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Belief Unbracketed

A Case for the Religion Scholar to Reveal More of Where He or She Is Coming From

by Stephen Prothero

I am crazy for people who are crazy for God: people nearly as inscrutable to me as divinity, who leave wives and children to become forest-dwelling monks in Thailand, who wander naked across the belly of India in search of self-realization, who speak in tongues and take up serpents in Appalachia because the Bible says they can.

Over my living-room mantel stand a chorus of carved snake-handlers, each holding a serpent aloft, each entrusting his life to God and to us a testimony. On my bookshelves stand a number of books on snake-handling. The best is Dennis Covington's *Salvation on Sand Mountain* (1995), which describes the author's spiritual sojourn in southern Appalachia, including his dramatic decision to take up serpents himself. Briskly paced and elegantly written, this memoir raises all sorts of intriguing questions about religion and violence, faith and fanaticism. It ends, however, on a sour note.

After two years as "Brother Dennis," Covington picks a fight about women speaking in church—a fight he knows he

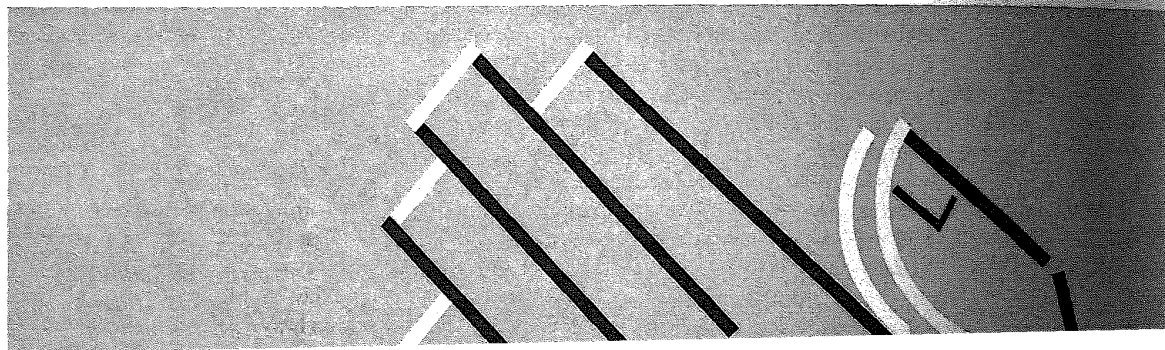
his own religious world against the worlds of his subjects, and otherwise refusing closure. "Religious studies is not a moralizing discipline," Orsi concludes. "It exists in the suspension of the ethical."²

Orsi is a brilliant theorist of religion and perhaps more than any of us (certainly more than I) he is alive to the ambiguities and complexities of religious experience, its everyday shame and violence. Still, he is saying little new here. For more than a century, scholars of reli-

gion have been distinguishing themselves from theologians by attempting to bracket questions of truth, morality, and causality—all in the name of better understanding religious phenomena. More than any other idea, Edmund Husserl's notion of bracketing, or *epochē* (from the Greek for "holding back"), has defined Religious Studies as a discipline. What do folks like me do? We enter empathetically into the worlds of religious people in an attempt to understand the believers who inhabit them. We set aside ques-

tions of cause and effect, good and bad. We check our worldviews at the door. Or, as Orsi puts it, we "enter into the otherness of religious practices in search of an understanding of their human ground."³

My latest book, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*, is an attempt to do just that—in this case to understand the myriad images of Jesus that have inspired Americans from Thomas Jefferson to Jerry Falwell. Though, as the subtitle intimates, one



It ends, however, on a sour note.

After two years as “Brother Dennis,” Covington picks a fight about women speaking in church—a fight he knows he is going to lose—and stomps out the door. Such endings are axiomatic in the “in-and-out” spiritual memoir, and I was disappointed that Covington fell into the cliché. Still, I forgave him the ungraceful exit, because the rest of the book is such a graceful introduction to the slings and arrows of hardcore faith (and because I knew he needed to get back home).

Harvard Divinity School Professor Robert Orsi is not so forgiving. In a provocative essay called “Snakes Alive: Resituating the Moral in the Study of Religion,” he praises Covington for providing “a good model for engaged, interpersonal, participatory religious study,” then chastises him for getting above his raisin’ at the end. According to Orsi, Covington commits at the conclusion of his quest the unpardonable sin of “otherizing”: of defining himself over against his subjects and then judging them to be morally inferior to himself.¹

What Covington should have done, Orsi argues, is linger in the no-man’s-land between going native and going home, forever flirting not only with his subjects but also with his own identity. He should have practiced the “erotics of Religious Studies” by suspending ad infinitum his judgments, endlessly playing

Stephen Prothero is chairman of Boston University’s Department of Religion and the author, most recently, of American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon (Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

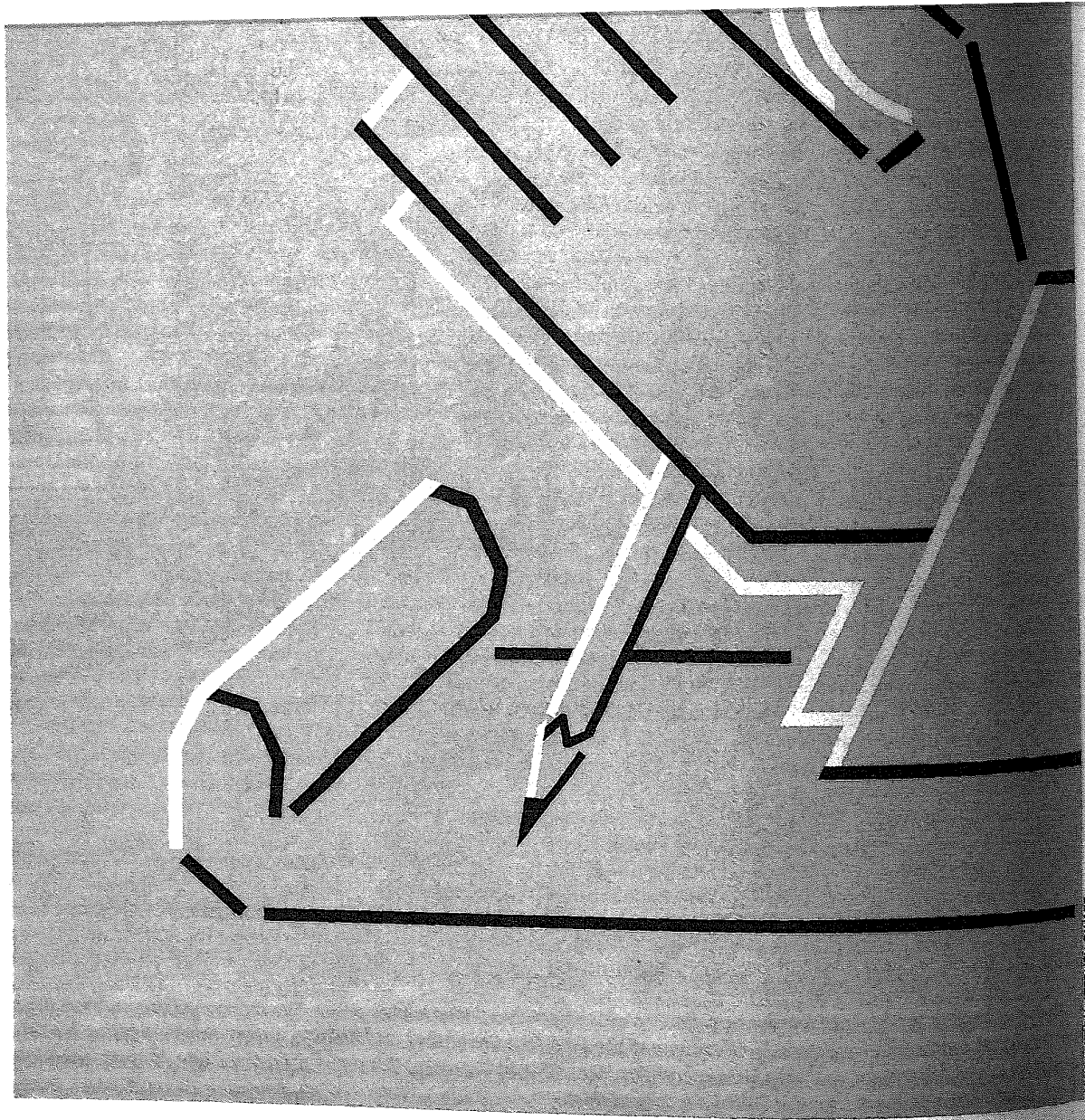


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s to explain how
d their Jesus from
l sign into a con-
ly into a celebrity,

an attempt at what the
Dutch religionist Gerardus van der
Leeuw called *Verstehen*, or empathetic
understanding.

As my book has been read, reviewed,
and debated, however, I have come to
believe that the endless bracketing that I
have always taken as my charge is viable
only as long as our work exists in the
splendid isolation of the Ivory Tower. In
the rough and tumble of the real world,
it is not possible, and likely not desirable.

In a review of *American Jesus* pub-
lished in *The New York Times Book Re-
view*, Michael Massing, apparently
taking as a personal challenge my refusal
to plump for any particular Jesus, went
on a quest for “Prothero’s own Jesus”
and found him in the person of Jeffer-
son’s rationalist sage. In the daily *Times*,
R. Scott Appleby described me as a par-
tisan of the “religion bad, spirituality
good” school. Both claims concern my
personal religious beliefs—a subject the
book dutifully avoids—and are plainly
false. As I wrote in a letter to the *Times*, I
personally find Jefferson’s Jesus laugh-
ably ahistorical. And while as a historian
I see the partisans of disorganized reli-
gion as key players in America’s spiritual
marketplace, I nonetheless consider the
disdain of so many Baby Boomers for re-
ligious institutions as ungenerous at best.
(Where, after all, do yoga and medita-
tion come from? Why such disdain for
the dead?)⁴

Perhaps more effectively than pry-
ing reviewers, inquiring readers draw us
out, too, demanding that we serve up
our expertise with a bit of judgment.

gious Studies scholars really so powerful?
Our readers so impressionable? Our sub-
jects so weak?

In all this hand-wringing about
bracketing beliefs and suspending the
ethical, I find more than a trace of con-
descension toward readers and subjects
alike. In *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, a
preacher named Punkin Brown bears the
brunt of Covington’s ire. In “Snakes
Alive,” Orsi rushes with bodhisattva re-
solve to Brown’s rescue, and to the aid of
Covington’s readers (who presumably
have been horribly betrayed by the au-
thor’s moral provocation). I do not know
for sure, but I rather doubt that Punkin
Brown was undone by the feminist rant-
ings of a scribbling outlander, or that the
book’s readers are powerless to resist
Covington’s theologizing.

When I was in college, a group of
students gathered regularly a bit after
midnight and argued, often for hours,
about politics, economics, and religion.
It was an eclectic crew. We had Marxists,
liberals, conservatives, an atheist, a Jew,
a born-again Christian, and a conservative
and a liberal Catholic. We went at one
another, no holds barred, consigning our
friends to heaven and hell, calling Chris-
tianity (Marxism as well) an opiate of the
masses, and otherwise making all man-
ner of outrageous judgments about the
world and ourselves. As far as I know,
none of us was hurt by any of the provo-
cation. And I learned more about myself
(and real friendship) in those sessions
than I did in all my college courses com-
bined.

At points in “Snakes Alive,” Orsi
seems to describe Religious Stud-
ies as an enterprise of just this sort
of provocation: You venture into the
dangerous border zone “between one’s

Crow (2004), is a masterly study of the
powerful role religion played in the civil
rights movement.⁵ It is also a timely re-
buke to the timidity of Religious Studies,
and of my own reticence to move be-
yond bracketing to moral inquiry. In it,
Chappell proceeds with all the subtlety
of a battering ram (or a prophet), blast-
ing black nationalist interpreters of the
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as anti-
intellectuals, sneering at the hokum of
the philosophical/theological school of
Personalism, and castigating King and
other civil rights saints for their intellec-
tual inconsistencies.

To tiptoe around the tough issues is to turn away. To tackle them head-on is true engagement.

While reading this book, I kept flash-
ing back to a very different volume: *Sal-
vation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim
Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown*
(1988) by David Chidester, a professor at
the University of Cape Town. I had been
at college only a few weeks when Jim
Jones and more than 900 of his followers
perished in a mass suicide/murder in
Guyana in November 1978. Night after
night, I was riveted to the radio, taking in
Jones’s haunting sermons. In retrospect,
these broadcasts may have been the cata-
lyst that diverted me from astrophysics
(my major at the time) to American reli-
gious history. I wanted to know why Jon-
estown happened. I wanted explanations.

A classic example of Orsi’s “erotic
methodology,” *Salvation and Suicide*
dances around these concerns with a

leagues today as with ghosts of religion-
ists past.

Since Jonestown, religion has shown
its dark side repeatedly—with Heaven’s
Gate, at Waco, and on 9/11. In each
case, we Religious Studies scholars have
been largely irrelevant to the public de-
bates. True, we drew out the parallels be-
tween the Heaven’s Gate website and
medieval Daoist immortality texts. But
we could not explain what produced the
worst mass suicide on American soil. No
surprise, then, that radio and television
producers turned instead to self-styled
“cult experts” to explain what happened

when Heaven’s Gate swung shut. And to
experts on the Middle East rather than
Islamicists when it came to parsing Islam
as “a religion of peace.”

Here’s a thought: Perhaps it is time
to stop “otherizing” ourselves. In hom-
age to Husserl, Orsi, Chidester, and all
the ghosts of Religious Studies past, let
us continue to suspend the ethical and
understand with empathy. Let us delight
in difference and tear down the barriers
between ourselves and our subjects. But
then also tear down this barrier: the bar-
rier against our own judgments. If we re-
ally want to resuscitate religion as a
moral enterprise, make bracketing a
temporary strategy rather than an eter-
nal imperative. Before you leave south-
ern Appalachia, tell Punkin Brown what
you think of him. He can tell the rest of

disdain of so many Baby Boomers for religious institutions as ungenerous at best. (Where, after all, do yoga and meditation come from? Why such disdain for the dead?)⁴

Perhaps more effectively than prying reviewers, inquiring readers draw us out, too, demanding that we serve up our expertise with a bit of judgment. Over the last few months, I have participated in dozens of media interviews about my book. Virtually every interviewer has eventually gotten around to matters of judgment. Which Jesus is your favorite? Is the proliferation of Jesuses a good or a bad thing? What would Jesus say about Buddhist and Hindu appropriations of his image? Is Jesus the Christ? Of course, some of these questions can be deflected, and I tried that for a while. But interviewers quickly grow tired of the cat-and-mouse game that is Religious Studies, and eventually so did I.

To my horror (and delight), I am now on the record against Jefferson's vision of Jesus as an enlightened sage and for representations of Jesus as a Black Moses. I have told interviewers that I am a Christian (albeit a confused one), that Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* is 99 and 44/100ths made up, that Hindu conceptions of Jesus as an avatar are deliciously bold, and that Jesus would not drive a car (unless he lived in Los Angeles).

In other words, I have come to see the "erotics of Religious Studies" as a tease. What is the danger of divulging to our readers what we really think (however confused or provisional)? Does criticizing our subjects really do them grave harm? Are Reli-

(and real friendship) in those sessions than I did in all my college courses combined.

At points in "Snakes Alive," Orsi seems to describe Religious Studies as an enterprise of just this sort of provocation: You venture into the dangerous border zone "between one's own moral universe and the moral world of the other" and come out a changed person. But when the contest is engaged and push comes to shove, Orsi becomes gun-shy. For him, Covington's principled assertion of women's rights "amounts to a refusal to engage his real subject." I could not disagree more. To tiptoe around the tough issues is to turn away. To tackle them head-on is true engagement.

One of my college friends, David L. Chappell (the village atheist in our early morning debates), is now a history professor at the University of Arkansas. His most recent book, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim*

Should—or How Should—the Religion Scholar Check a Worldview at the Door?

The Summer 2004 issue of *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, to be published in June, will include responses to Stephen Prothero by Robert Orsi, David Chidester, and other religious studies scholars, in a continuing forum on personal approaches to scholarship in the field.

gion's history. I wanted to know why Jonestown happened. I wanted explanations. Jones's haunting sermons. In retrospect, these broadcasts may have been the catalyst that diverted me from astrophysics (my major at the time) to American religious history. I wanted to know why Jonestown happened. I wanted explanations.

A classic example of Orsi's "erotic methodology," *Salvation and Suicide* dances around these concerns with a smile and a swagger, making it not only one of the most brilliant books in the field but also one of the most perverse. Chidester proudly refuses "causal explanations," offering instead a "religiohistorical interpretation" that seeks to understand empathetically what turned Jonestown into a "meaningful human enterprise." After invoking his method of "temporarily" suspending value judgments, he writes, "I stress the word *temporarily* here because after the strategy of *epochē* has been exercised, and the phenomenon we are exploring has appeared in as much clarity as we can bring to it, we can always go on (or back) to making moral judgments." Yet he never goes on, or back. True to his training (and my own), he refuses to moralize, except about the meaningfulness of Jonestown for its participants.⁶

This is what Religious Studies is all about. And if Orsi is right that excessive moralizing is the discipline's ever-present danger, then we should have more of it. Still, I can't help thinking that our problem is not a surfeit of judgment but a dearth—that the danger is not silencing our Punkin Browns but silencing ourselves. Revolutions never seem to be able to stop at drawing blood; inevitably they end up flaying corpses. And here Orsi seems to be doing battle not so much with his col-

in difference and tear down the barriers between ourselves and our subjects. But then also tear down this barrier: the barrier against our own judgments. If we really want to resuscitate religion as a moral enterprise, make bracketing a temporary strategy rather than an eternal imperative. Before you leave southern Appalachia, tell Punkin Brown what you think of him. He can take it (or leave it). So can our readers. Maybe Religious Studies (and I) can too. ♦

Notes

¹ Robert Orsi, "Snakes Alive: Resituating the Moral in the Study of Religion," in Elizabeth A. Castelli and Rosamond C. Rodman, *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 99, 112. My thanks to Julie Byrne of Texas Christian University for drawing this essay to my attention.

² *Ibid.*, p. 117, 115.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁴ Michael Massing, "America's Favorite Philosopher," *The New York Times Book Review* (December 28, 2003), p. 7; R. Scott Appleby, "When They Say Jesus, Which Jesus Do They Mean?" *The New York Times* (January 8, 2004), p. E9; Stephen Prothero, letter to the editor, *The New York Times* (January 18, 2004).

⁵ David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁶ Orsi, "Snakes Alive," p. 115; David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. xv, xii, 46, xiv.