

Awareness, Appropriation, and Loathing in Histories of Comparative Religion

Review and Assessment

Eric Bain-Selbo, Lebanon Valley College

Introduction

[1] A perusal through the latest program of the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion reveals that there is a movement afoot. Increasingly, many scholars of religion have turned their attention (either fully or in part) away from the subject matter of the discipline and to its history and formation.¹ Scholars are studying and writing about themselves rather than just religious individuals, institutions, or communities. Three recent works represent well this movement toward self-reflection in the discipline: David Chidester's *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (The University Press of Virginia, 1996), John P. Burris's *Exhibiting Religion: Colonialism and Spectacle at International Expositions, 1851-1893* (The University Press of Virginia, 2001), and Norman J. Girardot's *The Victorian Translation of China: James Legge's Oriental Pilgrimage* (University of California Press, 2002).

[2] This attention to the history of the discipline is not a bad thing. An awareness of the historical context that produced the terminology and the methodologies of religious studies is necessary for our critical appropriation of certain terms and methodologies in our current work. But there are important questions too about the purposes and implications of such work. In addition, we legitimately can wonder whether or not we have gone too far. In fact, have we moved beyond awareness and critical appropriation to an unproductive (even if fairly interesting) self-loathing?

Confronting Colonialism's Confrontation with the Other: Chidester and Burris

[3] In many ways, Chidester's work helped to define a new approach to the history of the study of religion. Ivan Strenski, though he has numerous criticisms of Chidester's book, writes that it "turns a new page in the history of the study of religions" (1998a: 314). The book certainly deserves such praise and attention.

[4] Chidester recognizes a shortcoming in previous studies of the history of the study of religion, and seeks to offer a corrective. He claims that "standard histories of the study of religion have been almost exclusively preoccupied with the questions, issues, or modes of analysis that were internal to the development of a set of European academic disciplines. As a result, the real story remains untold" (1996: xiii). The real story is one of confrontation and conflict, where conceptual tools become weapons of warfare as much as means to understanding the other. The particular story that Chidester wants to tell is of the study of religion in southern Africa from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. It is the story of European missionaries, travelers, and

¹ For example, at the 2002 meeting in Toronto there were two new consultations that focused on the history of the discipline: "Cultural History of the Study of Religion" and "History, Method, and Theory in the Study of Religion."

governmental authorities whose encounters with the indigenous people of southern Africa provided some of the early data for the academic study of religion.

[5] Chidester identifies three phases or *epistemes* in the history of the study of comparative religion: frontier, imperial, and apartheid (1996: 2-4). Notice that each phase or *episteme* is associated with a geopolitical situation. Frontier comparative religion encountered Africans in isolated religious communities. Conceived as immutable, hermetically-sealed religious groups, the Africans were denied any systematic religious beliefs. Indeed, in many cases it was denied that they had any religion at all. This fit well with the colonial effort to isolate African communities in general as a form of social control. Imperial comparative religion granted that there was religion among the Africans, albeit only in primitive forms. In this *episteme*, local context was ignored as Africans were placed on an evolutionary continuum. Thus, Africans came to represent our distant ancestors, primitive in mentality and savage in practice.² The shared mentality of the savage and the civilized provided justification for colonial control of savage peoples. Indeed, it could be perceived to be an obligation for the civilizer to help the savage up the evolutionary ladder. Also, since the Africans (in this case) were placed just above animals on the evolutionary scale, this form of comparative religion worked hand-in-hand with the colonial dispossession of land from Africans (since, as the equivalent or near-equivalent of animals, Africans could not own land). While apartheid comparative religion may have restored some context to the religious beliefs and lives of Africans (like frontier comparative religion), it also reified these in such a way that fruitful interaction and mutual transformation were inconceivable. This form of comparative religion borrowed also the evolutionary model from imperial comparative religion.³ It also conceptually supported separateness among Africans and between Africans and Europeans, thus practically supporting apartheid as a socio-political option.

[6] So what can we conclude from this history of encounter, reflection, and politics? In regard to the denial of religion, Chidester writes:

Although the denial of religion carried a significance that varied according to the specific context in which it was issued, the assertion that people lacked a religion signified, in general terms, an intervention in local frontier conflicts over land, trade, labor, and political autonomy (1996: 14).

In many cases, the diagnosis of an alien society without religion was delivered bluntly in the assertion that such people were brutes or beasts. As animals by comparison to Europeans, therefore, indigenous people who lacked religion also lacked any recognizable human right or entitlement to the land in which they lived (1996: 14).

Clearly, the “empirical” discovery of the absence of religion among southern Africans was tainted by Eurocentrism and colonial ambitions. This did not change when it suddenly was

² Amazingly, we still are not freed from this way of thinking. In a recent documentary on the differences between the sexes (appearing on The Discovery Channel on United States cable television), certain differences were traced to our distant past and how our ancient ancestors were able to survive. During this portion of the program, we are presented with footage of contemporary African villagers.

³ In terms of scholarship, these phases or *epistemes* of comparative religion utilized three principle kinds of comparison: taxonomy, genealogy, and morphology (1996: 238-42).

discovered that the natives indeed had religion. Even here, the recognition of religion still worked to promote and support colonial control and authority (1996: 20, 27).

[7] On the first page of his book, Chidester notes his indebtedness to the work of Michel Foucault and Edward Said (whose work on Orientalism is an excellent example of Foucauldian analysis) in developing his approach to the history of the study of religion. One sees the influence of Foucault throughout Chidester's book. The accounts of the study of religion in southern Africa as documented by Chidester appear to fit perfectly with the Foucauldian principle that power constructs knowledge that in turn comes to serve power.

[8] The problem with such a perfect fit, however, is that this hermeneutical principle is susceptible to leaving out important information or distorting information in order to preserve the principle. This always is a problem (potentially, at least) with generalized, monocausal explanations. Chidester recognizes this, and warns the reader against seeing his project in that way. He writes:

Before coming under colonial subjugation, Africans had no religion. After local control was established, however, they were found to have had a religious system after all. Although this formula sounds like a causal explanation, I explore its significance as a historical correlation by recovering the configuration of forces and discourses that produced discoveries of religion in southern Africa. The theory of the discovery of religion that I propose, therefore, is not intended as a simple deterministic explanation. The discovery or invention of religion did not result solely from its functional utility to colonialism; nor did indigenous efforts to recast their ways of life as religion only serve the cause of either accommodation or resistance to colonialism (1996: 20).

[9] This statement, early in the book, indicates to the reader that Chidester wants to avoid any simplistic application of Foucault. Yet, after reading the entire text one is not so sure that he avoids this. Especially when he concludes:

[A]s I have tried to suggest throughout this book, comparative religion does not necessarily compare religions. Beyond colonial containments, it can compare the situational, relational, and strategic practices of comparison that have produced *religion* and *religions* as objects of knowledge and instruments of power. In this work of comparing comparisons, comparative religion confronts the play of similarity and difference as a historical problem that can be situated within specific intercultural relations. Neither similarities nor differences are simply given in the world. They are produced through the practices of comparison and generalization that we have surveyed in this history of comparative religion in southern Africa (1996: 265-6).

[10] Ivan Strenski, for one, finds Chidester's work problematically Foucauldian. While applauding Chidester's "pioneering effort," Strenski concludes that "its determination to lash this new data onto a Procrustean 'rack' riveted together with theoretical hardware engineered by Foucault remains its greatest flaw" (1998a: 315). While Strenski tries to show how this is problematic in Chidester's work (1998a, 1998b), the general issue is the one I mentioned earlier - leaving out important data or distorting data in order to preserve the hermeneutical principle. Elizabeth Elbourne notes that while Chidester "reveals provocative and important patterns," nevertheless "his approach does . . . flirt with uni-dimensionality" (505). In regard to his

conclusions about Khoikhoi religion, she finds that it “is usefully provocative but somewhat over-simplified, and the chronological categories seem suspiciously neat” (505). Robert M. Baum concludes that the “correlation between domination and the discovery of religion is not nearly as exact as he [Chidester] suggests” (531). Both Elbourne and Baum detail specific areas in which the data may not fit as well as Chidester imagines or relevant data is ignored (or, at least, not discussed in the book).

[11] Burris’s *Exhibiting Religion* is a wonderful book, and like Chidester’s work it deserves serious consideration from scholars interested in the history of comparative religion. Indeed, a recent session of the Art(s) of Interpretation Group at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (Toronto, 2002) paired the authors together.

[12] Burris’s work is a brilliant account of how colonialism intersected with European interest in and study of the colonized others at international expositions - focusing primarily on England’s Great Exhibition of 1851 (also known as the Crystal Palace exhibition) and Chicago’s Columbian Exposition (with the accompanying World’s Parliament of Religions) of 1893. Burris demonstrates convincingly the way in which the exhibiting of “primitives” or “savages” at these events placed them at the bottom of the cultural ladder, thus justifying for the patrons their nation’s violence toward and colonization of these others.

[13] Burris argues that his study achieves four aims. First, it helps to show how the comparative study of religion was “formed on the basis of colonial interactions” (2001: xviii). Obviously, this is a conclusion that Chidester also draws from his look at colonialism in southern Africa.

[14] Second, in displaying others in the way they did, expositions helped to justify and promote the comparative study of religion to the broader population (2001: xviii). This was critical in securing its place in the academy.

[15] Third, expositions made significant use of the social evolutionary scale in the exhibition of the other. In portraying the other as below or before the civilized patrons (the native as superstitious child, the European or American as mature adult), expositions helped to justify this worldview and social evolutionism itself as a comparative tool (2001: xviii-xix). For example:

The collective “Other” outside the West was not only more industrially simplistic but also became caught up in the potentially denigrating carnivalesque atmosphere at international expositions. While “civilized” modern nations were invited to occupy the austere section of an exposition’s main fairgrounds, various peoples judged “savage,” and later “primitive,” took up places in the circuslike atmosphere of the carnival area. This served to reinforce implicit stereotypes about the backwardness of such peoples based simply on a lack of industrialization (2001: 8).

Because “savages” or “primitives” lacked scientific, industrial, and technological sophistication, they clearly were not as developed as Europeans or Americans. This developmental claim, in turn, then helped to define the status of the religion of the other as well. The other was behind in material culture. This was plain to see, and formed the objective basis to make the subsequent determination that the other must also be behind in its religious culture. Burris concludes: “Presumptions about the relative degree of people’s religious evolution followed assumptions about the extent of their cultural evolution almost verbatim” (2001: 64). He concludes:

Evolutionism succeeded in creating a new hierarchical system based on progress . . . This made it possible to regard less industrially inclined societies as simply having failed to develop to the same extent as industrially sophisticated cultures. What evolutionary theory was able to accomplish that no earlier model had was to convince a large enough percentage of the populace that the new basis for intercultural hierarchies was now grounded in the apparent objectivity of hard science rather than in the cultural subjectivity of religion (2001: 74).

Again, these presumptions and assumptions helped to justify in the minds of Europeans and Americans their violence toward and colonization of the other.

[16] Fourth, “what occurred within the international exposition tradition was that the encroaching global division between ‘primitive’ and ‘civilized’ peoples resulted in peoples deemed primitive becoming defined predominantly by cultural affiliation, or ‘race,’ as opposed to ‘religion’” (2001: xix). In short, the other was deemed to be culturally and/or racially inferior. As a consequence, the religion of the “primitives” or “savages” did not need to be considered seriously (thus their exclusion, for example, from the World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893) or (confirming the conclusions of Chidester) it effectively could be denied.

[17] Though Burris’s work has not received the same critical attention yet as Chidester’s has (the former was published five years after the latter), it is clear that similar questions can be asked about both authors in terms of their understanding of the pernicious influence of colonialism and the hermeneutical situatedness (limitations?) of the interpreter of religious phenomena.

Two Theoretical Questions

[18] First, what is the logical relationship between imperialist intentions and how the other was understood?

[19] The gist of this question has to do with whether or not imperialist motives *determined* (consciously or not) how the other was understood in southern Africa (and around the world for that matter). When encountering the religious lives of others, did Europeans come to false conclusions because they saw others only through colonialist eyes or did they understand something true about others and these truths were then used to benefit colonialism?

[20] Chidester is less than clear. In a paper presented to the Art(s) of Interpretation Group at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (Toronto, 2002), he writes: “This failure to recognize the existence of indigenous forms of religious life in southern Africa was not merely a mistake, as if it were an unfortunate consequence of limited opportunities for participant observation, the unfamiliarity of strange customs, the incomprehension of local languages, the intrusion of Christian theological prejudices, or some other failure of method” (2002: 1-2). The key word here seems to be “merely.” In other words, the denial of religion by Europeans in southern Africa cannot be explained simply by the list of factors that follow. Rather, there was something else going on as well. Chidester continues: “Instead, the denial of African religion was itself the method, a method for entering contested frontiers and representing them as if they were empty spaces for conquest and colonization” (2002: 2). But is “conquest and colonization” to be seen as one factor among many that led to the denial of religion or is it the *determining* factor? If the Europeans had not been engaged in the colonialist endeavor, would there have been no denial of religion or might the other factors still have led to such a denial?

[21] Again, I am not sure that Chidester makes a compelling argument either way. His critics, however, have tended to choose for him. In his review of *Savage Systems*, Jeffrey C. Ruff writes, “comparative religion was a European colonialist activity that produced a knowledge of essential humanity that functioned as a means of categorizing and defining peoples for the purposes of control, subjugation, and exploitation” (163). Here it is clear that Ruff believes that Chidester has shown the *determinative* influence of colonialism on the comparative study of religion. He adds that “the indigenous peoples were alternately found either to have or not to have religion, depending on their status as friend, enemy, or subject” (164). Here the word “depending” indicates that the conclusions about indigenous religion were *solely* dependent on the status of the indigenous people in the colonialist project. Strenski (apparently Chidester’s chief nemesis) reads *Savage Systems* similarly. In even stronger terms he writes: “Chidester believes both the concept of ‘religion’ and the discipline of Religious Studies are responsible for inflicting the kind of domination and victimization of mind and body in southern Africa” that Foucault has identified elsewhere (1998b: 360-1). Now it is not simply that colonialism caused bad work in comparative religion but that comparative religion caused colonialism!

[22] As stated above, I do not think that Chidester is clear on the exact responsibility we should attribute to colonialism when evaluating the poor research and bad conclusions produced by early comparativists (or pseudo-comparativists) of religion.⁴ Given the complexity of motivations and geo-political factors, this perhaps is impossible to determine anyway. It is clear that Chidester believes that comparative religion in southern Africa helped to contribute to an overall intellectual artifice that helped to support physical domination and even apartheid. But Strenski creates a “straw man” in his criticism of Chidester. The latter never argues that comparative religion caused colonialism, and one cannot reasonably construe this from his work.

[23] Indeed, Chidester tries to steer clear of the simplistic position attributed to him by Ruff and Strenski. In responding to the latter, he writes:

I do not try to establish causal relations between the theoretical productions of the academy and colonial, imperial, or apartheid administrations, but rather I try to interpret and analyze the locations, entanglements, and implications of theoretically informed practices of comparison that have been dispersed and distributed through specific networks of social relations (1998: 373-4).

In short, Chidester’s work is not about cause-and-effect, at least not in terms of the influence of comparative religion on colonial domination. He clearly believes that there was such an influence, but his project rather is to highlight the intersections of colonialism and comparative religion and, if anything, to show the influence of the former on the latter. Strenski concludes that this is not really a project worth pursuing (1998b: 382). I suppose he has a right to say that. On the other hand, in our efforts to gain clarity about the history of our discipline, Chidester’s work is quite helpful.

[24] Throughout Burris’s study, he recognizes that the encounter with the other was critical to the development of comparative religion - and in a positive way. Without such an encounter, the

⁴ The issue of responsibility raises an important and quite sensitive question: To what extent were indigenous people responsible for the misunderstandings and false conclusions that Europeans had about them? This is a sensitive question because nobody wants to blame the victim (the colonized). Yet a fair and balanced history of the discipline must address this. Chidester touches on this issue, and for an interesting example see his account of Zulu comparativists (1996: 168-72).

study of religion would have remained for much longer simply the study of traditional biblical religion. At the same time, “this new field of comparative religion was greatly informed by the political and economic intercultural reality out of which it emerged” (2001: 175). But what exactly does “greatly informed” mean? Here we encounter the kind of difficulty found in Chidester.⁵ Was the new field of comparative religion *determined* by its “political and economic intercultural reality”?

[25] While Burris brilliantly demonstrates the parallels between the exposition tradition and the comparative study of religion in the nineteenth century, he is not as successful as Chidester (especially in the final chapter to *Savage Systems*) in showing specific cases of influence of the former on the latter. In both cases, however, we are confronted with the difficulty of seeing intersections and connections between power and domination, on the one hand, and the formation of an academic discipline on the other. How can we understand these intersections and connections? Certainly a monocausal relation of power/domination to the production of knowledge is too simplistic, but only some such significant relation would seem to make the study of such intersections and connections pertinent.

[26] This leads to my second question. Given the complicated hermeneutical situation in which power and knowledge are in a sometimes benign but sometimes devastating interplay, can truth be found in what Chidester calls a “frontier zone” (that area of contact, interpretation, and understanding between one culture and another)? Put another way, one might ask: Can a person from a dominant culture come to any true understanding of those from the dominated culture? If colonialism, in this case, is the *determinative* factor in our understanding of the other, one might answer negatively. Chidester, for example, concludes that “the comparisons and generalizations through which Hottentot religion was invented were worked out on a battlefield. As a result, they remain contestable assertions. They do not provide solid evidence for establishing the truth about Hottentot religion. Rather, they demonstrate the fluctuation of comparative maneuvers on a contested frontier” (1996: 71). Is this example the exception or the rule? If the latter, then any “truths” from early comparativists or pseudo-comparativists are suspect. More generally, Chidester writes:

In any frontier zone, conflicts of interpretation intersect with contests over domination and resistance. Discourse and force inevitably overlap. Nevertheless, beyond colonial enclosures, intrareligious and interreligious relations become occasions for analyzing the fluid, mobile dynamics of the production of meaning and the contestation of power in situations of cultural contact (1996: 260).

The situation seems hopeless. Interpretation and discourse always will be distorted by force, manifested either through domination or resistance. Power is all-pervading. The best we can do is engage in the analysis of power as it reveals itself in the claims made by the dominating and the dominated. Yet, in the end, Chidester settles not in despair but in hopefulness.

[A] frontier is a zone of conflict; but it can also be a zone of reciprocal exchanges, creative interchanges, and unexpected possibilities. We might very well be faced

⁵ There also is the similar question about the culpability of the “primitives” or “savages” in their own denigration in the exposition tradition. In most cases they were willing and active participants in the displays about themselves and their cultures. Burris raises this question (see especially his comments about Native Americans on pp. 121, 168), but, like Chidester, does not pursue it significantly.

with a frontier future. By going back through the history of situated comparisons to the frontier, it is possible that we might clear a space - perhaps even a postcolonial, postimperial, or postapartheid space - where something new in the study of religion can happen (1996: 266).

Is this something “new” something true? Is it something free from power and domination? Chidester seems to think so, even if he does not provide the theoretical argument for answering affirmatively. The status of the truth claims that arose in colonial southern Africa, however, is left unanswered.

[27] Like Chidester, Burris is cautious about our present situation. He writes: “The serious consideration of little-industrialized societies and their importance for the field of religion in today’s world still presents a difficult challenge for religious studies” (2001: 177). One could reasonably ask whether or not contemporary scholars continue to “display” the other - perhaps more sensitively and with greater sophistication, but nevertheless for their own or cultural self-interest. In other words, if the work of our disciplinary “fathers” needs to be re-examined and in some cases rejected because of the colonialist context in which they researched and wrote (and the distortions arising from it), is it not equally possible that our own efforts likewise are suspect due to our own (albeit different) historical situatedness? Does our privileged position in the Western academy prevent us from hearing, seeing, and understanding the truth of the other?

A Sympathetic Understanding of China

[28] Like Chidester and Burris, Girardot’s *The Victorian Translation of China: James Legge’s Oriental Pilgrimage* is a study of the formative period of the comparative study of religion - indeed, it focuses on one of our disciplinary “fathers.” Unlike Chidester and Burris, however, Girardot seems less indebted to Foucault or, at least, a Foucauldian perspective is not nearly as influential. He explicitly addresses this when comparing his approach to someone like Said, who applies Foucault in his examination of the rise of Orientalism in the nineteenth century. Girardot notes that he has “refrained from a Saidian-style Orientalism that would hegemonically interpret all Orientalist texts and persons in terms of strictly one-sided power relations” (xxi-xxii). He thus advises:

We will want to examine the possibility that an overly cynical and one-sided emphasis on the intrusion of the Western imperialistic mission in the Orient (whether religious, commercial, political, or scholarly) may, in fact, prevent us from taking into account the revisionary reception and transformation of that mission in specific Asian traditions. Most of all, a balanced approach to the whole issue of Orientalism and the little-appreciated matters of Manchu Sino-Imperialism and Ruist/Confucian Occidentalism will lead to a more fully ambiguated understanding of Chinese and Western transcultural interaction and translation (15).

[29] This ambiguity is detailed through the telling of the life and work of James Legge, a telling that takes Girardot nearly 800 pages (including notes). But it is a story well worth telling and reading. As he observes, a full appreciation of the life and work of Legge “constitutes a critical test of some of Edward Said’s more sweeping generalizations and aggressive formulations about the intellectual colonialism of Orientalism in the nineteenth century” (14). It is clear from Girardot’s work that a Saidian and thus Foucauldian position fails this test.

[30] Legge is most famous for his translations of the Chinese classics, but his life and work went beyond those contributions. Girardot situates Legge's work in the context of his missionary vocation, his teaching and research at Oxford, and his collaboration with fellow Oxford don Max Muller (often considered the father of the discipline of comparative religion). What we have then *is not* a picture of a Western scholar who goes half-way around the world in the service of imperialism, denigrating the other and thus elevating his own culture through such denigration. Rather, we see a scholar working within the context of colonialism (including missionary Christianity) but developing a deep appreciation for Chinese culture, who came to value greatly the Chinese classics, and who thus helped to legitimize the other to a Western audience.

[31] Girardot's discussion of the act of translating is critical to his portrait of Legge and to his methodological self-reflection. Not only was Legge translating Chinese texts, but he also was translating Chinese culture for the European community. In addition, Girardot recognizes that he also is engaged in an act of translation, in this case translating Legge's life and work for us. Girardot describes translation as a "primary mode of transcultural representation and interpretation . . . embedded within a nested set of historical contexts, ideological presuppositions, and rhetorical strategies" (10). This clearly is a well-founded hermeneutical position. Works like that of Hans-Georg Gadamer (especially *Truth and Method*) have shown us that all understanding is interpretive in nature, that interpretation always is an act of translation, and that understanding/interpretation/translation are historically situated. Certainly, then, Legge's work as a translator must be understood in the context of European (particularly British) colonialism and imperialism. But to reduce his work to a manifestation of colonialism and imperialism clearly would fail to do it (or him) justice.

[32] While Girardot admits that translation is "always transgressive and transformatively syncretistic in its relation to the source text," it also is capable of transporting some of the foreignness (something true?) of the other culture (354). And what can be said of texts can likewise be said of cultures. Our historical situatedness obviously will have an impact on the ways in which we understand and talk about other cultures. At the same time, this does not preclude the possibility that we will understand something true about the other and that we can talk about the other truthfully. This may not happen immediately. It may be something that takes time, that happens even over the course of a career. For example, Legge's early published assessment of Master Kong (Confucius) was rather negative, influenced perhaps by his missionary/imperialist worldview. But this changed by the end of his life. Girardot's conclusion is that Legge remained open to the voice of the great master, and that his positive re-assessment of Master Kong demonstrates "an undeclared realization on Legge's part that dialectical self-revision is a necessary aspect of character building and understanding" (464). Such a realization is one we can all hope to achieve. Such a realization allows for the possibility of truth in a "frontier zone."

Conclusion

[33] In the works of Chidester, Burris, and Girardot, scholars interested in the history of the comparative study of religion have important and excellent models for scholarship. In praising Chidester's *Savage Systems*, Russell T. McCutcheon writes that it is "one of the best examples of an important trend in late twentieth-century scholarship: the movement toward taking seriously the material *and* theoretical preconditions that make the production and use of knowledge possible" (74). This, I believe, could be said as well for Burris's *Exhibiting Religion* and Girardot's *The Victorian Translation of China*. Certainly all three works have helped to provide

us with a greater awareness of the history of our discipline and some of its underlying assumptions. They offer cautionary tales (especially Chidester and Burris) that should make us wary of how we appropriate from our past, as well as reminding us (through these narratives) to be self-conscious about our own historical situatedness. This is important work, and I agree with Burris when he writes: "If we are going to create a genuinely complete picture of the study of religion and its history, we are going to have to locate scholars who can limit their theoretical ambitions and be willing to do the slower work related to exploring the contexts in which textual production [i.e., scholarship in the comparative study of religion] occurs" (2002: 8-9). I applaud all three scholars for the dedication and meticulous research they have done for us.

[34] At the same time, this review of the works of Chidester, Burris, and Girardot indicates that we also can learn negatively from these works - seeing what should be avoided so that future investigations can build upon this scholarship in even more fruitful ways. For example, in praising Chidester, Ruff concludes that *Savage Systems* "demonstrates that scholars do not ply their trade in extra-social, neutral, objective venues: not in the past nor in the present" (169). While true, I cannot think of any colleague of mine who thinks differently. This is "old hat," indeed, "very old hat." While Chidester, Burris, and Girardot all make this point in different ways - ranging from a strongly Foucauldian in-your-face approach with Chidester to a more subtle treatment by Girardot - it perhaps is time to focus more constructively on other points.

[35] Relatedly, Elbourne concludes her review of *Savage Systems* by drawing our attention to the issue of guilt.

I dwell on guilt because it strikes me that in the end guilt is one of the central themes of *Savage Systems*. Embedded in its history of comparative religion is a counter-narrative about the role of academic scholarship on religion in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa and perhaps in some sense about white responsibility more globally. Indeed, there is something of the feel of a Christian conversion narrative to this counter-narrative. Like other conversion narratives it arguably subsumes the complications of the past into some more striking overall story, perhaps with the hope of salvation to come (507).

I have no problem with guilt. Certainly there is much scholarship in the past for which our forefathers must be held accountable, and I am sure there even is work today for which scholars must be morally culpable. It may even be true that we still need more scholarship like that reviewed here in order to enlarge our understanding of the disciplinary situation both past and present. My argument is not that scholarship as represented in the works reviewed here should be abandoned, but that it needs to be complemented. Again, is it not time for more constructive efforts too? The kind of guilt producing work like that of Chidester and Burris (I think Girardot avoids this) was initiated, in my mind, by Charles Long (to whom both Chidester and Burris are indebted) in some of the essays that appear in *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*. Many of these appeared 20 to 30 years ago! We must critically examine our past, but to dwell there alone becomes an unproductive self-loathing. Are we not generally aware of the contours of that past? Is it not time to begin the work of re-imagining our present discipline in a way that appropriates the lessons of that past? As Strenski concludes, "further breast-beating over how the modern concept of 'religion' threatens to dominate the Other enjoys a rather limited scope of application. It is time to stop the whining and time to move on" (1998b: 365).

[36] I hardly think anyone is “whining” - unless it is Strenski himself. But he may be right that we are or should be at a turning point. Perhaps it is time to “move on.” And it does not take much imagination to think of some of the directions we can go: How might the discipline be understood from a “primitive” perspective? How might the recovery of indigenous voices reshape our theoretical models?⁶ What kind of power differentials still are operative today, and how do they affect comparative work?⁷ What methodological tools and guidelines can help us avoid the pernicious effects of power? How can we conceptualize the product of scholarly activity as something true in spite of the necessary historical situatedness in which it occurs?⁸

[37] Perhaps the example of James Legge, then, someone who seems to have successfully navigated the dicey waters of colonialism, who entered the “frontier zone” and came away with a genuine confrontation with the other, can be instructive.

[38] What we need is some balance between a *hermeneutics of suspicion* and a *hermeneutics of trust* - both in our approach to the other as well as our disciplinary history. While seeing Legge as leaning toward the latter in his approach to the Chinese classics and culture, Girardot insists that Legge more appropriately worked betwixt-and-between. This methodology, Girardot concludes, “may in the final analysis . . . be the best modality for finding human meaning in texts and persons” (431). It is to Girardot’s credit that he follows such a betwixt-and-between methodology in his treatment of Legge. He too perhaps leans a bit toward the trusting end of the spectrum. As he said in the Art(s) of Interpretation Group session devoted to his work (Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Toronto, 2002), he became “personally [emotionally?] involved” in this project that spanned more than two decades to bring to fruition. But he *does* reveal Legge’s shortcomings, and does maintain a balance between suspicion and trust.

[39] It is exactly this kind of balance that perhaps is missing from the work of Chidester and Burris. While Girardot’s work may have benefited from more substantive analysis of how colonialism and imperialism (let alone missionary Christianity) influenced certain aspects of Legge’s work, he nevertheless is more successful at showing the complexities and ambiguities of his subject than are Chidester and Burris. Again, Girardot may be a bit too sympathetic and trusting, but he is able to avoid the more one-dimensional (generally unsympathetic and suspicious) approaches of Chidester and Burris.

[40] Of course, there is no simple formula for achieving this balance, for striking the mean (as Aristotle might say) between sympathetic trust and critical suspicion. But like most practical activities, there *are* virtues that might help us.⁹ Two of the most prominent may be humility and charity. We should try to be a bit more humble about our own historical situatedness, our own limitations, and less condemnatory of the deficiencies of others. We also should grant (at least as a methodological starting point) that our predecessors may have gotten something right, may have arrived at some truth about the cultures they studied. Certainly these are two virtues that

⁶ Chidester, in fact, suggests this in his response to Strenski (1998: 374).

⁷ In an e-mail communiqué, Burris suggested this to me as a fruitful avenue of research.

⁸ I think philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer is exemplary, and my own work is a humble effort) help greatly in addressing these latter two issues. See Bain-Selbo 1999 and 2003.

⁹ For a full account of what I call dialogical virtues, and their application to educational and pedagogical issues, see my *Mediating the Culture Wars: Dialogical Virtues in Multicultural Education* (2003).

Girardot practices well in his account of the life and work of James Legge. As a consequence, he reaches conclusions about Legge that are very different than one might expect Chidester or Burris to have reached. Girardot writes: "One can approach the Orient as a judge or as a guest, as an aggressive transformer or a careful translator, as a bold general or a cautious pilgrim" (530). It clearly is as a "guest," "careful translator," and "cautious pilgrim" that Girardot finds Legge. Thus, he concludes:

There is good reason to say that Legge's career as both a hyphenated missionary-scholar and sinologist-teacher is a powerful instance of Edward Said's contrite observation about certain Orientalists who went against the grain of Orientalism and achieved some partial transcendence of their own religious and cultural context (530).

[41] After finishing Girardot's rich account of Legge's life and work, one might ask of the Foucauldian: Could we have asked any more of Legge given the time and the place in which he was working? Did he not arrive at some truth about the other, despite being a citizen of an imperialist power? Does this then give us reason to have hope in terms of our own discipline and a realistic understanding of both our limitations and possibilities?

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