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AR ESSAY

Lessons for Religious Studies in Waco?

Ivan Strenski

Like Jonestown over a decade ago, the events at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco should unsettle the intellectual consciences of students of religion. Are there lessons to be learned about religion and the study of religion from both the events at Waco and the way religious studies academics have publicly responded to them?

At the risk of seeming insensitive, let me begin with what I hesitate calling the “good news” for the study of religion in these otherwise sad and deathly events. As if the examples of Shi’a Iran, Hindu-Muslim strife in India, Catholic-Orthodox-Muslim war in Yugoslavia were not enough, after Waco, who can now doubt that we need to *know* more about religion? And by “know” I do not of course mean increased personal piety and a more profound faith, as essential as these are for the vitality of religious communities themselves. I mean “knowledge” in the sense that passes under its various guises in the university. Sometimes quantitative, sometimes interpretive, sometimes philosophical—but always public and open to critical scrutiny—this knowledge that the modern study of religion has sought to bring to the university is surely needed now more than ever.

In this light, it is clear that over the past decade religious studies has learned something of the lessons of Jonestown, which caught us off guard in November 1978. Since those days of embarrassment at being at a loss for words, a massive and substantial literature on new religious movements, religious violence, and the like has streamed forth from the wordprocessors of religious studies professionals. We surely “know”

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more today than we did only a few years ago, thanks in large part to academics who voluntarily retrained themselves—typically on their own time—to study and understand what for so long had seemed either refractory or repellent. These days religious studies professionals have a great deal to say about the so-called “new” religious movements. Such efforts at self-education and pioneering exploration of new domains of study deserve to be saluted. We have done well. Critics of the profession, who feel a teaching load in the single digits of hours must mean that academics are wallowing about in leisure time refinishing antique furniture or restoring colonial houses, should take note.

But there is other “news”—if not “bad news,” then certainly troubling news. Here I will not even take on the occasional celebrity academic who exploits the prurient interests of our culture in the “primitive,” weird, and bizarre. Wannabe gurus and “guru-ettes” ye shall always have with you. Pandering religious scholarship not only has a great history in our country, but perhaps even as great a future. As mainline religious communities fade, they leave behind the semi-lettered, unchurched, alienated, and emotionally needy. Promises of religious *frisson* in selfless trance or the siren call to “follow our bliss” fall sweetly indeed upon their ears. But what I have in mind instead are certain issues of a primarily methodological and conceptual sort that come into play in situations like Waco, and which too many of our colleagues either stumble over or misplay. I would suggest that there are four such subjects worth discussing: first, the cult/religion distinction or lack of it; second, whether or not religion is good; third, the slippery slope from empathy to sympathy; fourth, the tendency of academics to align with the adversary culture.

I am moved to single out these four points because of their prominence in the remarkable 21 April 1993 edition of one of the nation’s major newspapers, *The Los Angeles Times* (B7). On the paper’s op-ed page, two members of the religious studies community, Jean E. Rosenfeld, Ph.D. candidate at U.C.L.A., and Associate Professor Mary Zeiss Stange of Skidmore College’s Department of Religious Studies, pleaded for greater understanding of Koresh and company. These contrasted starkly with the views of nationally syndicated columnists William Raspberry and Edwin M. Yoder, Jr., who favored instead either “‘blaming the victim’ as the only reasonable thing to do” (Raspberry) or of Koresh as “Simply a Madman” (Yoder). While it would be wrong to fixate on our colleagues, Rosenfeld and Stange, they seem to me to typify certain troubling tendencies in our profession, deeply embedded in its hidden historical and theological nurture in deistic discourse or what

has also been called “natural religion.”¹ A cause of perhaps even greater concern, their opinions seem to typify how religious studies is *perceived*, rightly or wrongly, by public institutions like the mass media. To wit, religious studies is perceived to have vested professional interests in defending the *goodness* of religion.² It must surely be no accident that in the immediate wake of Waco this prestigious publication chose Rosenfeld and Stange’s “soft” version of this tragedy to typify religious studies’ opinion, and to have opposed them to self-styled hardheaded “realists” like Raspberry and Yoder. If this is so, it should set alarms ringing about the reputation of our profession. I shall argue that, although Rosenfeld and Stange represented much that is good about religious studies today, they also revealed some serious weaknesses. These flaws in turn affect the way we are perceived; we must not let those perceptions circulate uncontested. Let me begin by commending our colleagues for the manifest strengths of their contributions to the debate about Koresh.

First, judging by the work of Rosenfeld and Stange, religious studies has done a good job steering clear of drawing the invidious distinction between “cult” and “religion.” This does not, of course, mean that researchers might not want to cite *sociological* reasons for distinguishing such categories as “church,” “religion,” “sect,” or “cult” based on, say, considerations about social organization, authority patterns, behavioral characteristics, and so on. But it does mean that there is little *theoretical* reason to mark a distinction. “Cult” or “sect” are like the libelous labels which were freely applied until relatively recently to “other” religions. Here one made supposedly well-informed distinctions between “religion” and “superstition,” “heathenism,” or “paganism.” To her credit, Mary Zeiss Stange correctly observes how the word “cult” often functions simply as a pejorative: “cults” are just the “religions” we don’t like (B7). Although Stange herself finds the Koresh phenomenon distasteful, that is no excuse, she wisely counsels, for refusing to call it a “religion.” Stange’s judgment was likewise in effect confirmed by a joint statement signed even more recently after the Waco fire by leaders from fifteen mainline religious groups and the ACLU. Refusing to distance

¹ There is now an extensive literature on the deistic or “natural religion” background of religious studies. See for instance Byrne and Strenski.

² I realize that my view of the balance of opinion in our field runs contrary to a competing story that is often told of the domination of religious studies by critical, hyper-rational, Enlightenment intellectual paradigms. I cannot, however, hope to settle this issue within the compass of the present short discussion. I do, however, believe that the issue deserves full discussion in another venue, and volunteer my participation to defend my assessment.

themselves from their unconventional sister movements, the statement noted that "today's 'cults' may become tomorrow's religion." Thus, both so-called "cults" and "religions" share a common interest in freedom of expression and exercise: "'Absent some compelling justification, however, government should not restrict religious exercise.'" ³

In resisting question-begging definitions opposing "cult" and "religion," religious studies, like its sister departments, cultural and social anthropology, therefore approaches religious data with a certain sense of detachment and "strangeness." And even despite today's fashion for studies imbued with the post-modernist spirit of engagement and subjectivity, this spirit of detachment must continue to govern our endeavors. Indeed, despite theoretical criticisms to the contrary, at least something very much like an epistemological ideal of objectivity lives on simply because any discussion requires some—at least conventional and tentative—common ground. Taken to its natural extremes the post-modernist rejection of *some* ideal of "objectivity" defeats attempts to seek common intellectual ground and reduces discussion to talking at cross purposes. In studying religion, as has been the case for many years in studying traditional societies, the research ideal continues necessarily to be to try as much as possible to leave one's own prejudices and cultural "baggage" at the door of the classroom. As far as the putative cult/religion distinction goes, therefore, no privileged "center" is to be found. For contemporary religious studies, cults and religion, as indeed all religious phenomena, belong to the same level of inquiry, however they are called in common parlance. All well and good.

Second, while we can rejoice in the demise of these grosser forms of bias in favor of our own religion (whatever that might be), a subtler prejudice survives in the academic discourse about cults and religion, even among otherwise sophisticated and well-meaning investigators. This assumption is that religion itself, cultic or not, is good. Thus one is taken aback by the analysis of Koresh's theology done by Jean Rosenfeld, who pleads:

There is a core of reality to millennial expectations. Koresh merely (sic) amplified the despair that we may sometimes feel in this era of limits on an overcrowded planet. Maybe we seek to root out cults because they voice fears we would rather deny. (B7)

³From "Groups Warn against Using Waco Tragedy to Define a Valid Religion" (*Los Angeles Times* 1993b: B4). It is odd how badly named this headline is. In effect, it completely confounds the views expressed in the body of the article.

How can one otherwise account for such special pleading in behalf of a very dubious character like Koresh in terms of ecological themes like “era of limits” or “crowded planet”? Was Koresh really a kind of advance man for the Sierra Club? And what, furthermore, about Rosenfeld’s odd claim that a cult “does not initiate violence, but defends itself from threats to its continued existence”? This distinction is probably lost on the dead ATF agents, who, even if we may not approve of their zeal, were making a legal raid on the compound. Would Rosenfeld extend the same presumption to the Mafia or Aryan Nation the next time they are raided in a search for their cache of heavy arms? Are *they* allowed to open fire because they feel threatened by agents of law enforcement? Why does Rosenfeld grant religions special shooting rights in this regard, unless she feels that religions (cults included) are by definition good and inherently deserve the benefit of the doubt? Why can’t possession of .50 calibre rifles, grenade launchers, and the like be treated as such, and not, as Rosenfeld implies, excused because they are in the putatively good hands of a religion?

Third, following closely behind the assumption that religions are necessarily good, is the slide down the “slippery slope” from empathy to sympathy. Merely in attempting to “understand” a religion from its own perspective, some researchers often slide unwittingly into “sympathy” with it—something I shall call “sympathy sliding.” This “slide” happens in at least two ways. First, even with the best of intentions to maintain neutrality, the very act of understanding a worldview *tends* to lend it value. This tends to happen because by constructing its logic, by discovering the way a worldview “coheres,” one inches toward granting an often dangerous measure of plausibility to that worldview. Only “coherent” worldviews are in a position to “correspond” with the world. For instance, Rosenfeld’s discussion of biblical apocalyptic myth has helped us see the world as the scripture-obsessed and eschatologically-minded Koresh himself saw it (B7). But in doing so, as I have just noted, Rosenfeld in fact actually ends up sounding quite sympathetic to Koresh’s (ecological) vision and playing down the indigenous military character of his movement.

Secondly, although I applaud Jean Rosenfeld’s attempt to sketch the mythological worldview of millennial religions, it must also be admitted, it seems, that her account of the persistent “mytho-logic” of millennial religions—absent qualifications—makes Koresh’s behavior far more “understandable” than it might otherwise have seemed. The fallacy here is that, like the worldviews of some schizophrenics, the worldview of a Koresh may be quite coherent, while at the same time not corres-

pond to reality. "Sympathy sliding" thus eventuates in the view that, since the terms and worldview of a religion like Koresh's make up a distinct universe, and one incommensurable with those of our liberal democratic legal system and society, they are just as good. They are, after all, alternative pictures of reality. Understanding thus again leads to sympathy, because "sympathy sliders" seem unwilling to judge the relative values of worldviews over against each other. They are frozen into worldview relativity.

But this is a hopeless position. The coherence of a mythological "code," for example, does not in itself guarantee correspondence to reality, any more than the coherence of a schizophrenic worldview does. If we don't find some way to make these points in religious studies, we will be visited by many more Koreshes parading their views of the world as if they were fit competition for worldviews submitted to rather more rigorous confirmation and falsification. Would Rosenfeld accept that so-called "scientific creationism," its coherence for the moment granted, was really just as powerful as those views of the world generated from scientific cosmology or evolutionary biology? Are these two sets of worldviews equally plausible, just because each might be shown to be as coherent and seamless as the other? Thus, people like Rosenfeld need to focus not only on the mythological "code," but also on whether and to what extent it corresponds to reality as we know it at the time. Keep your mind open; just don't let your brains fall out.

Similarly, although I certainly agree when Stange says that "crazy" should not be the first word out of our mouths when talking of so-called "sects," yet it still might be the last (Stange:B7). Such labels, it is true, callously and casually thrown about, excuse us of responsibility for what we do against the "crazies," just as, not long ago, "heathen," "primitive," or "savage" did. Although I believe that we are right to try to understand the inner logic of the accounts of the world of those whom others would label "crazy," we are wrong to conclude therefore that "crazy" does not exist. Stange's appeals for tolerance are indeed well founded, such as when she tells us that "In an open society like ours, freedom of religion may necessarily entail toleration of a certain amount of craziness." I heartily agree. Yet Stange's analysis also *tends* to induce a measure of sympathy because, by her account, it does not seem that we can even *entertain* the notion that Koresh's craziness would have made a difference. "Even if David Koresh might have been a maniac, even a potentially dangerous one, there is no good excuse for what happened in Waco" (Stange:B7). Really? How many more law officers dead? How many more broken promises from Koresh? How much

more sexual exploitation? Was it also, for example, only a little “crazy” to have Davidians trained in suicide routines all along, and indeed apparently to have brought it off spectacularly according to their own plan? But if so, then Stange too bears responsibility for telling us when we *should* be allowed to use the term “crazy,” or something like it. Much as it affronts our liberality and respect for human integrity and pluralism, we must acknowledge that “crazy” people, e.g., sociopaths, psychopaths, and psychotics, really do exist. I personally find it highly disturbing that such persons, numb to any moral sense and dead to feelings for the pain of others, could exist at all. Yet they do. It is up to religious studies, I would submit, to factor their troubling existence into our understanding of reality *and* religion in a way Stange has not.

Fourth and finally, the articles of both Rosenfeld and Stange seem to give off the faint aroma of the adversary culture, and with it the fragrance of cultural self-hatred. Religious studies needs to get over this. We do not need to believe religion is always good, and we are not required to run to the defence of every religious adversary of the mainstream. Our mistaken tendency to do so may be laid at the foot of the counter-culture adversary mentality of the 1960s. It is that legacy we must all begin to deconstruct and engage critically.

Now as someone myself with interests in teaching religions of South Asia, I fully appreciate what religious studies owes to the historical “accident” of the counter-culture of the 1960s—the original adversary culture. Counter-culture enthusiasms for alternatives to the traditional religions of the West, for so-called “Eastern” religions, mysticism, Native America religions, and such, married to a passionate concern for issues of social justice in matters of race, gender, and ethnicity, have brought us to the place where we now are. It is as if, like Columbus in his visionary mystical moods, the study of religion, begun in the 1960s, launched out upon a quest for a fantastic India of the mind, only to discover upon arrival to have beached instead in the Bahamas! I am one of those who believe that even if by his own standards Columbus “failed,” by criteria gained from 20/20 hindsight (devastation of native America excluded), Columbus was more a “success” for having landed in the Bahamas than in Bombay. We need to be thankful for the historical accidents of the 1960s, but critical of them as well. Because of the 1960s, we have tended to favor the study of Hinduism and Buddhism, the Sufis and Zen, while neglecting Islam and Confucianism or Catholicism in Latin America; meditation, mysticism, myth, and *bhakti* have all been the rage, but economic, social, political, and even ritual materials

got second, if any, billing at all. Only now are we beginning to make up for our 1960s-influenced agendas.

What I am finally urging is that we ought to take a second look at how our one-sided attraction for the adversary culture distorts our scholarly agendas, as evidenced in the reactions to Waco that I have treated here. If much of the original energy for the comparative and critical study of religion came from a sense of disaffiliation with mainstream America, that need not be the whole story today. Why not risk "bracketing out" both cherished adversarial and "square" establishment cultural assumptions? Why not balance them off against each other, and let the sparks fly? Every day we see how important a subject religion is. Indeed, there seems to be no end in sight to the ways religious energies are creating dynamic changes all across the globe and in the minds of people. If we want to understand—and explain—religion's critical place in this new world, then we will need to have to hand the best stocked interpretive repertoire possible. If Waco means anything for the study of religion, I think it means this.

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