

The introduction to the study of religion must be self-consciously selective and limited in its approach. The following essay will propose a new approach for religious studies that introduces students to the study of religion by actively encouraging them to engage and think critically about religion as a human phenomenon, primarily through the theories of Jonathan Z. Smith and Bruce Lincoln. It is the aim of this analysis to construct an approach to the introduction to religious studies that will incorporate the theories advocated by these two individuals that seeks both to defamiliarize students with conventional understandings of classification, myth and ritual as well as introducing them to the discursive aspects of these phenomena. This approach will be necessarily exclusive focusing on a critical analysis of classification, myth and ritual and ascertaining how these ideas are related to religion.

In order to address issues of classification it is important to first address the category of religion itself. It will be the goal of this initial introduction to the discourse surrounding the category of religion to dispel such ideas that we are concerned with the truth claims of religion<sup>1</sup> or the origins of religion<sup>2</sup> and begin to introduce students to the concept that “religion is an inextricably human phenomenon...and that [r]eligious studies are most appropriately described in relation to the Humanities and the Human Sciences, in relation to Anthropology rather than Theology.”<sup>3</sup> Beyond contextualizing religious studies as the study of human phenomena, it will be the aim of this approach to introduce students to the category of religion itself. This will be an

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1 It will be important at this point to spend reasonable time in class dedicated to delineating the difference between theological pursuits and the aims of religious studies. Clear demarcation must be made with regard to confessional pursuits of seminaries and theological institutions and the aims of the secular study of religion.

2<sup>1</sup> Much to the chagrin of Bruce Lincoln’s earlier work.

3<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith. “Map is not Territory.” In *Map is not Territory*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 1978. 290

attempt at de-familiarizing students with religion as a privileged category of unique data, and introducing them to the idea that we are dealing with human creations that can be understood as “specific acts of communication between specified individuals, at specific points in time and space, about specifiable subjects.”<sup>4</sup>

From this point we will consider specific religious traditions, beginning with an emphasis on classification of a given tradition, and what the significance of such classifications is. Beginning with a common tradition such as Christianity, it is important to establish the idea that we are not talking about a monothetic idea that has not changed, or even a tradition that began as a singular entity and gradually grew to be the complicated collection of denominations that we know today. Instead, there must be emphasis on the multivalent nature of a given tradition from its beginning though to today. This begins by refusing to succumb to grand narratives by recounting the events as a linear narrative of how a religion came to be.

It is clear that while a complete review of the early development of a religious tradition is impossible, the aim of this section is to problematize the histories of traditions, and encourage students to abandon the notion that there is any merit in learning these histories, since they rely primarily on the notion of “essences” and “key features;” there must be an effort to dismantle “the old theological and imperialistic impulses toward totalization, unification, and integration,” an issue adequately problematized by Ian in his paper.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith. “Introduction.” In *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 1982. *xiii*

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith. “Fences and Neighbors: Some Contours of Early Judaism.” In *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 1982. 18

It is evident from Smith's position that there is a certain carelessness with the way we classify, and this is something that needs to be rectified, but there are further issues in classification not expressly discussed in Smith's work that are worth considering in terms of classification: that is the discursive effects of classification regarding religions. This means that in classifying we do not simply label entities for epistemological purposes, but we are actively engaging in a discourse about the subject matter we classify. This issue is most prominent in the case of world religions where we are often engaging in a discourse that places religions of "ours" – that is western religious traditions – in a position over and above religions of "theirs," relegating said traditions to the realm of "the other," and often times to the category of "false."

At this point it would be helpful to turn discussion to more contemporary events that reveal issues of classification for students. In recent history the United States elected its first African American president, Barack Obama. While there has been much discourse surrounding the ethnicity of Obama, a particular form has been the labeling of Obama as a Muslim. The point to be made is that the labeling of Obama as a Muslim is not a simple epistemological statement, it is an attempt at deconstructing the American identity as one who is "one of us" and replacing it with "the other," and more importantly one who is "not one of us," and accordingly one whose position is illegitimate.<sup>6</sup> In the same way Bruce Lincoln analyzed the dialectics of professional wrestling to find a discourse on "Americanism," so too in the Islamification of Barack Obama we find "an ethnocentric and racist coding for "Americanism" and lack thereof."<sup>7</sup> Embedded in

<sup>6</sup> The discourse surrounding the Islamification of Barack Obama is an issue that deserves more in-depth analysis than the scope of this paper. The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 provide a better context for understanding the discourse surrounding the Islamification of Barack Obama and the attempts at de-Americanizing him and it is an issue worth looking into at greater length.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Lincoln. *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies in Myth, Ritual and Classification*. Oxford University Press: New York. 1989. 155

the discourse of classification is the “struggle of imagery and counterimagery... [that] may be described as the working of a dialectic in which symbolic formulations both reflect and help to shape sociopolitical processes.”<sup>8</sup> In the case of Obama the attempt at classifying him as a Muslim is an exercise in agitation, just as the rebuttal classification that he is a Christian is an exercise in countering the deconstructive Islamic discourse. Attempts at inverting the image of Obama as an “all-American man” to that of “terrorist Muslim” is countered through efforts of reinforcing his image as “Christian by choice.” For Lincoln, “[i]nversion and counterinversion, when perfectly performed, lead back to the initial starting point. And for all that can prompt significant reform... or radical upheaval... dominant orders are capable of employing their own symbolic inversions to defend against just such threats.”<sup>9</sup>

It is critical that an introduction to religious studies begin with an introduction to the idea of classification. For Smith it is a matter of remaining self-conscious of the act of classification, and in that heuristic act of criticism we learn to be critical in the ways we classify our subject matter. In truest “Jay Zee” form we know that classification is inevitable—“though we can learn from the past to eschew dual classifications such as that between ‘universal’ and ‘ethnic’ or the host of related dualisms, all of which finally reduce to ‘ours’ and ‘theirs.’”<sup>10</sup> Additionally under the tutelage of Lincoln we keep in mind that the act of classification is fundamentally a discursive act steeped in shaping the world in which we live. To introduce

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8 Ibid. 148

9 Ibid. 159

10 Jonathan Z. Smith. “A Matter of Class: Taxonomies of Religion.” In *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 2004. 174

students to these concepts in religious studies is to ask them to remain critical in their attitudes toward classification since every time taxonomy is employed it is both an act of historical interpretation and contextualization as well as an exercise in discourse.

The next section that will occupy interest in introducing students to religious studies will be myth. According to Smith, “[m]yths may think *with* natural objects or categories; they are almost never *about* natural objects or categories.”<sup>11</sup> In this way myth is best understood as an intellectual activity that serves as a meditation on one’s social experience. Smith goes on to describe myth as “a limited collection of elements with a fixed range of cultural meanings which are applied, thought with, worked with, [and] experimented with in particular situations... the power of myth depends upon the play between applicability and inapplicability of a given element in the myth to a given experiential situation.”<sup>12</sup> The aim here is to coax students away from the idea of myth as “fictitious stories” and “fabled legends” and encourage them to think about myth as it is situated within an historical context and how it represents people “being thoughtful” of their social situations.

A key example useful in communicating this idea of myth to introductory students of religion is Smith’s analogical comparison of the Dionysiac cults of antiquity and the events of Jonestown in 1978. In this comparative endeavor Smith sought to make the events of Jonestown – which had been relegated to the category of “unknown” by the media – known; that is he sought to make the events of Jonestown intelligible. “We must be able to declare that Jonestown

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11 Jonathan Z. Smith. *Drudgery Divine*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 1990. 129

12 Jonathan Z. Smith. “Map is not Territory.” In *Map is not Territory*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 1978. 308

on 18 November 1978 was an instance of something known, of something we have seen before.”<sup>13</sup>

The comparisons made between the Dionysiac and Ronovuro cults and the events of Jonestown are not designed to be mirror images of the other. Instead, they serve as examples, in Smith’s usage, of social groups who see their existences, the autonomy of their social groups being threatened. In these comparisons we find analogous expressions of groups who understand their way of life to be threatened, and relate these feelings in their own way. In the case of Jonestown

[w]hat was left was a gesture—a gesture designed to elicit shame, a gesture that the mixed rhetoric of Jonestown termed a “revolutionary suicide.” By destroying all, by giving their all, they sought to call forth a reciprocal action. They would show the world, but most particularly, the defectors. In death, they would achieve a corporate picture of peace and harmony—the picture indelibly recorded by Krause and the news photographers.<sup>14</sup>

The labors of Smith with regard to the events of Jonestown are enormous. His understanding of the events of Jonestown and the feelings of social vulnerability that led to the White Night have not only begun to place Jonestown in the realm of the known, the intelligible, but it has also begun to give voice to apocalyptic writings that express similar concerns. The efforts of Smith and his interpretation of Jonestown would serve immeasurably in the classroom for students looking at apocalyptic materials that may see fantastic mythic representations of the end of the world, shifting that perspective to see narrative representations of people who at a socio-historical crossroad, and how these social groups are thinking critically about their situations. Students could be introduced to writings such as Revelation, and asked, “why might

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith. “The Devil in Mr. Jones.” In *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 1982. 112

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 120

someone write a document such as this?” By relating examples like Smith’s analysis of Jonestown students might also begin to demystify other examples once relegated to “the strange,” and “the other,” bringing them into the realm of “the known.”

In a slight shift of gears it would also be important to relate to students the discursive function of myth in an effort to show students how myth can be a tool of discourse. For Lincoln myth can serve as a powerful tool of discourse that can be very effective in shaping social boundaries. Lincoln’s theory of myth as discourse asks students of religion to consider instances where myth is employed by social groups who are competing with differing socio-political agendas.

In the case of gay rights, many individuals will appeal to various Biblical narratives in an effort to galvanize their anti-gay base against those supporting homosexuality. Not least of which have been appeals to the Judeo-Christian creation myth in an effort to create a boundary that suggests solidarity amongst Christians and creates social boundaries. Every time someone uses the story of God creating Adam and Eve as a discourse against gay marriage/rights we witness the employment of myth as a tool for creating social boundaries and hierarchies. The number of examples that can be drawn upon to demonstrate the discursive function of myth are virtually limitless. In this way Lincoln’s approach to myth has equipped us with tools to see the world as it is perpetually being constructed and reconstructed; where individuals are agitating for the deconstruction of normative orders and dominant groups are resisting through counter-discourse.

For the introductory student in religious studies, an education on myth will necessarily begin as an exercise preoccupied with the dispensation of inadequate definitions of myth such as fables, or legendary histories. With this aim in mind it is the task of the educator to

introduce students to the concept of myth as a social meditation, where myth is seen as people thinking critically about their social situation, and often, their social experience. Additionally it is also important to introduce students to the discursive function of myth, and demonstrate to them that myth can be employed as a tool of discourse for social groups who are advancing different social agendas.

In the final section our focus will turn to ritual where the aim will be to relate to students an understanding of ritual both as a tool of discourse and “as a human labor, struggling with matters of incongruity.”<sup>15</sup> In his exposition of the hunting ritual in “The Bare Facts of Ritual,” Smith argues that

*[r]itual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (i.e., the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things.*<sup>16</sup>

For Smith, the fact that these actions are “ritual actions” and not “everyday actions” demonstrates that the participants are fully aware that what ought to have happened did not happen and what ought to be the case is clearly not the case, and in ritualized action this incongruent situation is addressed and “thought about.”<sup>17</sup> For Smith “[r]itual gains force where incongruency is perceived and thought about.”<sup>18</sup> The thrust of ritual is not simply a matter of

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15) Jonathan Z. Smith. “The Bare Facts of Ritual.” In *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 1982. 57

16) Ibid. 63

17) Ibid

18) Ibid



perceived incongruities. For Smith it is also a matter of location; a matter of things being “in their place” that makes them sacred.<sup>19</sup> In the case of the Eucharist, for Christians, this is immediately clear. The consumption of bread and wine as a ritual action is meaningful specifically within the presence of a priest or minister, and most commonly within the confines of a church.<sup>20</sup> In this way the presence of a priest or minister, and more commonly the location of a church serve as a “focusing lens” that marks the significance of the ritualized action: the consumption of bread and wine in a specific locale with specific players.<sup>21</sup>

In keeping with Smith’s theory of encouraging students to look at religion as “people thinking critically about their social situations,” this approach to ritual encourages introductory students to consider the cognitive function of ritual as a means for thinking critically about incongruous situations in much the same way myth does.

It is also important to look at the discursive function of ritual, since ritual often “serve to catalyze, confirm, celebrate, and thereby perpetuate the established order...”<sup>22</sup> In the case of Lincoln, he understands ceremonial feasts of Ireland to be prime examples of the way in which ritual is employed to perpetuate social boundaries and hierarchies. In such a scenario, where social orders or hierarchies are completely visible, the banquet scenario offers a forum in which

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19<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith. “The Topography of the Sacred.” In *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 2004. 103

20<sup>1</sup> There are obvious exceptions to the location of the Eucharist, such as last rites inside of a hospital, but by in large these ritual actions are understood as being meaningful “at church.”

21<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith. “The Bare Facts of Ritual.” In *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 1982. 54

22<sup>1</sup> Bruce Lincoln. *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies in Myth, Ritual and Classification*. Oxford University Press: New York. 1989. 81

social order can be confirmed and even contested through the ritual of the meal; issues of invitation, seating, and distribution of meat all provide an occasion where the social hierarchy can be confirmed and even challenged.<sup>23</sup> For Lincoln, when we are participating in rituals of the current normative social hierarchy, we are actively reinforcing the dominant social hierarchy. We reconfirm that social system through our engagement in said ritual.

This approach to ritual advances the idea that rituals are not simply symbolic forms of archaic processes in religious traditions. It is designed to encourage students to think critically about the nature of ritual as a medium for thinking about and relating to the world we live in as well as a discursive tool in the construction of social boundaries and hierarchies as well.

It is likely that most students will arrive in Religious Studies 100 with an idea of what they think religion, myth and ritual are since classification of religion by students has undoubtedly occurred before stepping into this class. This approach to the study of religion would hopefully leave students with an understanding that there is nothing *sui generis* about religion, and that while we inevitably classify, such an act ought to be an exercise in self-criticism since it is riddled with its own biases.

The instructor charged with introducing students to the study of religion according to the aforementioned methodology will be met with an enormous task. Such an introduction must take great pains in drawing upon a multitude of different materials since an introduction to Religious studies cannot be an introduction to one's specialty. Examples of myths, rituals, and forms of classification from various religious traditions will provide students with a wide array of data to consider and make an enormous contribution to deconstructing the false dichotomy between East

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 75-84

and West that plagues the department of religion/religious studies. Students taking this class will be introduced to classification, myth and ritual in an effort to foster a more self-critical approach to the study of religion, since our task in teaching intro to religious studies is, in the words of Smith, “not to introduce or teach our field for its own sake, but to use our field in the service of the broader and more fundamental enterprise of liberal learning.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith. “The Introductory Course: Less Is Better.” In *Teaching The Introductory Course In Religious Studies: A Source Book*. Edited by Mark Juergensmeyer. Scholars Press. 1991