
Seeking Guidance: One Student's Critical Reflection on using the *Guide to the Study of Religion*

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From the professorial perspective, Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon's *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London/New York: Cassell, 2000) might be seen as a collection of accumulated knowledge, a distillation of many scholars' ideas and experiences up to this moment. From the student's perspective, though, the title of the book tends to be taken much more literally: a text like this truly is our guide to future explorations of the field of religious studies. If Professor Desjardins has used the book as a lens through which to focus broad knowledge into the constraints of the limited classroom, we as his students have used it as a lens through which to project our limited knowledge onto the broader academic field. From this perspective, then, it is important to examine the *Guide* as a directive tool: where does it lead students? What information and ideas does it present to help us on our journey towards knowledge, and how does it present them? If it is a map or guide, how does it represent the field; or if it is a lens, on what does it focus?

What follows is my personal struggle to work through these questions, trying to reconcile my hopes and expectations for the book with what it actually accomplished for me. First, I look at the titles of the book and its chapters, and what they promise to reveal, then I ask whether the promises are kept. Second, I extend my musing on the titles to ask on what path the *Guide* proposes to take me, what particu-

lar direction of study it promotes. In the third section, I look at how the book presents the field of religious studies in relation to other disciplines. The final section explores how the book presents religious studies in relation to religious experience. These last two topics are particularly salient with respect to my classmates' exploration of the text, because many students had personal links both to other departments in the university and to various religious institutions in the outside world. We had to rethink many of these links as we worked through the book.

Because this paper is a discussion of the aspects of the *Guide* with which my classmates and I struggled, some negative overtones were unavoidable. What I want to make clear before I start, however, is that Professor Desjardins' class and the *Guide* presented me with challenges that were exciting and stimulating. Even the sometimes-frustrating density of the text proved valuable and, when the class was able to work through especially difficult passages, the sense of accomplishment was rewarding. I truly enjoyed the opportunities that we had to contact the scholars who wrote and edited the book. The chance to put faces (and personalities) to the names behind the text was particularly exciting. Students generally have little or no contact with scholars other than our own professors and the chance to interact with other academics in the field was certainly welcomed. I want to be absolutely clear, therefore, that my classmates and I benefited from our struggles with the text. This paper, however, deals specifically with the challenges we faced and our reactions to them.

Titles

Let me begin at the very beginning of the book: the title *Guide to the Study of Religion*. A guide is, in everyday speech, a book that tells people how to do something. A travel guide tells one where to stay and what to see; a field guide tells one how to identify plants or animals; a do-it-yourself guide tells one how to build or fix something. If Braun and McCutcheon's *Guide* is a manual of this sort, then it must likewise give some sort of directions on how to do something. This is the first site of confusion, because the book seems to have a double intention. It is, at

once, a “guide to the study / of religion” and a “guide / to the study of religion.” In the first instance, it attempts to instruct readers in how to study “religion,” while in the second it tries to teach readers about the “academic study” of religion. This double approach results in a potentially skewed and unbalanced history of the discipline, because that history is constructed in order to lead to a recommended approach to study.

On the topic of titles, the chapter headings in the *Guide* are also significant. The one- or two-word titles have a totalizing effect: they lay claim to a vast knowledge and authority, appearing to encompass entire subject areas. In reality, of course, the individual chapters have quite narrowly defined topics, which occupy only a fraction of the area indicated by the headings. For instance, take Tomoko Masuzawa’s essay, “Origin.” This title could indicate (and indeed, various members of my class assumed that it *did* indicate) religious ideas about origin, creation stories, the origin of particular religious beliefs, the origin of entire specific religions, the origin of religion in general, or the origin of religious studies. The chapter, as it turns out, could be more accurately entitled “Theoretical Concepts of the Origin of Religion in Modern Western Academic Religious Studies.” Other chapter titles are as broad, and chapter contents as narrow. The net result of these universalizing, totalizing titles (including the title of the book) was considerable confusion on the part of my fellow students regarding exactly what the authors and editors were trying to accomplish, and reflection on how categories dictate results and expectations.

Pointing *the* Way

The most obvious effect of the titles, and of the accompanying essays, was a claim to the “right” way to study religion (or to study religious studies). What was this way? Much of our class discussion of the text centred on this very question, as we attempted to uncover the veiled (sometimes vague) structure of the *Guide*’s proposals for study. The question of modern vs. postmodern perspectives was one of the major topics in our debates. I present it here as an example of our struggle to delineate the directions that the *Guide* presented.

In video-teleconference sessions with the class, both McCutcheon and Braun shied away from discussions of postmodernism, preferring instead the solidity of modernism. At the same time, however, they and many of the contributors used a significant amount of postmodernist rhetoric (e.g., terms like “self-reflection” were commonplace in our discussions) and called on numerous postmodern thinkers in their analyses (e.g., Roland Barthes merited at least eight separate citations, and Michel Foucault at least nine). Perhaps the most postmodern aspect of the book was the premise, made clear, for instance, in William E. Arnal’s essay “Definition,” that religion cannot be defined and may not be a particularly useful category. In our class, there were several students who immediately rejected any further claims the book would make because this seemed like such a ridiculous if not impossible way to begin a book of this sort. I will return to these classmates and their struggles with their own religious viewpoints later, but for now I merely wish to draw attention to the clash between modernist and postmodernist impulses in the text.

Lest I sound too negative, let me be clear here that this tension is not all bad. Though problematic in any single work, it does serve to alert students (in a very subtle way) to the need for all scholars in the field to negotiate their own balances between the two schools. Such subtle indications of the state of the larger academy are common in the *Guide*, and they can be very helpful to the observant student. They are not, however, explicitly discussed (at least not with respect to the *Guide* itself). So, to many students the tensions and difficulties remained largely problems within the book itself, rather than signposts to debates in the wider field. It has been a revelation for me to come to recognize that there is a vast array of middle-of-the-road positions between the extremes of modernism and postmodernism—and that most scholars dwell in this middle ground—yet this has been a realization reached largely on my own. Texts like the *Guide*, along with many introductory courses, tend to classify academics in either one extreme position or the other. They provide strong examples of each position to delineate the differences clearly, which is necessary in the early stages of familiarization with the concepts. This text, however, is obviously aimed at a more advanced readership, and a more nuanced discussion

of the spectrum of positions would have been helpful in explaining the tensions and clarifying the potential for variety within the discipline.

Interdisciplinarity

Another example of these indicators is the book's (and the academy's) claim to interdisciplinarity. My initial clue to this was Braun's introductory essay, "Religion," in which he claims a "naturalistic, anthropological and sociological" study of religion. As a joint Honours student in both Religion and Culture *and* Anthropology, I was immediately on the alert for references to anthropology, looking for ways to link my two programs of study. What I saw surprised me. There are references to James George Frazer, Bronislaw Malinowski, Franz Boas, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, among other early- and mid-twentieth century anthropologists, but only a handful of more recent sources are cited. Not to diminish the importance of these early thinkers in the formation of the field, I was bemused to find that many of these thinkers' ideas were still being used as current theories in the *Guide*—anthropology as a discipline having long since built on, expanded, revised, and largely moved away from the original ideas. (I challenged Braun about the anthropological nature of his work in a video teleconference session, and his response was that the fieldwork for this text was done in the religious studies field, studying scholars rather than some other society. Be that as it may, there is no resulting ethnography here! There is no explicit discussion of how the religious studies academy functions, only the obscure indicators such as the ones I am discussing.) The main thing that made the text at all "anthropological" was its emphasis on the human, social level of analysis.

If the contributors do not show evidence of being well versed in their anthropology, I hoped that they might do better with other disciplines, such as sociology or psychology. Again, my classmates and I were surprised. Suffice to say that Durkheim and Weber do not qualify as recent sociologists, nor does Freud seem a particularly current psychologist. Philosophy fares little better; and historians are largely ignored, on the apparent assumption that history is objective and there

is no need to look at its creators. Indeed, the only field outside of religious studies in which the contributors seem well informed of current theory and practice is literary criticism.

What all of this suggests to me, ultimately, is that scholars of religion tend to see the field of religious studies as interdisciplinary, in and of itself. At least, that is the impression I get from reading the *Guide*. It looks as though religious studies paid attention to other disciplines only until they had made definitive splits and moved in separate directions. In the early days of social studies, boundaries were blurred and often transcended by certain important thinkers, but since that time, the fields have grown in distinct directions each developing their own corpus of knowledge and methodologies. This is of course perfectly understandable and, to some extent, even desirable insofar as specialization allows in-depth knowledge. The problem, as I see it, is that not everybody recognizes these new divisions—so we find religious studies scholars who seem to think that they are doing interdisciplinary work, even though they rarely look outside their own field to others as they currently exist. This tells me two things: 1), that there is an enormous range of work being done within religious studies (work that borders on many other disciplines); and 2), that this range of research both expands and restricts the theories and methods available to scholars in their studies. I say expands, because the breadth within the academy allows a wider range of ideas than a more narrowly defined discipline might permit; and restricts, because the extent of ideas available within the academy seems to fool some scholars into thinking that the *complete* range of ideas is represented.

As I puzzle through all of this, one immediate question that arises is whether this restriction is useful or harmful. The negative effects of this ideological restriction are quite apparent: cutting-edge ideas within religious studies are largely unaware of cutting-edge ideas in other fields, and presumably the reverse is also true. The positive aspects are somewhat more difficult to pinpoint, but I would suggest that it might actually be useful to keep some older ideas around for a while. Discarding ideas *too* quickly means that we may not realize their full potential with regard to nuances and possible diverse applications. A good edu-

cation involves familiarity with the classics, as my professors would agree. New ideas need foundations.

The other immediate question that occurs to me is how accurately my conclusions actually represent the religious studies academy. Is the *Guide* leading me to suggest anything really insightful about the larger field, or are its problems in this regard limited to its own pages? I cannot, as a student, draw any final conclusions here, but I can say that in my experience at school I have found a much greater degree of interdisciplinarity in the religious studies department than I observed in the book. That said, the interdisciplinary bridges are far from complete, and some of the tendencies on which I comment here are certainly present in my other classes.

Real Life Religion

My final point concerns without a doubt the most significant aspect of my classmates' interaction with the *Guide*. If we had problems linking the ideas in the book with our other areas of academic study, many people in the class had even greater difficulty linking them with ideas and experiences from their own lives. I think the biggest problem many of my classmates had was reconciling the human-centred model of religion presented in the book with their own beliefs and understandings as religious practitioners. Not everyone in the class was religious; personally, I am an agnostic with a humanistic orientation, so the anthropocentric model was rather less troublesome for me than for many. The book may be a "*Guide to the Study of Religion*," but it does not address the ultimate truths of my friends' religions. Furthermore, putting exotic and familiar religions on the same level for analysis, as the articles sometimes do, normalizes "strange" religion and makes "everyday" religion appear strange and irrational. The discussion of religion as created exclusively by humans directly challenges ideas like divine revelation, showing a striking lack of respect for the very beliefs being studied. Either my classmates were willing to sacrifice their religious beliefs to the "superior" wisdom of the *Guide*, or they were willing to disregard the book to maintain their theologies' consistency. Where the two clashed, most people were far more willing to give up the *Guide*

than they were to surrender (or even suspend) their religious convictions.

To be sure, as students in religious studies we must constantly renegotiate our positions relative to religion, both our own beliefs and those of other people. In one context, we may be a religious practitioner, and in another, a “professionally agnostic” observer. This is a difficult line to tread, yet it is vitally important. The *Guide* does not openly address this issue, which is central to religious studies. It was certainly a major theme for students in our exploration of the text. As a guide to the study of religion and of religious studies, it would have been helpful to address this problem. I know that McCutcheon in particular has a great deal of experience with the question of insider (emic) and outsider (etic) perspectives in religious studies (e.g., his *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion* [New York: Cassell, 1999]), so it surprised me that he did not address this issue more explicitly here.

The re-negotiation of position happens at both a personal level (the individual scholar grappling with his or her own faith) and a broader level involving the entire discipline (the academy distancing itself from, and defining itself against, theology). So much important thought in religious studies seems to be formed in reaction to theology, yet the *Guide* does not really address this factor in the development of the academy.

Part of the problem is that the *Guide* itself rarely touches the experience of religious people. It deals with capital-R Religion (the universal, equivalent to capital-C Culture, as opposed to distinct individual cultures or, in this case, religions), but it almost painstakingly avoids dealing with actual religions, actual customs, actual beliefs. Despite the “anthropological” pretence, the authors rarely speak of fieldwork, or of its text-based equivalents. Religious people scarcely get to speak for themselves—what they do is interpreted for them by the scholars, and only in the most generic and generalized ways. These interpretations largely discount any emic explanations. Instead, they are built of layer upon layer of academic theory. The assertion that religion cannot be defined (and is not a useful category even if it could be) is the ultimate snub to the religious mind, which has no doubt that religion exists.

Of course, academic theory is completely necessary—it is, after all, what academics *do*—and it is even necessary that such theorizing take place apart from religious (theological) thinking. And yes, as students, we must come to realize this, no matter how painful that realization might be for some. I think, however, that the *Guide* takes this separation too far, becoming so thoroughly divorced from religious experience and thought that it rarely seems to take insider explanations (for symbols, for myths, for the functions of religious activity, etc.) into consideration at all. Put simply, if someone tells me that their religion does something for them, I can construct all the theory around it I want, but I can never remove that person's experience of religion. For her or him, religion will still continue to do whatever it was doing before I came along. Surely that experience is as worthy of analysis as anything we can create in the proverbial ivory tower. What does religious studies *do* if it does not study religion?

Conclusion

Ultimately, the image with which the *Guide* leaves me is of an academy so intensely introspective that it has lost contact with the very people and phenomena that it purports to study. Part of the reason for this image, of course, is the second reading of the title that I discussed above: the book is (at least in part) a “guide / to the study of religion,” a retrospective handbook to the history of religious studies theory. I am still left struggling, however, with the other reading of the title, the “guide to the study / of religion.” How can this book point me (and other students) forward to a future in religious studies if it never studies religions or religious individuals?

For the time being, the *Guide* will remain on my bookshelf as a reference for the history of religious studies. It is a good handbook to use for reflecting on the original foundations of the discipline and it also has a very useful bibliography. I will not likely reach for it, though, when I am actually engaged in studying the beliefs and practices of religious individuals; nor will I recommend it to my fellow students as a representation of my chosen area of study. I have learned a great deal from studying it, but much of what I have learned was not intended by

its authors or editors. Sadly, it is largely because of the challenge of preparing this paper that I have struggled as deeply with the text as I have and, I must admit, head hanging low, that without the added incentive for reflection, I might have long since relinquished the *Guide* to the dusty corners of my mind.