
The Blessed Curse of Thought: Theorizing Religion in the Classroom*

Willi Braun
University of Alberta

Michel Desjardins' and Anne Whitcombe's reflections on teaching and learning theoretical thinking on religion, using the *Guide to the Study of Religion* (ed. W. Braun and R. T. McCutcheon; London: Cassell, 2000) as resource, require a much more considered response than I am given time to make. Nonetheless, I am grateful for the opportunity to throw back at least the following fragments, fragments that casually draw on my own three-fold "relationship" to the *Guide*: as editor/contributor, reader and teacher. My aim will not be to defend the *Guide* qua book in a manner of an author protecting his child from a spanking by strangers. Many of the observations that Desjardins and Whitcombe make are spot on: the *Guide*'s prose is indeed "scholarese," as one of my students aptly put it; it is liberally littered with non-everyday terms that will surely consternate many if not most readers;¹ its article entries are uneven in quality and clarity; some arguably important key terms are missing from its roster, though any that I would love to add would not alleviate but accentuate the most substantive difficulties that Desjardins and Whitcombe have with the *Guide*. So, let these features of presentation, in some instances admittedly edito-

* I thank Russell McCutcheon and Johannes Wolfart for conversations and advice during the writing of this response, especially for urging me not to give away an important principle with regard to scholarly language in my apology for terminological potholes in the text of the *Guide* (see note 1).

rial flaws or failures, be stipulated. At this point in the life of this volume I can't think of anything to say or do in response to the observation of editorial infelicities. Desjardins and Whitcombe issue some concerns, however, that have to do with how the *Guide* defines and indexes the study and teaching of religion. It is to these issues of representation that the comments below are aimed.

1. Anthropocentric "Religion" Mood

I begin with Anne Whitcombe's set of remarks on the way the *Guide's* claim to represent a "naturalistic, anthropological and sociological" study of religion is worked out in the volume's essays. Hoping to find ways of linking her two courses of study, religion and anthropology, she was "surprised" to find that the anthropologists regularly cited in the *Guide* come from a roster of famous names from anthropology's past. She was, she says, "bemused to find that many of these thinkers' ideas were still being used as current theories in the *Guide*" at a time when the current discipline of anthropology has "largely moved away from the original ideas" of the founding fathers.² Further gainsaying the *Guide's* representation of its anthropological interest is, writes Whitcombe, that it is devoid of ethnography, of fieldwork notes either from a society other than our own or from the "field" of religious studies itself.

From all this I ferret the point that the *Guide*, and hence its vision for the study of religion, is hardly anthropological in any sense that a modern anthropologist would recognize. I will partially grant the point and whisper—but only whisper—*mea culpa*, and that only by a slight rectification of a term that I, and others, use in the *Guide*. Rather than saying "anthropological" I should have used, and will henceforth use, "anthropocentric," a correction that I gratefully accept from Whitcombe. This correction allows me, on the one hand, to pass over Whitcombe's criticism as more mischievous than substantive and, on the other hand, to underscore not only the *Guide's* core aim, but also my own orientation both in my research and teaching, to pursue the study of religion in consistently and rigorously anthropocentric terms, terms which do not in every instance require of me or every student of

religion to be current and fluent in the disciplinary woofs and warps of anthropology (which anthropology?)—though more rather than less currency and fluency would surely benefit the anthropocentrically-oriented scholar of religion (just as, conversely, more rather than less currency and fluency in theorizing “religion” would benefit the disciplinary anthropologist who studies religious phenomena).

By “anthropocentric” I mean something like the following, loosely paraphrased from my prologue to the *Guide* itself: There is no religion in-it-self apart from people who do things that both those who do them and scholars of religion call “religious,” though with different meanings of the term “religious.” In that sense, religion does not exist; all that exists for our study are people who do things that we classify as “religious.” This entails that the proper object of study consists of the “religious” behaviours of people, a study that consists of description and explanation in general anthropocentric terms. Thus, even when we study objects that in the religious doings of religious people represent themselves as artifacts from the world of the gods, it is *people* who make this representation. For example, as I tell my students who come into my course on the New Testament and other early Christian writings, even when we study the Bible—the “word of god”—we shall be studying the *human motives and means for representing texts (or anything else) as divine rather than human* and the historical, social effects of these representations.

As a teacher of religion I find that this is a crucial pedagogical threshold-step that many students (among which I include some seasoned career-students that, owing to their length of study, come to be called “professors”) find difficult to make and one, therefore, that takes up a significant amount of time in my religion classrooms. This is not the place to meditate on the reasons for this difficulty, except to surmise that they are rooted in two complementary default affects: (1) a general inclination toward idealism which regards ideas as an autonomous realm of “things” apart from social contexts and, therefore, that ideas ought to be examined in their own terms; (2) a general inclination, induced by the forces of our culture, to regard religious ideas in hyper-idealist terms such that we are seduced into a desire for an analytic that is commensurate with religious ideas’ topical orientation to-

ward gods and ghosts and inscrutable human hearts—that is, the topical “its” of religious discourses rather than people and societies that constitute, rationalize, defend, etc., themselves in complex ways by means of these discourses in historically and socially located contexts. The “anthropocentrism” of the *Guide*—which I carry into my teaching venues—in the very least begs for an examination of these idealist affective stances and offers some of the conceptual tools for proceeding with such an examination, and at its strongest, resists severing ideas, even right godly ones, from social provenances and processes. In the end, Whitcombe actually recognizes this. “The main thing,” she writes, “that made the text [the *Guide*] at all ‘anthropological’ was its emphasis on the human social level of analysis.”

Just so! It sounds like the “main” is not very much, but it makes all the difference.³ To paraphrase with reference to theorizing religion a point made by the anthropologist John Comaroff on the relationship between “history” and “anthropology”: A theory of religion which is not at the same time a theory of society (might we also say, *vice versa*?) is hardly a theory at all (Comaroff 1982; see also Comaroff 1992, 13–18). That this must entail that the scholar of religion become a certified ethnographer-anthropologist is not evident to me, if such a “must” is insinuated by Whitcombe. To this should be added, as Anne Whitcombe knows much better than I do, the question: Which ethnography, riding which theory of ethnography? (I would protest a concomitancy between anthropocentric-social study of religion and a certain kind of ethnography, the symbolist-hermeneutic-ethnographic anthropology that Marvin Harris labelled “emic.” On “Emics and Etics” see Harris 1980, 32–41.) It is not clear what is included or excluded in Whitcombe’s notice with regard to “ethnography.” Perhaps it is nothing more than an innocuous nod at the disciplinary convention that a would-be anthropologist has to leave the confines of the academy and describe (literally “write”) an *ethnos* in the “field” before she can be certified as a “real” anthropologist. If so, I really have nothing to say, except to agree with her observation that the *Guide* is devoid of ethnography in the technical anthropological sense, though I think it is possible to read it as a whole, at least on one level, as an “ethnography” of the *ethnos* (guild) of scholars of religion and their practices. If,

however, “ethnography” is short-hand for the view that the scholar must go “native” in a quest for empathetic replication of the epistemologies of adherents to whatever religion the scholar is studying, such that the scholar is then in a position to speak *for*, perhaps speak *the* (no preposition needed) adherent, then it is I who gets nervous. This kind of ethnographic motive—which, by the way, is the legacy of the so-called phenomenological approach that continues to dominate much of Religious Studies, currently often under transmuted terms such as “postcolonialism,” “indigeneity” and “alterity” (recognizing, of course, that these terms are themselves divergently thought and contested)—strikes me as suspect for two reasons. First, no amount of ethnography, however empathetic, will fulfill the desires which motivate it, that is, the desires of the ethnographer to know not only what but exactly *how* the informant knows what he or she knows. Second, to persist nonetheless in the quest for an intersubjective convergence between ethnographer/anthropologist and native/informer such that the former might then be able to ventriloquate the subjectivity of the latter strikes me as conceit bordering on hubris. So, I don’t go there. Rather, I use the term “ethnography” as a general short-hand for “gathering information (data)” and specifically to gather the kind of information that is not available to the scholar except by ethnographic techniques such as observation and interviewing.

2. Bad-Ass (?) “Attitude”

The *Guide*’s “attitude”—more or less reconveyed in the paragraph above!—is remarked both by Desjardins and by Whitcombe, each doing so with an apparent, though differently articulated, nervousness. Desjardins characterizes the *Guide*’s discourse with reference to “gnosticism,” which I take to be in part a metaphor for the discourse’s self-sure certainty about its own superior sight of things, an Apollonian “god’s-eye” (my term) vantage point from which it can pronounce a diagnosis of the ills of past and current theorizing of religion, and from which it can offer curative *gnosis* for good health of the Religious Studies field. With characteristically irenic tone, Desjardins nonetheless implies that the *Guide* stands over Religious Studies’ past too harshly

and knows its future too brashly. Whitcombe insinuates the *Guide's* immodesty in various ways: in its "universalizing, totalizing titles," in the editors' retreat to the "certainty of modernity" despite (and contrary to?) the *Guide's* "rhetoric of postmodernism," in its call for "self-reflection" on the part of scholars of religion and, perhaps most oppositionally, in excoriating what she perceives as the *Guide's* claim to "superior wisdom" which is marked by "a striking disrespect" for and "snub" of the knowledge of religious people about their own religiosity.

I may have (mis)represented Desjardins' and Whitcombe's attitude toward the *Guide's* "attitude" as excessively reactionary; if so, let the following comments stand as a response to my distortion. I take the crucial issue to be a worry over scholarly "attitude" as a desire for theoretical imperialism. I accept the equivalence, but do not share the worry, neither as a feature or mood in the *Guide* nor as a teacher in the classroom. Concepts, theories and the methods of assembling and analyzing the objects of our scrutiny, once we commit ourselves to them, act like jealous lovers who insist that we permit them "the kind of monomaniacal power or imperialism that a good method has when we are honest about it."⁴ Theoretical mix-and-match, methodological profligacy, a come-one-come-all ecumenical generosity with respect to "approaches" or elemental presuppositions are, in the final analysis,⁵ not in my lexicon of scholarly or pedagogical virtues. Why not? "Without the experience of riding hell bent for leather on one's presuppositions, one is allowed to feel that methods have really no consequences and no entailments. Since none of them is ever allowed to have any power, none of them is ever subjected to any interesting cost accounting" (Smith nd "Necessary Lie"). In other words, a theoretical and methodological "fusion cuisine" (fashionably and ubiquitously called "pluralism"), sometimes prescriptively adjoined as a requirement of plain human decency or, perhaps more typically, thought to be mandated by a pseudo-postmodern abnegation of strong critical judgment, is corrosive of the very possibility of determined, disciplined, non-promiscuous explanatory intellection with respect to human, including religious, *arts de faire*.⁶ My problem with the *Guide* is not that it takes this attitude, but that it is *not articulated explicitly and sharply enough* in the multivocality and topicality of its table of contents.

3. "Monomaniacal" Theorizing

To forestall censure for this view, allow me four further clarifications. First, riding one's theory "hell bent for leather," whether in what one writes or in the classroom, is to be differentiated from social or political imperialism or even generalized intellectual imperialism. Riding like a bat out of hell, especially on the track (academy) to test the limits of machine and rider, is not an example of "road rage" that threatens the safety of other drivers and denies them road space.

Second, strong theorizing is not equatable with presenting one's theory from behind bullet-proof armour of dogmatism. Presuppositions and the theories and methods that they generate are corrigible and they should be held and presented as corrigible. Indeed, corrigibility and rectification are strong concomitants of "monomaniacal" theorizing, just as they are rather weak concomitants of all-inclusive, pluralist investigations of religious (or any other human) *arts de faire*. Only what is truly tested can be corrected.⁷ How to put this aphorism into classroom practice is a challenge (which I have by no means mastered) with implications for syllabus design, for student project design, and for managing the intellectual-emotional mixes of losses suffered and gains achieved.

Third, "monomaniacal" theorizing is not the same as analytical monism that can account for all jots and tittles of "religious" social practice by means of a single analytical category, such as "exchange theory" or "rational choice theory" or "ritual theory" or whatever. For example, the social-historical processes by which some tales become authoritative myths and some authoritative myths devolve into mere tales may require a different explanatory scheme than why some people religiously justify war-faring as a holy endeavour and other religious people think it is unholy. Nor does it require that a general, all tidied-up theory of society and culture (if such is even possible, about which I am pessimistic) be in place prior to accounting for religion, religions and religious doings in social-historical terms. Corrigible theoretical monism is compatible with plural analytics or methodologies, as the *Guide* attempts to demonstrate. I thus tend to think of the analytic

categories and tools of the human and social sciences as an equipment shed for anthropocentric-social explanations of religious practices. The tools in the shed may need fixing, adapting, constant scrutiny as to their utility, but there is no other shed with a different inventory of tools.

Fourth, I am not persuaded of the critique, most explicitly iterated by Whitcombe, that the *Guide's* presentation of the study of religion is an example of a modernist self-assertion of certainty that is hardly disguised by a see-through veneer of postmodernist rhetoric. This is not the place to pipe for a modernism vs. postmodernism tango, except to say that my view of the knowledge of Religious Studies and the means of producing this knowledge is neither "modern" (if by "modern" one means a foundational, ahistorical "universal human reason," i.e., knowledge and knowing that is historically unsituated and unaware of the conditions in which knowledge is produced), nor "postmodern" (if by "postmodern" one means the valorization of "whatever," of "difference" and "other" or "non-closure" as self-legitimated transcendentals of sorts). Rather, in my rejection of essentialism or foundationalism or "closure"—hence my importuning "corrugibility" above—I am post-modern; in my recouring to so-called Enlightenment regard for the possibility of conceptuality by conceptual labour—both examined, of course—as a matter of "becoming answerable for what we say" (Wolff forthcoming),⁸ I am a (corrugible) modernist.⁹ And as such, I am suspicious of any invocation of "postmodernism" where I sense that it is used either as a rhetorical device to place some taste, preference, practice or self-representation beyond criticism,¹⁰ or as an incantation of the dubious premise of what Ernest Gellner calls the "egalitarianism of all thought-systems" as the basis for an uninterrogatable admission of "whatever" into venues of critical thought (1992, 55; I accept Gellner's criticism of this premise and, generally, the main points of his meditation on the relationship of the three key terms in the title of his book). This is simply liberalism turned into compost for growing things that I find very frightening, not only because of what they bode for thought itself, but also what they imply socially and politically. By "things that frighten" I have in mind the very conditions that enchanting priests of postmodernism present as epicurean delight: the "dedif-

ferentiation” of all things, which, as Fredric Jameson diagnostically points out in his later writings, might be seductive and addictive but which constitutes the logic of the global voracity of late capitalism.

None of this, I likely need not add, is convertible to or entails a frosty, didactic mode of discourse in the classroom.

4. Pandora’s Blessed Curse

All the above is simply to say that the study of religion is a “secular” activity that, to my mind, has not yet given up on the idea of the university as a place for “no-holds-barred” (i.e., irreverent) examination and criticism of our culture’s (including the university’s) sacralities and for offering its students some resources for explaining the mechanisms and modes whereby these sacralities assume, maintain or lose their sacredness and its multi-layered cognitive, social and political effects.¹¹ The *Guide* assumes this, argues it, and “guides” from and toward that assumption. All this, too, is a long exposition of my discomfiture concerning Whitcombe’s sense that the *Guide* and its general articulation of a study of religion disrespectfully sneers at religious thought-systems and, therefore, at the people for whom those systems function as organizers of personal and social identities and practice.¹²

Oh Pandora, why did you not slay your curiosity and thus preserve us from the blessed curse of thought! Lest this ejaculation is too cryptic, I must add a few explicatives.

As a matter of record and as a plea for a stipulation: the motive force behind the *Guide* and its representation for a study of religion is neither to pan religion(s) nor to praise religion(s), neither to snipe at religion(s) nor to snuffle for religion. That is to say, the perception of “disrespect” and “snub” is entirely a matter of *Nebensache* (“side issue”), a kind of peripheral turbulence. So? What, dear student, dear reader, are you going to do about this turbulence, a turbulence that appears to be hyper-felt in the study of religion, though it is an endogenous effect of critical thought itself? Anecdotally, my daughter recently sent me an urgent e-letter that flashed on my screen with the header, “I am an accident,” which condensed her personalized conclusions drawn from her study of theories of evolution. I wrote back: “so?” Thinking I did not

understand, she wrote back even more urgently: "What do you mean, 'so?' My life has no meaning!" I replied, "what makes you think events of chance are less meaningful than intended events? I find the Rocky Mountains as meaningful as the CN Tower." After exploring several solutions to her predicament (including jumping into the St. Lawrence river off the very high Jacques Cartier bridge), she decided that her existence was too self-justifying to snuff it on the grounds of its accidentality (a smarting intellectual discovery perhaps second only to her grief, as a younger child, at the discovery that there is no Santa Claus or, rather, that Santa Claus was as ordinary as her mother or father). The point is that the discomfort of the turbulence does not strike me as a heedable call to still the wind of critical theorizing, neither in the study of religion nor in the study of anything else.

This turbulence accounts, I think, for why my students often ask, in more or less explicit ways, to have the "other" side presented as a "balance" to what they perceive to be my (and the *Guide's*) "one-sided" or "unbalanced" representation of the study of religion. Like Anne Whitcombe, they intuitively prefer to be gatherers and samplers of "meanings." Motives may vary, ranging from unreflected desire to evade the risk of "reductionist" demystification of their cherished meanings to an articulate preference for what we might call the school of hermeneutic anthropology which, now commonly validated by some understandings of "postmodernism," likes to collect and sniff meanings—though, so my impression, often remaining majestically cagey ("impartial") with respect to pronouncing whether meanings' bouquets are fair or foul.

My response, condensed here but doled out *ad hoc* in bits and bites throughout my courses on theorizing religion, is something like this: (1) "Meanings" indeed are as numerous as a thousand flowers in the garden, so let's stipulate a pluralism of meanings. But the plurality of meanings do not stand in symmetrically "balanced" relationship to each other for those who have and hold a meaning. That is, at the level of status and function meanings generally are not held with a sentiment of pluralism or relativism. To be sure, they may be regarded, in one sense, as "provincial" insofar as "other" "provincial" meanings are recognized, even tolerated, but this recognition and tolerance of

“other” meanings generally does not de-mean or relativize “my/our” provincial meaning-complex. The thousand flowers in the garden thus reveal themselves as a thousand provincial absolutes, not as a thousand “sympathetic relativisms,” as Gellner puts it (1992, 50). Religious meanings are always somebody’s meanings and they have the status of meanings precisely because they cannot be rendered less weighty by the counter-weight (balance) of an “other’s” meaning. What, then, is the scholar to do if he or she frets to do something more interesting and intellectually challenging than merely count and catalogue the flowers of meaning in the garden?¹³ (2) Meanings are notoriously inaccessible. I will let Gellner’s truculent words carry on: “one of the temptations to which the hermeneutic school is prone, and to which practitioners of postmodernism succumb with ecstasy ... [is that] they become so enthusiastic and inebriated with the difficulty of explicating the Other that in the end they don’t even try to reach it, but content themselves with elaborating the theme of its inaccessibility, offering a kind of initiation into a Cloud of Unknowing, a Privileged Non-Access ... a mystery on its own” (1992, 56). I agree, and hence (3) I suggest to my students that we might learn a lot more about religious meanings by paying attention not so much to the flowers in the garden but to the gardener and the gardener’s (human) processes of planting, cultivating, fencing off and reaping meanings.

All this to make the point that the problem of a buffeting turbulence effected by anthropocentric-social-historical theorizing of religion is best solved pedagogically by scrutinizing the problem itself, rather than by permitting the problem to frighten us into abandoning our hell-bent for leather theorizing ride.

5. Guide, Textbook or Companion?

Whether, finally, the *Guide* is indeed a creditable direction-pointer for theorizing religion and indexing the study of religion is, understandably, not something on which I am undecided. Yes! Anne Whitcombe has, however, correctly caught that the *Guide* is not representational of the field of Religious Studies as a whole, either of its past or its current constellation of practices. For her this is its weakness, while I consider

the *Guide*'s unrepresentational character as its strongest contribution to the field. It does strongly guide in a direction, though in a direction that not all, perhaps only a very few, in the field will want to take. I am quite content with that, happily leaving on those who do not want to follow the *Guide*'s lead the onus to draw their own map.

As a stand-alone "textbook" the *Guide* does not quite work, as Michel Desjardins rightly points out, and as I have learnt myself. Depending on one's aims in a course, it can be made to work, but not as a "take and read at home" survey of the field's history or current architecture which it quite intentionally does not deliver. Judgments will need to be made on the elemental intellectual aims in a course that is devoted to theorizing religion in an undergraduate program. I have found that stating, elaborating and testing the idea of "religion" as a taxon of human practices that are then accountable in social-theoretical terms is a sufficient objective in an introductory class on the study of religion. Many of the key terms on which the *Guide* meditates will inevitably, and quite apart from the *Guide*, impose themselves as word-presences that beg for interrogation, contextualization in historical-discursive terms, and testing as to their explanatory utility, thus inviting a reaching for the appropriate essay in the *Guide*. Once a scholarly definition of "religion" as a taxon is sufficiently understood, and once a social theory of religion has minimally been charted, its further elaboration and testing is best done, I think, with reference to "data." My approach is to require students to select the data; I simply ask each student to submit for consideration one "religious" practice or phenomenon that they find puzzling, intriguing, interesting enough for further thought. This generates a list, which the entire class is then asked to classify (itself an exercise in thoughtful classification) and reduce to manageable number of topics. These topics (classes of religious phenomena) then will be sites for theoretical and methodological work. For purposes of teaching theory and theorizing it does not really matter which topics are the subjects for inspection, for as Durkheim pointed out long ago, even shit can take on a "religious quality" (1995, 230; relying on the work of Preuss 1904). My most recent list of student-generated topics includes the following examples: sacrifice and violence; body practices; cows, pigs and other "sacred" and "profane"

animals; tradition; belief in unbelievables; the cost of religion. Time tends to run out before many, much less all of the topics on the list are covered. This does not matter, of course, for the aim is single and the same with all topics: to elaborate and test a theory, an aim for which less data may actually be better. One might here consider the distilled wisdom of an early German proverb: "It is better to drink small gulps of clean water, than to be stupefied after too many goblets of spicy wine."¹³

Perhaps, therefore, the best way to characterize the *Guide* would be to regard and use it not as a textbook in the conventional sense, but as a companion on any theoretical, explanatory venture in the field of Religious Studies. Whatever one finally thinks is entailed in defining and explaining "religion" will continue to be debated, but insofar as the issues of defining and explaining "religion" and accounting for one's explanations are not engaged, Religious Studies' gnosis will truly deserve to be called gnostic. Exhortations, such as those offered in the *Guide*, for a particular kind of constitution of the field may not be heeded much—for the kind of reasons that Anne Whitcombe has so clearly stated; its prospects for generating a large community of like sentiment most certainly are strongly at odds with the *Guide's* "imperialistic" manner of theorizing religion, at odds precisely because the field is ruled by a different hegemony.

But then an imperialism that has no chance for empire, and that therefore is merely an assertion of a difference that refuses to be assimilated, is perhaps the only tolerable imperialism. *Vive la différence!*
Vive la pensée!

Notes

¹ My stipulation of "scholaresse" and technical terminology is, I confess, only half my response. The other half, which my students also have heard me make in class, is more unapologetic and unrepentant for principled reasons. Some words in any discipline are not merely words but terms that function as compact storage spaces of the discourse and as condensed conveyors of special (as opposed to everyday) knowledge; many terms can be circumlocuted, but this is not always advantageous, perhaps never advantageous as a general axiom. Rather, axiomatic is the contrary, I suggest. Putting the adjective "scholarly"

before “discourse” is not reducible to an opposition of or to clarity, or convertible to obfuscatory code designed as a lacerating obstacle to deter outsiders from entering the discourse (examples to the contrary, notwithstanding), much less to distinguish smart people from dumb ones so as to add to the smug-factor of an academic “guild.” Rather, scholarly articulation is the effect of the limits of everyday speech for conceptualizing and analyzing nuances and precisions that are elided in the vernacular because they are not communicatively important. Thus, for example, it would entail great loss of knowledge to translate “object cathexis” with “love” even though in everyday speech “love” may vaguely include object cathexis as one of its variants; or, it may be enough for me to say I am taking prescribed “happy pills” for my “depression,” but my schooled prescriber must know—and not merely be able to say in putatively optional “scholarese”—that my unhappiness is due to a “dysthymic mood disorder” (not just any “depression”) that can be remedied by one (not just any) kind of a class of anti-depressants called “selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors.” Medical, mathematical, psycho-analytic, etc., language is *not optionally* medical, mathematical, etc., language. Why should we then think that scholarship on religion should be constrained by everyday argot? Cf. Clifford Geertz’s (1983, 56) distinction between “experience-near” words (everyday language) and “experience-distant” terms (specialized or scholarly language). Thus, my students have heard me suggest that newly-encountered words and terms might be approached optimistically, at the very least as opportunities for linguistic and, hence, conceptual enrichment, but be regarded as portholes through which to apprehend the discursive environment of the article or book that they are reading. And this is not really a matter of forcing students to “apprentice” themselves to a guild, as Desjardins suggests; it is a matter of recognizing that scholarly knowledge is not independent of scholarly language, that the presumption of the possibility of one without the other is wobbly.

² I note that Michel Desjardins seems to take a different view of the *Guide*’s treatment of the ancestors of Religious Studies. While Whitcombe thinks the *Guide* is too solicitous of the dead fathers, Desjardins implies that the *Guide* mimics the general oedipal disposition of scholarship to reconstitute and legitimate itself in a contest with anteriority that displays itself in a rhetoric of supercessionist patricide—creating thereby a “debris” (i.e. space) on which to build new theoretical edifices. On this disposition itself see Bloom 1982.

³ Evidently Whitcombe took “anthropology” as a disciplinary taxon rather than an orientation of scholarship on religion, and the fact that such misreading is possible suggests that the use of the adjective “anthropological” in the *Guide* should be clarified. But this concession does not let Whitcombe off my hook of the need to think about her implied sense that ethnography stands in for theorizing religion, or even that ethnography is itself not something that is itself riding on or servant of a theory. As a thoughtful exploration of discipli-

narity and cross-disciplinarity I recommend the essays collected in Messer-Davidow, Shumway and Sylvan 1993.

⁴ I am here restating a point that is elaborated in my Prologue to the *Guide*: “Concepts ... are jealously discriminating romancers and lovers of explanatory stratagems that are commensurate with (faithful to) the core sensibilities of the concept” (12). The quote is from Jonathan Z. Smith, nd.

⁵ “In the final analysis” indicates that I leave necessary room for surveys of past and current approaches and methodologies in the Religious Studies curriculum—a mandate that was not set for the *Guide* because surveys of this kind are plentiful. Rather, the *Guide* actually represents an argument for a “final” analysis, for critical theoretical judgment of approaches and methodologies.

⁶ In the realm of Religious Studies (though also in other disciplines) this view takes the side of the methodological reductionists in their long (and mostly tedious) debate with the anti-reductionists. Why “reductionism” is so often regarded as a “dirty word” that is equated with a “holier-than-thou” self-righteousness (Dawkins 1982, 113; see also Sperber 1996, 5-6), is something that I find more amusing than puzzling, though in the classroom “reductionism” is always a good gateway into the problematics of explaining human phenomena in translated terms, that is, in terms other than those in which the phenomena present themselves. I actually think the terms “reductionism” and “anti-reductionism” could easily be retired without any loss whatsoever for the academic study of religion; both are rhetorical tropes that do not describe what anyone who studies religion actually does. The binary, therefore, has devolved into something that is about as interesting as observing early Christians calling their marvels “miracles” and other people’s marvels “magic.” I prefer other terms, such as “translation” or “reconceptualization” of phenomena that present and promulgate themselves in asocial, ahistorical, natural, idealist, non-anthropocentric terms into social, historical, material, anthropocentric categories.

⁷ During a recent stay in Pretoria, South Africa, I was ever amused by a clever urban billboard slogan that promoted the incorrigible posture of a popular talk-radio personality: “My opinions may change, but the fact that I’m right doesn’t.” It marvellously captures the combo of argumentative promiscuity, untestability and dogmatism that often presents itself behind the kind smile of pluralism in the academy.

⁸ Cf. Wolfart’s argument, in the article “Postmodernism” in the *Guide* (2000), which I consider to be a fair statement of the modernism-postmodernism tango, as well as an acceptable statement on where, between pillar and post of modernity, the *Guide* is situated.

⁹ My fellow *Guide* editor, Russell McCutcheon, recently reminded me that I once described myself as a neo-modernist, perhaps, though I don’t remember,

as an expression of my affinity for the “neo-modernist” anthropology of John and Jean Comaroff, whose work has influenced me a great deal.

¹⁰ As a way of correcting the popular meaning of “criticism” as a synonym for negation or refutation, I may say that I use “criticism” in the old Greek sense, meaning the will and ability to distinguish and decide (*krinein*) between options on the basis of standards (*kriteria*) that are themselves the precipitates of a critical (*kritikos*) process that now, as in ancient Greek societies, is not esoteric but exoteric, i.e., public.

¹¹ Perhaps Anne Whitcombe will recognize that I am winking at her in what she will undoubtedly and correctly catch as Durkheimian talk. Durkheim may be a dead ancestor for many current anthropologists, but for many scholars of religion he seems never to have lived at all and, hence, he has never been given a proper burial—to wink at Whitcombe with my other eye.

¹² Whitcombe’s reaction is common. A good number of my students who have read portions of the *Guide*, and whom I asked (with the permission of Desjardins and Whitcombe) to read the essays to which I am responding, share Whitcombe’s views. Some of my students feel that the *Guide* “alienates” people of religious faith and expressed regret that I had not chosen for them a “book that may go well with all.” Others found in Whitcombe’s paper a kindred “voice” that articulated their fright at having their “foundation rocked.” Several of my students, too, feel that the *Guide* does not sufficiently “touch the experience of religious people”—though others thought it “touched” it far too roughly. One of my students thought that the *Guide* “set itself against religion.” There was some agreeable nodding toward Whitcombe’s view that the *Guide* is a good “guide/to the study of religion” but not good “guide to the study of/religion.” (As to this distinction, my consolation is that what the *Guide* does not do well is precisely that which the *Guide* avers against and which it therefore deliberately sets out *not* to do; my grief, therefore, is that the distinction seems to have some self-evident cogency even *after* the *Guide* has been read.)

¹³ Even Clifford Geertz, among the very best of hermeneutic anthropologists, spoofs this gathering and appreciation effort as an exercise in going “round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar” (1993, 16).

¹⁴ “Es ist besser, kleine Schlucke reines Wassers zu trinken, als sich nach vielen Bechern würzigen Weines übergeben zu müssen.” A most appropriate pedagogy is outlined by Smith 1991.

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