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Going Full Karen: I Want to Speak to the Manager of Religion

Now is the winter of our discontent, Steinbeck wrote, borrowing from William Shakespeare's *Richard III*. I went from being somewhat naïvely trusting of my heroes of religious theory to becoming alarmed and saddened by unraveling new revelations this winter. The skeleton of religious study had cancerous tumors in its bones, I wondered "How is it still alive with all this malignancy? How can it propel itself forward with the weight of it all?" Winter term as a Religious Studies major hit me like a snowball full of rocks: pretty, white, and clean on the outside; dangerous, sharp, and dirty on the inside. Two things must be addressed: the stench of racism and colonialism within religious studies and the need for a paradigm of how we balance problematic theorists against their theories.

When you start studying religion for real, in a Methods and Theories course in college, you might very well become enamored with the bread-and-butter theories of Durkheim, Geertz, Otto, Orsi, Weber, and maybe even Freud. These are the foundational ideas of theory that you come to know as familiar and exciting. It is your first opportunity to push back against ideas that do not sit well over historical time periods, and it is where you get to sharpen your incisors on fundamental concepts of what it means to study religion in academia. During this time, you feel the weighted blanket of religious theory pressing on you, giving you comfort and confidence in your scholarship. You might think "This is what I came here for! I really understand where I fit in this community! This is so nice." Later on, you will study Lincoln, Frankfurter, Asad, Masuzawa, McCutcheon, and Vasquez, where you meet your best,

imperfect heroes and be brought back to reality with a crashing thud. This was the beginning of my self-reflection and my responsibility in my chosen field.

It is not my intent in this paper to argue religious theory. Instead, I want to express how deeply these theories affected me. The theories themselves stand tall in the field and are there to underline exactly my observations as both participant and viewer in this course. I am only addressing the myriad epiphanies I had during my scholarship. I will save the problematic theorist (as an example) for later in this essay.

Let us start with Talal Asad¹. He almost openly calls Clifford Geertz a white supremacist, holding Christianity above all other religions as the supreme authority as to who defines religion². Asad explains that we have to consider historical context when interpreting symbols, and that means that sometimes we should not be interpreting them at all. Whites have the *caucasity* to categorize what is and is not an authentic religion. We cannot seem to read the room, and instead seem to more enjoy our ability to be completely tone deaf to black and brown religions. Well, my colleagues and I were up in arms about Asad telling us what we can and cannot study. It met with a lot of push back and whining and puling, and I include myself as one of the puling. Is my white bias that visible to others? Of course, it is, and it came out wielding a white savior sword, wanting to cut through the line that Asad was drawing. *How dare he tell a white woman what I am allowed to do!* I became the tone-deaf problem, and if I can see this as a woman and continue my behavior of bias, how can I even expect my male cohort to change? Asad was the first of our theorists to ask us to acknowledge who was holding power, leading us gently into how white supremacy molds religions to adhere to its apprehension of appropriateness.

¹ Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

² This was part of my discussion post from Asad week.

Bruce Lincoln and David Frankfurter³ continue the explanation of abuse of religious power and how it is used to demonize smaller, local religions, isolating them as the enemy of white Christian patriarchy⁴. We see that marginalized religions are a threat to the religious status quo and are asked to remember that the Church claimed authority as protector, at the same time acting as chief conspiracy creator. Funny how we use threats against white babies to mobilize the masses to commit war, murder, and genocide but still claim a pristine, innocent motivation to do harm to the Other. We eat these conspiracy theories up like Captain Crunch (a white colonialist wearing a uniform). It so bothers us when people pray to a different god with a different ideology. Someone is using our symbols and *they are getting away with it!* Women and indigenous people and black and brown people are an evil to be rooted out, the Church demands. Their differences are so counter-cultural to our love of racism that we call these groups “monsters”, and monsters are a lethal threat.

Lincoln and Frankfurter want religious scholars to employ critical inquiry to reveal what is really lurking under the surface in religion. I remember feeling upset again, that only those within the culture are allowed to write on it. We should be treating other cultures with respect, at least that is what we say out loud, but it feels like appropriation to write about what we are not a part of. Masuzawa⁵ introduces the demand to utilize critical reflection by religious studies students to identify and understand our own biases, so that we can dissect where our responsibilities lie in how Christianity categorizes other religions. White colonialists are professionals at cultural appropriation, Masuzawa tells us. Here is

³ Lincoln, Bruce. *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions*. Chicago, [Illinois]; London, [England]: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Frankfurter, David. *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Ritual Abuse in History*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006

⁴ Reading Response, Lincoln/Frankfurter.

⁵ Masuzawa, Tomoko. *The Invention of World Religions, or How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

another line drawn, not in sand, but in concrete, that we are not allowed to cross as scholars, and boy, we white folks do not like to be told what to do.

The big guns landed on our religious studies beach during our week with Russell McCutcheon⁶. This was the pivotal moment in my awakening. For McCutcheon, religion does not exist outside of human experience and is not special unto itself. He calls out the charting of religions on a scale, one that we have made to reflect our white privilege, to decide each religions importance in comparison to Christianity. This charting only manufactures and defines religion and provides nothing beneficial to anyone other than the scale-makers. Most importantly, McCutcheon challenges the immunity that religious studies claims for itself, describing the protective bubble that it has installed to prevent any external (or internal) criticism. He reveals the sharing of power between the Church and religious theorists, exposing our tendency to romanticize ourselves, being people of special privilege. Our religious studies community is, and always has been, *untouchable*.

What have I done, I thought? Every bit of my soul felt that because I am a perpetuator of yet *another* bias, now clearly understood. My heroes and my theorist mentors of my first term, everyone I put on a lofty pedestal, was now I joined them in the muddy, messy dirt. I had made them *precious*, and they did not deserve it. It was a revelation to me that I had been doing the same thing all my senior year of undergrad. These theorists that I held so impenetrable to criticism or even scorn were just *people*. Religious studies was just another field of academia. I was a pretender of the push-back, a beard, and a shield.

I started mourning the loss of my flawed mentors, angry that I allowed myself to diverge from reality, especially as a philosopher who should know better. I never had a problem stating that

⁶ McCutcheon, Russell T. *Manufacturing Religion the Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Emmanuel Kant was a racist, but now I had to admit that Eliade was a racist. I was mad at Dr. Koehlinger for pulling off my beautiful blinders. I was mad at my fellow classmates for not cluing me in faster than I could do it myself. I was mad at myself for not realizing that everyone is fair game, even my adored, sacred Religious Studies. What is it about Religious Studies that we feel so territorial about protecting it? Why do we feel we have to protect instead of attack like we do everything else? Religion attacks other religions. Why do I feel so protective, especially when I am not religious? What is sacred anymore? Isn't it exactly this, my chosen path? The answer is no. This is neither sacred, nor precious. I formed my own protective bubble around Religious Studies, preventing it from scrutinization and complaint, yet I was so shocked that McCutcheon would claim something so outlandish and blasphemous. I am guilty of providing this exact protection when, at the same time, I insist the protection does not exist. What a hypocrite I am! Speaking critically about religion and calling out its structure of racism and white supremacy demand fulsome discussion. Institutions larger than me have tried to keep it safe, but it is time for it to grow up and stand on its own merit. To sprint or to fall. We have to get out of our own way and stop making Religious Studies what it is not. It is not precious. It is fair game.

Speaking of fair game, I move to the issue of how to approach problematic religious theorists and/or their theories. I make no claim as to knowledge of personal history of each of the theorists I discussed previously (and part of me does not want to know). I can point to only one, Manuel Vasquez⁷, and boy, is he a doozy. First, his theory, and this is important because this begs the question I will offer later: which should we know first? The theorist or the theory?

I loved Vasquez' theory. He pushes for embodiment, asks us to include lived experiences of humanity and their nuances in religion, and reminds us to remember the theorists that came before us,

⁷ Vasquez, Manuel A. *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion*, Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2010.

paying respect to those who trailblazed religious studies territory for us to be able to do our work now. Lovely, is it not? Inclusionary, diverse, and honorable. I was impressed with his ability to reroute religion back to its practitioners, returning to them their rightful power. And then the shoe dropped. Not a shoe, per se, but a fricking 50-lb boot. Vasquez did a very bad thing in his personal life. It was a “yikes” that out-yiked every yike ever yiked. There is no need to describe this bad act, only to say that it made me hate his theory. How could I possibly appreciate the theory when I knew the theorist was a pariah? And *there is the rub*. The very best part of us in this community is our ability to trust one another. The very worst part of us is our susceptibility to dangerous rhetoric or people. How do we juxtapose someone’s flaws and their greatness? I felt helpless to both.

Looking at theories versus problematic people, their actions, and being critical of them must say something about who I am as a person. Maybe I am afraid to see my own problematic ingrained racism. It is so much easier to project my same flaws onto others and then clutch my pearls when reflected back at me. I know that the world is messy so why have I fought so hard against seeing how truly messy religious studies is, and why am I feeling such a drive to try and clean it up? Am I telling myself to clean up my own nature too? Is this my subconscious spurring into protective action? What if I write something great in the future, but someone finds out that I was a crappy mom sometimes, or someone who made terrible choices in my lifetime? Will my reputation as a human being be torn apart because of my bad-faith actions once upon a time? How do we separate the theorist from the theory, and should it be done? Can I do it in an ethical way? Where is the line that cannot be crossed when pushing back against a theorist? Rape? Sexual harassment? Murder? If I ignore these things about a theorist, am I complicit? Theories, for me, are like giving birth to a baby: it is yours to begin with, to nurture and cultivate, but once it is out in the world, it thrives or dies on its own. Are the sins of the mother paid for by the child?

For someone so concerned about the reputation of my field, I feel that there has come a time for a reckoning within the Religious Studies community, but where is the room for redemption? We must use our hearts, reason, and ethics to determine who is worth redeeming: the theorist, the theory, or the community that embraces them both. Or all of them, perhaps? What if they do not want redemption? Do we address that as well? Thank the gods for Robert Orsi⁸, our palette cleanser theorist, whom I think got us all through Fall and Winter terms. He was our comfort when we were uncomfortable, and our constant source of hidey holes to shelter in when things got intimately ugly. I dogmatically exclude Orsi from the bursting of the protective bubble around religious studies, for now. Give me that life raft until I get my swimming legs again.

This was the year of a global pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, the rise of American white supremacy, a historical election, historical fires, historical ice storms, a bloody insurrection at our Nation's Capitol, a Presidential inauguration, and real-time domestic terrorism attacks against people of color, so this amalgamation of religious study was a "come-to-Jesus moment" for me (without the Christ). It was life-changing, momentous, and humbling for who I am as a Religious Studies scholar. I still stand in a densely packed forest, looking for the path in identifying who I am within that field, and how I can personally enact change in pinpointing my own biases and unlearning those things that impact my own problematic nature. I am both the Karen and the Manager in this narrative, and sometimes, I need to see myself out.

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⁸ Orsi, Robert A. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, Princeton University Press, 2006.

