

## CHAPTER 1

### *More Than a Shapeless Beast: Lumbering through the Academy with the Study of Religion*

"Isn't religion people's attempt to connect with what's out there—or in here?" My right hand swept . . . toward the marbled ceiling where God possibly lived, then fell to rest on my heart. "No!" thundered Cameron. . . . "Religion is a social way of thinking about social identity and social relationships."<sup>1</sup>

—Allen (1996)

So went an exchange between Charlotte Allen and Ron Cameron, a scholar of Christian origins, that opens Allen's *Lingua Franca* cover article on the conflict between two approaches to the study of religion.<sup>2</sup> This seemingly inconsequential exchange with Cameron soon found Allen on the edge of what she describes as a "fault line of an academic debate"; it is a line drawn between, on the one hand, attempts to understand religion to be essentially about finding meaning, either "out there or in here"—a pursuit Allen associates with the largest North American professional society for scholars of religion and theologians, the American Academy of Religion (AAR)—and, on the other hand, efforts to explain this very effort to construct meaning as a product of human biology, psyches, history, or society—work typified, in Allen's estimation, by the much smaller and younger North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR). In Allen's words, the fault line is drawn between NAASR's "tiny David" and the "AAR's Goliath."

Finding the study of religion to be the feature article in a national periodical is well worth celebrating—given the economic constraints facing many North American universities in general, and their religious studies programs in particular—a little PR is never a bad thing. However, as accurate as it may be for Allen to describe the study of religion as "a shapeless beast, half social science, half humanistic discipline, lumbering through the academy with no clear methodology or *raison d'être*," in my opinion it is hardly a compliment. Because those who

carry out their scholarship within religious studies departments have, for some time, experienced this frustrating ambiguity, and because our colleagues in the university often misunderstand the contributions to be made by the academic study of religion, I think it will benefit us to revisit the old question of this field's identity and try to clarify the issue by redescribing the academic study of religion.

### RELIGION AS A PRIVATE AFFAIR

The dominant position in the field today is based on a tradition that goes back at least to the late-eighteenth-century German romantic Friedrich Schleiermacher; responding to the Enlightenment's commitment to rationality and objectivity and its conclusion that religion was little more than an instance of primitive superstition that somehow had survived into the modern era, Schleiermacher defended religion against its so-called cultured despisers by re-conceiving of it as a nonquantifiable individual experience, a deep feeling, or an immediate consciousness. (See Fiorenza [2000] for a theologian's reassessment of Schleiermacher's influence on current debates on "religion.")

Although the leading, contemporary representatives of this tradition agree with Schleiermacher in placing religion within personal consciousness and emotion, they refer to the object of this consciousness differently; for Paul Tillich, it took the form of a personal value judgment (as he phrased it, one's "ultimate concern"), for Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade, it was an unexplainable and irreducible element of human consciousness (the object of which was variously named the "holy" or the "sacred"), and for Wilfred Cantwell Smith, it was the capacity of persons to have what he referred to as "faith in transcendence"—a phrase very much at home with such seemingly nontheological, liberal humanistic notions as the triumph of the human spirit. Regardless what its object is called, the conception of religion as an inherently meaningful, nonempirical, uniquely personal experience that transcends historical difference and evades rational explanation is generally shared across a surprisingly large segment of the field today.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it is a folk conception that is shared by many of our colleagues within the university, along with many of the people that we as scholars of religion study. To argue for a different conception of religion, one that enables us to name something public and observable, is certainly to swim against the prevailing currents.

The main problem with using this folk conception of religion as an analytic, scholarly tool is that it takes what is all too public and social and tries to secure and protect it within the private and inscrutable

realm of subjectivity and pure consciousness. Because we as scholars cannot actually get our hands on these primary dispositions and aesthetic feelings—or so the standard argument goes—we are left simply with describing and empathizing with their secondary manifestations, expressions, and historical artifacts—hence our field has a host of descriptive handbooks on cross-cultural religious symbolism. Their logic: the diverse symbols characteristic of religion worldwide all point to a common inner experience shared by humans *qua Homo religiosi*. The premise that guides such scholarship is that, while religion is an independent variable and a cause of other events, it can never be considered simply to be an all too ordinary effect of events in the historical, social world.<sup>4</sup> In other words, from the outset what I call the "private affair" tradition presupposes that religion cannot be *explained* as a result of various cultural or historical factors and processes; instead, it is argued that the deeper meaning of religion can only be deciphered and understood to make manifest in culture certain essentially religious or transcendent values and feelings. Religions therefore manifest religious feelings. Despite the troublesome circularity of this sort of unilluminating reasoning, such a position continues to dominate popular *and* scholarly imaginations alike.

Martin E. Marty, perhaps the best known scholar of religion in the United States, provides a current example of this perspective in his *Academe* defense for teaching and researching on religion in the university (Marty 1996).<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that he at first appears to critique those who ignore what he terms religion's "public side" and, instead, see it simply as a "private affair," Marty continually refers to such things as "religious impulses," "religious sensibilities," "faith," and "piety"—terms all firmly placed within the "private affair" tradition inherited from Schleiermacher. Because such presumed sensibilities and impulses are nonempirical scholars of religion are left with studying what Marty refers to as their "expressions" (a term that significantly implies that the impulses originate from some sort of intentional source) and "artifacts" (a term that equally significantly implies that the source is alive and not to be confused with the inert evidence that remains after its departure from the scene). What we see here is none other than the common presumption that religion, or the sacred, is itself somehow pure, internal, intentional, creative, socially autonomous, and efficacious and can therefore only be studied through its various secondary, symbolic manifestations. In a word, religious feelings can be considered to be a cause, but never simply an effect. This is the undefended assumption that commonly grounds the widely used phenomenological method, a method uniquely suited, or so some would argue, for describing, comparing, and thereby determining the

common essence that underlies historically and culturally varied beliefs, behaviors, and institutions (in a word, its many manifestations).

Marty goes so far as to suggest repeatedly that such “things” as religious impulses and sensibilities deserve study in their own right as causal agents. Instead of seeing the rhetoric of unseen impulses as a potent rationalization used to privilege what are in fact historically motivated actions, on a number of occasions Marty discusses how religious impulses motivate people to do activities as diverse as killing or healing. Writing in the same issue of *Academe*, the onetime editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, William Scott Green, adopts the Weberian stance to assert that “religion [or ‘religious convictions,’ as he also calls them] has been and yet remains a tremendously potent force in American social, political, and economic life” (1996: 28).<sup>6</sup> For both Marty and Green, as for many scholars of religion, religious feelings are used to explain other aspects of human behavior, but religious feelings can themselves never be explained as the result of other aspects of human behavior.

#### THE NATURALISTIC TRADITION

Over against this position there are a number of scholars of religion currently working in public universities who are not content with simply studying religion in terms of supposedly self-evident impulses and private sensibilities. Instead, they take these very claims of self-evidency and privacy as deserving of study; they maintain that the privilege that results from this rhetoric of religious impulses and private experiences needs to be studied as the product rather than the cause of other human beliefs, behaviors, and institutions.

For example, while it may be accurate to *describe* liberal religious participants such as Marty as reporting that religious systems are based on special, authoritative, and private experiences, accurately *repeating* on such circular, self-authorized reasoning hardly exhausts all forms of scholarship on religion. When we read, for instance, one scholar—Charles Long—writing that religious experiences constitute “a mode of release from the entanglements of the social and the existential” (1986: 35), we must never fail to understand such *purely descriptive scholarship* as always incomplete until it *re-describes and historicizes* (in a word, *theorizes*) such claims of sociohistorical autonomy and privilege. *After all, the premise that makes the human sciences possible in the first place is that human behaviors always originate from within, and derive their culturally embedded meanings from being constrained by, historical (i.e., social, political, economic, bio-*

*logical, etc.) entanglements.* Despite what the people we study may assert, as scholars of religion we always begin from the premise that there can be no release from the historical. As our first step toward re-describing the study of religion, then, we would be well advised to put into practice the advice of the literary critic Frederic Jameson—“always historicize.”

To begin such historicization, we need to start pretty close to home by identifying the very real interests that are served by the private affair tradition’s most basic tool, the category of “religious experience” itself.<sup>7</sup> As the scholar of Buddhism Robert Sharf has recently phrased it in a wonderful article on the term *experience*, “[*religious experience*] is often used rhetorically to thwart the authority of the ‘objective’ or the ‘empirical,’ and to valorize instead the subjective, the personal, the private” (1998: 94).<sup>8</sup> The philosophically idealist rhetoric of ‘experience’ presumes that pristine, prereflective moments of pure self-consciousness (or, along with Schleiermacher, we could call it “God-consciousness”) somehow float freely in the background of the restrictive conventions of language and social custom, what Jonathan Z. Smith, quoting Nietzsche, has called the “myth of immaculate perception”; it is a position comparable to that which once fueled literary studies, inasmuch as Literature was thought by some to embody essentially transcendent themes and values. In the study of religion, Smith has traced this romantic rhetoric of experience to what he terms “the regnant Protestant *topoi* in which the category of inspiration has been transposed from the text to the experience of the interpreter, the one who is being directly addressed *through* the text.” Smith concludes, “As employed by some scholars in religious studies, it must be judged a fantastic attempt to transform interpretation into revelation” (1990b: 55).

As both Sharf’s and Smith’s critiques should make clear, the rhetoric of experience has come under hard times; simply put, some now understand experience as a thoroughly sociopolitical construct. I think here of the historian Joan Wallach Scott, who has directly addressed this very issue in a powerful essay, “The Evidence of Experience.” In her conclusion she writes:

Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident or straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political. The study of experience, therefore, must call into question its originary status in historical explanation. This will happen when historians take as their project *not* the reproduction and transmission of knowledge said to be arrived at through experience, but the analysis of the production of that knowledge itself. (Scott 1991: 797)

Fitzgerald agrees: experiences are always public, he suggests, for “the semantic context for having and interpreting an experience is necessarily also a social, institutional context” (2000: 129). Or, as Sharf phrases it,

the rhetoric of experience tacitly posits a place where signification comes to an end, variously styled “mind,” “consciousness,” the “mirror of nature,” or what have you. The category experience is, in essence, a mere placeholder that entails a substantive if indeterminate terminus for the relentless deferral of meaning. And this is precisely what makes the term experience so amenable to ideological appropriation. (1998: 113)

Scholarship in public universities entails pushing beyond mere description of subjective self-disclosures and reports on this or that experience, as if these experiences somehow predate the sociohistorical world; scholarship requires one to generate theories of human minds and societies, to engage in cross-cultural comparison of the human doings that our theories help us to see as significant, to contextualize our subjects’ reports on their doings within the larger settings that make both the doings and their reports possible and meaningful in the first place, and then to explain *why* just these similarities or just those differences exist between various human communities, their doings, and their self-perceptions.

As I use the term, this is the work of the scholar of religion as public intellectual, an admittedly trendy term that can be used in countless and contradictory ways; as noted in a recent *Lingua Franca* article, “any term that embraces both [the semiotician] Umberto Eco and [the conservative U.S. political pundit] Arianna Huffington can safely be said to have a problem” (Scoocca 1999: 8). Putting together the comments of Wallach Scott and Sharf, we can say that the work of the public intellectual entails the task of identifying the sociorhetorical mechanisms that authorize, normalize, and homogenize what are in fact divergent and highly contestable ‘experiences’ of the world in which we live. This is what I mean by a public intellectual. It doesn’t necessarily mean publishing in *The New York Review of Books*, being a regular panelist on Bill Maher’s “Politically Incorrect,” or acting as a consultant for government. As I will argue in chapters 8 and 9, the scholar of religion as public intellectual holds no philosopher’s stone that will turn lead into gold and, in the process, solve the world’s problems; for those who think there *is* some sort of easy solution, that the world is basically a simple place, and that a hermeneutic key will someday be found to unlock the meaning of life, this sense of a public intellectual is surely far too limited and therefore downright unsatisfying. I, however, happen to agree with

Edward Said when, recently commenting on the CNN coverage of King Hussein’s funeral, he flatly stated that “reality is a confusing, complex dynamic of events, processes, [and] personalities” (1999). Presuming just such a complexity, my public intellectual comes not to inform the world as to *how it ought* to work but studies the manner in which *how it happens to work* is actively portrayed as *the only way it can work*. Appeals to the rhetoric of experience are perhaps the most effective means human communities have so far developed for enabling slippage between *is* and *ought*, between *complexity* and *simplicity*, between the *local* and the *universal*, and, as the French critic Roland Barthes once phrased it, between *History* and *Nature*.

For the public intellectual, then, experience is sociopolitical and never pure; as scholars working in the human sciences, we should never fail to see it as the interpretive and therefore always contestable by-product of a stratified, diverse community, a by-product always in need of contextualization when studied. This is an important point, I think: it is not so much that the expression of an experience is sadly constrained by the limits of the languages that we have no choice but to employ in its expression (a point associated with romanticism and phenomenological analysis alike); rather, the ‘it’ of personal experience is likely possible only in light of preexistent linguistic, social, and other structural conventions and constraints. Although it may sound counterintuitive, *experiences are always public*; as Wallach Scott concludes, in this approach, experience is not the origin of our explanation, “but that which we want to explain.” Experience is the localized depository of complex and often virtually transparent messages communicated through, and made possible by, social life; the rock singer John Mellencamp knew as much when, in his 1985 hit “Small Town,” he sang that he was not only “educated in a small town,” but he was “taught to fear Jesus in a small town.”

This is *precisely* the point that many scholars of religion miss altogether: believing religion somehow to provide privileged access to some posited transcendent realm of meaning, they search for their hermeneutic philosopher’s stone and fail to understand feelings such as fear or awe as ‘taught’ and therefore products of social life. Ironically, I am reminded of the founding narrative of Gautama: scholars of religion often expend wasted effort, an expenditure that sustains the illusion of social autonomy and fuels the myth of the immaculate perception. For scholars of the private affair tradition to claim religious experiences and emotions as the pristine source or cause of religious behaviors is therefore to fall considerably short of the requirements of scholarship in a public university. Instead of seeing religion as an undefinable experience that mysteriously manifests itself first here and then there, we could instead understand the discourse on

experience as an all too human construction that accomplishes specific rhetorical work in specific social groups.

It should be clear that the implications of these two views on 'experience' cut to the very heart of how we study religion in a public university, how we distinguish the academic study of religion from theological studies, and how we organize departments for the academic study of religion. Whereas scholars once relied on a conception of religion as *sui generis* (i.e., self-caused) to form the basis of institutionally autonomous religion departments (their argument: an autonomous datum requires an autonomous site for its study), some scholars now question what sense it makes to argue that any aspect of human behavior could be unique, distinct, or in any way free from the unending tug-and-pull of historical change, social influence, and even genetic determination. Moreover, many now understand that the very efforts to privilege and protect any object of study, let alone the community of scholars that studies it, come with generally undetected social and political baggage.

#### REDESCRIBING A FOLK CATEGORY

As part of our redescription of the study of religion, we must acknowledge that not just 'experience' but also 'religion' is a slippery signifier, *not* because, as Cantwell Smith once suggested, it is the limited, inevitably reified and insufficient manner in which outsiders signify a prior, undescrivable, and interior faith (1991), but *because many of the peoples that we study by means of this category have no equivalent term or concept whatsoever*. "Religion" is an emic folk category scholars acquire from a rather limited number of linguistic/cultural families, a category that we simply take up for the sake of etic analysis and use *as if it were* a cross-cultural universal.<sup>9</sup> So, right off the bat, we must recognize that, in using this Latin-derived term as a technical, comparative category, even the most ardently sympathetic religious pluralist is, from the outset, deeply embedded in the act of intellectual, if not cultural, imperialism or theoretical reduction. (Although we disagree on most matters, see Griffiths [2000] for a useful survey of the Latin origins of "religion.")

While I do not mean to invoke some extreme notion of political correctness or cultural relativism by suggesting that scholarship in the human sciences must be driven by indigenous folk categories—if it were, it would mean the end of the human sciences as we now know them!—this does raise a crucial methodological point: *all scholarship, whether it is simply a well-intentioned and even sympathetic descriptive restatement*

*ment or a rigorous, explanatory analysis of indigenous systems of classification and collective representations, is by definition a reduction or a translation.*<sup>10</sup> With this in mind, those who rely on caricatures of reductionism as the basis for their protests against social scientific analysis of religious discourses will need to reconsider seriously their conception of how their own scholarship actually proceeds.<sup>11</sup> Despite the best intentions of self-reflexive ethnographers, human subjects under study generally do not "speak for themselves"—instead, they simply go about living their lives, with little or no interest in either self-consciously reflecting on the meanings, motivations, and implications for living just that life, in just that social world, or re-presenting these systematic reflections for the benefit of a cross-cultural collection of nonparticipants in that life. It should come as no surprise, then, that many now agree that all ethnographies are products of outside queries that are mediated through vocabularies and media foreign to the lives of the participants under study. If this were not the case, we would not have reports on the 'religions' of people living outside the Latin-based language family.

Moreover, even within societies whose members *do* employ the category of religion when generating folk classifications that they use to distinguish, arrange, and value various aspects of their daily social lives, its popular usage is intimately linked to a people's own self-descriptions and self-identity (e.g., "I'm saved; are you?"), therefore suggesting that the term is deeply embedded within conflicting systems of social classification and value. It is therefore questionable to what extent 'religion' can be of use to scholars who wish not simply to reproduce these systems of classification and value but, instead, who aim to explain the findings that result from their cross-cultural study of observable human social practices and institutions.<sup>12</sup>

With the slippery nature of our categories in mind, a second methodological point emerges: *scholars must be careful to distinguish, on the one hand, between reporting on folk descriptions, accounts, and classifications concerning how the world operates and, on the other, developing their own theoretically grounded redescriptions of these very same folk accounts and taxonomies*. An important, though somewhat ironic, point is apparent here: scholars of religion do not actually study religion, the gods, or ultimate concerns; rather, they use a folk rubric, 'religion,' as a theoretically grounded, taxonomic marker to isolate or demarcate a portion of the complex, observable behavior of biologically, socially, and historically situated human beings and human communities that talk, act, and organize themselves in ways that the scholar finds curious and in need of analysis. Accordingly, and I think this is also worthwhile to note, *what counts as religion for one theorist is hardly*

*religion for another*—not, as some of our colleagues might say, because one definition has a better grasp of the *real* nature of the object of study, making one definition a better “fit” with reality, but because each observer arrives on the scene with different interests, different questions, and different anticipations—all of which come home to roost in their classification tool “religion.” To count as scholarship, these interests and anticipations must be organized into a coherent theory that can be applied and debated publicly. Acknowledging that the world does not come already classified and prepackaged in little styrofoam containers, ready for our experiential consumption, means we must decline to advance the couch potato model of scholarship whereby scholars sit back and empathetically chronicle ‘that which presents itself’ (à la phenomenology). Instead, it is our responsibility as scholars constantly to propose, explicate, analyze, and critique our schemes and our theories, for it is around these—rather than the supposed self-evidency of our data—that all academic pursuits are developed and organized.

With a tip of my hat to the stories told about Socrates’ wisdom being rooted in the recognition of his ignorance, I can say that in owning up to the fact that we do not have *a priori* knowledge as to what religion ‘really is’ or where to find it, we are far wiser than many of our predecessors; unlike many of them, we acknowledge that pretheoretical values and social institutions are the contexts in which we propose, test, and defend theories, that theories make the generic stuff of unreflective human experience stand out as data, and that the data of religion is therefore of our own making.<sup>11</sup>

In a word, we manufacture zones of significance and value in the so-called real world by means of our label *religion*; moreover, depending on the definition and theory of religion we employ, we often manufacture goods of questionable value. It is little wonder, then, that our field continually suffers from a lack of identity and is so often misunderstood by our colleagues in the university: we lack agreement concerning the general theoretical parameters that enable us to make claims about this thing religion in the first place; and, more daunting than anything else, we attempt to engage in a theoretically precise analysis of human social life from within the very social worlds we seek to understand. These are important points, I think; at the root of the problem of definition is the fact that many in the field avoid the requirements of explicit theory building, testing, and public critique, and instead opt for simply repeating folk understandings by means of nuanced description and reporting. However, as I have already suggested, this latter sort of scholarship—if indeed it constitutes scholarship as opposed to mere color commentary—forgoes critical analysis and thereby fails to ask what Smith has simply referred to as the “So what?” question (1990a: 10).

### THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF AN ACADEMIC STUDY OF UNDEFINABLE ESSENCES

Because few descriptivist scholars actually formulate an explicit theory of religion that allows them to justify why a particular practice or symbol attracts their attention, let alone an explicit definition to direct their research, more often than not the category of religion as used in scholarly studies has little theoretical currency whatsoever. Instead, as already suggested, many scholars of religion and theologians alike take religion to be a self-evident human impulse in no need of definition, let alone explanation. Based on this assumption, they proceed inductively, as if observation of self-evidencies followed by generalization is sufficient. There may be no better example of what I understand as an antitheoretical stand than the comments of the current executive director of the AAR, as cited in a *New York Times* article that ran on the opening day of the AAR’s 1996 annual meeting in New Orleans: “Dr. DeConcini, for one, objected that trying to forge a definition of religion would threaten to exclude teachers whose specialties run outside the conventional bounds” (Niebuhr 1996: 13). Such an argument against definition (which is, after all, implicitly an argument against theory; definitions are simply theories in miniature) is puzzling, for without a commonly accepted definition of religion—some way of demarcating this category and the social domain to which it refers from others—how is it that we can even determine these so-called conventional bounds, let alone how could one even fall outside them? Without a definition that can be rationally articulated, applied, critiqued, and defended, how do any of us know precisely what our colleagues are talking about when they make claims about this thing ‘religion’? Without a definition of religion, what, precisely, do members of our field study? Moreover, without an agreed upon manner in which we can not only propose but publicly test and critique definitions, how will we know when any sort of progress has taken place in the field? And finally, how can one have a scholarly field when the leadership of the main professional organization seems to place sanctions on defining and thereby coming clean as to just what we are studying when we study religion.

Despite such clear dangers, a surprising number of people in the field hold such a view on the evils of definition and theory; they yet maintain that religion is an undefinable mystery that can only be experienced and appreciated. However, they fail to consider the logical and institutional outcome of this ill-considered position; according to the anthropologist Weston La Barre, if religion is conceived as a personalistic mystery, then it defies all attempts not only to analyze it but even to describe it; moreover, the academic study of religion ceases to exist as a scholarly pursuit. In La Barre’s words:

If God is unknown, then theology [as well as the study of undefinable religion] is a science without subject matter, and the theologian [as well as the scholar of *sui generis* religion] is one who does not know what he is talking about. [However,] if he has only forgotten what he was talking about—the premises lurking hidden in his unconscious connotations and denotations—then these must be made explicit if we are to discuss them meaningfully. We can proceed only if we have more verifiable meanings attached to our terms. (1972: 2)

Without explicit and public definitions of religion, without explicitly formulated, publicly criticizable theories of religion (as opposed to private intuitions, feelings, guesses, or hunches), all we are left with is the lumbering, directionless academic study of undefinable essences where scholars are united only in their presumably unified yet unarticulated intuitions. Failing to confront such issues, we continue to construct departments on a long-outmoded seminary model, as if the very people we study (the religious) somehow had privileged access concerning how their self-reports ought to be studied and understood.

#### CONCLUSION: MORE THAN A SHAPELESS BEAST

If one takes religion, religious impulses, sensibilities, and private convictions at face value and as self-evident, extraordinary causes of other human phenomena, one conveniently avoids ever confronting that religion may well turn out to be among the more enduring and powerful means humans have developed for legitimizing, contesting, and monitoring social cohesion and identity. After all, do not many people trace our term *religion* to Latin roots meaning either careful observation or the act of binding together? Avoiding this one possible redescription of religion by placing religion firmly within the private confines of individual experience, where religion is conceived as an essentially good or pure impulse, efficiently serves to protect an aspect of the social world from the types of study by which scholars in other fields routinely redescribe human constructs, behaviors, and institutions. It assumes religion somehow to be extraordinary, deriving from or expressing some unseen inner or outer world, and thereby avoids risking that religion—like all other aspects of human social life—may well turn out to be all too ordinary. As Cameron states in this section's epigraph, "Religion as mythmaking reflects thoughtful, though ordinary, modes of ingenuity and labor. . . . [B]oth religion and the study of religion are concerned with the human quest for intelligibility, with taking interest in the world and making social sense" (1996: 39). I would argue that it is only when we start out with the presumption that religious behav-

iors are ordinary social behaviors—and not extraordinary private experiences—that we will come to understand them in all their subtle yet impressive complexity. With this recommendation in mind, please be clear on one thing: understanding religion as ordinary hardly means our work will be any easier. As the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu so nicely observes, "[t]here is nothing more difficult to convey than reality in all its ordinariness" (1998: 21).

If we redescribe so-called religious beliefs, practices, and institutions as thriving yet all too public and ordinary sites where people manufacture, authorize, and contest ever-changing social identities, then the study of religion finds itself at the very core of the modern university's Humanities' mission. As Gary Lease said in his 1998 University of California Santa Cruz humanities lecture,

[In the humanities we find] the opportunity to conduct an intensive conversation with the traditions, present and past, that help make us who we are, and above all who we will be. . . . This linkage of past, present, and future; . . . this ability to communicate effectively with others both inside and outside of your culture . . . ; this pursuit of knowledge about yourself and others: These make up the core of humanities. (1998: 92)

Although some programs in the study of religion are housed within the social sciences, the vast majority of programs generally contribute to the work of the humanities. As some understand them, the humanities document and celebrate the beauty inherent in 'the human condition' and the resiliency of 'the human spirit', goals rightly associated with the liberal, private affair tradition in the study of religion. But, as identified by Lease, the key topic addressed across the humanities is the relationship between those three things members of a social formation narrativize as their collective 'past,' 'present,' and 'future'; to put it another way, we can simply talk about all three by means of the abstract notion of a 'tradition'. Despite the fact that religious studies programs sometimes struggle to maintain only a marginal status in their colleges, studying the mechanisms that enable traditions to be invented, authorized, reinvented, and contested *are the very topics that scholars of religion know something about* (for a good example, see Braun 1999a). If we can agree on anything, it would have to be the fact that humanists study the manner in which social groups recreate themselves by focusing their collective attention in the here and now. Scholars of religion in particular study the way groups manipulate such focusing devices as discourses on origins, endtimes, and nonobvious beings. Or, to put it another way, myths and rituals are mechanisms whereby groups exercise and manage what Smith terms an "economy of signification." As

scholars, we therefore examine the many narrative, behavioral, and institutional devices groups employ to represent and contest differing conceptions of themselves—and to allocate access to resources based on those conceptions.

In setting out to redescribe religion in this way—as but one set of ordinary strategies for accomplishing the always completed yet never ending work of social formation—we will be able to communicate with other scholars about an observable and enduring aspect of human behavior rather than isolating ourselves within a seemingly privileged yet marginalized discourse concerned with studying nonempirical experiences. It means that as scholars and teachers we have little choice but to go public and leave the private realm of privileged experience to the rhetoricians and theologians who can afford their idle lumbering. Moreover, redescribing religion necessarily entails redescribing the field that studies ‘it’: religious studies. Therefore, the two questions that Allen poses in the opening to her *Lingua Franca* essay turn out to be the central issues facing this field today: “What is religion, anyway, at least as a subject of study at the American university? And does it have anything to do with God?”<sup>14</sup> To these questions we can now offer two very different answers. On the one hand, the study of religion is the generally liberal pursuit of universal and yet deeply personal feeling gained largely through paraphrasing texts, claims, and behaviors inspired by, or which somehow are said to manifest, essential meanings and values, all of which is derived from experiences of God, the gods, the sacred, the wholly other, the numinous, or the *mysterium*. On the other hand, the study of religion is but one instance of the wider, cross-disciplinary study of how human beliefs, behaviors, and institutions construct and contest enduring social identity—talk about gods and talk about mythic origins are but two strategies for doing this. Although the former employs such methods as phenomenology and hermeneutics to study normally unattainable deep essences by means of surface descriptions, the latter employs social scientific tools to study how human communities construct and authorize their essentialist myths (by they grouped together and named as nationalist, ethnic, or even religious).

Despite the fact that these two approaches appear to be competing, lined up, as they are, on either side of what Allen characterizes as a fault line, the former turns out to be but one piece of data to be studied by means of the methods and theories of the latter. Or, as Don Wiebe is quoted in the same *Lingua Franca* article, the former constitutes the *religious* study of religion—itself a religious pursuit—whereas the latter constitutes the *academic* study of religion. Or, as aptly phrased by J. Z. Smith on a panel at a recent AAR annual meeting, the-

ologians are quite simply the data for scholars of religion (Smith 1997).

That the religious study of religion should be the datum for academic scholars working in publicly funded universities is slowly dawning on more members of the field who are no longer content to study mysteries, essences, and private experiences. Redescribing what we mean by ‘religion’ therefore means redescribing how we carry out scholarship and teaching in a public context where we are accountable to widely operating scholarly standards of evidence, argumentation, and refutation—“the rules of the game,” to borrow the words of DeConcini, who was also interviewed for the *Lingua Franca* essay. However, because she immediately goes on to maintain that there is “no gap between theology and [such academic] research,” it seems that she has confused two very different discursive games with significantly different sets of institutional standards and evidential rules.

This confusion even makes its way into Allen’s *Lingua Franca* essay, when, near its close, she suggests that it “may be a good thing for religious studies to be a shapeless beast, half social science, half humanistic discipline, lumbering through the academy with no clear methodology or *raison d’être*.” It is a good thing only if we presume that religion is essentially a multifaceted mystery that gets shortchanged when understood exclusively as a human doing. Contrary to Allen, and given the dominance of the liberal humanistic and theological approaches, the *raison d’être* of this lumbering beast is more than clear, and, to my way of thinking, it is far from good: it takes religion at face value simply as a self-evidently meaningful, apolitical, unique phenomenon that causes other things to happen but is itself uncaused since it is an indescribable impulse and personal conviction; it is, accordingly, a phenomenon in need of nuanced description and sympathetic appreciation *but not* explanatory analysis and redescription. As I read it, this is what theologians are in the business of doing; they need no help from us. An apology for the study of religion in the modern university that presumes scholars of religion to be empathetic caretakers and naive, well-meaning hermeneuts is doomed from the outset, for it fundamentally confuses a distinction that lies at the base of all human sciences, between theoretically based scholarship on assorted aspects of human behavior and those very behaviors themselves.

## NOTES

1. This is a paraphrase of Burton Mack’s own words: “[F]or [J. Z.] Smith, what has come to be called religion is actually a social mode of thinking about social identity and activity” (Mack 1988: 20.n. 9). My thanks to Ron Cameron for pointing this out to me.



2. For other views on the *Lingua Franca* article, see the *Bulletin of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion* 26/4 (1997) for Tim Murphy's introductory essay (1997) and the nine invited replies (representing the opinions of scholars of religion from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and South Africa); see also Allen's rejoinder (1998).

3. See McCutcheon 1997c for a study of the diverse sites where this understanding is evident, from the debate on the politics of Eliade to world religion textbooks. See the work of Tim Fitzgerald (1997, 1999) for a confirmation of my findings.

4. Such a presumption even underlies many of the articles published by social scientists in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. For a critique of such studies that presume religion to be an independent variable, see Krymkowski and Martin 1998.

5. *Academe* is the publication of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP); the issue in which Marty's article appeared was devoted to the study and practice of religion in public universities.

6. This article is a revised version of an essay Green originally published in a special issue of *JAAR* (62/4 [1994]), an issue that surveyed the state of the study of religion. For articles in that issue that take a rather different approach to the field, one that faults its members for their lack of theoretical sophistication, see Gill (1994) and Penner (1994).

7. I have attempted just this in a forthcoming essay on the history of the study of religion in the United States, entitled, "Autonomy, Unity, and Crisis: Rhetoric and the Invention of the Discourse on *Sui Generis* Religion."

8. Within the study of religion, I know of few essays better than Sharf's when it comes to problematizing what he aptly terms the "ideological nature of the rhetoric of experience." See also Fitzgerald (2000).

9. On the use of the emic/etic distinction in the study of religion, including a discussion of the terms' origin in linguistics and subsequent application in anthropology, see the introduction to chapter 1 in my own, *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (1998b; see also Headland et al. 1990, Harris 1979, 1987, and Pike 1967). For an excellent example of how such a common ethnographic category as "marriage" is a descriptive or interpretive category and not an explanatory one, see the first chapter of Dan Sperber's *Explaining Culture* (1996: 18–21, 29–31).

10. As noted in the preface, it is crucial to distinguish a *metaphysical reduction* (one that claims to have identified the essence of the data, à la Marx, Freud, and even Eliade) from a *methodological reduction* (one that only claims to have reduced the data based on the frame of reference provided by the researcher's theory). As should be clear, within the human sciences, only the latter option makes any sense at all, for the former presupposes the possibility of a context-less theory of everything.

11. See Dan Sperber (1996: 152): "Any attempt to analyze social and cultural phenomena in a scientific manner, in particular any naturalistic attempt, is sure to meet with accusations of reductionism. Of course such accusations could be brushed aside. It is not hard to show that the label 'reductionist' is doubly misused: on the one hand, nobody is really proposing a reduction of social phe-

nomena; on the other, should such a proposition be made seriously, it would deserve interest rather than scorn, since true reductions are major scientific advances."

12. Despite the growing number of writers commenting on the limited value of "religion," let alone the sociopolitical loadings of the category (see also King 1999), Ivan Strenski (1998a, 1998b) has recently penned two essays arguing that writers such as Tim Fitzgerald, David Chidester, Gary Lease, and myself are naively overconfident concerning the influence comparativists' works wield in centers of "real" decision making. Although I escape much of his wrath, concerning my work in particular Strenski claims that it is part of an "inbred clique" whose work, in his estimation, is "alternatively an exercise in naivete, bad faith, or ignorant mischief, or indeed, all of the above" (1998a: 118). Given that Strenski's past writings suggest that he too is interested in explaining religion, it is utterly perplexing why he has attacked the above group—hardly a cabal or a clique—by resurrecting Schleiermacher's reactionary romantic rhetoric (i.e., labeling us as religion's "despisers"). However, as I argue in a later chapter, there is a very real threat to all modernist, liberal ideologies (whether they are politically liberal and naturalistic [as in Strenski's case] or romantic and conservative [in Schleiermacher's case]) when one radically historicizes the kind of claims to individual autonomy that come prepackaged in the rhetoric of experience and in presumptions of religion's autonomy. In formulating an answer to Strenski's critique, then, we can say that it is not a matter of overestimating the influence individual scholars of religion have in determining such things as a government's foreign policy; rather, it may have more to do with recognizing how the choices and interests of scholars are shaped by and conform to pre-existing structures of power and privilege. Focusing, as Strenski does in much of his work, on individual action and accountability, rather than examining structural circumstances in which subjectivity and accountability are made possible, may allow us to continue to convince ourselves that the state-sponsored profession of defining, describing, sorting, and interpreting human behavior somehow floats free of its sociopolitical preconditions. After all, our object of study in such a neutered science reinforces a number of liberal assumptions concerning the autonomy of the individual, the importance of free choice, the evils of structure, and the universal nature of the Human Condition. In other words, as long as we play our assigned role as experts on disembodied, believing minds, symbols, and customs, there may be little need of governmental agencies in liberal democracies to pay attention to our work. (See Chidester and Lease's responses to Strenski in *JAAR* 66/2 [1998]; wisely, Fitzgerald seems not to have bothered to reply to Strenski's *ad hominem* attack on his work in particular.)

13. Observing that religion is the product of the scholarly imagination is, of course, a point I borrow directly from Jonathan Z. Smith. On Smith's use of theory in directing research, see Sam Gill's detailed and helpful essay: "It is not that religion has some inherent nature or essence, it is that religion takes on this profile according to the way Smith chooses to construct the data he considers relevant to his theory of religion" (1998: 287 n. 7); "Again, it is important to note that Smith's understanding of myth is a product of his self-conscious choices of theory. It is not a claim about some essence or nature of myth. Also, it is impor-

rant to note that Smith's view of myth would, I think, be broadly and soundly rejected by most religious adherents" (295 n. 18).

14 In the same *New York Times* article cited above (Niebuhr 1996), the AAR's former executive director, Jim Wiggins, "suggested that religious studies faculties would benefit from trying to answer a central question: What is religion?"

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