

Faith and the Academy:

Religious Communities and the Academic Study of Religion

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“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...”

-St. Peter (1 Peter 3:15 NIV)¹

“Modern secularism is a much more puzzling phenomenon than all these religious explosions – and the University of Chicago is a more interesting topic for the sociology of religion than are the Islamic schools of Qom.”

- Peter Berger²

¹ 1 Peter 3:15, New International Version (NIV). Ryrie Study Bible: Expanded Edition, New International Version. Chicago: Moody Press, 1994. All Bible references herein are from the NIV.

² Berger, Peter L. “Secularism in Retreat.” The National Interest. 46 (Winter). 3-12.

Introduction: A Bridge to Discussion

As the population of the world continues to grow at an incredible rate and new technologies and political entities bring unfamiliar cultures and religions into contact for the first time, growing pains should be expected as the price of progress. Conflict and disagreement are inevitable; how they are handled measures how much our civilizations have actually developed as civilizing institutions. As usual, few aspects of the post-modern world cause more of this conflict than the clashing of religious viewpoints with other worldviews. The world is constantly reminded by such incidents as the 1993 standoff between the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Branch Davidian community in Waco, Texas, that resolutions to such conflicts require mutual understanding. At Waco, the Branch Davidian faithful could not understand why they were under attack unless it was the prophesied fulfillment of the will of God, while the FBI could not see the standoff as anything other than manipulative antics by a cult leader with an dangerously large weapons stockpile. As the Waco incident and others demonstrate, serious and insightful study of religious beliefs is necessary, not only to further human knowledge, but to maintain law and order in a just manner. Yet, clearly, not all scholarly attempts to analyze religious belief are well-received or even acknowledged by faith communities; consider the *fatwa* issued against Salman Rushdie after the publication of his Satanic Verses. Mutual misunderstands abound, and cannot be resolved merely by more pondering in secluded university offices or clerical quarters; real appreciation of others can come only through interaction.

Gerald James Larson, in his review of Jeffrey Kripal's text Kali's Child, aptly calls this fundamental issue of religious studies the "Salman Rushdie Question," phrasing it this way: "What is the relation, if any, between our modern secular intellectual communities, on the one

hand, and the target believing communities or persons whom our scholarly and creative work seeks to interpret and characterize, on the other?”³ This “Salman Rushdie Question” constitutes the seminal challenge for the academic study of religion: if one wishes to study a religion, there must be interaction with its adherents, or one’s theories rapidly degenerate into illusions totally disconnected with their subjects. It also holds fundamental importance for believing communities: a religious system, once in contact with the modern, secular world, which refuses to face the searching light of academic criticism will dwindle and fade; “the heart cannot delight in what the mind rejects as false.”⁴ Therefore, all students and practitioners of religion have a duty to learn how to carry on a discussion with those of different views that is fair and of substantial depth. Moreover, as we will see shortly, such discussion can, in fact, strengthen and sharpen the perspectives of all individuals who come to the table prepared to challenge and be challenged for the sake of mutual edification.

The Participants

For a meaningful discussion of religion to take place, the parties involved must be clearly defined. We might fairly ask, then, if the Salman Rushdie Question is even properly formulated. As Larson posed the question, the parties consist of “modern secular intellectual communities” and “the target believing communities or persons whom our scholarly and creative work seeks to interpret and characterize.” Our first question must be, “Do such groups really exist and, if so, to what degree are they distinct?” A “modern secular intellectual community” in this context might be well-defined as “a community of individuals cognizant both of the plurality of religious

³ Larson, Gerald James. “Polymorphic Sexuality, Homoeroticism, and the Study of Religion.” Journal of the American Academy of Religion. 65/3 (1997). 656.

traditions and of the vast array of interpretations of ultimate reality and which uses reason as its primary tool and is not committed as a group to any specific religious *a priori*.” This holds some promise; after all, the modern secular academic world certainly is aware of religious pluralism and abounds in different viewpoints. However, one might ask if anyone is so balanced at the individual level. What does it mean if an individual does not hold any specific religious *a priori*? Such an individual would have no stable background against which to evaluate any new argument; his or her entire worldview would demand to be reconstructed from nothing with each new hour of study. This is clearly impossible, the perennial thorn in the side of philosophers and theologians throughout history; evaluation demands criteria, and criteria, by their existence, demand supporting *a priori* or at least experiences, which are used to generate new principles which, in turn, eventually serve as *a priori* assumptions themselves. In other words, no such thing exists as a thinker without prior philosophical commitments. The research scientist assumes that science can, given enough time and sufficient equipment, explain all that is observable; the physician assumes that ailments have real-world chemical or physical remedies; the theologian assumes the existence of deity, else his or her life’s work must start anew moment-by-moment *ad nauseum*. If no philosophically uncommitted individual academics are to be found, then we must consider the possibility of academics who also openly hold explicitly religious beliefs.

First, however, we turn to the second referent of the Salman Rushdie Question, “the target believing communities or persons whom our scholarly and creative work seeks to interpret and characterize.” What is a “believing community or person”? Belief, after all, takes a variety of forms: some individuals believe in a deity, some in many, others in a Supreme Power or Essence

⁴ Pinnock, Clark H. Set Forth Your Case. Nutley, NJ: The Craig Press, 1967.

but not a Being, others, while rejecting the concept of deities, nevertheless affirm the existence of absolute truths such as the theory of evolution. None of these ideas can be proven; all relate to beings, forces, and times beyond the perceptive ability of human sensory organs or direct knowledge. As Thomas Carlyle said, “We do everything by custom, even believe by it; our very axioms, let us boast of freethinking as we may, are oftenest simply such beliefs as we have never heard questioned.”⁵ That is, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln or the sacking of Rome can no more be directly observed and verified than can the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai or the night ascension of Muhammad. Though nearly all persons informed of the former two events hold that they actually occurred and accept them without serious reservations, wars have been fought over questions arising from the latter two. Indeed, the three great monotheisms, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all claim to be historical faiths; that is, their adherents claim that their beliefs are founded not on speculation or tradition but actual, literal, historical acts of God on Earth, directly or indirectly, but undeniably. That which could not be qualitatively observed as proceeding from God directly, such as the prohibition against eating pork in both the Hebrew Bible and the Qur’an, derives authenticity from prior divine intervention on behalf of the speaker.

What, then, distinguishes religious “belief” from acceptance of historical assertions? For the purpose of this discussion, it seems most useful to define religious belief as “an assertion which affirms or relies on affirmations of ultimate metaphysical truths” (that is, universally applicable in the realm of human experience). By this definition, beliefs in the claims of Marx’s and Engel’s Communist Manifesto qualify as religious, since they rest (explicitly or implicitly)

⁵ Carlyle, Thomas. Sartor Resartus, III. 1836. Qtd. in Shermer, Michael. How We Believe: The Search for God in an Age of Science. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 2000. 32.

on atheistic *a priori*s, while scientific thought does not automatically qualify. The scientific method of analysis is only the understanding that certain observable phenomena can lend support to rigid formulations of principles appearing to regulate those phenomena, but it does not itself state or even imply the popular idea that science is automatically anti-supernaturalistic. Science makes no claims about the reach of science's discerning power; scientists do that. Indeed, many scientists hold supernatural beliefs. Moreover, the above definition of religious beliefs remains broad enough to encompass so-called "civil religion", the general, but non-creedal, religious sensitivities of a generally secular culture. Thus, it acts as a decent filter for the present discussion, and a "believing community or person" is "a community or person that affirms statements of ultimate metaphysical truths."

All this establishes that the groups Larson refers to in his phrasing of the Salman Rushdie Question can be considered legitimate groups, at least in terms of distinguishing between believers and non-believers and between academics and non-academics. It remains to be determined, however if the groups can be regarded as distinct and if, therefore, there is any meaning in talking of interaction between them. In actuality, the distinction fades rapidly. Any more precise definitions of the groups involved reduce the spectrum of religious phenomena to a razor-thin field, far smaller than fairness or reason allow. For example, simply excluding claims based on historical evidence would, as we have seen, eliminate the three major monotheisms as religious systems of thought. Yet, clearly individuals and whole groups exist within both categories simultaneously. Within nearly any university department of religious studies, history, or sociology, or in any group formed for religious reasons, one can find individuals capable of high-level scholarship and reasoning who simultaneously fervently maintain certain religious beliefs. Apologists are especially common and, though their degree of sophistication varies,

many are scholars of solid stature. As a concrete example, consider the writer of the Gospel of Luke. The skeptical archaeologist Sir William Ramsay, after studying the issue for thirty years, concludes, “Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy ... this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.”⁶ Yet, without a doubt, Luke ranked among the most committed members of the early Christian church, as well. The tension only grows as we turn to various scholarly religious groups. Thousands of seminaries and schools of religious training have been established in dozens of faiths, and in many cases the faculty consists of recognized leading scholars in their fields. At the least, a large number of these institutions have both scholarly and religious aims and pursue both whole-heartedly. How, then, can we discuss an interaction in which the participants cannot be clearly separated?

The Discussion

Larson, in his critique of Kripal’s book, also lists some of the possible forms interaction between the academic and believing communities could take. He lists five significant possibilities:⁷

- 1) No interaction whatsoever, though the groups themselves exist and are clearly defined.
- 2) Asymmetrical relationship: influence moves in one direction only, though which one is debatable.
- 3) Symmetrical (reciprocal) relationship: a dialogue engaging members and opinions from both groups.

⁶ Ramsay, Sir W. M. The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915. 222.

- 4) Only one group is actually legitimately formulated; the other is a spin-off of the first, a temporary anomaly, or a pseudo-entity.
- 5) “Both terms of the two-termed relation are improperly formulated ... instead of thinking of communities in terms of related ‘things’ or ‘entities,’ it would be better to think in terms of relations and bundles of relations in mutual interaction wherein the purported ‘relata’ are simply pseudo-formulations.”⁸

Unfortunately, however, Larson never really returns to his schema. Rather, he assumes throughout his work and eventually explicitly states,

“My own view, as I suspect is reasonably clear by this point, is that it is important for all of us in the modern academy to be in frank and open conversation with the communities we study and with other scholarly communities in the academy. I am, therefore, personally persuaded that the relation of symmetrical reciprocity... is the only way to go if we wish our studies to be taken seriously and if we wish our studies to be properly nuanced and persuasive.”⁹

Larson’s only stated argument in favor of this kind of relationship is his own perception of “monocausal reductionism”¹⁰ in Kripal’s work; he offers no thoughts on the validity of this formulation or its practicality. Even in the case of Ramakrishna, the topic of Larson’s and Kripal’s dialogue, the very nature of a symmetrical relationship becomes vague. Kripal, in his response, charges that “Larson’s own relationship to the Ramakrishna Mission and his role here

⁷ Larson, 657-8.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 664.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 658.

as a defender of the tradition were influential in both the original conception and final negative conclusions of the review.”¹¹ We can fairly say, then, that none of the first four scenarios can be realistically expected to play themselves out in actual discourse; interaction produces attachments, positive or negative, and attachments alter perception. No matter how fine our razor, we can never fully separate the conjoined twins of religion and the academic study thereof without causing both to hemorrhage, losing any objective meaning as observer and object of study.

Larson’s fifth proposal, however, which receives no treatment in his essay, holds more promise, except for the claim that both the academic and believing communities are “simply pseudo-formulations.” They do indeed exist, and are well defined, but not quantifiable as they relate to each other. The proposal touches, however, on the ambiguity that exists with the phrase “instead of thinking of communities in terms of related ‘things’ or ‘entities,’ it would be better to think in terms of relations and bundles of relations in mutual interaction.” That is, perhaps the answer to the Salman Rushdie Question is not really a single form of relationship, but a bundle of relationships. The analogy we can draw is to a dialogue about, say, a water dispute, between two communities, which is conducted over a fiber-optic cable. In some sense, a collective conversation between groups with a limited number of major viewpoints is occurring, but it is occurring as a collection of conversations between individuals, in which many viewpoints can be found. The larger conversation occurs by means of the cable, which actually consists of many finer fibers on which the individual conversations are carried. This parallels the relationship

¹¹ Kripal, Jeffrey J. “Mystical Homoeroticism, Reductionism, and the Reality of Censorship: A Response to Gerald James Larson.” Journal of the American Academy of Religion. 66/3 (1998). 630.

between believers and the academy as it actually occurs: the collective dialogue between the academic world and a particular faith is always carried on by individuals (or, at most, small groups) writing, conferencing, and debating with each other. Thus, the actual interaction can take on very different forms, depending on the individuals involved. At Waco, the Branch Davidians, the believing individuals, were scared because they were not understood. In Rushdie's case, the opposite happened: his work, seen perhaps all too clearly for what it was and hitting too close to the mark, created massive opposition, and the academic this time had reason to fear for his life. In other words, the real-world answer to the Salman Rushdie Question appears to be that the believing and academic communities, though individually clearly defined in the larger social framework, intertwine deeply with each other, and so interaction varies with time, setting, and participants.

The Potential Dialogues

This answer offers little satisfaction and little guidance in how to actually pursue constructive interaction, so let us consider what the interaction could look like on smaller levels. First of all, we can find examples of all five of Larson's potential relationships.¹² The most difficulty comes from the "no relationship" possibility: by definition, the academic study of religion is influenced by the object of study. Any attempt to study a religious system without a sincere effort to understand the thought processes of adherents and to properly contextualize new developments in the tradition constitutes sloppy scholarship. Instances abound, however, in which little to no interaction occurs. The current world population of more than six billion people

combined with the spread of legal protection for religious freedoms virtually guarantees the births of hundreds if not thousands of cults worldwide each year. The vast majority of these will never come into contact with the scholarly world at all; most will arise around a single charismatic individual and disintegrate as soon as that individual is incarcerated or killed, never to be heard of again. Thus, dozens of new religions annually are born and become extinct without ever coming to the attention of the relatively tiny global academic community.

Likewise, plenty of examples exist of one-sided relationships. One can find no better example than the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages. Those who persistently differed with official Church doctrine on theological, political, scientific, philosophical, or any other grounds, whether from within the Church or without, faced censorship and excommunication at best and execution at worst. The absolute political and religious power of the institutionalized Church at its peak effectively quelled any dissent or even, at times, discussion. Needless to say, the faith group in this instance strongly influenced the professed attitudes of the intellectual community, and those few academics who braved the criticism and persecution by the Church often made a negligible impact in their own lifetimes. The relationship between the Church and the academic world could hardly have been more unbalanced.

The third possibility, genuine dialogue proves hard to come by on a broad level, but does exist in pockets. For example, modern Biblical criticism has had profound effects on Christianity in the last two centuries, particularly on certain Protestant denominations. Recent philosophers of religion such as Kant, Nietzsche, and Hegel have not failed to leave their mark. Some churches have renounced the supernatural, yet retained a concept, however fragile, of God, while others

¹² Though, for the sake of making them somewhat concrete and readily accessible, some generalizations must be made. Interaction on the individual level, again, will vary widely from

have embraced pluralism, recognizing multiple paths to God. Still others have gone so far as to reduce Christ's role to that of "possible-first-century-radical-role-model, except for the whole issue of his criticism of the Pharisees and Sadducees; that," they say, "is purely intolerant." Likewise, the Christian church has affected Western scholarship in all fields in ways too profound to catalogue. Many have argued, and quite correctly, that the Western concept of God, even in scholastic circles, is so fundamentally shaped by the Judeo-Christian traditions as to be inapplicable elsewhere. Even a cursory glance at the Hindu Vishnu or the Shinto *kami* will convince a Western reader that the prototypical Western concept of deity does not apply well. Thus, though often against one party's or the other's will, the post-Reformation discourse between academics and the Christian tradition has profoundly impacted both.

Various groups can also be said to be spin-offs either of academia or religious traditions. Scientology, UFO cults, and certain theistic evolutionist movements can be said to have obtained their roots from scientific, i.e. scholarly, studies, even though the source material may be on the fringes of the academic world or outright poor scholarship. Without question, though, these groups perceive themselves as rising out of scholarly traditions. Needless to say, the reverse has held true; much of the modern academic study of religion derives from the work of members of the monotheistic traditions. Though today it would be absurd to claim that the academic community has no legitimacy of its own outside of, say, the Christian church, the scholarly groups in these traditions certainly went through a transition period in which they were anomalous and impossible to categorized definitively as inside or outside their root tradition.

As we have amply seen, the fifth case, in which it is impossible to clearly break down the interaction into categories, holds often, but Larson failed to consider one last possibility. There is

the categorical classifications I am making here.

no reason why the academic world and the believing communities could not act out a dialogue and feign mutual understanding, then go about business as usual. In other words, a “bad faith” dialogue¹³ could be carried out complete with statements, responses, questions, and answers, but with no measurable impact on the thinking of either group. Consider, for example, the Southern Baptist Convention and the so-called Jesus Seminar and assume for the moment that they neatly fit into the categories of believing community and academic community, respectively.¹⁴ Certainly, dialogue exists between members of the two groups; the quantity of information available in printed and electronic forms about the single question of the Gospel of Q, for example, one of the Seminar’s pet theses, is staggering. Yet, neither group seems to be noticeably affected by the other. To the best of my knowledge, no members of the Jesus Seminar have become practicing Southern Baptists, nor have any Southern Baptist Churches adopted the Bibles published by the Jesus Seminar which are multi-colored based on supposed authenticity of the text. The theological and philosophical lines are clearly drawn and the debate rages, but with little observable impact so far.

The Potential Future Dialogue

None of this is to say, however, that meaningful discourse between academics and members of any given religious tradition is impossible. After all, the world of religious studies

¹³ This phrasing of this scenario comes from Rice University Professor William Parsons.

¹⁴ Though the Jesus Seminar is certainly on the fringe of New Testament scholarship, it can hardly be classified as a believing community. In fact, overlap is probably at the minimal possible level. Moreover, however unorthodox the Jesus Seminar’s methods, they do attempt scholarly analysis. So, for the sake of argument, we will regard them here as scholars and leave the philosophical debate about their *a priori* commitments for another time.

includes representatives of all of the world's major religions and a vast number of smaller ones; surely it could theoretically hold a scholar of every religious variety. If a scholar holds ties to a religious tradition simultaneously with his or her ties to the academic world, then discourse must be possible, else large numbers of students and teachers of religious studies would go insane. Indeed, with these individuals we must begin. Many have argued whether or not it is possible to know anything about the world of the believer if one is an academic only or vice versa; the existence of academic believers (or believing academics) makes this a moot point, in most cases. The believing academic has at least enough insight into both worlds to be able to keep one foot in each.

One must admit, of course, that this also poses problems. After all, if there are aspects of one worldview which those of the opposite community cannot fully grasp, then perhaps these individuals are not doubly-sighted, but doubly-blinded, equally incapable of understanding the implications of their reason for their faith or of their faith for reason. This may be; so be it. The value of these individuals is not in their ability to be perfectly balanced and see all sides with perfect clarity; such individuals might be better suited as diplomats than scholars. Their value lies rather in their ability to empathize with members of both communities. Though they are, of course, potentially valuable contributors themselves, they hold even greater promise as "conduits," the fiber optics themselves in the analogy above: individuals who can convey the view of one community to the members of the other in an inoffensive but clear and complete manner. For example, I have had the pleasure of studying under one Samuel Karff, a Reform Jewish rabbi and a scholar. Because of his firm ties to both his congregation and the university world, he has been able to coordinate an annual interfaith dialogue in Houston. The "foot in the

door” in both camps gives him legitimacy in the eyes both of scholars and people of faith. Such individuals hold the key to a successful interaction.

Conclusions: Mutually Informed Dialogue

The human race has only two options in the long run for resolving faith-based conflicts: mutual understanding or mutually assured destruction. Issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian feuds, Northern Ireland’s problems with the Irish Republican Army, and the persecution of the Falun Gong movement in mainland China will only be resolved in the end through total annihilation of one party or agreements based on mutual trust and understanding. The only hope for such understanding comes from scholarly study of religious perspectives. When one analyzes a religious tradition only through the lenses of one’s own religious affiliations, one cannot help but come to the same conclusion again and again: “I’m right. You’re wrong.” When, however, one takes a step back and applies the same set of unbiased hermeneutics, whatever they may be, to both traditions, partial understanding at least becomes possible. Academic knowledge of a religion and genuine interfaith dialogue are possible only when one can step back far enough to see both views, at least in part. Those individuals who find themselves in both academic and religious camps therefore have a dual responsibility: a responsibility to teach their fellow religionists, however unwilling they may be to learn, how to analyze a religion from an academic perspective, and to teach their fellow scholars what it means to experience their particular tradition. Those who do not find themselves in both camps but sit in only one or neither have an obligation to learn to approach religious viewpoints both from the believer’s perspective and the academics by applying both the believer’s hermeneutical framework and the academic’s to the same material. Only once we learn to see the world from another’s perspective in this way can

we hope to move out of our current growing pains. After the Reformation, the flood of radical religious pluralism ushered in by the American and French Revolutions, and the dawn of the so-called "Information Age," our fairest answer to the Salman Rushdie Question may have to remain: "It's impossible to answer yet. Wait and see."

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