

On the True, the Real, and Critique in the Study of Religions*

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Without Mary, man had no hope except in Atheism, and for Atheism the world was not ready. Hemmed back on that side, men rushed like sheep to escape the butcher, and were driven to Mary; only too happy in finding protection and hope in a being who could understand the language they talked, and the excuses they had to offer. How passionately they worshipped Mary, the Cathedral of Chartres shows; and how this worship elevated the whole sex, all the literature and history of the time proclaim. If you need more proof, you can read more Petrarch; but still one cannot realize how actual Mary was, to the men and women of the middle-ages, and how she was present, as a matter of course, whether by way of miracle or as a habit of life, throughout their daily existence. The surest measure of her reality is the enormous money value they put on her assistance, and the art that was lavished on her gratification, but an almost equally certain sign is the casual allusion, the chance reference to her, which assumes her presence.

Henry Adams (1904)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Henry Adams wrote the history of an earlier century through the study of what he believed to be its major accomplishments—Mont Saint Michel, Chartres, the life of Francis of Assisi, and the theology of Thomas Aquinas. For Adams, the years 1150-1250 expressed the essence of a time that was to be fundamentally transformed by the forces of modernity. An age is defined, Adams argues, by the site from which force emanates; hence his distinction, in *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), between the Virgin—the Mary of the Christian Middle Ages—and the dynamo.¹ Both, as centers of force, are real.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, I find myself preoccupied with the question of what it might mean to say that the Virgin is real—actual, present, palpable—in one time and place and not in another. The question is vital, I think, to writing the history of religion. For Adams, history is always the history of forces. The Virgin was a force; hence the Virgin was real. In positing the reality of the Virgin in the Middle Ages, Adams suggests her veridicality; she exists in the world, able to effect the actions of human beings.

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1 A dynamo is an electrical generator. In , Adams describes himself as fascinated by the display of dynamos at the Great Exposition held in Paris in 1900. On the one hand, unlike the Virgin, a dynamo extracted power from natural material; on the other, the method of extraction, devised by the human mind, remained both material and mysterious. See Henry Adams (1983); and Christopher Perricone (1991). References from , , and will be to this edition unless otherwise noted.

Adams does not say whether her veridicality depends on the creative power of the human imagination or is, instead, independent of human desires, practices, and aspirations. In *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*, he suggests these crucial theological and philosophical questions when he asks whether Mary is actual “by way of miracle or as a habit of life” (As we will see, he is significantly less reticent—or rather, his characters are—in his earlier novel, *Esther*, published in 1884).

In most of the essays collected here I too focus on medieval Christianity, particularly on texts in which people claim that they or others around them encounter, talk to, see, smell, taste, and hear spirits, saints, angels, demons, and, of course, God. Any attempt to understand the claims made by these writings immediately opens onto vital ontological and epistemological questions. What does it mean to say that the object of religious devotion is real? If something is real are propositions about it also true? If such propositions are true, in what way are they so?² If we posit the veridicality of the saints, angels, demons, and God encountered by medieval Christians, and hence the truth of claims about them, are we simply acknowledging the creative power of the human imagination or are we asserting that these entities exist independently of human practice?

Today, those working in the human sciences have become adept at distinguishing between what is real for the people they study and what is real for some putatively generalizable “us”. Calls for imagination, empathy, and respect generally fall short, explicitly or implicitly, from assertions that what is real for religious people is also true, at least in the sense of that term generally presumed by contemporary historians. A number of scholars in religious studies argue that for medieval people, Mary is real; they cede, furthermore, that pre-modern Christians believed Mary to be irreducible to human knowledge, practice, or desire. Yet the methodological skepticism and agnosticism of modern Western historical methods (and much of modern Western philosophy as well) generally require that we deny or bracket the question of whether it is true *for us* that Mary, as Virgin Queen of Heaven, exists or existed—of whether she is or was an ontological

force in the world independent of human practices and relationships. In Adams’ terms, the modern world is ready for atheism, perhaps even unable to think critically and coherently outside of its terms. Mary may be very real for believers, but the claim that Mary existed or exists as an independent being is at worst untrue and at best one the historian, given the constraints of her field and its methodologies, cannot answer.

Lest we think that the distinction between the real and the true—between that which an individual palpably experiences and hence inexorably takes to be the case and what is the case from the standpoint of a third party witness—is a thoroughly modern one, there is ample evidence that such a distinction was operative within the Christian Middle Ages. Not every vision was understood to be a vision of God or of demons; sometimes, medieval authors view the visionary as sick, deluded, or insane³ (Sometimes, even, people made up stories to entertain and astonish others; and sometimes, of course, they lied).⁴ And yet the desire to move from compelling experience—what is palpably real for the one who undergoes it—to claims for independently verifiable truth of that which is experienced seems inexorable. History as a discipline in the modern West is premised on a critical engagement with this movement. It is precisely here that the following essays pause.

The true and the real are intimately tied, in the modern human sciences—or, in terms more often used in the contemporary academy, in the humanities and social sciences—to the practice of critique.⁵ So with the questions outlined above also comes the question of whether history is necessarily a *critical* endeavor, with critique understood in a quite specific way.⁶ The

2 For more on the variety of ways in which something can be said to be true, see my essays “Acute Melancholia”, “Queering the Beguines” and “Practice, Belief, and the Feminist Philosophy of Religion”, all included here. For the moment, I am focused on what many if not most Christians mean when they talk about the reality of their religious engagements and the truth of Christian claims, which are ineluctably tied to historical claims. On this see my “Reading as Self-Annihilation”, also collected here.

3 I discuss the issue further in the third part of this essay.

4 Gabrielle M. Spiegel has done vital work on the question of historical truth in the Middle Ages. Gabrielle M. Spiegel (1995; 1999; 2005.) As medievalists well know, however, historical truth is only one kind of truth and a relatively devalued one within the Christian medieval context. For more on this issue, see Monika Otter (1996); Elizabeth (2005); Catherine Sanok (2007); and Robert Bartlett (2013). For wonderful work on related issues as they emerge in the study of visual culture, see Cynthia Hahn (2001; 2013). For an early discussion of the issue of lying, see Augustine, *Lying and Against Lying*, both in Augustine, *Treatises on Various Subjects*, trans. Mary Sarah Muldowney and others, ed. Roy J. Deferrari (1952, 53-110, 125-179). Also see Paul J. Griffiths (2004).

5 For more on this issue, see my “On Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Feminist Historiography”, collected here; and Amy Hollywood (2009, 865-878).

6 In “Reading as Self-Annihilation”, collected here, I ask a number of questions that are always in the back of my mind when thinking about critique. Key is the issue of the potential historical contingency

critical historian stubbornly pushes against unreflective acceptance of her sources, continually testing them against each other in order to sort out the true from the false. This is work in which I have an enormous investment, as a number of the essays collected here attest. For Adams, it is one of the crucial distinctions between what he calls the science of history and antiquarianism. The other key factor for Adams is that history, to be scientific, must be theoretical. It must, he insists, give an account of history as a unified whole; the antiquarian, on the other hand, is content with fragments.⁷ Adams did not hesitate to argue for the reality, the actuality, and the truth of Mary for medieval Christians, but he is able to do so because he assumes that she is no longer an active presence in the world.

As should be obvious to contemporary readers, Henry Adams' insistence that Mary was a real force in the Christian Middle Ages but that she is not in early twentieth-century America ignores the persistence, in his own time, of claims that spirits, ancestors, saints, angels, and deities are present in the world and that they play a vital role in the experience of those who encounter them.⁸ Of course, such claims persist into the present. Christianity did not lose all of its force in modernity, nor have other religious traditions that have come into contact with the modernizing and secularizing power of certain forms of modern Western rationality. Nor did

Christianity become, as some hoped, a fully rational or naturalized religion. So while it may be true, as Charles Taylor argues, that in the pre-modern West atheism was not a live option and that the modern West is governed by a social imaginary in which what Taylor calls the supernatural does not necessarily play a role, the fact remains that in almost every part of the world people continue to engage in religious practices and to make claims about their experience of and encounters with modes of being irreducible to the human.⁹ Questions Adams thought he could relegate to the past are very much alive in the present; for many in modernity, both the Virgin and the Dynamo are real.

In a number of the essays collected here, I ask what it might look like if we were to entertain the notion that what others encounter as real might also be true, not just for them and not solely as a force generated by acts of the human imagination. Most importantly, I want to ask whether the methods others—in this case religious people of a particular sort, those who encounter and interact with ghosts, spirits, saints, demons, or God—use to determine what is real and what is true might challenge the ontological and epistemological presuppositions of modern history, themselves grounded in central presumptions of modern Western philosophy.¹⁰ For whether we acknowledge it or not,

of Western conceptions of critique in the face of the historical claims and historical dubiety of much of the Bible. Would the term criticism carry such destructive resonance in the Western academy if the Hebrew and Christian Bibles had been more “reliable” documents? To what extent does this unreliability depend on the peculiarly historical claims made by these documents and the traditions that arise from them? Or is it a feature of reason to attack, such that *any* document of faith would have been found wanting?

- 7 On Adams view of history see the late historiographical essays, “The Tendency of History”, *A Letter to American Teachers of History*, and “The Rule of Phase Applied to History”, all of which were collected together in Henry Adams, with an introduction by Brooks Adams (1919). While many still share the first of Adams's assumptions, the second tends to fall out of sight in contemporary historical and historiographical work, although as I will argue here, naturalism and empiricism are generally assumed.
- 8 This is true, of course, not only for nineteenth-century American Catholics, but also for Protestant evangelicals and many others across the spectrum of Christianity and at its edges, in Spiritualism and related movements. Positing the childlike character of these forms of religion, as contrasted to the maturity of those ready for atheism, an assessment often implicit in Adams, is morally, politically, and intellectually inadequate. On Catholicism and the Protestant responses to Catholicism that create the background against which Adams writes, see Jenny Franchot (1994). For the fascination with Catholicism at the turn of the last century, and for more on Adams' own complex relationship to religion, see T. J. Jackson Lears (1981). For the varieties of religious experience in eighteenth and nineteenth-century America, see Ann Taves (1999).

- 9 See Charles Taylor (2007). Many of Taylor's arguments in the book have been hotly contested, particularly the notion that the shift in social imaginaries he describes marks the end result of a process of disenchantment. For Taylor's rewriting of Weber's thesis, see *A Secular Age*, but also Michael Warner, Jonathan Van Antwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (2013) and Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornell West (2011). For a very different account of secularism, one that contests some of Taylor's fundamental claims, see Talal Asad (2003); Charles Hirschkind and David Scott (2006); and Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood (2013).
- 10 My work here is deeply indebted to, but slightly diverges from, that of Robert Orsi. In a series of important essays Orsi argues for the necessity of an “abundant history” or “abundant empiricism” that is able to contend with the “real presence” of spirits, saints, gods, demons, and ancestors in the lives of religious people. Citing important work by the anthropologists Stanley Tambiah and Gananath Obeyesekere and the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, among others, Orsi points to the necessity of finding “a vocabulary for the kinds of mental *and* bodily processes that go on among humans in the company of each other and of their gods and other special beings.” “But belief”, Orsi insists in another essay, “has nothing to do with it.” If by belief, we mean the mere assent to a proposition, Orsi is certainly right. However, I would contend that belief means much more than this and that it is always in play in the kinds of religious experiences to which Orsi points. He goes on to explain that he is interested in thinking about how “the really real comes to be so” and in moving beyond the claim that an experience is real for the one who undergoes it to find “presence, existence, and power in space and time”. This leads him to ask how these presences become “as real as guns and stones and bread, and then how the real in turns acts as

there is a theory—there are many theories—underlying contemporary historical work and the study of religion, most prominently a kind of naturalist empiricism that assumes everything in human history can be explained in terms of the operations of the natural world and of human beings, themselves a part of that world.¹¹ Truth is unquestioningly identified with empirical truth, which in discussions of the human means either scientific or historical truth, a historical truth that is assumed to operate in naturalistic terms (I discuss this more in “Gender, Agency, and the Divine”).

To push against these presumptions—or in my case to allow the texts I study to push against them—entails real risks; we know that the presences—and absences—that populate the worlds in which we live give rise to confusion, conflict, and violence, as well as to the certainty, security, and joy for which Adams was nostalgic. Reason, articulated broadly within Western modernity as entailing the verifiability of belief by independent observers, has been essential to keeping certain kinds of conflict in check. From this standpoint, many contemporary scholars of religion assume that the best we can do is to acknowledge that religion is the product—often the very vital and active product—of human acts of the imagination; this is as real, many imply, as we can allow religion to be.

This is probably closer to what I think that my argument thus far would suggest, and yet there is an important, if subtle, difference. The clearest articulation of my current views can be found in “Acute Melancholia.” It appears in the form of a fiction that insists on leaving room for something irreducible to individual or collective acts of the imagination. I there tentatively

an agent for itself in history”. Part of what is at work here is the belief that one’s experience is not imaginary or fictional or mistaken, but rather that it corresponds to something ontologically independent of the one having the experience. In other words, it entails belief, although of a much more robust kind than that which Orsi eschews as the focus of religious studies. In rejecting the category of belief, I worry that Orsi renders it impossible to deal with the issues of deception and conflicting experiences that I point to in a number of the essays included here. For a similar worry, see Stephen Prothero (2004); Thomas Kselman (2008, 16-18); and Elizabeth A. Pritchard (2010, 1087-1111). For the first citation from Orsi, see Robert A. Orsi, (2011, 15). For the second two, see Robert A. Orsi (2007, 45). See also Robert A. Orsi, (2003, 169-174); Robert A. Orsi (2004); Robert A. Orsi (2008, 12-16); Robert A. Orsi (2011b, 84-105); and Robert A. Orsi (2012, 80-83). For a captivating attempt to think with Orsi that also moves in slightly different directions from him, see Constance M. Furey (2008, 22-25). For important work on these issues from the standpoint of Santería, see Aisha Mahina Beliso-De Jesús (forthcoming).

11 Adams himself struggled with and against precisely this theory. See Lears (1981, 262-297).

hold out the possibility of a transcendence that occurs between people, or between people and the world around them, and yet is irreducible to the various parties in the relationship, perhaps even to the relationship itself.¹² I hesitate to give a solely humanist and naturalizing account of religion because of my own experience, as “Acute Melancholia” attempts to show, but also because of my study of Christianity and my desire to understand what it is in Christianity, as in other religious traditions, that resists humanistic, naturalizing accounts.

My project in these essays, then, is not governed in any simple sense by nostalgia for a lost historical past; the vitality of Christianity—and of many other religions—surrounds me, even if I do not share in its practices and often find them, in their contemporary forms, dull or repugnant. Like the anthropologist Saba Mahmood, whose work plays an important role in my thinking, my concerns are political and ethical—I would add, given my own training and predilections, theological and philosophical. As an anthropologist, Mahmood takes the living women and men whom she studies not only as objects of analysis, but also as subjects able to offer meaningful accounts of their own practices. Again, at stake is not nostalgia for some putatively lost religious past, but instead an ethically and politically motivated encounter with living religious subjects. Mahmood asks, together with a host of other scholars in the study of religion, whether we can have a meaningful engagement with subjects whose self-understanding we *presume from the outset* to be false or misguided. How can we begin with such assumptions and ever hope to understand?

In a recent issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Elizabeth A. Pritchard condemns a number of scholars who pursue this line of inquiry (although curiously not Mahmood). Pritchard argues that Robert Orsi and myself abnegate the responsibility of critique. Rather than contending with the crucial *differences* between religious people, she argues, the stance of openness to the other is in danger of becoming merely another liberal plea for tolerance in which real conflict is ignored or—even worse—a self-satisfied and self-satisfying exercise in intellectual masochism.¹³ Focusing her attention on my essay, “Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Feminist Historiography”, collected here, and Orsi’s “Snakes Alive: Resituating the Moral in the Study

12 See also Constance M. Furey (2012b, 201-224; 2012a, 7-33; 2012c, 328-340).

13 Pritchard (2010, 1087-1111). Mahmood perhaps does not appear because she offers an account of critique in the opening of her book, one to which I will return.

of Religion”, to which I refer in a footnote of that essay, Pritchard generalizes from quite specific cases.¹⁴ In the two essays, Orsi and I both ask questions about what it might mean to suspend judgment, at least temporarily, as part of an ethical mode of listening.

In his discussion of Appalachian snake handlers, Orsi may be subject to Pritchard’s first charge. He asks his readers to defer judgments about his subjects, even as they voice and enact virulent misogyny. Yet Orsi is an historian and he argues that the historian must bracket the phenomena to be studied in order to come to as rich an understanding of them as possible. Easy judgments, he contends, stand in the way of understanding. On this reading, Orsi does not claim that critique is impossible, but simply that it is not what historians do (I raise questions about the possibility of maintaining that distinction in a number of essays, as does Orsi himself). He also suggests, quite rightly, that any well-grounded critique must be premised on as rich an understanding of the phenomena in question as possible and that such understanding depends on a suspensive moment like that undertaken in good historical work.¹⁵ As to the second charge, I admit to an unfortunate word choice when, in “Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Religious Historiography”, I urge scholars of religion to allow themselves to be “pierced” by the presumptions of those they study. The Christian resonances of self-sacrifice are, perhaps, a little too strong. Challenged would have done the trick argumentatively, if not affectively. But Pritchard’s argument goes more deeply than this.

Pritchard insists that in “Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Religious Historiography” I renounce critique (She is careful to note that the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, with whose work I engage in the essay, does maintain the necessity of critique even as he asks what it would mean to occupy the time of those for whom the gods are active in history). This is inaccurate, but in an interesting and a telling way. I do maintain the necessity of critique in the ways in which Chakrabarty uses the term; for

Chakrabarty critique is essential to emancipatory political projects. But I also ask—and at that point it appears very much in the form of a question—whether religious practice and discourse might *themselves* be sites from which critique emanates. Unlike Chakrabarty, who suggests that critique is the result of a particular historical moment, in his case rendered in explicitly Marxist terms, I ask whether critical challenges to the way things are and creative hope for how the world might be—all fundamental, on my view, to critique—might not come from religion itself.

For not all critique is secular, nor is it always grounded in secular accounts of what constitutes reason. My views on the topic became clearer to me a number of years ago, when I was invited by Saba Mahmood to participate in a symposium asking the question, “Is Critique Secular?” My most immediate response was that it was both a provocative—and a provocatively stupid—question.¹⁶ This is precisely why it is such a crucial one; hence also the importance of Pritchard’s essay. A lot of people will think the answer to the question, “is critique secular”, is obvious. Yet whether that obvious answer is “no” or “yes” depends entirely on who is answering the question and what they take the terms critique and secular to mean, as well as how they understand religion. Many within the academy, as I suspected when I first approached the question and as subsequent commentary demonstrates, find the question redundant, presuming that critique is defined in terms of its secularity and vice versa.¹⁷ For those who presume that critique is always the critique of something, that this something is associated with a putatively unquestioned authority, and that religion is, in its very nature, grounded in an unquestioned and unquestioning appeal to such an authority, critique and secularity are mutually interdependent phenomena.¹⁸

14 See Robert Orsi (2005, 177-204). Unlike most of Orsi’s work, this essay does not depend on his own engagements, historical and ethnographic, with religious communities, but is a critical engagement with the journalistic study of snake handling done by Dennis Covington. Orsi’s larger point is a methodological and ethical one about the study of religion and liberal attitudes toward religion endemic to the U.S. academia and press. See Dennis Covington (1995). For Orsi in a more critically engaged set of interactions with those he studies, see Robert Orsi (1998).

15 For a similar defense of Orsi against the charges raised by Pritchard and Prothero, see Tyler Roberts (2013, 111-118).

16 For an extension of part of the discussion that took place that day, see Asad *et al.* (2013). As they authors note, they do not try to answer the question directly.

17 For this assumption rendered explicit, see Wendy Brown (2013) and Stathis Gourouris (2008, 445). Saba Mahmood robustly argues against Gourouris in “Is Critique Secular?: A Symposium at UC Berkeley”, *Public Culture* 20: 3 (2008): 450. The problem with Brown’s account, which does include the possibility that the notion of the secular might itself require critique, is that it identifies critique only with the philosophical deployment of the term in the tradition running from Kant to Marx and Critical Theory. As I suggest here and in a number of the essays included here, there is more to critique than this truncated, albeit essential, history.

18 Hence in Brown’s account, Kant employed critique to limit reason’s claims and to insure that a properly chastened reason, rather than religion, will be the source of authority in intellectual and moral pursuits. What this misses is that for Kant, even a properly chastened reason *needs* religion, although one that lies “within the boundaries

One might even push this a step further and suggest that, for those who would answer the question “is critique secular?” with an unqualified “yes”, the appeal to any authority other than reason is always, in some way, religious. From this perspective the transmutation of physical force into authority has been called theological or mystical, and hence has been seen as participating in an irrationality associated with religion.¹⁹

There are those, then, who insist that critique is antithetical to religion, given the putative rationality of the former and irrationality of the latter. To these secularist critics of religion I find myself asking how anyone can possibly look at Christianity—just to give an example close to home—and claim that its practitioners do not engage in critique.²⁰ One can think very quickly of examples across the political spectrum, from the long history of Christian protest against war to Christian activism in pursuit of the repeal of *Rowe v. Wade*. And of course, there are Christians who embrace and make religious arguments for war and Christians who pursue the cause of women’s reproductive freedom²¹ (The diversity and complexity of Christian positions on any given topic renders assumptions about what Christians, as a putative whole, think or do moot). Yes, a certain kind of secularist interlocutor might respond, but the social, political, moral, and theoretical critique of authority leveled by Christians is always tendered either on grounds other than those specific to Christianity or on the unquestioned authority of Christianity itself. Yet the first assertion is false. Christians critique that which lies outside the domain of Christianity on the

basis of specifically Christian claims all the time—this is precisely what bothers so many about Christianity in the contemporary United States.

To the second one must ask what it means to talk about the authority of Christianity. The authority of the Bible, some might be tempted to reply. Yet there is not now nor has there ever been any agreement among Christians about what it means to speak of the authority of the Bible or even about what constitutes the Bible, to say nothing of what this contested entity tells Christians they ought to do or think (or even whether it does so and if it does so, how). Some of the earliest Christian creedal formulations claim explicitly that the Bible is *not* the ultimate source of authority for Christians (A number of other candidates are put forward, including the very formulae themselves—just the kind of putative circularity religion’s contemporary despisers love to exploit. Note that I am not making any claim here for the rationality of Christian belief, but simply for its critical and self-critical capacities). Every one of these issues has been and continues to be contested among those who call themselves Christians.

In other words, Christians continually critique Christianity and that which lies outside its boundaries. They constantly contest even what it means to be a Christian. And the same can be said for every other religion about which I know anything. It is difficult to see how a tradition could stay alive and vital without such contestation, however implicit and unremarked on it might be. As for the boundary between Christianity and the world, in the Latin West a distinction was made early on between the “city of God” and the “city of humanity”, but Augustine, who most famously argues the point, insists that the former can never fully be known as long as we are residents in the latter.²² For Augustine, the two can never be entirely disentangled in the present time (*saeculum*, the temporal realm, as opposed to the eternal, of which we only have obscure glimpses). What this means concretely is that Christians stand in a critical relationship to the temporal realm from the perspective of hope given in things as yet only dimly known, not from the standpoint of fully present and authoritative knowledge²³ (There are, of course, Christians who will disagree, who claim that there is a self-evident and inerrant source of Christian

of mere reason.” For Kant religion’s authority depends on reason’s claims, yet the power to activate the will in the moral life depends, in obscure ways, on aesthetic and religious impulses. Hence the vexed role of enthusiasm across Kant’s corpus, a subject on which I am currently working. See Brown, “Introduction”, in *Is Critique Secular?*

19 Whether this is good, bad, or simply inevitable is the subject of heated debate. The provenance of the move in very different and politically diametrically opposed thinkers, Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin, demonstrates this clearly. The bibliography on the topic is vast and growing, but for an introduction to some of the relevant issues, see Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (2006). The volume has the advantage of understanding that Carl Schmitt did not invent “political theology”, nor is his usage about theology; instead, he uses the term to describe the putatively hidden theological source of secular power.

20 For a specific and compelling example, see Constance M. Furey (2014, 254-272).

21 For compelling examples of Christian and Jewish activism from the left, see Jeffrey Stout (2010). For Stout, however, it is essential that anyone participating in democracy be willing and able to make explicit their positions in terms available to all those operating within that democracy. But who determines what constitutes and who determines those terms? See Stout’s important book, *Democracy and Tradition* (2004).

22 The crucial text is, of course, Augustine (2003).

23 From this perspective, the robust self-confidence of religion’s contemporary despisers might easily be taken for idolatrous fideism.

teaching and that they know exactly what it is and what it demands. Some of those about whom I write in the following essays stand among this group, although far fewer than one might suppose. Furthermore, I am not a Christian and so might be judged by some incompetent to participate in the debate. Yet the Christian tradition and contemporary Christian practice—which does not always align with what contemporary Christians say about what they do—bears out my view).²⁴

Yet despite all of the evidence to the contrary, the position persists, even within the study of religion, that religion is inherently uncritical, authoritarian, and ideological. This is the primary assumption of those who insist that the study of religion purify itself of all theological remnants and that it be rigorously scientific or historical. In an extremely helpful intervention, *Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism After Secularism*, Tyler Roberts makes the cogent point that these arguments depend on a notion of religion as locative.²⁵ Roberts borrows the term from J. Z. Smith, who uses it to describe Mircea Eliade's understanding of religion as "affirming and repeating the basic order of the world, firmly locating or placing people by repressing the creativity of chaos, denying change, and stressing 'dwelling within a limited world'".²⁶ Yet Roberts points out that Smith also offers another account of religion, for Smith distinguishes between a locative vision of religion, like that he finds in Eliade, and a utopian one.

To cite Roberts once again, for Smith

the second vision emphasizes rebellion against and freedom from established order. Smith calls it a "utopian" vision of the world: where the locative vision focuses on place, the utopian affirms the value of being in no place. Both, he claims, are "coeval existential possibilities".²⁷

According to Roberts, Smith's second understanding of religion shifts across the essays collected in *Map is Not Territory* from utopian to liminal. Roberts is most compelled by Smith's account of religion as capable of engaging with disorder, incongruity, and excess; religion understood in

this way, according to Roberts, "neither rejects one order for another nor revises an old order". It is "neither locative or utopian" but instead "relativizes all order".²⁸ I cannot follow Roberts' in distinguishing so sharply between the utopian and the excessive, for the utopian rejection of an old order of necessity relativizes all order and the relativization of order can itself be understood as utopian. But Roberts' primary point—that religion operates in ways that are both locative and excessive—is enormously helpful in the context of contemporary debates in the study of religion.

Against those scholars of religion who assume that religion is always about order, stability, and authority, then, Roberts asks whether an overemphasis on "locative religion" has

prevented us from pursuing more fully other questions: Can religious people play religiously? Can they recognize absurdity in and through their religious thought and practice and, if so, how? Do they always, necessarily, "speak" with transcendent and eternal authority when they speak of God or about their religious beliefs? Can they think critically when they think religiously? Finally, if so, where and how, exactly, do we draw the boundary between religion and the academic study of religion?²⁹

My answer to these questions is obvious: of course religious people play religiously, can recognize absurdity, and think critically while thinking religiously. The essays collected here show numerous examples of religious people doing precisely these things, all the while both claiming and subverting their own claims to transcendent and eternal authority in their talk about God. Roberts also uses the conception of religion as excessive, as unsettling boundaries, norms, and authorities, to show that locative accounts of religion are inadequate to their object and that forms of critique embraced by many locativists can be found among religious people, even theologians (His favorite example here is Rowan Williams, who continually emphasizes the need for humility in claims about God and the nature of reality).³⁰ This is a vital contribution to the study of religion, for it enables scholars to articulate the different ways in which religious texts, practices, and communities work, and to see and name the almost infinite variety of things that religions do.

24 For the limits of a religious nation's knowledge about their own and other traditions, see Amy Hollywood (2011, 460-466).

25 Roberts takes on scholars as diverse—although united on the point of religion's locative nature—as Russell McCutcheon, Donald Wiebe, Ivan Strenski, Russell McCutcheon, and Bruce Lincoln. See Roberts (2007, 36-82).

26 Roberts (2007, 26-27); Roberts cites J. Z. Smith (1978, 100).

27 Roberts (2007, 27); Roberts here cites Smith (1978, 101).

28 Roberts (2007, 30).

29 Roberts (2007, 41).

30 See, for example, Rowan Williams (1990; 2000; 2002). I am not myself sure that Williams' emphasize on epistemic humility embraces excess and destabilizes order in quite the way Roberts suggests.

I also agree with Roberts' assertion that the study of religion can and should be not only descriptive, but also constructive (This is not to say that every scholar of religion will bring together the various aspects of its study, but instead that constructive theological and philosophical work is properly part of the study of religion and cannot and should not be ejected from the conversation). To this end, Roberts turns to the work of Hent de Vries, Eric Santner, and Stanley Cavell to think through what an "affirmative criticism" might entail. There are powerful accounts of responsibility, responsiveness, and gratitude in these pages, all of which speak to our work as scholars and to the broader questions of how we might best live. The pages on Cavell and gratitude are particularly important, yet they are also the most distant from religion. Perhaps more crucially, Roberts embraces de Vries' conception of philosophy itself as a form of "minimal theology", a "restless wakefulness" and "infinite responsibility" in which thought is always in excess of itself.³¹ Although Roberts deploys Santner and Cavell in an attempt to overcome the seemingly hopeless and unending task of critique to which we are enjoined by de Vries, the resources for doing so again come primarily from outside of religion.³² The only religion useful to the secular critic, Roberts suggests, is excessive and destabilizing. Religion as locative, as providing a space in which to live and to breathe, has once again been banished.

We seem to be far from those who insist that critique is, of necessity, secular, since for de Vries and Roberts, religion, at its best, is critique. What de Vries and Roberts share with secular advocates of critique is an understanding of critique as destabilizing and unsettling. There are good reasons for this seemingly paradoxical conjunction of positions. The critics of Christianity most often cited as the source of contemporary Western philosophical conceptions of critique —Immanuel Kant, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche, among many others— all understood Christianity itself as a vital *source* of the impulse toward critique. A presumption runs through parts of the modern European philosophical tradition that the self-critical nature of Christianity leads —or will lead— to the radical revision of Christianity or to its dissolution (and with it, the dissolution of all religion) (This final turn of the screw appears most explicitly in Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. John Locke

and Immanuel Kant, for example, had no intention of dissolving Christianity, which both of them believed to be congruent with rational claims). Embedded here are claims both for the supremacy of Christianity (sometimes Judaism instead or as well) over all other religious traditions and an association of Christianity with the emergent secular realm, one in which rational argument is said to take the place of irrational faith (In the terms provided by Augustine, then, Christian self-critique leads to the recognition that all we have is the temporal [*saeculum*]; there is no eternal realm and it is irrational to believe that there is). Christianity, according to this account, is both irrational and the ground out of which rationality emerges.

In one version of this argument, the secular looks a lot like liberal Protestant Christianity —sometimes shorn of its explicitly Christian trappings, sometimes not. Irrational, authoritarian, bad Christianity is then identified with Roman Catholicism and, often, the radical reformation. Since the early modern period, the battle has also been staged as one between irrational fanaticism (Catholics again are among the chief culprits) and rational belief. Yet regardless of the distinctions made—between rationality and fanaticism, paganism and true religion, Protestantism and Roman Catholicism— a paradox remains at the center of some of the most influential modern accounts of the dissolution of religion, for in Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud somehow the irrational begets the rational. On this account, critique is *both* secular and theological, for religion (or at least Christianity) gives rise to—even fuels—that which stands in opposition to it.³³

For despite the desire that rational discourse be undertaken in a spirit of calm and order, modern western rationality bears within it the marks of a purificatory fervor. In its endless demands, critique is itself fanatical. From this standpoint, a certain

33 A number of secularist critics of religion —some of those with the biggest audiences, like Daniel Dennett or Kathe Pollitt, but also those internal to religious studies like Russell McCutcheon —want to bypass this entire historical narrative, both in terms of the history of anti-religious critique within the modern West and in terms of the role of religion itself within that critique. For these critics there are scientific grounds for rejecting religious belief and modern scientific reasoning owes nothing to Western —or any other— religion. Despite its ubiquity, this is an exceptionally hard argument to make. I cannot here demonstrate all of the difficulties involved, but merely point to the fact that for innumerable modern philosophers who argue against either fanaticism specifically or against Christianity and religion more generally, Christianity plays a key role in the constitution of modern rationality.

31 Williams (2002, 158 and 161).

32 Williams (2002, 168).

implacability is visible even in Mahmood's capacious account of what constitutes critique. Mahmood urges "an expansion of normative understandings of critique". Whereas on the old view criticism "is about successfully demolishing your opponent's position and exposing the implausibility of her argument and its logical inconsistencies", she argues that

critique ... is most powerful when it leaves open the possibility that we might also be remade in the process of engaging with another's worldview, that we might come to learn things that we did not already know before we undertook the engagement. This requires that we occasionally turn the critical gaze upon ourselves, to leave open the possibility that we may be remade through an encounter with the other.³⁴

Note here that critique as critique of something does not disappear, but instead is turned against one's own presuppositions. I stand by my assertion that the move is essential to contemporary political and cultural criticism and yet, from whence this relentlessness? Are there times when critique, understood as a form of intellectual asceticism, is not enough?

Roberts, who follows de Vries in positing a theological and religious origin for the relentlessly destabilizing force of critique, turns to philosophy for remedy and respite. Within this context, religion is most compelling as critical and excessive, less so as locative; the two aspects of religion seem at odds with each other in ways Roberts does not fully explore.³⁵ What I want to suggest here is that a different deployment of the concept of excess, one that draws directly on the work of the

34 Saba Mahmood (2005, 36-37). Michel Foucault's and Judith Butler's accounts of critique arguably lead to a position very close to Mahmood's. At their most explicit, they both define critique, like the rationalist critiques of religion I describe above, as the critique of authoritative traditions and norms. What they contest is the presumption that rationally based arguments or claims to authority can escape the dynamics of power. They go on, however, to suggest that critique is a virtue in ways that bring their arguments close to that of Mahmood. See Michel Foucault (1997); and Judith Butler (2002).

35 Roberts does include discussion of work that draws on the Christian theological tradition, including a generous reading of some of my own previous work. But when he turns toward the kind of responsive criticism in which he is interested, he names the project philosophical and rests his account on the work of de Vries (a philosopher of religion and theologian), Santner (a literary critic and theorist), and Cavell (a philosopher). The work on Santner and Cavell is compelling. My real problems with this part of the book, as I will show, are less problems with Roberts than with de Vries and the ways in which Roberts relies on and allows de Vries to ground his constructive philosophical project.

philosopher Jacques Derrida as well as on the Christian tradition, might help us think about the relationship between the locative and the critical aspects of religion in fresh ways. Religion might then be understood as providing rich resources with which to do the work of responsive criticism in which Roberts is interested.

For Roberts reading de Vries reading Derrida, "the religious exceeds the historical" in the very process of handing down, that is, of tradition itself:

one responds to the past, as tradition or heritage, in a repetition that, if it is to be responsible, is faithful to the past even as it exceeds and betrays it in a performance of singularity, an "event" of "irreducible prescriptivity." Such testimony involves a complex performative, or a "perverformative", speech act that is both a following of or adhering to *and* a perversion of this past, a faithful interpretation and a singular invention.³⁶

There are at least two problems with this account in addition to the worry Roberts himself has with its purely negative conception of critique and responsibility (Again this worry runs parallel to my own concern about the relentlessness of critique). First, de Vries's reading of Derrida is one-sided in much the same way that locativist readings of religion are one-sided, although what is emphasized and what is ignored differ. Whereas the locativist takes religion as solely upholding order, stability, and authority, de Vries finds religion of value only in its excessive, destabilizing, anti-authoritarian form. The move is premised on a reading of Derrida in which the claim that repetition always involves both sameness and difference (this is the movement of what Derrida calls *differance*, in which spatial and temporal otherness is recognized as intrinsic to repetition itself) is understood as perversion and infidelity.

Yet in his work from the 1960s, *differance* is not marked by perversion and infidelity—or if it is, it is a perversion and an infidelity that Derrida embraces. Across his corpus, moreover, he insists that tradition exists because of the human capacity to repeat, whether linguistic signs, visual images, or bodily practices.³⁷ As I argue in "Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization", for Derrida repetition always entails both sameness—a practice must be sufficiently like other practices to

36 Williams (2002, 168). Roberts here cites Hent de Vries (1999, 287; 2002, 177, 386, 398). Also relevant to this discussion is Hent de Vries (2005).

37 For me the crucial text on tradition is Jacques Derrida (1996). See also Amy Hollywood (1999, 150-160).

be recognizable as the same practice—and different—the practice, to be repeated, occurs in a different time and place than other instances of its enactment.³⁸ The difference internal to repetition both enables a tradition to be handed down and requires that it change, whether that change is recognized or not. Only if we believe that we can know the absolute origin of signification—a term I use here in its broadest possible sense, to include practices and images as well as language—can we be said to betray a tradition and our responsibilities to it merely through the act of repetition itself.³⁹ Derrida argues forcefully that we can never know a pure origin and this is something about which a large part of the Christian tradition agrees with Derrida.

As Roberts notes in his use of Rowan Williams's work, many if not most Christians insist we can never know God with fullness or surety (For some we can never have this knowledge while living; for others, we will never have it; and for a very few, those, not surprisingly, most interesting to Derrida, it is possible that God Godself does not know God). The unsaying of the names of God—what the sixth-century Syriac monk who goes under the name of Dionysius the Areopogite first called apophasis—marks the recognition that all human concepts and practices are inadequate to the divine.⁴⁰ God is without limits and so escapes all our attempts to know God. Derrida spent a considerable amount of energy pointing to the similarities and emphasizing the differences between his work and that of apophasis.⁴¹ What is of most interest to me here, however, is that for Dionysius, as for the Christian tradition as a whole, apophasis always comes together

with what Dionysius called cataphasis, the saying or naming of God. For Dionysius, cataphasis and apophasis are two moments in the movement toward God, two moments that together constitute Christianity. Until something has been ascribed of God, we cannot unsay it; without some conception of God's goodness or being or love, we cannot move to the claim that God is beyond goodness or being or love, or that God is unbounded goodness or being or love, or that God's goodness or being or love is so unlimited that we cannot think it within human conceptions of these attributes.

There is no "apophatic theology" within Christianity, then, but only the interplay between cataphasis and apophasis. Some emphasize one movement over the other. Some bury or forget the one movement in favor of the other. Yet when this happens, the *liveness* of the tradition—its very capacity to signify and to be handed down—is in danger.⁴² Arguably this is the problem with much academic theology at the moment, whether it be Christian or post-Christian, an ugly term that I take to mean secular philosophers and theologians deeply influenced by the Christian tradition, not unlike myself; too many insist that theology be solely cataphatic or solely apophatic. In the first instance, the tradition is idolized and becomes a dead and inert thing; in the second, all ties to a living tradition of practice and faith is lost and with it the vitality of human life within those traditions (There are enormous problems with the very language of this claim, grounded as it is in the Christian dismissal of non-Christian religions as idolatrous and the refusal to recognize other religions as worshiping anything other than dead and inert things. One of the most crucial tasks before us now is to find language with which to name the liveness of a tradition and whatever the opposite of that liveness might be. The language most likely will not be new in some absolute sense, but handed down from traditions other than Christianity).⁴³

Santner and Cavell, on Roberts' reading, both point to the possibility of a secular theology or philosophy of religion in which we look to the everyday world and our critical engagements with it as the site of theological and existential meaning. As I suggested above, in many ways my own work is moving in just that direction. Yet because he is intent on following

38 My reading focuses on Jacques Derrida (1984), although one could go to multiple sites in Derrida's work.

39 According to Roberts, for de Vries reading Derrida, responsibility demands a paradoxical "forgetting without forgetting", which "is a function both of the particular, unique context in which it takes place (which is thus dependent on historical chains of ideas and circumstances) and of a response, by this speaker or this actor here and now, to the singularizing imperative of the absolute. It is a kind of crossing or pivot between absolute origin and history, autonomy and heteronomy." Roberts (2007, 167). But of course, for Derrida there is no absolute origin and what is being described are two moments of singularity, two historical moments that are both irreducible to their historicity. This does not make them sites of radical autonomy or originarity, but instead always implicated in the general movement of the particular.

40 As Andrew Louth usefully reminds us, the practice is biblical. See Andrew Louth (2012, 137-146).

41 The key texts are "Difference", in *Margins of Philosophy*; "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials", "On an Apocalyptic Tone in Newly Adopted in Philosophy", and "Post-scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices", all collected in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (1992); and "Passions" and "*Khora*", collected together with "Post-scriptum" in *On the Name*, trans. Thomas DuToit and David Wood (1995).

42 For a wonderfully Derridean—and more importantly Morrisonian—take on the liveness of tradition and what renders it dead, see Toni Morrison (1994).

43 See, for example, Beliso-De Jesús's discussion of "co-presences" in her *Electric Orisha*.

out a certain kind of philosophical argument, Roberts remains focused on abstractions; from whence do we receive the concrete traditions that enable us to live? Santner and Cavell turn to psychoanalysis, literature, and film as sites for reflection on how we might live;⁴⁴ for many people, literature, music, film, television, and the visual arts *are* their tradition (And stories. Always stories). Yet the resources of Christianity and Judaism, as of many other religions, are also available to us if we can find ways to keep them alive, even in—always necessarily in— changed forms.

This leads to my second worry about Roberts' argument, which is that what is truly excessive within religion may be lost (Earlier I posited this in terms of a question about whether naturalizing humanistic accounts of religion, like the one Roberts ultimately embraces, are adequate to their object). One way to read my understanding of the cataphatic and the apophatic into Roberts' work is to argue that the cataphatic is locative and the apophatic excessive. In terms of Derrida's understanding of signification, the cataphatic and the locative would be that which remains the same in the act of repetition, whereas the apophatic and the excessive would be the movement of difference. Yet I am uneasy with these analogies even as I make them. I am not at all sure that the cataphatic naming of God and of worlds is purely locative or the apophatic purely destabilizing, for the distinction between cataphasis and apophasis, unlike that between the locative and the excessive, does not depend on their opposition. Instead, the two work in relationship to each other; the one always requires the other. Put in Derridean terms, you cannot repeat without both sameness and difference. Hence the importance of Derrida's neologism, *differance*, which entails *both* sameness and difference, naming and unname, fidelity and infidelity—or better, fidelity *as* infidelity (Derrida's inability or refusal properly to understand the interplay between the cataphatic and the apophatic fuels his own agonized relationship to Christianity in particular and religion in general).

Derrida's writing from at least the 1980s until his death, work in which he worries about singularity, rests on his recognition that what is released in the interplay between sameness and difference is irreducible to any particular instantiation of signification or to its general movement. Both history and philosophy, insofar as they are governed

by the logic of the particular and the general (and hence of the generalizable), are inadequate to the experience of the gift, of givenness, of grace. Yet this does not mean that we can stop trying to name what we receive, what we value, and what we desire. We can never free ourselves from our debts, yet we can work to understand them and to live in the space of creative transformation that is the intertwined tasks of *tradition and critique, of tradition as critique and as always irreducible to critique*.

For the real and the true are not determined only through the process of critique; finding and creating the real and the true, articulating when they converge and when they diverge, demands attention to the interplay between sameness and difference so vital to the handing down, acceptance, and rejection of tradition. To do this work we need to be willing to listen, to hear, and to try to understand what is; to articulate how what is and what was and what will be are always intertwined, even as our political and moral commitments may require us to disentangle them; and to recognize that there are aspects of human experience we will never fully capture, never fully understand, never fully name. We always and inevitably receive what it is handed down, whether religious practices, philosophical texts, or *Double Indemnity* (my mother used to make me watch it with her when I was far too small to know what it was about). If we are very, very lucky, we are given worlds in which we can thrive. Yet our reception of tradition is always also a critical engagement with it, and it is that gap—the gap between what is handed down and what is received—that makes life possible *and* that makes possible the more robust and self-conscious forms of critique on which most of our lives depend. Critique emerges as a self-conscious modality in those moments when we realize that we occupy the world differently—or desire to occupy the world differently—than at least some part of the traditions into which we have been born demand⁴⁵ (The multiplicity of tradition is also in play here, for there is always, of necessity, more than one way of being handed down, hence opening further the space to live differently and to live in critical relationship to the traditions that form us). ♦♦

44 As Roberts notes, Santner also turns to Jewish theology, in particular the work of Franz Rosenzweig. See Eric Santner (2001).

45 This is the space, then, out of which the possibility for critical engagement with systemic evil and injustice emerge. To know that we are being told lies and that the tradition (or a part of the tradition or one of the many traditions) in which we live is unjust require a hold on the real that has also been, in some way, given to us. On my reading, this is the space in which the work of Judith Butler dwells. For my discussion of Butler, see "Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization", included here. See also Judith Butler (2004; 2005; 2006, 276-289).

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