,’ or ‘insider’ anthropologists are believed to write about their own cultures from a position of intimate affinity.” What these terms actually mean in practice, however, has become increasingly complicated. As a western-trained anthropologist, born in India to parents of Indian and European origin, Narayan argues that a fixed distinction between “native” and “non-native” anthropologists is simply unworkable.⁵

Faculty, who routinely move back and forth between the worlds of theological education and the secular academy, often find themselves in an equally complex situation, albeit one that for that very reason provides a potentially fruitful basis for reflecting on the boundaries between theological studies and religious studies. The students who have gathered here are enrolled, I assume, in a mix of graduate programs. Some of you may have thought about the distinctions between religious studies and theological studies and chosen to attend the GTU because it is one of those places where people struggle with such matters. Others of you, especially those preparing for the ministry, may feel, rather thankfully, that you can ignore such discussions. I think, however, that your experience in seminary, which is designed to make you “learned clergy” as they used to say, initiates you into a new world and sets you up to be boundary

crossers as well. You arrive at seminary, in effect, as natives of your home parishes who have been sent away to school for professional training and formation as priests, ministers, and lay leaders. When you return to your parish or someplace like it, you will most likely no longer experience yourself as the “native” lay person that you once were. Indeed, the deconstruction and reconstruction that the typical seminarian undergoes while in school ritually separates you from what you once were and initiates you into a new role. In the process, you will gain what some anthropologists have referred to as a “multiplex subjectivity,” that is a subjective sense of identification with more than one community and, as a result, a sense that you are no longer completely and fully just one thing.⁶ Most of us, whether clergy or academics, have multiple shifting identities – professional and personal - that surface to varying degrees in different contexts. Like persons moving across cultures, we, adopt different roles, play by different rules, and fulfill different obligations in each of these different contexts. Many of us, I suspect, take this for granted and know how to do this, without necessarily spending a lot of time reflecting on how we do this or what marks the boundaries between one role and the other.

Today I want to focus on how we do this. What marks the boundary between insider and outsider status? How do we shift from one role to the other? In formulating these questions, I am making two moves: First, I am moving away from static metaphors of place and identity. Second, I am adopting a performance metaphor that carries with it the idea of movement between roles that can be learned or cultivated. In making the first move, I am taking to heart Tom Tweed’s criticism of Orsi’s depiction of the scholar of religion as occupying an “in-between place.” Though I like the general direction that

Orsi is taking, I agree with Tweed that this way of formulating it is too static. As Tweed puts it, “any theory of interpretation that stills the ongoing process [of interpretation] by locating the scholar in *any* fixed position – here or there, inside or outside, even between – misrepresents scholarly practice.”⁷

While Tweed’s stress on motion is helpful, his formulation lacks a sense of the sort of self that can in fact move or cross between positions or cultural worlds. I think that Narayan’s concept of “multiplex subjectivities” provides a helpful basis for thinking about selves in motion. In shifting from a spatial to a performance metaphor, I want to suggest that the in-between “place” described by Orsi and others is better understood as a role that can be cultivated than a location or even a movement, through the role may involve cultivating the ability to move across boundaries or the ability to hold different perspectives in tension.⁸ It is precisely the movement between different socio-cultural worlds that gives rise to the performance of different roles, the appropriation of different identities, and the emergence of the “multiplex subjectivity” described by Narayan.

Thus, following Narayan’s lead, I want to ground a more dynamic understanding of role of the scholar and the process of constructing and negotiating the boundaries between religious and theological studies in a more complex and dynamic understanding of the self. To paraphrase Narayan, I want to consider the effect that moving from a paradigm grounded in fixed distinctions between insiders and outsiders, scholars and subjects to one premised on the “shifting identifications and interpenetrating communities and power relations”⁹ would have on how we conceptualize and negotiate the boundaries between academic disciplines (such as theological and religious studies), on the one hand, and religious traditions, on the other. I will argue that we can use the decision of

whether or not to define key terms as a means of signaling our status as insiders or outsiders (or more broadly as engaged with or detached from) an academic discipline or a religious tradition. Using the act of definition as a marker, it is easy to view insider and outsider statuses as roles rather than as fixed identities and to envision how we might cultivate the ability to move between different roles in various contexts. Finally, I will suggest that the crucial distinction between the various disciplines and traditions lies in the sorts of persons each is trying to form. I will argue that formation, whether academic or religious, is premised on an act of definition and, as such, is limited to those who are engaged with (or insiders to) the discipline or tradition in question.

The Role of Definition

So to begin, I want to argue that the decision whether or not to define key terms marks the boundary between the inside and the outside of a discipline or a tradition. By key terms, I mean what others have referred to as “constitutive terms,” that is the terms without which the discipline or tradition in question would not exist. The constitutive term for the study of religion is “religion.” The constitutive term for the study of spirituality is “spirituality.” For the study of history, it’s “history.” And so on. I think that with respect to traditions the situation is quite parallel. The constitutive term for Christianity is “Christian.” In other words, for Christianity to exist as a living tradition, we have to ask “what does it mean to be a Christian?” Likewise for (say) Presbyterianism to exist as a living tradition, we have to ask “what does it mean to be Presbyterian?” Or for Judaism, Jewish; or Islam, Muslim, and so on.

With respect to academic disciplines, Tom Tweed has argued that “scholars have a role-specific obligation to define constitutive disciplinary terms: *art* for art history,

music for musicology, *literature* for literary studies, *culture* for anthropology, *space* for geography, and *language* for linguistics.” Scholars of religion, he insists, have a role specific obligation to define “religion.”¹⁰ Scholars of spirituality, in so far as they view the study of spirituality in disciplinary terms, have by extension a role-specific obligation to define spirituality. Choosing not to define key terms locates us outside the discipline in question. As a corollary, we can say that religious practitioners do something analogous with respect to the traditions they practice. Explicitly through teachings, legal rulings, and confessions and implicitly through the performance of practices, practitioners define what it means to be inside or outside of a tradition.

Critics of a discipline or tradition, intent on reforming or undercutting it, may define its constitutive terms for their purposes as well. Sociologists may define religion in terms of society and incorporate it into the discipline of sociology. Others argue that religion should be defined as an aspect of culture and the study of religion subsumed into cultural studies. Reformers within a tradition may attempt to redefine doctrine or practice, sometime changing the course of a tradition and other times finding themselves defined by others as heretics or outsiders. The insider-outsider distinction loses its usefulness when the nature of the discipline or tradition is being challenged or the boundaries of the discipline or tradition contested, that is, in situations of conflict. At these points, who counts as an insider or an outsider is up for grabs. It is at this point that I find it helpful to substitute the terms “detached” and “engaged.” Those who are fighting over *how to define* a tradition or discipline (and thus over who should be considered as insiders and who as outsiders) are all, nonetheless, engaged in offering definitions of the key terms that make, remake or dissolve the boundaries of the discipline or tradition in

question. Those who refrain from defining the constitutive terms that are being fought over as can be characterized as “detached” from the discipline or tradition in question.

Detachment vs. Engagement

By detached, I mean to suggest a historical approach that attempts to analyze and observe the making (and unmaking) of phenomena (experiences, movements, traditions, etc.) over time. Such an approach does not begin with its own definition of the phenomena in question, but works with the definitions of those who are actively engaged with making or unmaking the phenomena in question. It is, thus, “detached” in the sense that it does not attempt to define (or “make”) the phenomena, even if only for heuristic purposes. This is a posture of asceticism or restraint, which should not be confused with objectivity, as if the scholar had no commitments or social location. Detachment, in this sense, signals the intention to cultivate a posture of non-alignment (outsiderness) that brings serious, sympathetic and critical attention to the claims of those who are invested positively or negatively in the phenomena in question.

The engaged or insider approach, by way of contrast, does define its constituent terms. In doing so, it engages, however minimally, in “making” (or “unmaking”) the phenomena in question. It may do so only for heuristic purposes (i.e., conceptually or strategically) or with the more robust goal of “making” (or “unmaking”) persons through processes of formation. Most scholars of religion, especially those in departments of religion, invest a certain amount of energy building up “religious studies” as a field or discipline. Engagement, however, may be non- or anti-religious as well as religious. Scholars may actively or passively promote secularity by reducing religion to non-religious terms. Engaged approaches, thus, may be informed by religious or secular

definitions and/or theories of religion.¹¹ Engaged approaches may be particularly appropriate, as Steve Prothero argues, “in the rough and tumble of the real world,” where, as he discovered, interviewers really want to know how we feel about what we are studying.

In an engaged posture, whether religious or non-religious, our concern is with what *we* think about religion or spirituality; in a detached posture, our concern is with what *others* think about religion or spirituality. In a detached mode, we allow a full-range of competing voices -- religious, spiritual, and secular -- on to the page.¹² Our role as teacher or author or religious leader in this mode is to chair the debate, to interrogate and to clarify without taking sides. Umpires and moderators exemplify the detached mode. Teaching, speaking, or writing in an engaged mode, we take a stand, make a case, or offer an opinion. Preachers, debaters, and columnists exemplify the engaged mode.¹³

While we might assume that scholars who are themselves religious will necessarily approach the study of religion or the study of a particular tradition from a religious (that is, engaged) perspective, I see no reason why this should necessarily be the case. All scholars – indeed anyone -- can or should be able to step back, when appropriate, to allow others to define “religion” or “spirituality” and make what others deem to be religious or spiritual the object of their study or consideration. This is the basis for my own claim that it is possible for me to be a Catholic and to teach Catholic Studies at a public university from a detached or outsider point of view. In suggesting that this is a desirable approach to take in a Department of Religious Studies, I am tacitly taking a stand with respect to what it means to do “religious studies.” I am thus *engaged* in the making of religious studies and in discussions of what it means (or should mean) to

teach religious studies, on the one hand, and *detaching* myself from the making of Catholicism by focusing on what assorted *others* believe that it means to be Catholic. This, I would argue as a scholar of religion, is how I think Catholic Studies *should be* positioned within a secular, publicly funded department of religion. This does not mean, however, that I can never speak as a Catholic in the classroom. Just as a committee chair can step out of the role of chair and address a question as a faculty member, so too we may want to cultivate our ability to switch roles or voices in the classroom or in our written work. If we flag these shifts in role as we make them, the shifts will allow us to clarify the distinction between detached and engaged postures and in doing so model a more reflexive approach to scholarship.

Definition and Formation

If both scholars and religious leaders can adopt either an engaged or a detached stance and even switch between them as they desire, what would this then suggest about the boundaries between theological and religious studies or the classical theological disciplines and the arts of ministry or the study of spirituality and spiritual formation? I want to suggest that the boundary between these paired concepts lies not in underlying oppositions such as engagement/detachment or theory/practice or forming/not forming persons, but rather in the question of *who we are forming for what end* or, to put it another way, *what we are trying to make*. When I am teaching Catholic Studies in a Religion Department, I am not only participating in the making of religious studies, I am also participating in the formation of students in the liberal arts, in the humanities, and in the discipline of religious studies. My aim in that context is not to form Catholics.

To put this more generally, students may pursue the study of religion within programs in secular universities that have no connection to processes of religious or spiritual formation. In doing so, they enter into a process of academic formation under the direction of academic insiders whose insider status is established by academic traditions (i.e., degrees, promotions, tenure) rather than through participation in specific religious or spiritual traditions. Conversely, the task of forming persons religiously or spiritually may be taken up by the traditions and reflected on by persons formed within those traditions independent of processes of academic formation.

Theological schools that aim to combine processes of academic and religious or spiritual formation occupy a complicated institutional middle ground. Here again, I think a consideration of who we are forming for what ends is more helpful in revealing the underlying distinctions than (say) the traditional dichotomy between theory and practice. Thus, I would argue that the “classical theological disciplines” – that is Biblical Studies, Church History, and Systematic Theology – can be understood as forming students as theologians – in the broad sense of the term. In so far as these fields have been cross-fertilized by the secular disciplines of religious studies or history this traditional formative agenda has sometimes become obscured. Nonetheless, I would argue that all these disciplines *as theological disciplines* have theology rather than religion or spirituality or history as their constitutive term. The Master of Divinity degree combines the classical theological disciplines with preparation in the arts of ministry. These arts – preaching, counseling, worship, etc. – all have a theoretical, historical, and academic component. They are not simply “practical” disciplines. I would argue that when taken together with the classical disciplines in the context of the M.Div., their aim is to form

ministers and not simply theologians. The constitutive term for the M.Div. is thus ministry, which includes, but is not limited to, theology.

So what then can we say about the study of spirituality? Looking at it from an outsider's point of view, the amazing thing about the concept of spirituality is its ubiquity and ability to take on different forms in different contexts. Some would define it as a subset of theology, some as a subset of theological studies broadly defined and thus as a nascent theological discipline. Others would define it as a central component of ministry and thus, under the rubric of spiritual direction, as an art of ministry. Others would define it as a central component of all religions and thus as an aspect of religious studies. Still others would define it as prior to religion and resist its capture by any institution or program. Wherever you may stand on the definitional question, if you are defining it, you are *engaged* to some degree in the *making* or *unmaking* of spirituality. If you refrain from defining it, locating yourself (say) as a historian, you can stand back from the fray and track the twists and turns of the debate.¹⁴

Conclusion

While detachment is often held up as a virtue within religious studies and engagement as a virtue within theological studies, this use of the terms condenses implied meanings in ways I have tried to unpack. Detachment as it is typically used in the context of religious studies means detached from the overt promotion of a particular religious tradition. Engagement in the context of theological studies signals commitment to the promotion of a particular, presumably religiously-informed, ideal. I have argued that if we understand engagement and detachment more generically in relation to defining or not defining the constitutive terms of a discipline or tradition, then it becomes evident

that scholars and religious leaders can assume *either* a detached or an engaged posture relative to their discipline or tradition depending on their aims and circumstances. We can decide situationally whether to define key concepts such as religion, spirituality, theology, and ministry or sit back and track how others are defining them. Either stance has its strengths and liabilities. Each allows us to see some things while obscuring others. The key is to figure out what we want to see under any given circumstances.

I would argue that modeling both detachment and engagement in the classroom allows us to do more complicated things in both theological schools and departments of religious studies. From a common commitment to modeling detachment and engagement, departments of religion can incorporate methods and viewpoints, which, if pursued exclusively, might threaten to undercut the overarching ideal of refraining from advocating particular religious viewpoints. Conversely, from a common commitment to engagement and detachment, theological educators might be able incorporate methods and viewpoints, which, if pursued exclusively, might threaten the theological school's overall commitment to Christian engagement.

In this talk, I have sought to shift the way we think about negotiating the boundaries between religious studies and theological studies by replacing a metaphor of place (where are we standing?) with a metaphor of performance (what role are we playing?). While I would argue that this shift moves the discussion forward, the performance metaphor raises questions of its own. In reflecting on an earlier draft of this talk, Doug Burton-Christie asked how we might think about the question of integrity in relation to multiplex selves.¹⁵ I think that talk of multiplex selves, fluid identities, movement between roles naturally raise questions about integrity. We associate

performances with playing a part and, thus, with the imagined, the inauthentic, or the unreal. We associate multiplicity with fragmentation of the self and psychopathology. Some psychologists, however, distinguish between pathological and healthy forms of splitting, arguing that the latter may represent an important developmental step toward more complex forms of relating. Drawing on object relations theory, John Schneider argues that the polarizing effect of splitting “keeps open a clearance for something new to happen from the tension created between the sides ... In healthy splitting, things can be freshly thought about and new thoughts generated.”¹⁶

The performance metaphor might best be seen as means of helping ourselves and others negotiate the movement from a relatively homogeneous environment with a relatively fixed sense of identity to a more complex sense of self capable of negotiating between disparate worlds. While I have found the performance metaphor helpful, especially in teaching, I suspect that what I am groping toward may ultimately have more in common with a deeply internalized interior discipline than with the performance of a role.¹⁷ If that is the case, then both the “attitude of open, disciplined, and engaged attentiveness” that Orsi encourages scholars to cultivate and the self-reflexive movement between detachment and engagement I have advocated here might be profitably probed and extended by comparing them with spiritual disciplines, such as the Jesuit spiritual exercises or Buddhist practices of meditation. That, however, will need to be the subject of another talk.

NOTES

This lecture builds on an earlier essay, "Detachment and Engagement in the Study of 'Lived Experience,'" Spiritus 3 (2003): 186-208 and has benefited from on-going conversations with Steve Prothero, Robert Orsi, Sandra Schneiders, Doug Burton-Christie, and Tom Tweed.

¹ Robert Orsi, Between Heaven and Earth (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 198.

² Stephen Prothero, "Belief Unbracketed: A Case for the Religion Scholar to Reveal More of Where He or She Is Coming From," Harvard Divinity Bulletin 32/2 (Winter/Spring 2004) at <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news/bulletin/articles/prothero.html>.

³ Orsi, "A 'Bit of Judgment'" [one of four responses to "Belief Unbracketed"], Harvard Divinity Bulletin 32/3 (Summer 2004) at http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news/bulletin/articles/orsi_et_al.html.

⁴ Orsi, Between Heaven and Earth, pp. 187-88.

⁵ Kirin Narayan, "How Native is a 'Native' Anthropologist?" American Anthropologist 95 (1993): 671-72.

⁶ Narayan, 676, quoting Rosaldo 1989:168-95.

⁷ Thomas A. Tweed, "On Moving Across: Translocative Religion and the Interpreter's Position," JAAR 70/2 [June 2002]: 272. The importance of "crossing" or "movement" in understanding the interpreter's position is integral to the work of Thomas Tweed and brought out in his critique of Orsi (see Tweed, 269-70).

⁸ Some scholars of religion have argued for the usefulness of metaphors of role or voice in thinking about "neutrality" in the study of religion. Peter Donovan argues that the best way to conceive of neutrality in the study of religion is by analogy to the role neutrality expected of a committee chair, judge, or umpire. David Hufford argues that impartiality is a matter of voice. Cf. Peter Donovan, "Neutrality in Religious Studies," in Russell T. McCutcheon, ed., The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion (London & New York: Cassell, 1999), 238-43; David Hufford, "Reflexivity in Belief Studies," in McCutcheon, The Insider/Outsider Problem, 297-98.

⁹ Narayan, 671-72.

¹⁰ Thomas A. Tweed, Crossing and Dwelling (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, forthcoming 2006), quote taken from mss chapter titled "Sacrosapes," pp. 1-2.

¹¹ In lumping together those secular scholars who employ stipulative or taxonomic definitions of religion for heuristic purposes with those who espouse explicit theological commitments, I am taking sides with Arnal in a current debate among the more secularly oriented scholars of religion. Disagreement focuses, to a large extent, on how these scholars assess the implications of Talal Asad's work (The Genealogy of Religion) for the study of religion, cf. William E. Arnal, "Definitions," in Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds., Guide to the Study of Religion (London & New York: Cassell, 2000), 30-33 and Russell McCutcheon, Manufacturing Religion (New York: Oxford, 1997), 133-34.

¹² What I am calling detachment could be redescribed as a form of neutrality if neutrality is understood (1) in terms of refraining from defining that which is the object of one's inquiry; (2) as a role rather than a fixed posture or identity; and (3) as a posture of asceticism that can be learned, cultivated, and executed with varying degrees of sophistication or competence, much as one learns to umpire a game or moderate a discussion.

¹³ Tom Tweed: "[T]his seems to imply they stand somewhere "neutral" to do the chairing or adjudicating?" AT: Yes, they/we can cultivate a posture of neutrality that is again role specific and defined by the context. An umpire is neutral relative to the competing parties in ways that are defined by the larger concept of the sport; a moderator is neutral relative to the panelists or

debaters again in ways that are role specific and defined by the rules of the presentation or debate format.

¹⁴ Tom Tweed: “[D]oesn’t every scholar have to do some defining of key terms to some extent and so are not all engaged, in your terms? This might be a central objection to your thesis?” AT: We are all undoubtedly engaged somewhere, but I am suggesting we aren’t necessarily engaged everywhere. As a historian I can stand back from the debate over how to define spirituality. As a historian I would have a role specific obligation in your terms to define what I mean by history, though I have to say I’ve never actually bothered doing that ..., but from that (engaged) vantage point as a historian I could maintain a detached posture vis-à-vis spirituality. If I was trying to “do” spirituality or contribute to “spirituality studies”, I’d need to define it. If I, as a historian, was trying to write a history of “the making of spirituality studies” I not only would not need to define spirituality but indeed should avoid defining it so that I could track the shifting boundaries proposed by those attempting to “make” it.

¹⁵ Personal email communication, September 7, 2005.

¹⁶ John A. Schneider, “Working with pathological and healthy forms of splitting: A case study,” Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic 67/1 (2003): 32 ff.

¹⁷ On the related issue of the academic study of religion as a “secular spiritualities,” see Robert Cummings Neville, “The Emergence of Historical Consciousness,” in Peter van Ness, ed., Spirituality and the Secular Quest (New York: Crossroad, 1996) and my comments on Neville in Ann Taves, “Detachment and Engagement in the Study of ‘Lived Experience,’” Spiritus 3 (2003): 204-205