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dency. The suspicion of sexuality that has long characterized European and American Christian culture can easily flow over into a repression of general life energy. The disembodied character of much of white Euro-American culture is striking. As adults, we do so little dancing, and it scarcely occurs to us that this has anything to do with the frequently brittle character of public moral discourse.

In sum, those of us in the United States who are interested in the revival of moral inquiry ought to consider taking Haitian Vodou on as a conversation partner—not to become like it, something we could never do anyway, but to see ourselves from a different angle in relation to it.²¹ The challenge of the postmodern age is centrally about hegemonic power or, more precisely, the loss of it. Haitians would be good conversation partners for North Americans precisely because they have never had the money, the power, or the weapons to be tempted to think that they possessed universal truths or that they could speak with authority for the rest of the world. Haitians have lots of experience, however, living in a troubled relationship with the United States, where such assumptions have been routine. Haiti, a country that has long been the target of the most stubborn of U.S. racist projections,²² might be a *very* interesting interlocutor for the conscience of the United States. The records, oral and written, of United States–Haiti interaction span more than two centuries, starting during the period of trans-Atlantic slavery and running continuously through the end of the cold war. As such, they provide a rich resource for exploring the parameters of moral vision. As Haiti has come increasingly under the sway of U.S. popular culture and political economy during the last century, all of the learning has tended to flow in one direction—from the United States toward Haiti. The time may be right to test what can flow in the other direction.

²¹ Much of what is attractive about Vodou morality could not be replicated in the United States. Eighty percent of the Haitian population lives on the land, in small communities where everyone knows everyone else. This circumstance reinforces tolerance for behavioral diversity within each person and among people in general. Such small agricultural communities also foster the strong spirit of cooperation, even communitarianism, that is at the heart of Vodou. Yet, at the same time, rural life where people depend so much on one another also inevitably feeds the more dysfunctional aspects of Vodou, for example, the tendency of the group to accuse talented or wealthy individuals of sorcery.

²² See Robert Lawless, *Haiti's Bad Press* (Rochester, Vt.: Schenkman Books, 1992).

Snakes alive: Resituating the moral in the study of religion

ROBERT A. ORSI

At the end of a compelling account of his two-year sojourn among snake-handling Christians in southern Appalachia, Dennis Covington, a Georgia-based reporter for the *New York Times*, describes the night he realized that he could not join the handlers, whom he had come to love and respect, in their faith. I want to borrow this instance of one man's discovery of radical religious otherness—a discovery that led him to turn away in sorrow and disappointment from his friends—as an opening onto the question of what a renewed emphasis on moral inquiry might mean for the academic study of religion.

The discipline of Religious Studies has always been organized around a distinct and identifiable set of moral values and judgments, most often implicit and commonly evident more in convention than in precept. Disciplinary theorizing about religion has proceeded in accordance with these embedded moral assumptions, even when Religious Studies insisted most vehemently on its “scientific” status.¹ The usually unacknowledged centrality of these values in the working life of the discipline has limited the range of human practices, needs, and responses that count as “religion”—excluding, for example, experiences of the power of holding poisonous snakes against one's face or brandishing them in righteous anger against one's foes. A revival of moral inquiry in Reli-

This chapter is affectionately dedicated to Karen Brown and David Haberman, two masters of the erotics of Religious Studies who are also good friends of mine and conversation partners. I have learned a great deal about the study of religion from both of them. I also have benefited from Richard Fox's careful reading of and commentary on successive drafts of this chapter.

¹ The distinction here between precept and convention in the way moral orientations have informed the study of religion is borrowed from Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (1975; reprint, LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986), 311.

gious Studies should not be simply an explicit embrace of the old implicit values and judgments: to reauthorize the embedded normative cultural core of the discipline at a moment when the field has an opportunity to break free of it would be a regrettable failure of nerve. Before we practitioners of Religious Studies can introduce moral questions into our approach to other people's religious worlds, we must first excavate our hidden moral history. Otherwise, all that a revival of moral inquiry will be is the discovery, as if we had come upon something new, of our unacknowledged assumptions and prejudices as moral concerns.

SNAKES AND THE NATURE OF GOD

Dennis Covington first entered the culture of snake handlers on assignment from the *Times* to cover the trial of a minister accused of attempting to kill his wife by forcing her to put her hand in a crate of poisonous snakes.² Drawn by a religious idiom that fused domains others considered irreconcilable—heaven and earth, spirit and snake, vulnerability and control—and that generated experiences of tremendous visceral power, Covington stayed on. He came to see snake handling as a way for poor, displaced people in a ravaged land to contend with and surmount (at least once in a while, with the snakes in their hands) the violence and danger that bore down on them in their everyday lives. His account is never reductive nor does he stay aloof from the people he writes about. He smells the “sweet savor” of the Holy Spirit moving in the room when the snakes are taken out of their boxes—a smell like “warm bread and apples,” discernible, he says, just beneath the smell of reptile—and finally he takes up serpents, too. Until the last night of his years with snake-handlers, Covington offers a good model for an engaged, interpersonal, participatory religious study.

But on this last evening, at the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ in Kingston, Georgia, Covington watches in horror as his photographer, a young woman well known by then to the handlers, is verbally assaulted—by a minister Covington had considered his spiritual father—

² Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1995). For a much more existentially challenging account of this culture, see David L. Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents: Snake Handlers of Eastern Kentucky* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

for her usurpation of man's scripturally mandated role (as the community understood this). Covington rises to witness against this denial of spiritual equality to women, but he is silenced by his mentor. Then another preacher, a legendary figure named Punkin Brown who was known among other things for wiping his sweat away with rattlesnakes, reached into the serpent box, pulled out a “big yellow-phase timber rattler and slung it across his shoulder like a rope.” As he does so, Punkin Brown makes a sound that Covington records as “haaagh,” an explosive, angry grunt; and as he bears down into his nasty, woman-hating sermon, the preacher uses this sound to set the cadence of his attack and to underscore his rage. Covington makes sure we hear this: “haaagh” appears ten times on one page—and it is thus—haaagh!—that he reestablishes the border between himself and the handlers that he had up until then so courageously been tearing down.

Covington signals and solidifies his new position vis-à-vis the handlers with a change in rhetoric. Before this evening in Kingston, he had seen an eerie, otherworldly beauty in the moans and movements of the handlers; in particular, his descriptions of female handlers, sobbing and trembling as they drew bundles of snakes close to themselves in religious “ecstasy,” are charged with a fierce, unacknowledged erotic intensity. But now he gives us Punkin Brown, a vile, primitive force, “strutting” about the sanctuary with the big snake across his shoulders, his body contorted, his face flushed with blood and hate. The evangelist brushes his lips with the serpent and wipes his face with it, and always there is the brutal “haaagh,” like “steam escaping from an *underground* vent.”³ Punkin Brown has become a nightmare figure, a subterranean creature, a snake himself.

Covington believes that he was saved at the last minute from descending into such strangeness himself. He tells us he was all set to give up his work, stock his car trunk with snakes, and make his way across the land as an itinerant, snake-handling evangelist. But the “haaagh!” brought him to his senses and restored his world to him. This appears to be the existential impulse behind the abrupt change in voice: to shield himself from otherness, to impose closure on a dangerous two-year experience that threatened in the end to penetrate the boundaries of his own subjectivity. The description of Punkin Brown—or rather, the construction of “Punkin Brown”—is a barrier enacted in rhetoric against

³ Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, 234 (my emphasis).

the compulsive attraction of otherness. "Punkin Brown" makes the world safe again for Covington and his readers. Protected now against this alien other—who would ever confuse the author or oneself with this wild creature, one's own fantasies, rages, needs and hopes with his?—Covington can find Punkin Brown ridiculous, "grotesque and funny looking, with his shirttail out and a big rattlesnake draped over his shoulder."⁴ Alterity first secures the identity of the observer as safely separate from the other, and then establishes the observer's superiority.

But Covington makes still another move. At stake that night in Georgia, he maintains on the closing page of the book (so that the handlers will never have the opportunity to say anything further for themselves), was not simply the role of women in the church. Nor was it the rightness of taking up serpents, even though this is how Punkin Brown understood the conflict: if the Bible is wrong about women, the preacher believed, then it is wrong about the Christian's invulnerability from poisonous snakes too, so that we who take up such serpents will die. Rather, according to Covington, at issue that night in Georgia was "the nature of God."⁵ Punkin Brown's god, Covington reassures himself and his readers, is not, cannot be, my, our, god. This is the final, and most damning, step in the rendering of Punkin Brown as radical other: he has been cast out of the shared domain of the sacred.

What has happened here? How could a writer who managed to bring the alien world of snake handlers so close end by repositioning them at the margins of culture? Covington has inscribed an existential circle, taking a long detour to reestablish the prejudices against snake handlers many readers undoubtedly started out with, alongside whatever fascination drew them to the work as well. I want to explore now the process by which the other is silenced and securely returned to otherness and the world of the writer is restored and reauthorized, rather than transformed.

GOOD RELIGION, BAD RELIGION, AND RELIGION AT ITS BEST

It seems to be virtually impossible to study religion without attempting to distinguish between its good and bad expressions, without working

⁴ Ibid., 235.

⁵ Ibid., 239.

to establish both a normative hierarchy of religious idioms (ascending from negative to positive, "primitive" to high, local to universal, infantile to mature, among other value-laden dichotomies familiar to the field) and a methodological justification for it. These resilient impulses take on special significance in light of the well-known inability of the field to agree on what religion is: normative boundary setting fills in the theoretical vacuum. We may not know what religion is, but at least we can say with certainty what bad religion is, or what religion surely is not. Historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith has rightly observed that of all the distinctions so dear to scholarly practitioners—sacred/profane, natural/supernatural, magic/religion, with books/without books, and so on—the most fundamental and the most tenaciously held is that between "us" and "them," and this has usually been a moral distinction.⁶

To understand the cultural grounds of this moralizing imperative within Religious Studies, we have to look outside it, specifically to the history of American higher education. The academic study of religion in the United States developed within a university culture that, as historian George Marsden has recently argued, has always had to struggle with the conflicting claims of Christian authority (widely accepted in the culture) and secular learning (as this developed over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). Christian authority was never singular in the United States, and so whatever compromises were sought in light of this intellectual and cultural tension had to be acceptable within the broader social context of American denominational diversity. The solution to the dilemma from the early Republic until the years after World War II, says Marsden, was "morally uplifting undergraduate teaching" and voluntary, extracurricular religious activities situated at the margins of academic life in order to satisfy the concerns of Christians inside and outside the academy.⁷ Ethics in this context stood in for Christianity in American university culture, but ethics defined in a broad, universalist, nondogmatic, nonsectarian, nondenominational way designed to appeal to a broad "Christian" clientele. Liberal Protestantism, in short, or what Marsden acidly calls "pious nonsectarianism," became the official religious culture of the American academy.⁸

⁶ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 6.

⁷ George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 31, 85.

⁸ Ibid., 89.

This was a pragmatic position: the challenge of the educational marketplace in which colleges and universities competed was to attract students from many different denominations, since not even church schools could survive on enrollments from one source. But the emphasis on moral learning of a sort that all Protestant Americans could have access to as the crown of education was also congruent with the understanding among American educators of the role of the academy in the turbulent, pluralist democracy the United States was proving itself to be. The rationale for building colleges in the early Republic was explicitly understood to be civilizing the population; "next to religion," as Marsden frames the Whig position, "education was the best means of taming an unruly populace and assimilating diverse peoples into a common culture with shared ideals," an understanding that persisted down to John Dewey and the Progressives at the start of this century.⁹ The nation with a soul of a counting house would make its universities into Sunday schools of moral and social values.

This liberal ethical ethos coincided with broader trends in the re-orientation of academic culture over the nineteenth century, in particular the insistence on critical research as the mainstay of learning, the professionalization of the professoriate, and the secularization of methodology. Already in the postrevolutionary period, academic leaders influenced by Scottish Common Sense philosophy asserted that science, morality, and "true religion" were all allied. Marsden points out that American evangelicals, whose religion did not resemble this "true" one, at first went along with the notion of a broad intellectual alliance between tradition and modern learning because at the time they were secure in their own cultural authority. But things would change, particularly as natural science came to pose an increasingly serious threat to Christian conservatives; and then, Marsden says, "Christian teaching itself would have to be adjusted to meet the demands of a scientific age" and subject itself to the requirements and procedures of critical scholarship.¹⁰

Many progressive social scientists at the turn of the century, who played such an important role in shaping the contemporary university world in the United States, were often children of orthodox Christian households. They rejected the faith of their families in favor of a scien-

⁹ Ibid., 85.

¹⁰ Ibid., 93.

tific approach to social and psychological knowledge that was nevertheless deeply and passionately informed with liberal Protestant values.¹¹ They replicated, in their own intellectual and emotional journeys, the development of the American academy from Calvinism to liberalism. But while liberal religious concerns informed the scholarship and pedagogy of this group of explicitly post-Christian Christian academics, which Marsden presents as the last generation of such scholars, those concerns had no effect on the fundamental understanding among these men and women of the university as a place of secular, critical, scientific learning. "After a century of resistance from more traditional Christians," Marsden writes, "the dominant educational ideals were defined by a synthesis of Enlightenment ideals and an enlightened Christianity, or religion of humanity." Outside the gates of the academy, meanwhile, increasingly alienated fundamentalist Christians waged a campaign to restore what they understood to be the primary purpose of education at all levels—"to learn the wisdom of the elders," in Marsden's formulation of their position—in direct opposition to modernists who "gave their ultimate intellectual allegiance to the scientific method as the essence of true education."¹² Liberal Protestantism became the essential buffer within the academy against the ever more intransigent (and panicky) fundamentalists outside it.

It was in this intellectual environment that the academic study of religion first appeared in the United States. Certain key issues had already been settled in the wider academic culture, such as the authority of the scientific method and the primacy of critical research. The new discipline would have to meet these standards and comport itself by these rules if it wanted to be a player in the modern academy. Moreover, the distinction between "Christianity," which was amenable to the aims of modern learning, and "sectarianism," which was hostile to them, had by now been embedded in academic culture in its confrontation with fundamentalism. Finally, the entire curriculum was understood by liberal Christian educational leaders to be morally uplifting, oriented to the shaping of human spiritual and moral development. The impact of these

¹¹ See Murray G. Murphey, "On the Scientific Study of Religion in the United States, 1870–1980," in *Religion and Twentieth-Century American Intellectual Life*, ed. Michael J. Lacey (Washington, D.C., and Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press, 1989), 136–7; and Robert M. Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization, 1889–1920* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

¹² Marsden, *Soul of the American University*, 177, 329.

converging forces on the nascent academic discipline of Religious Studies can be seen in University of Chicago founder William Rainey Harper's rationale for including the study of religion in the curriculum of a major research university. According to Marsden,

Harper shared with many of his contemporaries enthusiasm about the powers of "scientific study" to settle longstanding human debates in all areas. He accordingly justified the inclusion of the Bible and other distinctly religious subjects in the broadening university curriculum on the grounds that they could now be studied scientifically. There were "laws of religious life" just as there were laws of health and physical life. Yet "men and women of the highest intelligence in matters of life and thought are discovered to be cultivating a religious life far below the plane of their intellectual life." Advances in the scientific study of religion, not only in biblical studies, but notably also in the psychology of religion, now made possible a scientific approach to this part of life as much as any other.¹³

The true religion long established within American university culture would now become the "religion" studied in the academy.

It was inconceivable that religion would be anything but good religion in this social and intellectual setting, "good" meaning anything acceptable in belief or practice to liberal Protestantism. Profoundly influenced by the evolutionary paradigm of the natural sciences, American sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists of religion asserted that cultures, society, individuals—indeed, planetary civilization itself—developed from lower, primitive forms successively toward higher expressions of the human religious spirit, expressions that inevitably resembled this good religion. American psychologists of religion, for example, heirs and interpreters of Jamesian pragmatism, designated as religion that component of human personality that moved it toward emotional, spiritual, and existential unity and maturity, success and happiness. Such normative terms were presented as analytical categories, and their implicit moral and cultural assumptions went unchallenged; such was the authority of "true" religion in the academy. Likewise, sociologists tended to emphasize religion's socially integrative functions, its role as the pivot of social stability and solidarity, and to relegate to categories other than religion any phenomenon that did not serve this consensual function.

Of course, Americans outside the academy knew well that religions often did not function this way. American culture has been extraordi-

¹³ Ibid., 243.

narily rich in religious movements that promoted divisiveness not integration, insisted on authority or emotion rather than reason, resorted to violence, shame, and degradation in pursuing their spiritual ends, and crafted subjectivities of a sort far beyond what was tolerable in the precincts of the academy. Indeed, it was partially the cultural elite's recognition and fear of such popular religious fecundity that led to the insistence on teaching liberal ethics and true religion in the academy, to inoculate the young against the contagion of American religious imaginings. Perhaps this is why religious practitioners often do not recognize what passes for "religion" within religious studies.

Legal scholar Stephen L. Carter expresses the normative academic position in his recently published and widely celebrated account of religion in American public life, *The Culture of Disbelief*. Carter bluntly asserts that "religion at its best" resonates with the values most Americans hold dear and that this religion-at-its-best "tends to be a positive not a negative force in people's lives." Thus is practiced the familiar art of distinguishing true religion from everything else.¹⁴ The point here is not simply that this normative account of "true religion" excludes from the study of religion ugly, violent, or troublesome matters (although it certainly does this). Rather the entire notion of religion has been carefully demarcated to preserve it from ambivalence and ambiguity, from anything not in accordance with certain sanctioned notions of self and society. Religion is gridded along a graph of diametric opposites—in Carter's terms, "positive" rather than "negative," which may be taken as a summary of all the other dichotomies I have mentioned. The possibility that religion can transgress these various normative dualities, that it does its cultural, psychological, and political work precisely by disregarding boundaries between one self and another, or between past, present, and future, or between the natural and the supernatural, is disallowed. True religion is epistemologically and ethically singular; it is rational, respectful of persons, noncoercive, mature, nonanthropomorphic in its higher forms, mystical (as opposed to ritualistic), agreeable to democracy, monotheistic (no angels, saints, demons, ancestors), a reality of mind and spirit not body and matter. It is concerned with ideal essences not actual things. Thus all the complex dynamism of religion is stripped away, its boundary-blurring and border-crossing pro-

¹⁴ Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 268, 270.

pensities eliminated. Not surprisingly, there is only one methodology and one epistemology for studying this "religion," critical, analytical, and "objective" (as opposed to "subjective," existentially engaged, or participatory).

In this way the discipline reflects the religious politics of the United States as well as the distinct history of the academy: the embedded, hidden others against whom the religion in Religious Studies is constituted are the religions on the American landscape that appeared so terrifying and un-American to the guardians of the culture—Mormonism, Catholicism, evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, among others. The discipline was literally constructed by means of the exclusion—in fact and in theory—of these other ways of practicing religion, which were relegated to the world of sects, cults, fundamentalisms, popular piety, ritualism, magic, primitive religion, millennialism, anything but "religion."

The academic study of religion is not an American phenomenon, of course. The notion that religion could be made acceptable to sophisticated and civilized men and women goes back in the modern period at least to Friedrich Schleiermacher, just as Marsden's critique of such religion has its roots in Søren Kierkegaard's contempt for it. American academics who study religion participate in an international community of scholars that is institutionalized in various sorts of academic arrangements, scholarly exchanges, and international symposia. But in this broader context too, liberal notions of religion allied to particular political agendas came to be authoritative.

Eric J. Sharpe points out in his history of the modern development of the discipline that scholars shaped in liberal Christian traditions played important roles in its early formative period and that liberal versions of Christianity acquired a normative status in the work of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century comparativists. Indeed, this Christianity was seen as the *telos* of the evolution of world religions. As the colonial period shuddered to a close, scholars proposed a broadly inclusive, universal religion of man as the goal of both the study and practice of religions. They aspired to gather the world's many different religious traditions into a single, global narrative of the progressive revelation of God.

Given this normative evolutionary orientation in the field, many practitioners began to insist that the academic study of religion itself make a positive contribution to human culture and to the betterment of life on earth, to facilitate relations across cultures and to deepen human tolerance. This social task seemed particularly imperative after World

War II, when many in the discipline held that academic study had a role to play in the reconstruction of Western culture devastated by war and totalitarianism. A hard-core group, comprised mainly of European scholars, held onto an "empiricist" vision of the field (as Sharpe identifies it) and insisted that the emphasis on the moral responsibility of professors of Religious Studies represented the intrusion of theology and normative ethics into the discipline. But these scholars were in the minority. Both in content and method, Religious Studies has long been occupied with "good" religion.

By the time I arrived as an undergraduate at a small New England college with an excellent religion department, this combination of a liberal Protestant understanding of what religion is and a sense of the moral responsibility of the field had become institutionalized in the curriculum. My professors were all educated at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where they learned theology from Paul Tillich and ethics from Reinhold Niebuhr, the two figures whom I thus came to see as the alpha and omega of the study of religion (an unusual conclusion for an Italian American Catholic from the Bronx, but not one that seemed odd at the time). Sharpe points out that "scholars trained in one or the other liberal religious tradition [came] to occupy a prominent position in the newer religious studies enterprise since the early 1970s," a reflection of broader cultural trends in the 1960s, especially the moral animus against the Vietnam War. The discipline is far more varied and complex today, but it is still oriented, as Sam Gill, a prominent scholar, laments, toward "the broadly held essentialist view of religion—that is, that religion is 'the sacred' or 'ultimate concern' and that the attributes of the 'sacred' and 'ultimate concern' are goodness, purity, and unity, or of the center or origin." To study religion from this approach, Gill writes, "means to discern and appreciate these desirable qualities in any culture."¹⁵

The work of the discipline in constituting itself this way has had grave social consequences far beyond the academy. By inscribing a boundary between good and bad religions at the very foundation of the field, Religious Studies enacts an important cultural discipline. There is no end to human religious creativity; one would have to look to the staggering varieties and complexities of what humans have made of sexuality to

¹⁵ Sam Gill, "The Academic Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62 (Winter 1994): 969–70. Gill is here specifically criticizing the way "comparison" is understood in the discipline by some, but he clearly intends his remarks to have broader force.

find another site of such explosive and complicated activity. Yet it has been the impulse of Religious Studies since its inception to impose closure and discipline on religion, to control and contain this complexity. When the Branch Davidian compound was incinerated at Waco, Texas, in April 1993, much was made of the failure of the government and of federal law enforcement officials to recognize the particular religious character of leader David Koresh's movement. It was not as widely noted that the government's failure paralleled the limitations of Religious Studies, which has long offered an authoritative map of religious experience that excluded such a "marginal" group.

It is in this context of the history of Religious Studies and specifically of the centrality of a definition of religion that is essentialist, moralistic, and exclusionary, that we must think about what the current revival of moral inquiry across the disciplines might mean. Any approach to religion that foregrounds ethical issues as these are now embedded in the discipline will only obstruct our understanding of religious idioms, because religion at its root has nothing to do with morality.

Pace Stephen Carter, religion does not make the world better to live in (although some forms of religious practice might); religion does not necessarily conform to the creedal formulations and doctrinal limits developed by cultured and circumspect theologians, church leaders, or ethicists; religion does not unambiguously orient people toward social justice. Particular religious idioms can do all of these things; the religiously motivated civil rights movement is a good example of a social impulse rooted in an evangelical faith and dedicated to a more decent life for men and women. But however much we may love this movement and however much we prefer to teach it (as opposed to, for example, the "cultic" faith of Jonestown or the "magical" beliefs of "popular" religion), this is not the paradigm for religion, nor is it the expression of religion at some idealized best. There is a quality to the religious imagination that blurs distinctions, obliterates boundaries—especially the boundaries we have so long and carefully erected within the discipline—and this can, and often does, contribute to social and domestic violence, not peace. Religion is often enough cruel and dangerous, and the same impulses that result in a special kind of compassion also lead to destruction, often among the same people at the same time. Theories of religion have largely served as a protection against such truths about religion.

It is the challenge of the discipline of Religious Studies not to stop at the border of human practices done in the name of the gods that we

scholars find disturbing, dangerous, or even morally repugnant, but rather to enter into the otherness of religious practices in search of an understanding of their human ground. Practitioners must find a way of honoring their own moral and political values, while not masking the common humanity that both researcher and religious adept share—share even with a man like Punkin Brown.

But in attempting such a morally and existentially demanding engagement with the men and women they study, practitioners of Religious Studies will run into a problem. Although the discipline authorizes an implicit account—freighted with moral value—of what religion is, Religious Studies in its quest for legitimacy has also explicitly insisted that scholars adhere to canons of critical and analytical scholarship as defined by the secular academy. In particular, scholars of religion must maintain a critical distance from their subjects, a remove that is understood to be the necessary precondition for analysis and interpretation. (It is not unusual to hear it said for this reason that one cannot study one's own religious tradition.) Scholars of religion are trained to keep their own lives, values, and, above all, religious understandings out of their research; not to do so exposes them to charges of subjectivism, of writing autobiographically, journalistically, or, worst of all, theologically.

Religious Studies acquired its contemporary shape in the American academy after the Second World War in explicit distinction from—and rejection of—seminaries and schools of theology. The severity of the injunction against theology, and more broadly against the moral and religious presence of the scholar in the conduct or presentation of his or her research (other than to articulate the discipline's liberal Protestant moral assumptions), reflects this origin. Theology is the reflection upon the thought and practice of a religious tradition by its adherents; Religious Studies is an outsider's discipline by definition, aspiring to the status of science through a strategy of distance. This paradigm, however, has lately come under attack.

CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN CRITIQUES OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Among the most severe contemporary critics of Religious Studies are evangelical Christian academics of various denominational affiliations who have felt that the hegemony of the liberal definition of religion and the dominance of liberal approaches to research have precluded full par-

participation by evangelicals in the discipline or in the wider university culture. Evangelical perspectives have survived in the liberal university, according to these critics, only to the extent that evangelicalism denies its own distinctiveness, severs its connections to the believing community, and becomes a branch of cultural studies. Could a Christian scientist, grounded in a particular faith community and certain of the truth of Scripture, conduct her research according to the perspectives of her faith? Would such an alternative be allowed in the academy, which is otherwise so open, by its own account of itself, to the perspectives of the oppressed, marginalized, voiceless? The liberal secular university, in the view of these evangelical critics, is the site of manifold prohibitions masquerading as permissions. Liberalism opens the space for anything to be studied critically so long as the critical perspective brought into play is not religiously particular, and thus theology, a decidedly particularist discipline, has been expunged by academic liberalism.

Religious Studies is an especially egregious expression of this culture since it sets out to study matters of greatest concern to others, usually others who are situated in a distinct religious culture themselves, from a nonconfessional point of view—ostensibly demanding, indeed, the suppression of the researcher's own religious values in the process. Could a Christian scholar of religion frame her classes by what she understood to be the authoritative witness of her church? But how does one assess one's understandings of Christian history or doctrine apart from the guidance of tradition as articulated in a believing community?

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas has written harshly of departments of Religious Studies as being "comprised of people who are willing to study a religion on the condition that it is either dead or that they can teach it in such a way as to kill it. The last thing they would want to acknowledge is that they might actually practice what they teach, because such an acknowledgement might suggest that they are less than objective." Programs in these departments might introduce students to Thomas Aquinas or Karl Barth, but they would never hire such intellectually rigorous but religiously committed intellectuals for their faculties. The discipline is literally founded on the distortion of its own subject, by this account, or worse yet on an act of academic—and personal—bad faith; and it demands the intellectual and religious deformation of scholars who believe as the condition for admission into the guild.¹⁶

¹⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, "Christians in the Hands of Flaccid Secularists: Theology and 'Moral Inquiry' in the Modern University" (paper presented at conference on the Revival of

Christian critics now sense that the moment is right for a challenge to this century-long hegemony. Insurgent groups of younger, conservative Christian theologians, many of them trained and credentialed in departments of Religious Studies at secular universities, have set out to undermine the authority and influence of older, modernist liberal scholars and perspectives in Biblical studies, philosophy of religion, theology, and even religious history. The notion of a nonparticularist study of religion has come to seem almost fusty to some. Ironically or perversely (depending on one's politics), the Christian critique of the liberal, secular university echoes themes of radical young postmodern critics of modernity. As Marsden argues in a polemical "Concluding Unscientific Postscript" to his history of the secularization of learning in American higher education, "the widespread current critiques of scientific objectivity provide a context for reconsidering the near exclusion of religious perspectives from the academic life of American universities of Protestant heritage." Once one admits that "everyone's intellectual inquiry takes place in a framework of communities that shape prior commitments," there is little reason for excluding explicitly religious claims from the teaching and research that take place in the academy.¹⁷ Confessional pedagogy slips into the academic tent through the opening created by postmodernism.

THE POLITICAL CRITIQUE OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

An alternative account of contemporary university culture posits Christianity in any form, modern or postmodern, as an obstacle for intellectual work, not as an alternative to the frustrations of secularism. Marsden claims that contemporary university culture is anti-Christian, and surely anyone who has spent any time in this world must agree that there is a measure of truth in this charge. Some of this is simply prejudice; some of it is a way for university intellectuals to draw an unmissable boundary between the culture of learning they value and a surrounding society that they often believe is anti-intellectual because it is Christian. But for some the critique of Christianity is linked with a broader political and epistemological agenda and is meant as a serious

Moral Inquiry in American Scholarship, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C., May 15–16, 1995). Cited with permission.

¹⁷ Marsden, *Soul of the American University*, 429–30.

challenge to the hegemony of Western culture, to its ways of knowing and living. Articulated by scholars who have worked in cultures that endured the burden of Christian authority under colonial regimes, this perspective on Christianity is politically charged. Christianity is understood to have been indispensable to Western imperialism, providing its cultural legitimation, moral confidence, and epistemological grounding while spiritually underwriting the military and economic campaigns of the Western powers. Intellectuals, including scholars of religions, crafted the philosophical framework that constituted native populations as other, a key move in the enactment of domination and exploitation; this was the intellectual politics of Orientalism. The representation of native culture as either primitive, proto-Christian, or crypto-Christian was the intellectuals' contribution to imperialism.

The postcolonial world since the 1950s has exposed the cruelty of Western intellectual hegemony, unmasking the practices of domination and exploitation enclosed within the culture of enlightened reason and liberal tolerance. Intellectuals in Asia, Africa, and South America have challenged the canons of Western culture. The task for American university intellectuals now is to rethink American culture from the perspective of the once-dominated other and from alternative and once-oppressed vantage points, a process of decentering and defamiliarizing as the first step to reinterpretation. Western styles of knowledge, which typically give priority to detachment over engagement, to textuality over vocality, to mind over body, are to be exposed to radically different ways of construing and inhabiting reality.

In the context of this broader criticism of Western knowing, the challenge for any revival of moral inquiry among postcolonial scholars of religion would be to become radically aware of their own implicit Western and Christian biases, of the hidden, normative Christianity within the basic methodologies and philosophical orientations of Religious Studies, and then expunge it. Moreover, just as postcolonial intellectual culture calls into question central tenets of Western thought, so a new kind of moral inquiry must be open to construals of the "ethical" profoundly at variance with Christian ideals and formulations.

One example of what this new kind of ethical inquiry would look like is Karen McCarthy Brown's discussion of Haitian Vodou morality in *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. Unlike the radically dualist distinction made within Christianity between absolute good and

absolute evil, a boundary authorized and presided over by a singular deity, Vodou asserts multiplicity, diversity, and contradiction. Vodou notions of subjectivity understand the self to be multifarious, the site of conflicting energies, capacities, possibilities, without the Christian insistence on consistency in self-presentation. "A moral person, in Vodou," Brown writes, is one who lives "in tune with his or her character, a character defined by the spirits said to love that person." Such moral "flexibility," she adds, "is provided in the midst of moral dilemmas by the support these favorite spirits offer to different and sometimes contradictory values."¹⁸

Vodou locates fault not inside persons (which by rendering them evil exposes them to harsh proselytism at the least, if not persecution or destruction for their own good, at the worst) but in relationships between persons in the social field. As a healing medium, Vodou seeks to dissolve whatever is holding people in hostile and antagonistic relations. It may be quite extreme in this work of unblocking, heating up the contradictions, conflicts, and inconsistencies within a person or in the social setting—disorientingly, shockingly at times—in order to create a liberating and revealing excitement. In Brown's account, Vodou is the pragmatic idiom by which a poor, politically oppressed, economically marginalized people live their lives with grace, dignity, and compassion in the spaces between the absolutes constituted by intellectuals of more politically powerful and materially comfortable regimes.

Brown and other scholars who have spent personally and intellectually formative years in other cultures call us to juxtapose—playfully and perversely as Vodou does in its healing work—the language of American reality with the realities of those other worlds. They propose to bring the religious and moral vision of the colonized into creative tension with the moral sensibility and religious idioms of the colonizer. The goal is a creole scholarship that draws from the epistemological, aesthetic, religious, and moral idioms of different cultures to decenter and rethink the idioms of the West. Christianity itself—as well as the normative, dualistic, crypto-Christian categories of Religious Studies—looks very different when viewed from Mama Lola's living room.

¹⁸ Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 241.

BACK TO THE SNAKES

It may appear that there is little common ground between the evangelical and the postcolonial critiques of the liberal academic paradigm for studying religion. But surprisingly and perhaps ironically there are significant convergences. Proponents of both perspectives propose, for instance, that the universalistic ambitions of Western enlightened rationality give way to local orientations: there is no essential, singular truth, only situated truths. Both understand the scholar herself to be situated at a particular cultural location that fundamentally shapes her vision, and both place passion and commitment at the center of research methodology and pedagogy. Stanley Hauerwas has said that the confessional teacher "witnesses" in the classroom, makes his or her faith present and invites students into a dialogue about it, holds it up as a lens for examining and challenging the dominant arrangements of culture. Critical anthropologists propose a radical critique of Western culture as the appropriate classroom stance. They use the experiences of people in distant places, their way of construing reality, and their often disastrous encounters with Christianity as the framing device for students' examination of Western religions and their assessment of the claims of Western reason. Conversion—to Christianity or to other religious idioms—is not necessarily the explicit goal of either pedagogy, but there is a heightened existential edge to this kind of teaching compared with the older critical liberal model. The evangelical and the political critiques challenge the authority of liberal Protestantism in the discipline and demand that scholars in the field transgress, in method and in the foci of their work, the authoritative boundaries of Religious Studies.

I find both critiques compelling and welcome the challenge each represents to the way we have gone about the study of religion in the United States. But I am not sure that either one ultimately avoids the pitfall to which Covington succumbed in reestablishing his barrier against Punkin Brown. Evangelical and postcolonial scholars themselves rely on the constitution of respective others in doing their work—the Christian other, in the case of postcolonial critics (for whom non-Western religions are valued, at least in part, as expressions of not-Christianity), and for evangelicals, either the liberal, secular other or, just as likely, an other made of Christian beliefs and practices different from those of evangelicals.

The postmodern Christian scholar in the postliberal university

would presumably assess Punkin Brown's Christianity from the perspective of a particular theological orientation, a distinct set of Christian beliefs and perspectives, much as Covington himself did in his own criticism of the snake handler. Encountering such a figure would be a ripe moment for "catechesis," the explication of the researcher's own faith through a dialectical interplay between his or her religious world and the religious world of the other. Covington secured the boundary between himself and Punkin Brown by evoking God as his witness, explicitly placing himself in a debate within the Christian community over the "nature of God" (in his words) and the role of women in the church and society. Likewise, the confessional professor might witness to her own faith by affirming that in her reading of Scripture God sanctions the participation of women in religious life; she might say that the God of the handlers is not the God of the New Testament, as Covington did.

I find it even harder to imagine what postcolonial professors would make of Punkin Brown given the resolutely anti-Christian animus of so many of them. His rage against women and his apparent determination to dominate them (religiously and probably otherwise too) disclose what many consider to be the inherent social aggressiveness of Christianity. A cultural critic could help us understand Punkin Brown's impulse to dominate in global and domestic perspectives. He or she might shift the focus of analysis away from the nature of God to the sorts of social conditions that shaped Punkin Brown. But the internal power of the man's religious imagination, his relationship with Jesus crucified, and his deep desire to experience the power of the spirit with the life-threatening snake in his hands might be missed by observers tone deaf to matters of faith and religious practice, especially Christian faith and practice.

Punkin Brown and others like him are just too valuable precisely as *others*, as the unassimilable and intolerable, to be easily surrendered. So long as the point of religious scholarship, even implicitly or unconsciously, is to seal the borders of our own worlds of meaning and morals, whatever these may be, against such others, it will be impossible to relinquish the "Punkin Browns" constituted in the field or the archives. The challenge facing the discipline today, however, is not to find new others, as both the evangelical and postcolonial approaches do, but to get beyond "otherizing" as the basic move of the discipline.

RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN A MOMENT OF TRANSITION

There is another alternative to the liberal paradigm, one that unlike the evangelical or postcolonial options guards more assiduously against the moralistic impulse to construct figures of otherness. This alternative is characterized by a disciplined suspension of the impulse to locate the other (with all her or his discrepant moralities, epistemological orientations, and religious impulses) securely in relation to one's own cosmos. It has no need to fortify the self in relation to the other so constituted. Instead, this alternative destabilizes the authority of one's own world. It is an in-between orientation, located at the intersection of self and other, at the boundary between one's own moral universe and the moral world of the other.

The ground upon which such a researcher stands belongs neither to herself or to the other but has come into being between them, precisely because of the meeting of the two. This is ground that would not have existed apart from the relationship between researcher and her subject. (Covington forgets that Punkin Brown was responding to *him* that night, that the preacher would not have given that sermon had Covington not entered his world.) On this ground, unowned by anyone, each person experiences the taken-for-granted world as vulnerable, decontextualized, realigned. Ideally, after such an exchange, neither party is the same as when it began. Most importantly, such a movement onto the ground between universes of meaning would not permit the kind of closure Covington imposes on Punkin Brown and his world. It requires that the scholar of religion abandon the security offered by the discipline, by its implicit and explicit moral certainty and theoretical apparatuses, and proceed instead by risk, suspension, engagement.

To illustrate what I have in mind here, I want to turn to David Haberman's study of the Ban-Yatra pilgrimage in northern India, *Journey through the Twelve Forests: An Encounter with Krishna*.¹⁹ Like Covington's, this is an intensely personal narrative. It recounts Haberman's deep existential entanglement with the Hindu pilgrims he journeys with through Braj, as the pilgrimage area is called. Haberman never forgets his social location nor the history of Western relations with India. A

¹⁹ David L. Haberman, *Journey through the Twelve Forests: An Encounter with Krishna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). I should note that David Haberman is a colleague of mine on the faculty of Indiana University and a friend.

sophisticated theorist of postcolonial culture, he is aware that as a contemporary student of Hinduism he steps into, and attempts to challenge, a tradition of interpretation with roots in the imperial period.

Braj is dotted with sites central to the narratives about Krishna—the grove he frolicked in with his consort, Radha, for example, and the prison cell where he was born. Believers claim that Braj is in some sense the body of god: the landscape is so intimately connected to Krishna that it is he. The god's body is thus uniquely present to the pilgrims during their arduous journey through Braj. This trope of physical presence becomes a central device of Haberman's work: early in the journey Haberman begins to develop awful blisters on his tender feet, and for the rest of the pilgrimage he must contend with terrible pain and rely on the assistance of his fellow pilgrims. Just as the god's body is over-present in Braj, so is the ethnographer's in his experience and account of the pilgrimage, which as a result becomes a journey through the possibilities and limitations of corporality. On the levels of religious understanding and existential experience, pain is the pathway for Haberman into the intersection between worlds, the suspensive space where a new kind of understanding of other religions is possible.

Haberman could see that many of his fellow pilgrims were also in pain. But this did not prevent them from taking a deep sensual pleasure at sites commemorating Krishna's own pleasures, an incongruity that Haberman found confusing at first. How could these weary bodies stumbling into the groves of Krishna's delight experience joy and pleasure, and how could the anthropologist with his inflamed foot? But as he enters into this apparent disjuncture of pain and pleasure, deprivation and sensuality, distress and celebration, Haberman comes to see it as the dynamic of the pilgrimage. Haberman's confusion, disorientation, and pain become means of comprehension. He shows us what Covington might have done differently, at greater personal risk for himself and cultural disorientation for his readers, that night in Georgia. Covington might have used the distress and even revulsion occasioned in him by Punkin Brown's performance as such a pivot of reflection. By suspending the need to guard himself against whatever fears and revelations Brown's performance had evoked, Covington could have been led to discover the common source of both the violence and the beauty of this startling religious idiom. He might have reflected on the roots of Brown's anger; he might have explored the intersection between desire and rage, the sacred and the obscene, and come to grips with his own attraction to

snake handling. Instead, he turns away, and asserts a principled commitment to the spiritual equality of women. This commitment may be laudable in itself, but Covington does not see how invoking it where and when he does amounts to a refusal to engage his real subject.

The key moment in Haberman's account for my purposes—his version of the Punkin Brown encounter—comes when he finds himself standing on bleeding feet in a place called Charan Pahari, the "Mountain of the Foot," where Krishna is said to have left a footprint in a white stone softened by his music. The stone is lovingly, regularly bathed by the god's devout with water and smeared with red powder. Haberman's account of his visit to this spot begins with an acknowledgement of otherness. There is a quality to the site that causes him to step out of his role as pilgrim and admit his place—and confusion—as observer: "Such claims [as that Krishna had stepped on this stone] are naturally met with some doubt on the part of the outsider." He moves still further out in the second half of this sentence: "especially considering the economic benefits gained by the attendants busily collecting money from the pilgrims." A moral distance has opened between him and the caretakers of the shrine. This is the "haaagh" experience: suspicion, detachment, and doubt overwhelm compassion and understanding.²⁰

Haberman might have turned away at this moment in disgust at the venality of shrine keepers and the gullibility of the devout, as other visitors to India have done. There are, indeed, good reasons to be suspicious of what goes on at shrines, in India and elsewhere. Shrine priests do not scruple to take advantage of people in considerable emotional need and religious excitement. Moreover, as countless Western critics of popular religion have pointed out wherever they have encountered such human practices, the money spent on feeding, dressing, and adoring the gods in this way might be better spent on peoples' health, clothing, or education. Liberal scholars of religion have been as bemused by immigrant Catholics' devotion to saints as by Hindus in this regard. This could have been the outer boundary of Haberman's journey, the point at which he stopped at otherness and confirmed it, and many readers would have understood his moral concerns.

But he turns back to the experience of the people he is observing and forces himself—and his readers—to recognize that there are many worlds, many different ways of making and inhabiting reality. He writes,

"upon observing several women bow down and touch their heads to this stone, come up with tears streaming down their faces, and hug each other crying, 'O Sister! O Sister!' I began to think that questions [about the venality of the shrine keepers or the ontological reality of the stone's imprint] . . . were inappropriate." Since "reality is not set for human beings [and] multiple realities or worlds of meaning are available to us," moral judgment is rendered problematic. "Judgments of realities are difficult," Haberman continues, not impossible or unnecessary, "because there is nowhere to stand that is not situated in a particular reality, which by its very nature regards other realities with suspicion."²¹ The challenge becomes then to set one's own world, one's own particular reality, now understood as one world among many possible other worlds, in relation to this other reality and to learn how to view the two in relation to each other, moving back and forth between two alternative ways of organizing and experiencing reality. The point is not to make the other world radically and irrevocably other, but to render one's own world other to oneself as prelude to a new understanding of the two worlds in relationship to each other.

Ironically, it is Haberman's constant awareness of his difference that permits him to enter so deeply into the intersection of two worlds; indeed, there would be no intersection without an awareness of difference. Covington portrayed himself initially as having passed over entirely to the culture of snake handling, but that apparent immersion ends up telling us less about either his own or Punkin Brown's world than Haberman's intersectional strategy does about Braj.²² This is where the pleasure, excitement, and risk of Religious Studies are, its delights as well as its dangers. The space is dangerous because one cannot, after all, simply abandon one's deepest values or tolerate the intolerable, even though something awful and intolerable might make sense in someone else's world; it is delightful because by staying in the space between—indeed, prolonging one's stay there by refusing the initial opportunities for closure—one comes to know something about the other and about oneself through relationship with the other. Haberman identifies this as an erotic methodology, borrowing from French psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan an understanding of desire as that which rejects closure. The erotic orientation to another's religion resists ending the tension

²¹ Ibid., 169.

²² I owe the useful phrase "intersectional strategy" to Richard Fox.

²⁰ Ibid., 168–9.

provoked by the proximity of two diverse worlds. It is this delight in difference that sets Religious Studies apart from the more conventional orientations of liberal academics, evangelical theologians, and postcolonial critics alike.

Besides imagining himself as a snake-handling minister, there is one other way that Covington attempts to bring the world of the other closer, to himself and to his readers: through an appreciation of the physical beauty of Christian women with snakes in their hands. He invites us to gaze on these women holding snakes and find their spiritual passion beautiful. His account of Aline McGlockin in particular, the wife of one of Covington's closest friends in the community, emphasizes her haunting, lovely appearance in spiritual ecstasy; and again there is a sound. Covington records that Aline cries "akiii, akiii, akiii," as she experiences the spirit's presence, and he finds this unnerving and sexually interesting.

Covington offers us two sounds—"haaagh" and "akiii"—and two choices, the ethical and the aesthetic, one approach through judgment and another through beauty. Haberman offers a third way, neither ethical nor aesthetic. He calls it erotic; living so far from the delights of Krishna's groves, I will call it instead suspensive. Religious Studies is not a moralizing discipline; it exists in the suspension of the ethical, and it steadfastly refuses either to deny or redeem the other. It is a moral discipline, however, in its commitment to examining the variety of human experience and to making contact across boundaries—cultural, psychological, spiritual, existential.

CONCLUSION: A CELEBRATION OF THE POLYTHEISTIC CLASSROOM

The classroom is where many of us perform a significant portion of our daily intellectual work; it is where we invite others to join us in our questions. Our students come to us from many different worlds, bearing many different histories. This is true even in the Bible Belt, where I teach. The world's many cultures are well represented in Midwestern classrooms. Furthermore, "Christian" students bring complex Christianities into the classroom. Many of them—and here I can say *especially* in the Bible Belt—have had truly ruinous experiences in their churches and Christian homes. They are already quite familiar with the power of Christian faith to scar them and, if they have been fortunate, with its

powers of liberation and salvation. These students from Bible-reading homes are sick of witnesses and revivals, of experiencing the "truth" as a prescription about the doable, thinkable, or possible. In response, some have put together intricate Christian understandings that draw on neopaganism, snippets of Asian religions, popular psychology, contemporary science fiction. Others simply will have nothing more to do with religion, finding their way instead to Religious Studies classes in hopes of securing tools to help them reflect critically on their religious experience. Some (the minority in my experience, even here in southern Indiana) are practicing Christians of various sorts. "Christianity" when it is used in the authoritative singular, as if it had secure, discernible boundaries, makes sense only as a symbol for political or cultural mobilization. The social fact of our classrooms, as of American culture, is that there are many, many Christianities.

None of the students in this polytheistic world will be addressed by witnessing to a singular truth, nor will they be awakened by denunciations of their Christianities by postcolonial critics. Having worked hard to undo the tradition of making non-Western cultures "other," these critics have returned to this one only to make it other. Students will not be interested in normative versions of religion that neglect or exclude all the humiliating, destructive, beautiful, mysterious, and terrifying dimensions of it they know from their own experience. It is difficult to see these "Christian" students as agents of Western hegemony, since like Punkin Brown their families have so often been on the receiving end of cultural domination; postcolonial criticism becomes another form of imperial witnessing when it is conducted without a vivid sense of the worlds Americans come from and the varieties of Christianities they have known. Witnessing in any case will always fail as communication in the university, and moral inquiry without communication and conversation is nothing but covert compulsion.

There is no distinct moment of moral inquiry that comes before and exists separately from the communication of one's moral reflections to others. Discernment does not precede rhetoric; talking does not represent the outcome of moral analysis but serves as its necessary vehicle. Moral inquiry proceeds through conversation—which is to say, more broadly, that moral inquirers exist in relationship with each other on a social field comprising cultural traditions, economic and political circumstances, and family patterns. Such inquiry never exists apart from conversations among real, historically situated people, and moral inquiry is

always simultaneous with efforts to make its doubts and decisions public. I can imagine that the phrase "moral inquiry" might conjure up for some the image of a person reflecting in solitude upon the grounds for discerning good and bad before he or she goes out into the public to speak about what has been learned, but this is not what I understand by the term. To discuss a particular theory of moral inquiry, therefore, is necessarily not only to examine its explicit notions of moral rhetoric but to grasp that an understanding of morality is not a once-and-for-all acquisition, but an engagement in communication. We narrate what we know and we know by what we narrate.

Since moral reflection is in fact the conversations that constitute it, then the presence of many different histories, memories, experiences—and moral idioms—converging in our classrooms is a unique opportunity for Religious Studies. Moral inquiry in this context proceeds not through the constitution of the other—of "Punkin Brown," or of "Hinduism," or of "cult members" or of "popular" religion. This is the move Religious Studies has been making for the past century. Instead, moral inquiry proceeds through the recognition of the other and a revisioning of one's own story through the lens of the other openly engaged, as Karen Brown does in *Mama Lola* and David Haberman does in *Journey through the Twelve Forests*. It means experiencing one's own world from the disorienting perspective of the other's, and this necessarily entails risk, vulnerability, vertigo; it invites anger and creates distress. Like the discipline itself, the Religious Studies classroom exists in suspension too. Moral understanding in the polytheistic classroom—and in the polytheistic world beyond it—comes only through the multiplicity of stories told and attended to and the new possibilities that emerge in the places between lives and stories.

Social science and the moral revival: Dilemmas and difficulties

ALAN WOLFE

There can be little doubt that a moral revival is taking place in American social science. The notion that a strictly value free social science is both possible and desirable is not as widely shared as it was thirty years ago. Shaken by recent political events, influenced by colleagues in the humanities, and persuaded that good citizenship is a laudatory ideal, an increasingly large number of social scientists are seeking ways to apply their professional training and interests to the larger moral questions facing American society. Social science has rediscovered its moral roots (and, in this way, reforged its links with philosophy). Adam Smith, we are frequently reminded, was a moral philosopher, not just an economist. Immanuel Kant has served as a model for political philosophers such as John Rawls and psychologists such as Lawrence Kohlberg. American pragmatism has been an inspiration for thinkers concerned with communicative action, as well as for those concerned with institutions and organizations.¹

One of the hardest of such moral roots, especially for sociologists, is the work of Emile Durkheim.² Because sociology studies human be-

¹ See Jerry Muller, *Adam Smith in His Time and Ours: Designing the Decent Society* (New York: Free Press, 1993); John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971); and Lawrence Kohlberg, "The Future of Liberalism as the Dominant Ideology of the West," in *Moral Development and Politics*, ed. Richard W. Wilson and Gordon J. Schochet (New York: Praeger, 1980), 55–68. On communicative action, see Jürgen Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, vol. 1 of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984). For an example of a thinker concerned with institutions and organizations, see Philip Selznick, *The Moral Commonwealth: Social Theory and the Promise of Community* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

² A good overview is Mark S. Cladis, *A Communitarian Defense of Liberalism: Emile*