A TWICE-TOLD TALE: THE HISTORY OF THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS' HISTORY

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In Shakespeare's curiously neglected play, *King John* (III.4, line 108), in William Broome's eighteenth century translation of the *Odyssey* (XII.538), as well as in the title of Nathaniel Hawthorne's first published collection of short stories, the phrase, "twice-told tale," signifies tedium. By contrast, for those of us who study religion, twice-told or twice-performed is understood to be a minimal criterion for those basic building blocks of religion: myth and ritual. For us, repetition guarantees significance. Indeed, we demand more. In Jane Harrison's suggestive characterization, ritual (or myth) is "representation repeated,"[1] thus doubling the twice-told, twice-performed quality.

Harrison's formulation reminds us as well of the nature of our enterprise. As is characteristic of the human sciences in general, the little prefix *re-* is perhaps the most important signal we can deploy. It guarantees that we understand both the second-order nature of our enterprise as well as the relentlessly social character of the objects of our study. We re-present those re-peated re-presentations embedded in the cultures and cultural formations that comprise our subject matter.

I labor this point at the outset to make plain one presupposition which will guide my remarks. The history of the history of religions is not best conceived as a liberation from the hegemony of theology — our pallid version of that tattered legend of the origins of science, whether placed in fifth century Athens or sixteenth century Europe, that depicts science progressively unshackling itself from a once regnant religious world-view. Our variant of this twice-told tale needs to be set aside, not because such a claimed liberation has been, in so

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[1] J. Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1918), 42.

many moments of our history, an illusion, but rather because this way of retelling the tale occludes a more fundamental issue that yet divides us. In short-hand form, this is the debate between an understanding of religion based on *presence*, and one based on *representation*. But, I get ahead of myself . . .

As in any historiographic enterprise, the history of the history of religions may be imagined in a variety of ways. Each is appropriate to the interests of their fashioner. While the mappings remain curiously consistent, there have been, in fact, two major opposing stratagems: the exceptionalist and the assimilationist. Each, in its own way, seeks legitimation, seeks a place for the study of religion on the map of recognized academic disciplines. The exceptionalist insists on the distinctive (or, unique) nature of the subject matter of the study of religion; the assimilationist argues for the equivalence (or, parity) of the methods of the study of religion with those of other human sciences. In either case, the mode of representation is genealogical, a narrative of founders and schools which often takes the form of an inverted tree diagram. While this mode was common in both the biological sciences and the linguistic sciences — abstaining from the debates as to which one influenced the other — it has now been subjected to strong critique in both fields in favor of a more diffuse, tangled, multicausal and interactive representation. For example, the evolutionary biologist, W. Ford Doolittle has written, this year, in an article entitled, "Uprooting the Tree of Life," that the schematization of the origins of life "look more like a forkful of spaghetti than a tree." Similarly, one might cite the strictures of Colin Renfrew and Bruce Lincoln with respect to the Indo-European tree diagram, building, in part, on Schuchardt's and Schmidt's wave theory.[2] For this reason, while in what follows I shall employ conventional periodization, I

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[2] The tree or inverted tree diagram has had a long history in biological and linguistic representations. For an important collective volume on the image with rich bibliographies, see, H.M. Hoenigswald and L.F. Wiener, eds., *Biological Metaphor and Cladistic Classification: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Philadelphia, 1987). I have taken the quotation by W. Ford Doolittle, "Uprooting the Tree of Life," *Scientific American* (February, 2000) from *The New York Times* (June 13, 2000), D 2.

would stress that each of these has exceptionally fluid boundaries, and are properly thought of as pluriform phenomena. Thus, one should, for example, talk of Renaissances, and take pain to specify which Enlightenment one is speaking of.

While this is a historiographical discussion well worth pursuing, it is also somewhat misleading. It assumes that the study of religion is best mapped by being attentive, at the outset, to the occasional instances of reflexive, meta-discourse in the field, to its defining moments, rather than the "normal science" of its quotidian praxis. If we start, so to speak, on the ground, a different constellation of characteristics emerges, which gives rise to a different sort of narrative as well as to a different sense of urgency with respect to matters of second-order discourse.

If some alien, unfamiliar with the fierce eighteenth and nineteenth century taxonomic controversies concerning the classification of the academic disciplines, were to observe scholars of religion in action, it would have no difficulty identifying the class to which they belong. With respect to practice, the history of religions is, by and large, a philological endeavor chiefly concerned with editing, translating and interpreting texts, the majority of which are perceived as participating in the dialectic of 'near' and 'far'. If this is the case, then our field may be redescribed as a child of the Renaissance.[3]

While there are surely precursors (the historian's always present temptation towards infinite regress), it is the various projects associ-

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For the strictures on the tree diagram in Indo-European linguistics, see C. Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins* (Cambridge, 1987) and B. Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology and Scholarship* (Chicago, 1999), esp. pp. 211-16. The theoretical basis of the rival "wave theory" was revisited in E. Pulgram's classic article, "Family Tree, Wave Theory, and Dialectology," *Orbis* 2 (1953), 67-72. The theory ultimately depends on the works of H. Schuchardt, *Der Vokalismus des Vulgärlateins* (Leipzig, 1868), vol. 3, and J. Schmidt, *Die Verwandtschaftsverhältnisse der indogermanischen Sprachen* (Weimar, 1872).

[3] In this brief sketch of Renaissance linguistics, I have relied, above all, on M.-L. Demonet, *Les voix du signe: Nature du langage à la Renaissance, 1480-1580* (Paris-Geneva, 1992).

ated with the equally various Renaissances that set the agendum of
our field. First, the sheer mastery of others' languages — a charac-
teristic that still marks our field within the contemporary academy —
whether their otherness be expressed in terms of temporal or spatial
distance. Second, the etymological conviction, still regnant, that there
is something of surpassing value hidden 'beneath' the words, a some-
thing that is essential, as opposed to the verbally accidental, and that
may be uncovered only by decipherment; or, the comparable rhetorical
conviction that values the givenness of the 'real' concealed 'behind'
the words. Third, building on this etymological conviction, the tension
between perceptions of unity and diversity in cultural formations was
often settled by the postulation of an essential similarity in the face
of accidental difference. The accidence to be explained by either en-
vironmental differences or the diffusing effects of historical processes.
These issues became urgent because of the unanticipated increase of
data for variegation, each the product of specific, European, historical
causes. To list only three.

(1) The movement north and west of Greek and Hebrew manuscripts
following the capture of Constantinople and the expulsion of Jews
from Spain, both of these not unrelated to an expansive Islam, pre-
sented Renaissance scholars with an internal other, an ancestral past
profoundly distant and different from the then European present. A
past which was now only accessible through acts of imagination.

(2) The European colonial and mission adventures in the Americas
as well as in Africa and Asia gave rise to a number of unanticipated
consequences. The unexpected presence of the Americas shattered the
classical biblical and Greco-Roman imagination of the inhabited geo-
sphere as a tripartite world-island, thus giving rise to the first new in-
tellectual confrontation with the problem of human and biological dif-
ference as possibly signalling otherness.[4] Were the Americas created
separately? Were their inhabitants not descendants from Eden? In the

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[4] On the issues engendered by the novelty of the Americas, see, J.Z. Smith, "What
A Difference A Difference Makes," in J. Neusner and E.S. Frerichs, eds., *"To See
Ourselves As Others See Us": Christians, Jews, "Others" in Late Antiquity* (Chico,

case of both the Americas and Africa, there was, as well, the production of ethnographic texts in which European words replaced and represented those of the native.[5] In the case of Asia, a different result was the collection and translation of significant texts in hitherto unknown languages.[6] Then too, there were, also, in Asia, contacts with kinds of Christianities, not experienced since the thirteenth century, whose difference from familiar European forms was often perceived as more problematic and therefore more threatening than native religions.

(3) This latter perception resonated with a European one in which the schismatic impulses of emergent Protestantisms raised a host of questions as to religious credibility and truth. These rival claims to authority made implausible older heresiological explanations for internal diversities.[7]

In each of these cases, languages and religions became the privileged cultural formations in which the controversies of unity and difference were framed. Indeed, as already suggested, it was most often the then regnant linguistic model of essence/accidence that governed these controversies when applied to religion. It is, therefore, here, as well, that the debate over what would become the question of 'reli-

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1985), 3-48 and Smith, "Close Encounters of Diverse Kinds," in S. Mizruchi, ed., *Religion and Cultural Studies* (Princeton, 2000), in press.

[5] On the production of ethnographic texts focusing on indigenous American and African religions, Ramón Pané, *Relación acera de las antigüedades de los indios* (ca. 1495) seems to be the earliest for the American. See, among others, E.G. Bourne, "Columbus, Ramon Pane and the Beginnings of American Anthropology" (Worcester, MA, 1906: offprint, *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*); *Fray Ramón Pané; Relación . . .*, ed., J.J. Arrom (Mexico City, 1988). H. Louis Gates has given an oral report of the Mellon-Harvard-Timbucto project which recovered a 1453 Arabic manuscript produced at the University of Timbucto on African indigenous religions which would represent an early example from a different expansionist movement.

[6] While scattered throughout the work, the most convenient guide to Asian language materials and translations in Europe remains D. Lach's multi-volumed study, *Asia in the Making of Europe* (Chicago, 1965-93).

[7] On the issue of external and internal diversities, see J.Z. Smith. "Religion, Religions, Religious," in M.C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago, 1998), esp. pp. 270-76.

gion' and 'the religions' first took on imperative force. Awareness of the plural 'religions' (both Christian and non-Christian) forced interest in the imagination of a singular, generic 'religion.' As a late example, I take as emblematic of these Renaissance concerns Edward Brerewood's, *Enquiries Touching the Diversity of Languages and Religions through the Chiefe Parts of the World* (published, posthumously, in 1614),[8] the second work, as far as I am aware, in the English language to employ the plural 'religions' in its title. There is, as well, a second sense in which Brerewood, now the individual, may be taken as emblematic. Like so many other non-clerical writers on religion prior to the mid-nineteenth century, Brerewood was an *amateur*, publishing not only on languages and religions, but also on antiquities (especially numismatics), mathematics and logic. One may well argue that the subsequent professionalization of religious studies, in concert with other fields undergoing professionalization, gave rise to new disciplinary horizons carrying their own methodological and theoretical interests that were, in the main, by no means peculiar to the study of religion. In particular I think of the claimed *sui generis* nature of a field's object of research, a claim, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially associated with the newly emergent social sciences.

The Renaissance pattern was modified through Enlightenment, counter-Enlightenment and Romantic theories of language and religion, which brings us to the threshold of the modern enterprise of the study of religion — although I will signal, here, only one trajectory of new elements in linguistic theory which was taken over into thinking about religion.

Enlightenment interest in language is a by-product of its preeminent concern for thought and thoughtfulness, an emphasis that must be

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[8] E. Brerewood, *Enquiries Touching the Diversity of Languages and Religions through the Chiefe Parts of the World* (London, 1614). Samuel Purchas, *His Pilgrimage, or, Relations of the World and the Religions observed in all Ages and all Places discovered* (London, 1613) appears to be the earliest English work to employ the plural, 'religions,' in its title.

reaffirmed by any scholar of religion, while prescinding from some of its formulations of this concern. For example, unity and uniformity were revalued as universalism; difference was stigmatized as irrational. Their sometimes vision of an abstract, universal humanity required the imagination of the possibility of an equally abstract, universal language in which all would be transparent, in which decipherment would be superfluous.[9] Language was thus conceived as a secondary tool for the expression of thought, with the development of the former the result of the progressive refinement of the latter. To quote one eighteenth-century authority, language "being entirely the invention of man, must have been exceedingly rude and imperfect at first, and must have arrived by slow degrees at greater and greater perfection, as the reasoning faculties acquired vigour and acuteness."[10] The only question was whether the perfecting of language was best achieved by controlling the denotation of signs or the regularization of grammar.

The counter-Enlightenment takes the issue of thoughtfulness in a new direction, one as yet insufficiently appropriated by scholars of religion.[11] Language, it was argued, is not a secondary naming or memorializing; it is not a translation of thought, it is not posterior to experience, rather, it is the very way in which we think and experience. The human sciences become conceptually possible largely through the acceptance of the counter-Enlightenment argument that their objects of study are holistic linguistic and language-like systems, and that,

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[9] While a number of complex linguistic issues recur in Enlightenment thought — compare, for example, H. Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis, 1982) and Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England 1780-1860* (Minneapolis, 1983) with L. Formigari, *L'esperienza e il segno: La filosofia del linguaggio tra Illuminismo e Restaurazione* (Rome, 1990) — I focus, here, on the issue of universality, on which see, U. Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Oxford, 1997).

[10] "Language," *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1st ed. (Edinburgh, 1771), vol. 3, p. 863.

[11] I have taken the term, 'counter-Enlightenment' from I. Berlin. For the linguistic theories here summarized, see esp. Berlin, *The Magus of the North; J.G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism* (New York, 1994).

therefore, they are the study of "eminently social" human projects. This gives rise to what was already alluded to at the beginning of my presentation: an insistence that the central debates within the study of religion revolve around the relations of language and experience. Questions as to whether experience can ever be immediate or is always mediated? Whether we can experience a world independently of the conventional ways in which it is socially represented? Whether the *re-* of re-presentation remains always at the level of re-presentation? Such questions constitute the serious theoretical matters that sharply divide us in ways that cut across conventional, essentially political, divisions such as historians of religions and theologians.

For a certain sort of grand theorist in the study of religion, two aspects of Romantic theories of language proved most compelling. First, the reassertion, against the Enlightenment, of the supreme value of uniqueness, singularity, or individuality in the name of the creative, free expression of will. Second, and of greater import, the identification of poetic language, in opposition to the prosaic, as intransitive, as a non-pragmatic, autonomous totality, a thing-in-itself. In such a view, there is no gap between signifier and signified. The counter-Enlightenment's insistence on the non-secondary character of language has now been transformed into the transparency of self-disclosure. From poetry to myth is but a small step; Schelling, most famously, made the translation:

> Each figure in mythology is to be taken for what it is, for it is precisely in this way that it will be taken for what it signifies. The signifying here is at the same time the being itself, it has passed into the object, being one with it. No sooner do we allow these beings to signify something than they are no longer anything themselves ... Indeed, their greatest attraction lies in the fact that, whereas they only are, without any relation, absolute in themselves, they still allow signification to shine through.

> Mythology is not allegorical; it is tautegorical. For mythology, the gods are beings that really exist; instead of being one thing and signifying another, they signify only what they are.

Allegory, one of the prime modes of interpreting myth for more than a millennium, is here dethroned; the hermeneutics of 'speaking-

otherwise' has given way to the direct apprehension of the Other's speech.[12] Romanticism laid the groundwork for one of the hallmarks of influential twentieth century theories of religion in which a still essentially philological discipline all but ignores modern linguistics, and is often prepared to impeach the status of language in an effort to preserve ontology from anthropology and to maintain the privilege of unmediated, direct experience.

With this much by way of a brief background, let me turn to some implications of locating the history of religions within philology, and of re-situating it within Renaissance and Romantic linguistic thought for both practice and theory.

We may recall, Mircea Eliade's double critique of dominant modes of scholarship on religion, made in the course of a set of reflections on the past and future of the field. As is well-known, for those outside of the history of religions, chiefly in the human sciences, his name for all that he abjured in their work was 'reductionism.' Less famously, Eliade named as his opponents within the field, the 'philologians.' I shall take up these two names from Eliade's execration text in reverse order.

From Eliade's totalizing perspective, the philologically based historians of religions persistently take parts for wholes, thereby giving priority to the local, rather than to the general and typical. His fear was that the preponderance of language-based specialists within the field would result in a situation where, "the History of Religions will be endlessly fragmented and the fragments reabsorbed in the different philologies."[13] To a degree, this has occurred, and has brought with it a

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[12] For Romantic language theories, I have relied primarily on T. Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol* (Ithaca, 1982), esp. pp. 147-221. The two passages from Schelling are translated in Todorov, pp. 210 and 163-64. Note that the indebtedness of Schelling to Coleridge's use of the term "tautegorical" (S.T. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection* [reprint, London, 1913], 136) is acknowledged in a footnote to the latter passage (Schelling, *Introduction à la Philosophie de la mythologie*, V. Jankélevitch, translator [Paris, 1946], vol. 1, p. 238, n.1).

[13] M. Eliade, "Crisis and Renewal in History of Religions," *History of Religions* 5(1965), 17.

new ethos of particularism that challenges the global ambitions which, from time to time, have animated the field. But, more can be said.

There is the sheer effort involved in gaining proficiency, to the best of ones ability, in difficult languages, often first encountered in the course of graduate studies. While such language studies, taken together, constitute one of our major achievements over the past two centuries, their result has been that language instruction consumes a disproportionate amount of time in the training of the historian of religions. As certification in language ability has increasingly come to be the criterion for achieving professional status, other matters, preeminently those associated with mastering the second-order discourse of the field, get pushed to the side. Philology is the vocation; generalization and theory, the avocation. This has led to the wholesale adoption of a sort of common-sense descriptive discourse as a major rhetoric for the work of the field.

It is possible to point to a variety of practices symptomatic of this sort of discourse in which everything is treated as a self-evident instance of ostension. Texts are pointed to, paraphrased, or summarized as if their citation is, by itself, sufficient to guarantee significance. When translation is undertaken, it is without an explicit theory of translation; rather reproduction and verbal congruence are assumed to be values in their own right. Comparisons are limited to those grounded in common genealogy or spatial contiguity.

The ostensive nature of these practices serve a protective role. In each of these, the unity, the integrity of the subject for study is preserved. Like the Mosaic altar, such practices guarantee that the scholar's work will be built of "whole stones," that the injunction, "thou shalt not lift up any iron tool upon them," (Deuteronomy 27.5-6) has been piously observed; that like the Temple of Solomon, "there was neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron heard in the house while it was in building" (1 Kings 6.7). By means of such practices, the handicraft of the scholar is disguised so as to give the appearance of achieving "a house not made with hands" (Acts 7.48). Such an attitude, as Bakhtin pointed out, has as one of its causes philology's focus on

"dead languages, languages that were by that very fact 'unities.'"[14] But it comes as well from a deeply held ethos which Karl Mannheim characterized, in his seminal essay on the sociology of knowledge, as a "conservative" ideology, a "right wing methodology," which tends to use "morphological categories which do not break up the concrete totality of the data of experience, but seek rather to preserve it in all of its uniqueness." Opposed to this, Mannheim wrote, is "the analytical approach characteristic of parties of the left [which] broke down every concrete totality in order to arrive at smaller, more general units which may then be recombined."[15] Here, the scholar's "tools" have indeed been busy with the altar. The result can no longer be thought of as 'natural' but rather stands forth, marked as a construction. Whether this fabrication be judged as informative or as a lie, depends not on presumptions of congruence, but on the exercise of a critical intelligence that assesses the cognitive gain or loss made possible by the constructive difference and distance from what Mannheim termed "the concrete totality." The fabrication is, necessarily, a representation rather than a claimed presence.

I would note as well Mannheim's description of the analytical approach as seeking "smaller, more general units." Scholars of religion have made insufficient use of the notion of 'generalization,' a neo-Latin coinage, growing out of the Aristotelian taxonomic distinction between genus and species, the latter giving rise to 'specialization' as the proper antonym to 'generalization.' In handbooks of logic, the 'general' is placed in opposition to the 'universal' by its admission to significant exceptions. Generalization is understood to be a mental, comparative, taxonomic activity which directs attention to co-occurrences of selected stipulated characteristics while ignoring others. Both of these qualifications, not universal and highly selective, are central to generalization. Indeed, they are frequently exaggerated, leading to the pejorative sense of 'generality' as exhibiting vagueness or indeterminacy.

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[14] M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. M. Holquist (Austin, 1981), 271.

[15] K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York, 1936), 274.

Employed correctly, these same characteristics insure that generalities are always corrigible.[16] By this understanding, our object of interest would then be 'religion' as the general name of a generic anthropological category, a nominal, intellectual construction, surely not to be taken as a 'reality.' After all, there are no existent genera.

It is here that we begin to get an assist from modern linguistic theories. The scholarly imagination of 'religion' as an intellectual category establishes a disciplinary horizon that should play the same sort of role as 'language' in linguistics or 'culture' in anthropology. In each case, the generic category supplies the field with a theoretical object of study, different from, but complimentary to, their particular subject matters. Taking up only the analogy to language, Hans Penner has persistently reminded us of the relevance of the Saussurean project[17] which was undertaken to "show the linguist what he is doing," in conscious opposition to what Saussure termed the "philologies" and languages' "ethnographic aspect[s]."[18] As described by one scholar of language:

> Saussure was doubtless one of the first to render explicit, for linguistics, the necessity of accomplishing what Kant terms the Copernican revolution. [Saussure] distinguished the *subject matter* of linguistics, the linguist's field of investigation — which includes the whole set of phenomena closely or distantly related to language use — from its *object* ... The role of general linguistics ... is to define certain concepts that allow us to discern in the particular investigation of any particular language, the object within the subject matter.[19]

It is important to recall that Saussure's distinction between 'language' and 'speech' is maintained, methodologically, by most forms of contemporary linguistics, although there is sharp disagreement as to

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[16] See, for example, J.S. Mill, *A System of Logic*, 10th ed. (London, 1879), vol. 2: 127-41, 360-80. A good sense of the semantic range of the term can be gained from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'general,' 'generality,' 'generalization,' 'generalize.'

[17] H.H. Penner, *Impasse and Resolution: A Critique of the Study of Religion* (New York, 1989), esp. pp. 130-134.

[18] F. de Saussure, Letter to A. Meillet (January 4, 1894) as quoted in E. Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (Coral Gables, 1971), 33-34.

[19] O. Ducrot and T. Todorov, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language* (Baltimore, 1979), 118.

their definitions as well as over the appropriate criteria for distinguishing the empirical subject matter from the theoretical object of research. That is to say, the formulation is both arguable and corrigible. It is this very process of argumentation concerning this object that has resulted in some of the most significant theoretical advances in linguistics.

To come at the same point from a different angle. The field of religious studies has been more persistent than many of its academic neighbors in continuing to maintain one strand of nineteenth century neo-Kantian thought which argued that the distinction between the natural sciences and the human sciences was a matter of explanation as opposed to interpretation. The former, in one of its earlier formulations, being understood as privileging the general (through subsumption to law-like statements); the latter, as privileging the individual, or more strongly, the unique. Each was thought to have its own sort of data, its own appropriate subject matter. Far more fruitful is the alternative proposal, from another strand of contemporaneous neo-Kantian thought, that holds these two approaches to be alternative ways of construing the same datum, the same subject matter.[20] In either proposal, the term 'reduction' has come to stand, nowhere more so than in the study of religion, as the ambivalent cipher for this difference, perceived as being highly valued by the natural sciences and abjured by the majority of the human sciences. Such a view — at times raised to the level of an ethical proscription — is, and has been for some time, utterly inadequate.

Both explanations and interpretations are occasioned by surprise. It is the particular subject matter that provides the scholar with an occasion for surprise. Surprise, whether in the natural or the human sciences, is always reduced by bringing the unknown into relations to the known. The process by which this is accomplished, in both the natural and the human sciences, is translation: the proposal that the second-order conceptual language appropriate to one domain (the known/the familiar) may translate the second-order conceptual lan-

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[20] On this issue, see the references in J.Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago, 1987), 33-34 and 138-39, notes 48-51.

guage appropriate to another domain (the unknown/the unfamiliar). Perhaps the strongest example of this procedure in the study of religion is Durkheim's translation of the language appropriate to religion (for him, the unknown) into the language appropriate for society (the known). The point at which one may differ from Durkheim's project is with respect to his acceptance of the goal of explanatory simplicity. Better, here, is Lévi-Strauss's formulation: "scientific explanation consists not in a movement from the complex to the simple but in the substitution of a more intelligible complexity for another which is less."[21]

While the adequacy of any translation proposal may be debated, an argument made more difficult by the lack of elaborated theories of translation by scholars of religion, the only grounds for rejecting such a procedure is to attack the possibility of translation-itself, most often attempted through appeals to incommensurability. Such appeals, if accepted, must entail the conclusion that the enterprise of the human sciences is, strictly speaking, impossible.[22]

I would note only two implications of translation. First, translation, as an affair of language, is a relentlessly social activity, a matter of public meaning rather than of individual significance. Here, for the study of religion, the public is, first of all, the academic community and, therefore, a central issue becomes one of specifying the relations between the study of 'religion' and other disciplinary endeavors, a

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[21] C. Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage* (Paris, 1962), 328. Compare the different translation of this sentence in Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, 1966), 248.

[22] For a preliminary account, see R. Feleppa, *Convention, Translation and Understanding; Philosophical Problems in the Comparative Study of Culture* (Albany, 1988). Once again, Hans Penner, reflecting the work of Donald Davidson, persistently urges confidence in the possibility of translation. "To interpret means to translate. The notion then that someone speaks an uninterpretable language is incomprehensible — language *entails* translatability." H.H. Penner, "Interpretation," in W. Braun and R.T. McCutcheon, eds, *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London-New York), 69. See further, Penner, "Holistic Analysis: Conjectures and Refutations," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62(1994), 977-96; Penner, "Why Does Semantics Matter to the Study of Religion?" *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 7(1995), 221-49.

matter of locating oneself with respect to ones conversation partners, those with whom one will work out appropriate translation languages. Second, whether of a conceptual or natural language, whether inter-cultural or intracultural, translation is never fully adequate. To pick up again Schelling's term (borrowed from Coleridge), translation can never be "tautegorical." There is always discrepancy. (To repeat the old tag: "To translate is to traduce".) Central to any proposal of translation are questions as to appropriateness and 'fit,' questions that must be ad-dressed through the double methodological requirement of comparison and criticism.

Indeed, the cognitive power of any translation, model, map, gen-eralization or redescription — as for example in the imagination of 'religion' — is, by this understanding, a result of its *difference* from the subject matter in question and not its congruence. This conclusion has, by and large, been resisted throughout the history of the history of religions. But this resistance has carried a price. Too much work by scholars of religion takes the form of a paraphrase, our style of ritual repetition, which is a particularly weak mode of translation, insuffi-ciently different from its subject matter for purposes of thought. To summarize: a theory, a model, a conceptual category, a generalization cannot be simply the data writ large.

The alternative would be to persist in a view that would make our "twice-told tale" truly tedious, to persist in denying that a science depends on the construction of its theoretical object of study, insisting rather that it is founded on the discovery of a unique reality which eludes any translation other than paraphrase. It is to accede to the odd sort of "tautegorical" claim that last appeared in the 1960-61 description of the History of Religions field at the University of Chicago: "It is the contention of the discipline of History of Religions that a valid case can be made for the interpretation of transcendence as transcendence."[23] This expression, with its implied acceptance of incommensurability, denies the legitimacy of translation, and the

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[23] University of Chicago, The Divinity School, *Announcements for Sessions of 1960-1961* (Chicago, 1960), 3.

cognitive value of difference. It condemns the field to live in the world of Borges's Pierre Menard where a tale must always be identically "twice-told," where a word can only be translated by itself.[24]

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[24] Jorge L. Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," in Borges, *Collected Fictions* (New York, 1998), 88-95.