

# BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

THE RELIGIOUS WORLDS  
PEOPLE MAKE AND THE SCHOLARS  
WHO STUDY THEM



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carefully enforced. Fieldwork in religion provides a rich opportunity to conduct this sort of boundary-crossing experiment. The outcome of this experiment would not necessarily be the dismantling of this border, but even rendering it problematic would be something. Our work as scholars of religion could then become as porous as the life of the shrine, a site of many voices talking on top of each other and against each other, a place of unexpected intrusions and uncertain borders, built in the middle of and from the same stuff as what Sartre calls the "equivocal givens of experience."

## Chapter Six

### SNAKES ALIVE: RELIGIOUS STUDIES BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

He was just a man, just like everybody else, but in my opinion, he was a man that loved everybody. And he taught his children to love God and their neighbors, no matter what color people were, no matter where they come from, if they was rich or they were poor. He was a man on a mission from Jesus Christ, and sometimes we didn't agree on things, spiritual things and Biblical things, but it never put any ill feelings between us. He made his mistakes along the way, but he never tried to hide his mistakes.

*Cameron Short describing his friend Punkin' Brown,  
in Fred Brown and Jeanne McDonald, The Serpent Handlers:  
Three Families and Their Faith*

Religion is strange business. You shouldn't expect to figure these things out.

*Jonathan Rosen, Eve's Apple*

AT THE END of an account of his two-year sojourn among snake handling Christians in southern Appalachia, Dennis Covington, who at the time was a Georgia-based reporter for the *New York Times*, describes the night he realized that he could not join the snake handlers whom he had come to love and respect in their faith. I want to borrow this instance of one man's discovery of radical religious otherness—a discovery that led him to turn away in sorrow and disappointment from his friends—as an opening onto the question of how critical scholarship in religion is not only possible but compelling, exciting, and revealing, especially given the challenges—moral, political, and epistemological—that have so profoundly shaken scholarship in the humanities in the last quarter century.

We scholars of religion go among people in other times or in other places who are working on their worlds with (among other things) religious tools they have found, made, or inherited, in relationships with each other and with gods, spirits, ancestors, and other significant beings. Mostly we do not share these ways of living and imagining, or do not

quite share them, or even if we do share them or once did, we train ourselves to approach them now in another spirit and with different questions. Yet we want to understand these persons in their worlds in order to discover something about human life and culture, about religion and about ourselves; we would not be doing this work unless we believed that we would learn something essential about questions and problems that press themselves upon us with great urgency. How is any of this possible? How is it possible given legitimate concerns about the political implications of studying other cultures, our disturbing awareness of the limits of Western rationalities for understanding (let alone assessing) other ways of construing the world, or simply given the formidable linguistic, historical, and existential difficulties of making one's way into a religious world that one does not share?

Critical scholarship on something called "religion" (as opposed either to theological reflection within a religious tradition or polemical commentary on religions, one's own or someone else's) first appeared in the early modern era in the West amid the ruins of the religious wars between Protestants and Catholics and just when Europeans were encountering the ancient religious cultures of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. The study of religion then developed through the ages of European colonialism and industrialism. Discourse about "religion" and "religions," in which the dilemmas, judgments, hatreds, and longings of modern Christian history were inevitably if unconsciously embedded—nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scholarship on "Hindu" ritual, for instance, echoed with anti-Catholic contempt for corporal religious idioms and revealed less about religious practices in south Asia than about internecine European hatreds—became one medium for construing the peoples dominated by European nations, at home (in factories, on slave plantations, in urban working-class enclaves) and abroad. Discourse about "religions" and "religion" was key to controlling and dominating these populations, just as religious practice and imagination were central to the way that the dominated themselves submitted to, contested, resisted, and reimagined their circumstances. So the history of the study of religion is also always a political history, just as the political and intellectual history of modernity is also always a religious history. The epistemologies, methods, and nomenclature of scholarship in religion are all implicated in this history.<sup>1</sup>

Within this political and historical frame, the academic study of religion has been organized around a distinct and identifiable set of moral judgments and values that are most often implicit and commonly evident more in convention and scholarly ethos than in precept. Theorizing about "religion" has proceeded in accordance with these embedded moral assumptions even as religious studies has increasingly claimed and vehemently insisted on its "scientific" status in the secular university. The usually

unacknowledged imperative of these values in the working life of the discipline has limited the range of human practices, needs, and responses that count as "religion." It is true that over the past twenty years in response to criticism from various quarters the discipline has intermittently made room for less socially tolerable forms of religious behavior within the scope of its inquiries. But the social and intellectual pressures against this are great and the odd inclusion of a anxiety-provoking ritual or vision has not fundamentally changed the meaning of "religion" in "religious studies." It is understandably preferable to write and think about people and movements that inspire us rather than those that repel us, that make us anxious, that violate cherished social mores, and that we want to see disappear. However understandable this may be, though, the question is how this hidden moral structure limits the study of religion.

Scholars of religion, moreover, are often requested by journalists, lawmakers, and fellow citizens to map the complex and frequently troubling landscape of contemporary religious practice and imagination in a way that makes normative distinctions among religious behaviors and that reassures people that despite the wildly profligate and varied nature of religions on the world stage today, only some are really religions, while other apparently religious expressions—such as the fury unleashed against the World Trade Center in 2001 in the name of Islam—represent perversions or distortions of "true" religion. A lot of public talk about "religion" in the media works to stir up terrible but also thrilling anxiety, which is not surprising in a country enthralled and titillated by movies and stories of gothic horrors, imaginative creations that rose up from the bloody soil of the violence between Protestants and Catholics in the founding age of American culture. These frissons of titillating anxiety in the media call forth the need—and create the occasion—for expressions of reassurance and authority.<sup>2</sup>

People want to be reassured that the men who flew their planes into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, were not representatives of "real" or "good" Islam, or that the Christians gunning down abortion doctors do not reveal anything about contemporary American Christianity, or that priests abusing the children in their care cannot have anything to do with Catholicism. Such concerns are understandable, and there are important distinctions to be made in all these cases. Islam is a rich and complicated religious culture now and in the past; in the fall of 2001 and since, many Americans were appropriately concerned that Muslim fellow citizens and visitors not be persecuted by baseless identification with the acts of terrorists. Evangelical Christians span the political spectrum and most of them abhor the vigilantism of the very radical religious Right. Some of the commentary on the clerical abuse scandal in the media and in the courts does draw on deep anti-Catholic roots to malign a faith

because of the actions of a few. How can we scholars of religion face the world today or our students, who are so troubled by that world, and not make such moral distinctions?

I am not here to argue for relativism, for scholarship that ignores or denies its perspectives or politics, or least of all for learning that does not address the haunting and urgent questions of our times, nor am I suggesting that "Islam," "evangelical Christianity," or "Catholicism" are each respectively one unified coherent entity. But the tools that scholars of religion use to make moral distinctions among different religious expressions were crafted over time in the charged political and intellectual circumstances within which the modern study of religion came to be, and before introducing or reintroducing moral questions into our approach to other people's religious worlds, before we draw the lines between the pathological and the healthy, the bad and the good, we need to excavate our hidden moral and political history. Otherwise, the distinctions that we make will merely be the reiteration of unacknowledged assumptions, prejudices, and implications in power.

Dennis Covington first entered the culture of snake handlers on assignment from the *Times* to cover the trial of a minister accused of attempting to kill his wife by forcing her hand into a box of poisonous snakes.<sup>3</sup> Drawn by a religious idiom that fused domains that others considered irreconcilable—heaven and earth, spirit and snake, above and below, vulnerability and control—and that generated experiences of tremendous visceral power, Covington stayed on. He came to see snake handling as a way for poor, displaced people in a ravaged land to contend with and to surmount, at least once and a while, with the snakes in their hands, the violence and danger that bore down on them in their everyday lives. Covington vividly describes local life and religious practice, and he does not stay aloof from the people he writes about (although some scholars working in the same area and many of the people with whom Covington spoke about their practices later challenged his descriptions and interpretations). He smells the "sweet savor" of the Holy Spirit moving in the room when the snakes are taken out of their boxes—a smell like "warm bread and apples" discernible just beneath the reptile fug—and finally he takes up serpents too. Until the last night of the time he spent with the snake handlers, Covington offers a worthy model for an engaged, interpersonal, participatory religious study.

But on this last evening, at the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ in Kingston, Georgia, Covington is appalled when his photographer, a young woman well known by then to the handlers, is verbally assaulted—by a minister Covington had considered his spiritual father—for what this minister and others in the congregation saw as her usurpation of the place

assigned to men in church by Holy Scripture. Covington rises to witness against this denial of spiritual equality to women, but his mentor silences him. Then another preacher, the legendary figure Punkin' Brown, who was known among other things for wiping his sweat away with rattlesnakes bunched in his hand like a handkerchief, reached into the serpent box, pulled out a "big yellow-phase timber rattler, which he slung across his shoulders like a rope." As he does so, Punkin' Brown makes a sound that Covington records as "haaagh," an explosive, angry grunt, and as he bears down into his nasty, woman-hating sermon, the preacher uses this sound to set the cadence of his attack and to underscore his rage. Covington makes sure we hear this. "Haaagh" appears ten times on a single page—and it is thus—"haaagh!"—that he reestablishes the border between himself and the handlers that he had up until then so courageously been tearing down.

Covington signals and solidifies his new position vis-à-vis the handlers with a change in rhetoric. Before this evening in Kingston he had seen an eerie, otherworldly beauty in the moans and movements of the handlers. His descriptions of women taking up serpents, sobbing and trembling as they drew bundles of snakes close to themselves in religious "ecstasy," in particular are charged with a fierce (and unacknowledged) erotic intensity. But now he gives us Punkin' Brown, a vile, primitive force, "strutting" about the sanctuary with the big snake across his shoulders, his body contorted, his face flushed with blood and hate. The evangelist brushes his lips with the serpent and wipes his face with it and always there is the brutal "haaagh!" like "steam escaping from an *underground vent*" (I have added this emphasis). Punkin' Brown has become a nightmare figure, a subterranean creature, a snake himself.<sup>4</sup>

Covington believes that he was saved at the last minute from descending into such strangeness himself. He tells us he was all set to give up his work at the newspaper, stock his car trunk with snakes, and head out across the land as an itinerant, snake-handling evangelist. But the "haaagh!" brought him to his senses and restored his world to him. This appears to be the existential impulse behind the abrupt change in voice—to shield himself from otherness and to impose closure on a two-year experience that threatened in the end to penetrate the boundaries of his own subjectivity. The description of Punkin' Brown—or rather, the construction of "Punkin' Brown" not the man but the character in this drama of Covington's imagination—is a barrier enacted in the language of the text against the compulsive attraction of otherness. "Punkin' Brown" makes the world safe again for Covington and his readers. Protected now against this alien—who would ever confuse the author or oneself with this wild creature, one's own fantasies, needs, and hopes with his?—Covington can find Punkin' Brown ridiculous, "grotesque and funny looking,

with his shirttail out and a big rattlesnake draped over his shoulder." His description of "Punkin' Brown" is humiliating. The work of rendering Punkin' Brown into "Punkin' Brown" first secures the identity of the observer as safely separate from the other and then establishes the observer's superiority.<sup>5</sup>

Before moving on I want to say something about what I just called the compulsive attraction of otherness—not of difference that can be bridged but otherness that cannot and that offers only the alternatives of surrender or repulsion. Punkin' Brown died some years ago in church with a snake in his hands (his friends maintain it was not the bite that killed him but a heart weakened by the venom of many prior snakebites). Brown appears to have been a compelling man. But the wider reality here is that Americans have long been deeply fascinated by such powerfully complex religious figures, who blur gender or racial categories, for example, or do forbidden and dangerous things with their bodies or with others' bodies. Brown and his fellow snake-handling Christians were the subject of several television show and documentaries, of many research projects, and tourists came from around the county to watch them in action. Brown believed that it was God present before him that caused him to pick up snakes at meetings; he embodied, in other words, the enduring power of sacred presence in the modern world and in modern persons' imaginations and memories, from which presence is disallowed. Americans want to be protected from these religious actors, but at the same time they want access to some of their power, an unstable mix of desire and prohibition.

Having turned Punkin' Brown into a snake, Covington makes another move. At stake that night in Georgia, he maintains on the closing page of the book (so that the handlers will not have the opportunity to say anything further for themselves), was not simply the role of women in the church. Nor was it the rightness of taking up serpents, even though this is how Punkin' Brown understood the conflict. If the Bible is wrong about women, the preacher believed, then it is wrong about the Christian's invulnerability from poisonous snakes too, so that we who take up such serpents will die, and so will our beloved family members. ("This wasn't a *test of faith*," a Tennessee minister commented on Punkin' Brown's death, "this *is* our faith.") Rather, according to Covington, at issue that night in Georgia was "the nature of God." Punkin' Brown's God, Covington reassures himself and his readers, is not, cannot be, my, our God. This is the final, and most damning, step in the rendering of Punkin' Brown as radical other: he has been cast out of the shared domain of the sacred.<sup>6</sup>

What has happened here? How could a writer who managed to bring the alien world of snake handlers so close end by repositioning them at the margins of culture? Covington has inscribed an existential circle, taking a long detour to reestablish the prejudices against snake handlers many readers started out with, alongside whatever fascination drew them to the work as well. I want to explore how this happens, how the religious figure that confounds and challenges us with his or her difference is silenced and securely relegated to otherness, and then I want to propose another way of approaching religions.

It seems to be virtually impossible to study religion without attempting to distinguish between its good and bad expressions, without working to establish both a normative hierarchy of religious idioms (ascending from negative to positive, "primitive" to high, local to universal, infantile to mature, among other value-laden dichotomies familiar to the field) and a methodological justification for it. These resilient impulses take on special significance in light of the well-known inability of the field to agree on what religion is: we may not know what religion is but at least we can say with certainty what bad religion is or what religion surely is not. The mother of all religious dichotomies—us/them—has regularly been constituted as a moral distinction—good/bad religion.<sup>7</sup>

One of the main sources or contexts for the development of this moralizing imperative in the study of religion had to do with the way that the nascent discipline of religious studies was situated in American higher education as this was taking modern shape in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The academic study of religion in the United States developed within a university culture struggling with the conflicting claims of Christian authority (widely accepted in the culture) and secular learning. Christians did not speak with a single voice in the United States and so whatever compromises were sought in response to this intellectual and cultural tension had to be acceptable within the broader social context of American denominational and theological diversity, to Calvinists, Arminianists, Quakers, Spiritualists, Christian Scientists, and so on. The solution to the dilemma from the early Republic until the years after the Second World War, according to a distinguished historian of religion in American higher education, was "morally uplifting undergraduate teaching," on the one hand, and voluntary, extracurricular religious activities on the margins of academic life, on the other, in order to satisfy the concerns of Christians inside and outside the academy. Morally uplifting undergraduate teaching: *ethics* came to stand for Christianity in American university culture but ethics defined in a broad, universal, nondogmatic, nonsectarian, and nondenominational way designed to appeal to a broad clientele. A modern and liberal creed, what the historian just cited acidly

but justly calls "pious nonsectarianism," became the official religious culture of the American academy.<sup>8</sup>

This was a pragmatic position too: the challenge of the educational marketplace in which colleges and universities competed was to attract students from many different denominations because not even church-affiliated schools could survive on enrollments from a single church. But the emphasis on moral learning of a sort that all Protestant Americans could have access to as the crown of their education was also congruent with the understanding among American educators of the role of the academy in the turbulent and pluralist democracy the United States was proving itself to be. The rationale for building colleges in the early Republic was explicitly understood as civilizing the population, taming it and creating out of its diversity a common culture of shared values and behaviors. This aspiration persisted down to the Progressives and John Dewey at the start of the twentieth century and it remains alive among educational theorists today and among defenders of religious studies departments in secular settings. "Civilized" has always included in American nomenclature particular forms of acceptable religious belief, practice, and emotion. What counted as civilized religion has varied somewhat over time, in different regions of the country, and according to changing economic fates associated with practitioners of particular religious ways, but not that much. The nation with the soul of a counting house would make its universities into Sunday schools of moral and social values and of appropriate and tolerable Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

This ethos further coincided with broader trends in the reorientation of academic culture in the nineteenth century, in particular the insistence on critical research as the mainstay of learning, the professionalization of the professoriate, and the secularization of methodology. Already in the early Republic, academic leaders influenced by Scottish Common Sense philosophy asserted that science, morality, and "true religion" were all allied. American evangelicals, whose own religion did not resemble this, went along with the notion of a broad intellectual alliance between tradition and modern learning secure in their own cultural authority. This would change later, particularly as the social and natural sciences came to pose an increasingly serious threat to Christians, subjecting the Bible and Christian history to the requirements and procedures of critical scholarship.

Many of the progressive social scientists at the turn of the twentieth century who played important roles in shaping the contemporary university world in the United States were children of orthodox Christian households. They rejected the faith of their families in favor of a scientific approach to social and psychological knowledge that was nevertheless deeply and passionately informed by Protestant values. These intellectuals and scholars replicated in their careers the development of the American

academy from Protestantism to secular science. But while liberal religious concerns informed the scholarship and pedagogy of this group of explicitly post-Christian Christian academics, those concerns had no effect on the commitment among these men and women to the university as a place of secular, critical, scientific learning. "After a century of resistance from more traditional Christians," writes historian George Marsden, "the dominant educational ideals were defined by a synthesis of Enlightenment ideals and an enlightened Christianity, or religion of humanity." Outside the gates of the academy, meanwhile, increasingly alienated fundamentalist Christians waged a campaign to restore what they understood to be the primary purpose of education at all levels—"to learn the wisdom of the elders" in Marsden's formulation of their position—in direct opposition to modernists who "gave their ultimate intellectual allegiance to the scientific method as the essence of true education." A liberal and enlightened civic Protestantism became the essential buffer within the academy against the ever more intransigent fundamentalists outside it.<sup>10</sup>

It was in this intellectual environment that the academic study of religion first appeared in the United States. Certain key issues had already been settled in the wider academic culture, such as the authority of the scientific method and the primacy of critical research. The new discipline would have to meet these standards and comport itself by these rules if it wanted to be a player in the modern academy. Moreover, the distinction between a "Christianity" amenable to the aims of modern learning and "sectarianism" hostile to them had by now been embedded in academic culture in its confrontation with fundamentalism. The entire curriculum was understood by liberal Christian educational leaders to be morally uplifting, oriented to the shaping of human spiritual and moral development. Students would emerge from the American university knowledgeable in the sciences and morally formed as virtuous persons and good citizens.

The impact of these converging forces on critical scholarship in religion can be seen in University of Chicago founder William Rainey Harper's rationale for including the study of religion in the curriculum of a major research university. According to Marsden,

Harper shared with many of his contemporaries enthusiasm about the powers of "scientific study" to settle longstanding human debates in all areas. He accordingly justified the inclusion of the Bible and other distinctly religious subjects in the broadening university curriculum on the grounds that they could now be studied scientifically. There were "laws of religious life" just as there were laws of health and physical life. Yet "men and women of the highest intelligence in matters of life and thought are discovered to be cultivating a religious life far below the plane of their intellectual life." Advances in the

scientific study of religion, not only in biblical studies, but notably also in the psychology of religion, now made possible a scientific approach to this part of life as much as any other.

The true religion long established within American academic culture—what another historian calls a domesticated Christianity tailored “for use in public life”—now became the “religion” studied in the academy.<sup>11</sup>

It was inconceivable that “religion” would be anything but good religion in this social and intellectual setting, “good” meaning acceptable in belief and practice to this domesticated modern civic Protestantism. Proponents of the academic study of religion claimed a place in university culture by asserting that the study of “religion”—meaning the denominationally neutral version of Christianity recast as an ethical system—was good and even necessary for American democracy. Outside the walls of the academy, the winds of religious “madness” howled (in the view of those inside)—fire-baptized people, ghost dancers, frenzied preachers and gullible masses, Mormons and Roman Catholics. “Religion” as it took shape in the academy was explicitly imagined in relation to these others and as a prophylactic against them.

Fear was central to the academic installation of religious studies. Religious difference overlapped with ethnic and racial otherness, and this combination produced and fed upon the pervasive and characteristically American idea that dangers to the Republic were germinating in the religious practices of dark-skinned or alien peoples congregated in areas beyond the oversight of the Christian middle class. Religious paranoia has been as deep in the American grain as political paranoia, deeper even because it came first; religious paranoia always shadows times of political fear. Early American scholars of religion, searching diligently for scientific laws of religious behavior, explicitly committed themselves to the project of social order. “I have undertaken not simply to discriminate spurious and genuine revivals,” sociologist of religion Frederick Davenport told readers of his highly influential survey of the contemporary religious landscape in the United States in 1905, “but to show that in genuine revivals themselves there are primitive traits which need elimination or modification in the interest of religious and social progress.”<sup>12</sup>

“Primitive” is an important word here. One way that Davenport and other scholars of religion contributed to social order was by constructing and authorizing scales of religious practice and imagination that went from “primitive” to modern—where modern or mature meant the domesticated Protestantism tolerable within the academy—and mandating movement up the developmental ladder as prerequisite for modern life. (Such culturally obtuse schemas attained substantial psychological authority later in the century in models of religious “faith development.”)

American psychologists of religion created categories and terms to pathologize unacceptable forms of religious behavior and emotion—a scientific nomenclature of containment—and countered bad religious expressions with a normative account that designated as “religion” that component of human personality that moved it toward emotional, spiritual, and existential maturity, unity, success, and happiness. Sociologists of religion correlated unacceptable religious behaviors with certain environments and “types” of people—immigrants, migrants, African Americans, women, children, poor rural folk. “Religion,” on the other hand, was socially integrative. These sociologists emphasized “religion’s” role as the pivot of social stability and solidarity and relegated to categories other than “religion” any phenomenon that did not serve this consensual function. Normative terms were presented as analytical categories, and their implicit moral and cultural assumptions went unchallenged. Such was the authority of “real” or “good” or “true” religion in the academy.

All this had dreadful social consequences when it converged with broader racist discourse in the world outside the academy. It contributed to destructive federal policies toward Native Americans. Northerners who wanted to temporize about (or even to justify) the grim realities of lynching used sociological accounts of African American popular religious culture, defined in racist terms, as mitigating explanation. Teaching domesticated Protestantism as “religion” would protect American democracy and inoculate the young against the contagion of American religious imaginings, which scholarship would contain and enclose by nomenclature and analysis. No wonder religious practitioners often do not recognize what passes for “religion” in religious studies.

The point here is not simply that the normative account of real religion that took shape within the academy or at the anxious intersection of the academy with the extravagance of American religious life excluded from the study of religion ugly, violent, or troublesome matters (although it certainly does this). Rather the entire notion of “religion” had been carefully demarcated to preserve it from ambivalence and ambiguity, from anything not in accordance with certain sanctioned notions of self and society. Religion came to be gridded along a graph of diametric opposites, and the possibility that religion can transgress these various dualities, that it does its cultural, psychological, and political work precisely by disregarding boundaries between one self and another, or between past, present, and future, or between the natural and the supernatural, is disallowed.

So what is real religion?

There is a nomenclature problem here. As I have noted, the distinction between “religion” and “spirituality” is an important one in contemporary American popular culture. *Religion* in this context—“I’m spiritual



but not religious," as even the most religious Americans characterize themselves today—is a bad word. On the other hand, I cannot really call the kind of religious practice and posture that has normative status in this culture "spirituality," a relatively recent term, because it carries too many connotations of its own. So I will retain the word *religion* but qualify it as "good religion" or "true religion." Readers can transpose "true religion" to "spirituality" if they wish, on the understanding that "spirituality" is a term crafted in this culture to designate the opposite of "bad religion." It is a disciplinary word, built out of and for exclusion.

True religion, then, is epistemologically and ethically singular. It is rational, respectful of persons, noncoercive, mature, nonanthropomorphic in its higher forms, mystical (as opposed to ritualistic), unmediated and agreeable to democracy (no hierarchy in gilded robes and fancy hats), monotheistic (no angels, saints, demons, ancestors), emotionally controlled, a reality of mind and spirit not body and matter. It is concerned with ideal essences not actual things, and especially not about presences in things. Students of mine over the past twenty years in classrooms in New York City, Indiana, and Massachusetts have unfailingly refused to acknowledge as "religious" the practice of putting holy water into an automobile's transmission (as pilgrims to a Bronx Lourdes shrine commonly do). Whatever this is, it is not "good religion." All the complex dynamism of religion is thus stripped away, its boundary-blurring and border-crossing propensities eliminated. Not surprisingly, there is only one methodology and one epistemology for studying this "religion," critical, analytical, and "objective" (as opposed to "subjective," existentially engaged, or participatory).

In this way the discipline reflects the religious politics of the United States as well as the particular history of American higher education. The embedded, hidden others against whom the "religion" in religious studies is constituted are the religions on the American landscape that appeared so terrifying and un-American to the guardians of the culture—Mormonism, Catholicism, certain forms of radical Christian evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, among others. The discipline was literally constructed by means of the exclusion—in fact and in theory—of these other ways of living between heaven and earth, which were relegated to the world of sects, cults, fundamentalisms, popular piety, ritualism, magic, primitive religion, millennialism, anything but "religion."

The academic study of religion is not an American phenomenon, of course. American academics who study religion participate in an international network of scholars institutionalized in various sorts of academic arrangements, scholarly exchanges, and symposia. But in this broader context, too, liberal notions of religion allied to particular political

agendas came to be authoritative. Scholars shaped in liberal Christian traditions played important roles in the formative period of the modern development of the discipline in Europe and in Asia; a vision of "religion" that developed out of liberal and modernist Christianity acquired a normative status in the work of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars of comparative religion. Nineteenth-century scholars of south Asian religions, for example, "invented what might be called a Euro-Buddhist canon," according to anthropologist H. L. Seneviratne, "by portraying a rationalized and sanitized Buddhism in keeping with the imperatives of the sociology of their own intellectual life."<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, this Christianity was seen as the telos of the evolution of world religions. At the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 an authoritative and hypostasized "Christianity"—identified by its superior moral teachings—was compared with other essentialized religious entities—"Islam," "Buddhism," and so on—to create a class of "world religions" identified by enlightened liberal and rational characteristics and to set Christianity up as the highest realization of global religious culture. The Columbian exposition performed this distinction spatially, by putting the world religions into massive buildings and everyone else on the Midway. While representatives of the former traded pieties, a carnival atmosphere took hold of the latter space, where religions marked as other were depicted in mock demonstrations of cannibalism and human sacrifice. As the colonial period came to a close, scholars proposed a broadly inclusive, universal religion of man as the goal of both the study and the practice of religions, aspiring to gather the world's many different traditions into a single, global narrative of the progressive revelation of the Christian God.<sup>14</sup>

Given the commitment within modern scholarship on religion to the evolutionary model—from primitive to modern, infantile to mature, religions—many practitioners insisted that the academic study of religion itself make a positive contribution to human culture and to the betterment of life on earth, to facilitate relations across cultures and to deepen human tolerance. This seemed particularly imperative after the Second World War, when many figures in the discipline held that academic study of religions had a role to play in the reconstruction of Western culture devastated by war and totalitarianism. A hard-core group, comprised mainly of European scholars, held to an "empiricist" vision of the field and insisted that the renewed emphasis on the moral responsibility of professors of religious studies represented the intrusion of theology and normative ethics into the discipline, but their voices were overwhelmed by the ameliorative imperative. Both in content and method the academic study of religion has been preoccupied with the study and defense of "good" religion for a long time.<sup>15</sup>



By the time I arrived as an undergraduate at a small New England college with an excellent religion department this combination of a liberal Protestant understanding of what religion is and a sense of the moral responsibility of the field had become institutionalized in the curriculum and heightened by the increasingly urgent debate over the war in Southeast Asia. Religion departments around the country, with some exceptions, taught Christian and Jewish scriptures, theology or the philosophy of religion, Christian and philosophical ethics, and some religious history; the dominant ethos was Protestant; other religions when they were taught at all were taught precisely as such—as *other* religions (this usually included Catholicism and Judaism). What was meant and valued by “religion,” in other words, was exactly the domesticated liberal Protestantism that had been pressed deep into religious scholarship at the turn of the century. (“Christianity” remains the default religion in the discipline of religious studies today despite the enormous development of scholarship on Asian religions in the last three decades. *Scriptures*, for instance, unless otherwise specified refers to the texts important to Christians.) My professors were all educated at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where they learned theology from Paul Tillich and ethics from Reinhold Niebuhr, the two figures whom I thus came to see as the alpha and the omega of the study of religion (an unusual conclusion for an Italian American Catholic from the Bronx but not one that seemed odd at the time).

Eric J. Sharpe, a historian of the study of religion, points out that “scholars trained in one or other liberal religious tradition [came] to occupy a prominent position in the newer religious studies enterprise since the early 1970s,” a reflection of broader cultural trends in the 1960s. The discipline is far more varied and complex today, but it is still oriented, as Sam Gill, a prominent scholar of Native American religions has lamented, toward “the broadly held essentialist view of religion—that is, that religion is ‘the sacred’ or ‘ultimate concern’ and that attributes of the ‘sacred’ and ‘ultimate concern’ are goodness, purity, and unity.” To study religion from this approach, Gill writes, “means to discern and appreciate these desirable qualities in any culture.” Departments of religious studies are really thus departments of the study of desirable religions. The enduring confusion today between the fact of the “plurality” of different religions in the United States and in the world (an empirical observation) and the notion of “pluralism” (a theological position that encourages the search for common ground that different religions may share or on which they might meet) is an example of how the normative vision of a certain kind of modern liberal Protestantism was embedded in the analytical tools of religious studies and represents itself as theory.<sup>16</sup>

The work of the discipline in constituting itself this way has had grave social consequences beyond the academy. By inscribing a boundary between good and bad religions at the very foundation of the field, religious studies enacts an important cultural discipline. There is no end to human religious creativity (a comment that has nothing to do with whether this is a positive thing or not). One would have to look to the staggering varieties and complexities of what humans have made of sexuality to find another site of such explosive and inventive activity. Yet it has been the impulse of religious studies since its inception to impose closure and discipline on religion, to control and contain this complexity. When the Branch Davidian compound was incinerated at Waco, Texas, in April 1993, much was made of the failure of the government and of federal law enforcement officials to recognize the religious character of leader David Koresh’s movement. It was not as widely noted that the government’s failure paralleled the limitations of religious studies, which has long offered an authoritative map of religious experience that excluded such a “marginal” group.

Any approach to religion that foregrounds ethical issues as these are now embedded in the discipline obstructs our understanding of religious idioms because religion at its root has nothing to do with morality. Religion does not make the world better to live in (although some forms of religious practice might); religion does not necessarily conform to the creedal formulations and doctrinal limits developed by cultured and circumspect theologians, church leaders, or ethicists; religion does not unambiguously orient people toward social justice. Particular religious idioms can do all of these things. The religiously motivated civil rights movement is a good example of a social impulse rooted in an evangelical faith and dedicated to a more decent life for men and women. But however much we may love this movement and however much we may prefer to teach it (as opposed to the “cultic” faith of Jonestown or the “magical” beliefs of “popular” religion) this is not the paradigm for religion, nor is it the expression of religion at some idealized best. There is a quality to the religious imagination that blurs distinctions, obliterates boundaries—especially the boundaries we have so long and so carefully erected within the discipline—and this can, and often does, contribute to social and domestic violence, not peace. Religion is often enough cruel and dangerous, and the same impulses that result in a special kind of compassion also lead to destruction, often among the same people at the same time. Theories of religion have largely served as a protection against such truths about religion.

It is the challenge of the discipline of religious studies not to stop at the border of human practices done in the name of the gods that we scholars find disturbing, dangerous, or even morally repugnant, but rather to enter

into the otherness of religious practices in search of an understanding of their human ground. Practitioners must find a way of honoring their own moral and political values while not masking the common humanity that both researcher and religious adept share—share with a man Punkin' Brown, for instance, who was, after all, as his friend pointed out, "just a man." The point of engaging other religious worlds should not be to reassure ourselves and our readers that we are not them, that Punkin' Brown and I belong to different species.

But in attempting such a morally and existentially demanding engagement with the men and women they study, practitioners of religious studies will run into a problem. Although the discipline authorizes an implicit account, freighted with moral value, of what religion is, religious studies in its quest for academic legitimacy has also explicitly insisted that scholars adhere to canons of critical and analytical scholarship as defined by the secular academy. Scholars of religion must maintain a remove that is understood to be the necessary precondition for analysis and interpretation. (This is why there is such trepidation in the discipline about studying one's own tradition.) Scholars of religion are trained to keep their lives out of their research; not to do so exposes them to charges of subjectivism, of writing autobiographically (which is a critical comment!), journalistically, or theologically.

Religious studies acquired its contemporary shape in the American academy after the Second World War in explicit distinction from—and rejection of—seminaries and schools of theology. The severity of the injunction against theology, and more broadly against the moral and religious presence of the scholar in the conduct or presentation of his or her research (other than to articulate the discipline's domesticated Protestant moral assumptions), reflects this origin. Theology is the reflection upon the thought and practice of a religious tradition by its adherents; religious studies is an outsider's discipline by definition, aspiring to critical knowledge through a strategy of distance. But of course this paradigm is under attack now, from several different quarters.

Among the most severe contemporary critics of religious studies are evangelical Christian academics of various denominational affiliations who have felt that the hegemony of the liberal definition of religion and the dominance of liberal approaches to research have precluded their own full participation in the discipline or in the wider university culture. Evangelical perspectives have survived in the liberal university, according to these critics, only to the extent that evangelicalism denies its own distinctiveness, severs its connections to the believing community, and becomes a branch of cultural studies. Could a Christian biologist, grounded in a particular faith community and certain of the truth of Scripture, conduct

her research according to her faith? Would such an alternative be allowed in the academy, which is otherwise so open by its own account of itself to the perspectives of the marginalized, oppressed, and voiceless? The liberal secular university, in the view of these evangelical critics, is the site of manifold prohibitions masquerading as permissions. Liberal piety opens the space for anything to be studied critically as long as the critical perspective brought into play is not religiously particular, and thus theology, which is always particularist, has been exiled by academic liberalism.

Religious studies is an egregious expression of this prohibitive environment since it sets out to study matters of greatest concern to others from a nonconfessional point of view—ostensibly demanding, indeed, the suppression of the researcher's own values in the process. Could a Christian scholar of religion frame her classes by what she understood to be the authoritative witness of her church? But how does one assess one's understandings of Christian history or doctrine apart from the guidance of tradition as articulated in a believing community? Some have even seen religious studies as corrosive of religious practice generally on college campuses: writing as an evangelical and neoconservative critic of the discipline, D.G. Hart notes that "religious studies reflects the very same intolerance of religious points of view or normative religious judgments that characterizes the university's culture of disbelief," with the result that "the academic study of religion is a failure when it comes to making the university a more hospitable place for religion."<sup>17</sup>

Christian theologian Stanley Hauerwas has also written harshly of departments of religious studies as being "comprised of people who are willing to study a religion on the condition that it is either dead or that they can teach it in such a way as to kill it. The last thing they would want to acknowledge is that they might actually practice what they teach, because such an acknowledgement might suggest that they are less than objective." Religious studies departments might introduce students to Thomas Aquinas or Karl Barth, but these programs would never hire such intellectually rigorous but religiously committed thinkers for their own faculties. The discipline is literally founded on the distortion of its very subject, by this account, or worse yet on an act of academic—and personal—bad faith. It demands the intellectual and religious deformation of scholars who believe as the condition for admission to the guild. For God's sake, Hart concludes his critique of religious studies, do away with it: "by excluding religion as a field of academic study, the university may be paying religion great respect."<sup>18</sup>

These Christian critics now sense that the moment is right for a challenge: insurgent groups of younger conservative Christian scholars, many of them trained and credentialed in departments of religious studies at secular universities, have set out to undermine the authority of older,

modernist, liberal scholars and perspectives in biblical studies, philosophy of religion, theology, and even religious history. The notion of a critical and unaffiliated study of religion has come to seem almost fusty to some, a vestige of modernist confidence long ago chastened by postmodernism, and indeed, ironically, or perversely (depending on one's politics), the Christian critique of the liberal, secular university echoes themes of radical critics of modernity. Scholar of education Warren A. Nord, for instance, has suggested that what multiculturalism means is that education "should give voice to various subcultures—religious subcultures included—which currently have little say in the world of intellectual and educational elites." George Marsden argues in a polemical "Concluding Unscientific Postscript" to his history of the secularization of learning in American higher education that "the widespread current critiques of scientific objectivity provide a context for reconsidering the near exclusion of religious perspectives from the academic life of American universities of Protestant heritage." Once one admits that "everyone's intellectual inquiry takes place in a framework of communities that shape prior commitments," there is little reason for excluding explicitly religious claims from the teaching and research that take place in the academy. Confessional pedagogy slips its nose into the academic tent through the opening created by postmodernism.<sup>19</sup>

An alternative account of contemporary university culture maintains that it is Christianity in any form, modern or postmodern, that stands as an obstacle for intellectual work, generally and particularly in the study of religion. Marsden claims that contemporary university culture is anti-Christian, and surely anyone who has spent any time in this world must agree that there is a measure of truth in this charge. Some of this is simply prejudice; some of it is a reaction against the long Christian domination of thinking about other religions in the world; some of it is a way for university intellectuals to draw an unmistakable boundary for themselves—and for their students—between the culture of learning they value and a surrounding society that can be anti-intellectual on explicitly Christian grounds. (I certainly came to understand that providing my students with an environment in which they were free to think critically about religion came as a necessary antidote to their teenage religious environments in which such open inquiry was not welcome. It would have been dreadful for these students to have come into a religious studies classroom only to discover the same constraints on their thinking they were encountering in their churches.)

But for some the critique of Christianity is linked with a broader political and epistemological agenda and is meant to challenge the hegemony of Western ways of knowing and living. Articulated by scholars who have

worked in cultures that endured the burden of Christian authority under colonial regimes, this perspective on Christianity is politically charged. Christianity is understood to have been indispensable to Western imperialism, providing its cultural legitimacy, moral confidence, and epistemological grounding while spiritually underwriting the military and economic campaigns of the Western powers. Intellectuals, including scholars of religion, crafted the philosophical framework that constituted native populations as empty of culture and therefore not only open to but actually requiring Western conquest and domination for their own good. Representations of native cultures as either primitive, proto-Christian, or crypto-Christian were the intellectuals' contribution to imperialism.

The postcolonial world since the 1950s has exposed the cruelty of Western intellectual authority, unmasking practices of domination and exploitation enclosed within the culture of enlightened reason and liberal tolerance. Intellectuals in Asia, Africa, and South America have challenged the canons of Western culture. The task for American university intellectuals now, some say, is to rethink American culture from the perspective of the once-dominated other and from alternative and once-oppressed vantage points, a process of defamiliarizing and decentering as the first step to reinterpretation. Globalism as an economic, demographic, and political reality demands an intellectual reorientation, a reimagining of the place of the United States in world culture. Western styles of knowledge, which typically give priority to detachment over engagement, textuality over vocality, mind over body, are to be exposed to radically different ways of understanding and inhabiting reality.

In the context of this broader criticism of Western knowing and given the history of religious studies' implication in Western power at home and abroad, the challenge now, say scholars of religion working from this political vantage point, is to become radically aware of the discipline's implicit Western and Christian biases, of the hidden, normative Christianity within the basic methodologies and philosophical orientations of religious studies, and to expunge them. Just as postcolonial intellectual culture calls into question central tenets of Western thought, so a new kind of moral inquiry must be open to construals of the "ethical" that are profoundly at variance with Christian ideals and formulations.

One example of what this sort of ethical inquiry would look like is Karen McCarthy Brown's now-classic discussion of Haitian vodou morality in *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. Unlike the radical distinction made within Christianity between absolute good and absolute evil, a boundary authorized and presided over by a singular deity and an authoritative clergy equipped with the varied tools of moral discipline, Brown maintains that vodou asserts multiplicity, diversity, and contradiction. Vodou notions of subjectivity understand the self to be multifarious,

the site of conflicting energies, capacities, and possibilities without the Christian insistence on consistency in self-presentation. "A moral person, in Vodou," writes Brown, is one who lives "in tune with his or her character, a character defined by the spirits said to love that person." Such moral "flexibility," she adds, "is provided in the midst of moral dilemmas by the support these favorite spirits offer to different and sometimes contradictory values."<sup>20</sup>

Vodou locates fault not inside persons (which by rendering them evil exposes them to harsh moral proselytism if not persecution or destruction for their own good) but in relationships between persons in the social field. As a healing medium, vodou seeks to dissolve whatever is holding people in hostile and antagonistic relations. It may be quite extreme in this work of unblocking, heating up the contradictions, conflicts, and inconsistencies within a person or in the social setting—disorientingly, shockingly at times—in order to create a liberating and revealing excitement. In Brown's account, vodou is the paradigmatic idiom by which a poor, politically oppressed, economically marginalized people live their lives with grace, dignity, and compassion in the spaces between the absolutes composed by intellectuals of more politically powerful and materially comfortable regimes.

Brown and other scholars who have spent personally and intellectually formative years in other cultures call us to juxtapose the language of American reality with the reality of those other worlds. They propose to bring the religious, and moral vision of the colonized into creative tension with the moral sensibility and religious idioms of the colonizer. The goal is a creole scholarship that draws from the epistemological, aesthetic, religious and moral idioms of different cultures to decenter and rethink the idioms of the West. Christianity itself—as well as the normative, dualistic, crypto-Christian categories of religious studies—looks very different when viewed from Mama Lola's living room in Brooklyn or her ancestral home in Haiti.

It may appear that there is little common ground between the evangelical and the postcolonial critiques of the liberal paradigm for studying religion, but surprisingly and perhaps ironically there are significant convergences. Proponents of both perspectives propose that the universalistic ambitions of Western enlightened rationality give way to local orientations: there is no essential, singular truth, only situated truths. Both understand the scholar herself to be situated at a particular cultural location that fundamentally shapes her vision, and both place passion and commitment at the center of research methodology and pedagogy. Stanley Hauerwas has said that the confessional teacher "witnesses" in the classroom, makes his or her faith present and invites students into a dialogue about

it, holds it up as a lens for examining and challenging the dominant arrangements of culture. Critical anthropologists also propose a radical critique of Western culture as an appropriate classroom stance. They draw on the experiences of people in distant places, and especially their often-disastrous encounters with Christianity, to frame students' examinations of Western religions and their assessments of the claims of Western reason. Conversion—to Christianity or to other religions—is not necessarily the explicit goal of either evangelical or postcolonial pedagogies, but there is a heightened existential edge to this kind of teaching as compared with the older critical liberal model, so that students may find themselves attracted to the religious worlds represented in both of these classrooms. The evangelical and the political critiques challenge the authority of liberal Protestantism in the discipline of religious studies and demand that scholars in the field transgress, in method and in the subjects they choose, the authoritative boundaries of religious studies.

I find both critiques compelling and welcome the challenge each represents to the way we have gone about the study of religion in the United States. But I am not sure that either one ultimately avoids the pitfall to which Covington succumbed in reestablishing his barrier against Punkin' Brown. Evangelical and postcolonial scholars themselves rely on the constitution of others in doing their work—the Christian other, in the case of postcolonial critics (for whom non-Western religions are valued in part as expressions of not-Christianity, a perspective that often informs how these religions are described and interpreted), and for evangelicals, either the liberal, secular other or, just as likely, ways of being Christian other than those espoused by evangelicals. The postmodern Christian scholar in the postliberal university would presumably assess Punkin' Brown's Christianity from the perspective of a distinct set of Christian beliefs and perspectives, much as Covington himself did in his own criticism of the snake handler. (Covington's argument at the end is a liberal Christian theological one about God and human equality.) Encountering such a figure would be a ripe moment for normative theological engagement and criticism, the explication of the scholar's own faith through a dialectical interplay between his or her religious world and the religious world of the other. Covington secured the boundary between himself and Punkin' Brown by evoking God as his witness, explicitly placing himself in a debate within the Christian community over the "nature of God," in his words, and the role of women in the church and society. The confessional professor too might witness to her own faith by affirming that in her reading of Scripture, God sanctions the participation of women in religious life. She might say that the God of the handlers is not the God of the New Testament, as indeed Covington did say. How much closer does

this get us to understanding the world of the snake handlers, which is the goal of scholarship in religion?

I find it even harder to imagine what postcolonial professors might make of Punkin' Brown given the resolutely anti-Christian animus of so many of them. His rage against women and his apparent determination to dominate them (religiously and probably otherwise too—although this is not the picture that emerges in other studies of the man) disclose what many consider to be the inherent social aggressiveness of Christianity. A cultural critic might help us understand Punkin' Brown's impulse to dominate in global and domestic perspectives. He or she might shift the focus of analysis away from the nature of God to the sorts of social conditions that shaped Punkin' Brown. But the internal power of the man's religious imagination, his relationship with Jesus crucified, and his deep desire to experience the real power and presence of the Spirit with the life-threatening snake in his hands—Brown's passionate love of God in the snakes—might be missed by observers tone-deaf to matters of faith and religious practice, especially to Christian faith and practice.

Punkin' Brown and others like him are just too valuable precisely *as others*, as the unassimilable and intolerable, to be easily surrendered. So long as the point of religious scholarship, even implicitly or unconsciously, is to seal the borders of our own worlds of meaning and morals, whatever these might be—liberal or conservative, Christian or not—against such others, it will be impossible to relinquish the “Punkin' Browns” constituted in the field or in the archives. The challenge facing the discipline today, however, is not to find new others, as both the evangelical and postcolonial approaches do, but to get beyond “otherizing” as its basic move.

There is another alternative to the liberal paradigm that guards more assiduously against the moralistic impulse to construct figures of otherness. This alternative—which I think of as a third way, between confessional or theological scholarship, on the one hand, and radically secular scholarship on the other—is characterized by a disciplined suspension of the impulse to locate the other (with all her or his discrepant moralities, ways of knowing, and religious impulses) securely in relation to one's own cosmos. It has no need to fortify the self in relation to the other; indeed, it is willing to make one's own self-conceptions vulnerable to the radically destabilizing possibilities of a genuine encounter with an unfamiliar way of life. This is an in-between orientation, located at the intersection of self and other, at the boundary between one's own moral universe and the moral world of the other. And it entails disciplining one's mind and heart to stay in this in-between place, in a posture of disciplined attentiveness, especially to difference.

This in-between ground upon which a researcher in this third way stands belongs neither to herself nor to the other but has come into being between them, precisely because of the meeting of the two. This is ground that would not have existed apart from the relationship between researcher and her subject. (Covington forgets that Punkin' Brown was responding to *him* that night; the preacher would not have given that sermon had Covington and his friends not entered his world in the way they did. Covington represents his own presence as a provocation that revealed the real nature of the snake handlers, the depths of their faith, but what it revealed was the snake handlers in relation to Covington.) On this ground, not owned by either party, each person experiences the taken-for-granted world as vulnerable, decontextualized, realigned. Ideally, after such an exchange, neither party is the same as when the exchange opened (which is exactly the problem with the evangelical and postcolonial approaches and with Covington: they wind up just where they started). Scholarship in the third way is transformative. Such a movement onto the ground in-between universes of meaning would not permit the kind of closure Covington imposes on Punkin' Brown and his world. It requires that the scholar of religion abandon the security offered by the discipline, by its implicit and explicit moral certainty as this is embedded in its theoretical apparatuses, and to proceed instead by risk, suspension, and engagement.

To illustrate what I have in mind here, I want to take an example, David Haberman's study of the Ban-Yatra pilgrimage in ancient and contemporary northern India, *Journey through the Twelve Forests: An Encounter with Krishna*.<sup>21</sup> Like Covington's, this is an intensely personal narrative. It recounts Haberman's deep existential involvement with the Hindu pilgrims he journeys with through Braj, as the pilgrimage area is called. Haberman never forgets who he is, and he is always mindful of the history of Western relations with India and of the implications of Western religious and philosophical preoccupations in mapping the landscape of “Hinduism.” A sophisticated theorist of postcolonial culture, he is aware that as a contemporary student of Hinduism he steps into and attempts to challenge a tradition of interpretation with its roots in the period of empire. A scholar of the third way remains resolutely aware of the history of religious scholarship in his or her area, conscious that the analytical terminology he or she works with (whatever it is) is formed and marked by this history.

Braj is dotted with sites central to narratives about Krishna—the grove he frolicked in with his consort, Radha, for example, and the prison cell where he was born. Believers claim that Braj is in some sense the body of the god: the landscape is so intimately connected to Krishna that it is he.

The god's body is thus uniquely present to the pilgrims during their arduous journey through Braj. This trope of physical presence becomes a central device of Haberman's work. Early in the journey Haberman begins to develop awful blisters on his tender feet, and for the rest of the pilgrimage he must contend with terrible pain and rely on the assistance of fellow pilgrims. Just as the god's body is overpresent in Braj, so is the ethnographer's in his experience and account of the pilgrimage, which as a result becomes a journey through the possibilities and limitations of corporality. On the levels of religious understanding and existential experience, pain is the pathway for Haberman into the intersection between worlds, the suspensive space where a new kind of understanding of other religions is possible.

Haberman could see that many of his fellow pilgrims were also in pain. But this did not prevent them from taking a deep sensual pleasure at sites commemorating Krishna's own pleasures, an incongruity that Haberman found confusing at first. How could these weary bodies stumbling into the groves of Krishna's delight experience joy and pleasure, and how could the anthropologist with his inflamed foot? But as he entered into this apparent disjuncture of pain and pleasure, deprivation and sensuality, distress and celebration, Haberman comes to see it as the dynamic of the pilgrimage. His confusion, disorientation, and pain become means of comprehension (as Clara could have told him). Haberman shows us what Covington might have done differently, at greater personal risk to himself and cultural disorientation to his readers, that night in Georgia. Covington might have used the distress and even revulsion occasioned in him by Punkin' Brown's performance as such a pivot of reflection. By suspending the need to guard himself against whatever fears and revelations Brown's performance evoked, Covington could have been led to discover the common source of both the violence and the beauty of this startling religious idiom. He might have reflected on the roots of Brown's anger; he might have explored the intersection between desire and rage as these swirled around each other in the snake handlers' world, or looked at the convergence of love and pain in the handlers' experience or on the intersection of the sacred and the obscene, and come to grips with his own attraction to snake handling. Instead, he turns away, and asserts a principled commitment to the spiritual equality of women. This commitment may be laudable in itself, but Covington does not see how invoking it where and when he does amounts to a refusal to engage his subject.

The key moment in Haberman's account for my purposes—his version of the Punkin' Brown encounter—comes when he finds himself standing on bleeding feet in a place called Charan Pahari, the "Mountain of the Foot," where Krishna is said to have left a footprint in a white stone that had been softened by his music. The stone is lovingly, regularly bathed by

the god's devout with water and smeared with red powder. Haberman's account of his visit to this spot begins with an acknowledgment of otherness. There is a quality to the site that causes him to step out of his role as pilgrim and to admit his place—and confusion—as observer: "Such claims [as that Krishna had stepped on this stone] are naturally met with some doubt on the part of the outsider." He moves still further out in the second half of this sentence: "especially considering the economic benefits gained by the attendants busily collecting money from the pilgrims." A moral distance has opened between him and the caretakers of the shrine. This is the "haaagh" experience: suspicion, detachment, and doubt overwhelm compassion, attention, and understanding.<sup>22</sup>

Haberman might have turned away at this moment in disgust at the venality of the shrine keepers and the gullibility of the devout, as other visitors to India have done. There are indeed good reasons to be suspicious of what goes on at a shrine, in India and elsewhere. Shrine priests do not scruple to take advantage of people in considerable emotional need and religious excitement. Moreover, as countless Western critics have pointed out whenever they have encountered such human practices, the money spent on feeding, dressing, and adoring the gods in this way might better be spent on people's health, clothing, or education. Religious discomfort in this way is transmuted into moral criticism through a posture of pragmatic superiority. Liberal scholars of religion have been as bemused by immigrant Catholics' devotion to the saints as by Hindus in this regard. So this could have been the boundary of Haberman's journey, the point at which he stopped at otherness and confirmed it, and many readers would have understood and even shared his moral concerns.

But he turns back to the experience of the people he is observing and forces himself—and his readers—to recognize that there are many worlds, many different ways of making and inhabiting reality. He writes, "upon observing several women bow down and touch their heads to this stone, come up with tears streaming down their faces, and hug each other crying, 'O Sister, O, Sister!' I began to think that questions [about the venality of the shrine keepers or the ontological reality of the stone's imprint] . . . were inappropriate." Since "reality is not set for human beings [and] multiple realities or worlds of meaning are available to us," moral judgment is rendered problematic. "Judgments of realities are difficult," Haberman continues, although not impossible or unnecessary, "because there is nowhere to stand that is not situated in a particular reality, which by its very nature regards other realities with suspicion."<sup>23</sup> The challenge then becomes to set one's own world, one's own particular reality, now understood as one world among many possible other worlds, in relation to this other reality and to learn how to view the two in relation to each other, moving back and forth between two alternative ways of organizing



and experiencing reality. The point is not to make the other world radically and irrevocably other, but to render one's own world other to oneself as prelude to a new understanding of the two worlds in relationship to one another.

Ironically, it is Haberman's constant awareness of his difference that permits him to enter so deeply into the intersection of the two worlds; indeed, there would be no intersection without awareness of difference, no in-betweenness. Covington portrayed himself initially as having passed over entirely to the culture of snake handling, but that apparent immersion ends up telling us less about either his own or Punkin' Brown's world than Haberman's intersectional strategy tells us about Braj. This is where the pleasure, excitement, and risk of religious studies are, its delights as well as its dangers. The space is dangerous because one cannot, after all, simply abandon one's deepest values or tolerate the intolerable, even though something awful and intolerable might make sense in someone else's world. It is delightful because, by staying in the place in between—indeed, prolonging one's stay there by refusing initial opportunities for closure—one comes to know something about the other and about oneself through relationship with the other. Haberman identifies this as an erotic methodology, borrowing from French psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan an understanding of desire as that which arises from lack and rejects closure. The erotic orientation to another's religion resists ending the tension provoked by the unexpected proximity of two diverse worlds. It is this delight in difference that sets religious studies apart from the more conventional orientations of liberal academics, evangelical theologians, and postcolonial critics alike.

Besides imagining himself as a snake-handling minister, there is one other way that Covington attempts to bring the world of the other closer, to himself and to his readers: through an appreciation of the physical beauty of Christian women with snakes in their hands. He invites us to gaze on these women holding snakes and find their spiritual passion beautiful. (This is good spiritual passion, Punkin' Brown's is bad spiritual passion, and Covington knows his readers will know the difference.) His account of Aline McGlockin in particular, the wife of one of Covington's closest friends in the community, emphasizes her haunting, lovely appearance in spiritual ecstasy; and, again, there is a sound. Covington records that Aline cries "akiii, akiii, akiii," as she experiences the spirit's presence, and he finds this unnerving and sexually interesting.

Covington offers us two sounds—"haaagh" and "akiii"—and two choices, the ethical and the aesthetic, one approach through judgment, the other through beauty. Haberman offers a third way, neither ethical nor aesthetic. He calls it erotic. Because I live so far from the delights of Krishna's groves, I will call it instead suspensive. Religious studies is not

a moralizing discipline; it exists in the suspension of the ethical, and it steadfastly refuses either to deny or to redeem the other. It is a moral discipline in its commitment to examining the variety of human experience and to making contact across boundaries—cultural, psychological, spiritual, existential. It is a moral discipline in its cultivation of a disciplined attentiveness to the many different ways men, women, and children have lived with the gods and to the things, terrible and good, violent and peaceful, they have done with the gods to themselves and to others.

The classroom is where many of us perform a significant portion of our daily intellectual work; it is where we invite others to join us in our questions. Our students come to us from many different worlds, bearing many different histories. This was true even in the Bible Belt, where I taught for more than a decade: the world's cultures are well represented in midwestern classrooms. Furthermore, "Christian" students bring complex Christianities into the classroom. Many of them—and here I can say *especially* in the Bible Belt—have had truly ruinous experiences in their churches and Christian homes. They are already quite familiar with the power of Christian faith to scar them and, if they have been fortunate, with its powers of liberation and salvation. These students from Bible-reading homes are often sick of witnesses and revivals, of experiencing the "truth" as a prescription about the doable, thinkable, or possible. In response, some have put together intricate Christian understandings that draw on neo-paganism, snippets of Asian religions, popular psychology, and contemporary science fiction. Others simply will have nothing more to do with religion, finding their way instead to religious studies classrooms in hopes of securing the tools to help them reflect critically on their experiences. "Christianity," when it is used in the authoritative singular, as if it had secure, discernible boundaries, makes sense only as a symbol for political or cultural mobilization and the domination of others. The social reality of our classrooms, as of American culture, is that there are many, many Christianities.

Students in this polytheistic world are not well served by a professor's witnessing to a singular truth, nor will they be inevitably awakened by denunciations of their Christianities by postcolonial critics. Nor will students be helped by normative accounts of religion that neglect or exclude all the humiliating, destructive, beautiful, mysterious, and terrifying dimensions of it that they know from their own experience. It is difficult to see these "Christian" students as agents of Western hegemony, since like Punkin' Brown their families have so often been on the receiving end of cultural domination; postcolonial cultural criticism becomes another form of imperial witnessing when it is conducted without a vivid sense of the worlds Americans come from and the varieties of Christianity they



have known. Religious witnessing in any case will always fail in the university, where the expectation is appropriately for discussion, critical analysis, and open exchanges (an ideal often enough abandoned but no less desirable or admirable for that). Moral inquiry without communication and conversation is nothing but a covert compulsion.

There is no distinct moment of moral inquiry that comes before and exists separately from the communication of one's moral reflections to others. Discernment does not precede discussion; talking does not represent the outcome of moral analysis but serves as its necessary vehicle. Moral inquiry proceeds, like everything else in culture, through conversation—which is to say, more broadly, that moral inquirers exist in relationship with each other on a social field comprising cultural traditions, economic and political circumstances, and family histories. Such inquiry never exists apart from conversations among real, historically situated people, and moral inquiry is always simultaneous with efforts to make its doubts and decisions public. Understandings of morality represent an engagement in communication; we narrate what we know and we know by what we narrate.

Since moral reflection is in fact the conversations that constitute it, then the presence of many different histories, memories, and experiences converging in our classrooms is a unique opportunity for religious studies. Moral inquiry and religious study proceed in this context not by constituting the other—"Punkin' Brown," "Hinduism," "cult members," "popular" religion, and so on; rather, they work through the recognition of difference and a revisioning of one's own story through the lens of the other openly engaged. It means experiencing one's own world from the disorienting perspective of the other—from Uncle Sal's, for example, or from Gemma's—and this necessarily entails risk, vulnerability, vertigo; it invites anger and creates distress. Like the discipline itself, the religious studies classroom exists in suspension too. The understanding of other religious worlds and of the moral impulses of these worlds comes only through the multiplicity of stories told and stories attended to and to the new possibilities that emerge in the places between heaven and earth, between lives and stories, and between people and their gods.

## NOTES

### INTRODUCTION

#### JESUS HELD HIM SO CLOSE IN HIS LOVE FOR HIM THAT HE LEFT THE MARKS OF HIS PASSION ON HIS BODY

1. Richard Wightman Fox, *Trials of Intimacy: Love and Loss in the Beecher-Tilton Scandal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 5 and 7.
2. Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, trans. Simon Lee (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000), especially chapter 1, "Sociology in Opposition to Religion? Preliminary Considerations."
3. For an especially elegant treatment of this notion of braiding as an alternative way of conceptualizing not simply religion's fate in modernity but modernity itself, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). My thinking about the tension between presence and absence in modern religious history has benefited from years of conversation and friendship with Leigh Schmidt.
4. Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 32.
5. Don Kulick and Margaret Wilson, eds., *Taboo: Sex, Identity, and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

### CHAPTER ONE

#### "MILDRED, IS IT FUN TO BE A CRIPPLE?" THE CULTURE OF SUFFERING IN MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN CATHOLICISM

The epigraphs to this chapter are taken from two autobiographical reflections written by Sal in the 1960s and circulated among his friends in mimeograph form.

What I say in this chapter about American Catholic popular theology is based on my readings of the many devotional periodicals that made up the everyday literary culture of this community for most of the last century. Some of these, such as the *Voice of St. Jude*, were published by the shrines that proliferated on the American Catholic landscape in these "heyday" years of devotionism (as historian Jay Dolan has called them). Others (*Catholic World*, *Ave Maria*, and *America*) were the work of specific religious orders. Still others were more or less trade journals for clergy (*Homiletic and Pastoral Review* and *American Ecclesiastical Review*). *Hospital Progress* was published for Catholic hospital professionals.

While it is impossible to give a history of American Catholic popular journalism here, I want to note, first, that this kind of popular journalism has existed among American Catholics since the early nineteenth century. These periodicals have always appealed mainly to a middle-class, not a working-class, readership, for obvious reasons, and they have always promoted the devotional piety that has been seen since the early modern period as the foundation of Catholic life and a bulwark against modernity. In the decades considered here, especially in the late 1950s and into the 1960s, Catholic magazines slowly became attractive, accessible, upbeat family periodicals in a self-consciously American voice, offering arti-

11. McAvoy's comment about fearing to open the door to the past is from "The *Ave Maria* after 100 Years," *Ave Maria* 101, no. 18 (1 May 1965): 6–9, 21; the quoted remark is on p. 6. The saints and objects associated with them were in many cases simply thrown away: there is a contemporary organization called the Vestment Exchange run by Episcopalian nuns dedicated to rescuing the artifacts of mid-twentieth-century American Catholic devotionism from the junkyards, head shops, and taverns where they have been turning up for the last four decades. The founder of Vestment Exchange is Sister Elias Freeman and her website is <http://www.vestmentexchange.org>.

12. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 15.

13. On the early apprehensions about the study of religious history among modernizing historians see Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 38.

14. Information about *Late Nite Catechism*, which was conceived and produced by Maripat Donovan (who also originated the role of "Sister") and Vicki Quade, can be found on the website <http://www.latenitecatechism.com>. The description of the production on the website notes, "the authoritarian whims of Sister steer the course of the evening as she doles out glow-in-the-dark rosaries at one moment and confiscates lipsticks and candy at the next." (See <http://www.latenitecatechism.com/Inc-skip.html>.)

15. Examples of the photographs described here in the text may be found in the separatist newsletter, *Sangre de Cristo Newsnotes*, nos. 66–67, 15 November 1979, 6–7.

16. Crapanzano, *Tuhami*, 144.

17. On the proliferation of banners in the post-Conciliar sacred space, see Paul Hendrickson, *Seminary: A Search* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), 36–37.

18. Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1967), 41.

19. Sartre, *Search for a Method*, 91. Sartre, in an interview in the *New York Review of Books* (26 March 1970), identified this as his understanding of freedom.

20. Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 449.

21. Jackson, *Paths toward a Clearing*, 20.

22. Stanley A. Leavy, *The Psychoanalytic Dialogue* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 30, 29–30. Paul Rabinow, writing about anthropological research, notes that understanding is "mutually constructed" by ethnographer and informant in a process that transforms both, in *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977): 38.

23. John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 10.

24. Comaroff and Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*, 11.

25. Jackson, *Paths toward a Clearing*, 4. For Jackson, this exercise reveals "the grounds of a common humanity," "the continuity of experience across cultures and through time." A powerful account of the use of one's own experience in the process of understanding another person's (in this case in a culture different from

the ethnographer's), is Renato Rosaldo, "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage: On the Cultural Force of the Emotions," in *Text, Play, and Story: The Construction and Reconstruction of Self and Society*, ed. E. M. Bruner (Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society, Washington, D.C., 1984), 178–95. See also Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

26. Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Work of Culture: Symbolic Transformation in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 230.

27. Obeyesekere, *The Work of Culture*, 226.

28. Sartre, *Search for a Method*, 72.

29. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Fences and Neighbors: Some Contours of Early Judaism," in *Reimagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 6.

## CHAPTER SIX

### SNAKES ALIVE: RELIGIOUS STUDIES BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

1. My discussion of the history of the modern Western study of religion is based on a rich literature on the subject that has begun to emerge in the past decade (with some distinguished predecessors). Among the works that have most shaped my understanding are Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-colonial Theory, India, and "the Mystic East"* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Hans G. Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, trans. Barbara Harshay (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Donald S. Lopez Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Lopez, *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Tomoko Masuzawa, *In Search of Dreamtime: The Quest for the Origin of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Nandy, *Intimate Enemy*; Nandy, *Time Warps: Silent and Evasive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992); J. Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Schmidt, *Hearing Things*; Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianity and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Ann Taves, *Fits,*

*Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Taylor, *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*; Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

2. On the history of the gothic in American culture see Mark Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) and Edward J. Ingebreetsen, *Maps of Heaven, Maps of Hell: Religious Terror as Memory from the Puritans to Stephen King* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1996). For a powerful study of the eruption of this ancient memory of religious horror in the present see Lawrence Wright, *Remembering Satan* (New York: Knopf, 1994).

3. Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1995). For other accounts of this culture that include some trenchant criticism of Covington's work see David L. Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents: Snake Handlers of Eastern Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) and Fred Brown and Jeanne McDonald, *The Serpent Handlers: Three Families and Their Faith* (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, Publisher, 2000).

4. Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, describes the "sweet savor" of the snakes, a phrase used by the handlers themselves, on p. 162; the description of Punkin' Brown at the service is on p. 234, as is the comparison of Brown's "haaagh" with the underground vent. When he first introduces Brown, Covington tells readers that the preacher is "mired in the Old Testament, in the enumerated laws and the blood lust of the patriarchs" (209).

5. Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, 235.

6. Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, 239. The Tennessee minister is quoted by Brown and McDonald, *The Serpent Handlers*, 20.

7. On this point see also Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 6.

8. George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 31, 85, and 89.

9. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*, 85.

10. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*, 93, 177, 329. On this early generation of Christian university professors in search of a new moral and intellectual vision see Murray G. Murphey, "On the Scientific Study of Religion in the United States, 1870-1980," in *Religion and Twentieth-Century American Intellectual Life*, ed. Michael J. Lacey (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 136-37, and Robert M. Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization, 1889-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

11. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*, 243; D.G. Hart, *The University Gets Religion: Religious Studies in American Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 29.

12. Frederick Morgan Davenport's survey of the 1905 religious landscape is *Primitive Traits in Religious Revivals: A Study in Mental and Social Evolution*

(New York: Macmillan, 1905), viii. The best history of this tense engagement of the academic study of religion with broader social anxieties in American culture is Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*.

13. H. L. Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2 and passim; on this subject see also Stephen R. Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

14. See John P. Burris, *Exhibiting Religion: Colonialism and Spectacle at International Expositions, 1851-1893* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001) and Richard Hughes Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

15. See Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2d ed. (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986), 266-93.

16. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 310-11; Sam Gill, "The Academic Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62 (Winter 1994): 969-70. Gill is here specifically criticizing the way "comparison" is understood in the discipline by some, but he clearly intends his remarks to have broader force.

17. Hart, *The University Gets Religion*, 241.

18. Stanley Hauerwas, "Christians in the Hands of Flaccid Secularists: Theology and 'Moral Inquiry' in the Modern University," paper presented at the conference on the Revival of Moral Inquiry in American Scholarship, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C., 15-16 May 1995, cited with permission; Hart, *The University Gets Religion*, 251.

19. Warren A. Nord, *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 8. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*, 429-30.

20. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 241.

21. David L. Haberman, *Journey through the Twelve Forests: An Encounter with Krishna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

22. Haberman, *Journey*, 168-69.

23. Haberman, *Journey*, 169.