

WHY ME?
Methodological-Autobiographical Reflections
of a Wisconsin Farm Girl Who Became a Buddhist
Theologian When She Grew Up

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During my many years of teaching Buddhism at a provincial midwestern university, I have been faced with two opposing demands or questions from students. Some have wanted to be taught Buddhism “not filtered through the lens of Western perspectives, but the way an Asian Buddhist (culture unspecified) would experience it.” Others have asked, unbelievably, whether anyone born in the West could ever understand Buddhism. One student commented about a film that included scenes of some Western Buddhists doing a complicated Tibetan *sadhana*, “The film was okay except when the whites tried to meditate. You could tell that they couldn’t possibly do it.”

Admittedly, the first demand occurred more frequently in the early 1970s, whereas the latter skepticism characterizes students of more recent vintage. Nevertheless, in each instance students were equally dissatisfied with my responses. The former felt that if I were a good enough teacher, I should be able to undo their (and my) immersion in Western culture and enable them to “feel” like “real Buddhists,” that is, Asian Buddhists. The latter simply refused to concede when I tried to explain that the ability to understand Buddhist teachings or to engage in Buddhist meditation is not encoded on one’s genes, like hair color or eye shape, and, therefore, Westerners can perfectly well learn to meditate and can understand Buddhism.

These conflicting student expectations reflect, in a naive way, major methodological issues about who can study religion and how much or what we can understand. Some insist on a rigid separation between theology or constructive work, and history of religions or descriptive work. Such demands permit a scholar either immersion in the subject matter or distance from it, but do not accept the possibility that one could self-consciously and contemplatively move between these two stances. I maintain that the most significant contemporary religious scholarship, whether feminist or not, re-

fuses to buy the false dichotomy between descriptive scholarship and reflective world construction. As the work of Christine Downing demonstrates, one does not have to choose between accurate scholarship about religious phenomena and passionate, personal involvement with those same phenomena. By routinely combining disclosure and autobiography with reflection and analysis, one can ride that supposed dichotomy without pretending to more universality than is appropriate.¹

In this essay I will reflect on my own work as a Buddhist feminist theologian and as a historian of religions, combining autobiography with more systematic reflections.² These two sides of my being, according to some, are as incompatible as my students' opposing expectations. My training in the history of religions tried to teach me that "whites can't meditate," or least shouldn't meditate if they want to be good students of religion. But I am also a Buddhist "theologian," an oxymoron I use to indicate that I do not confine my discussions of Buddhism to reports about Buddhist history and doctrine, but insist on doing reflective world construction, mainly in a feminist vein, with the explicit aim of contributing to the development of Buddhism. Therefore, I have learned to meditate despite my white skin. Rather than choosing one identity and rejecting the other, I attend to the dialogue between them and to what this dialogue teaches me about attending to religion, whether it is to study, to understand, or to participate in religions. As feminists usually understand, the dialogue often plays itself out in story, in tracing the developments that lead to one's own unique stance, which is presented as an offering and an example to others. In using this method, we differ from conventional scholars who try to convince us that the results of their thinking are independent of personal experience and are applicable universally.

Then and Now

Nothing in my cultural background as a highly provincial Wisconsin farm girl growing up before an awareness of either feminism or pluralism,

¹ See Christine Downing, *The Goddess: Mythological Images of the Feminine* (New York: Crossroad Continuum, 1981), *Journey through Menopause: A Personal Rite of Passage* (New York: Crossroad Continuum, 1987), *Psyche's Sisters: Reimagining the Meaning of Sisterhood* (New York: Crossroad Continuum, 1990), *Myths and Mysteries of Same-Sex Love* (New York: Crossroad Continuum, 1991), *Women's Mysteries: Toward a Poetics of Gender* (New York: Crossroad Continuum, 1992), and *Gods in Our Midst: Mythological Images of the Masculine, a Woman's View* (New York: Crossroad Continuum, 1993).

² For additional autobiographical materials, see Rita M. Gross, "Three Strikes and You're Out: An Autobiography at Midlife," in *A Time to Weep, A Time to Sing: Faith Journeys of Women Scholars of Religion*, ed. Mary Jo Meadow (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 30–46, and "Autobiography: Mutual Transformation, and the Prophetic Voice in Buddhist Feminism," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 13 (1993): 127–33.

predisposed me to become a Buddhist theologian, or a historian of religions, for that matter. The cultural distance between my hay fields and the meditation caves of Tibet is even greater than the cultural distance between a girlhood spent milking cows by hand and a young adulthood spent studying Sanskrit in the Swift Hall Library of the Divinity School at the University of Chicago.

It is hard even for me to imagine traveling those distances, for the world of my childhood was very small and impoverished, both economically and culturally. Being familiar with only an outhouse in my early years, the first time I found myself alone with a flushing toilet, at about age seven, I didn't know how to use it. My parents barely had grade school educations and did not encourage me to pursue education. Indeed, the opposite was often true. There were no books at home, and my library privileges were taken from me because my parents didn't pay property taxes to the county that supported the nearest library. We did not receive a daily newspaper or have a telephone, and in the summer my only contact with the world was an AM radio. When I left for college, I had never been out of the state of Wisconsin and had rarely been more than seventy-five miles from home. The meditation caves of Tibet could hardly have been farther away. And yet, I am sure I remember correctly that in the summer of 1959, I heard on the AM news about the Chinese takeover of Tibet and the flight of the Dalai Lama from Tibet and that I *understood* what was going on.

Many years later, I did join the meditation caves of Tibet with that spot where I grew up. I still own the twenty-by-twenty-foot log cabin in which I grew up. It has been abandoned for thirty years, except for my occasional visits, but in recent years I have returned there to complete a meditation practice in the sequence I am doing as a Vajrayana Buddhist that requires total isolation. The road in to the cabin has now become a trail indiscernible to most eyes. Once my supplies are inside, I lock the gate behind me, and because no one has seen me arrive, no one knows I am there or what I am doing, which is as it should be. I set up the shrines facing east, looking out a window at a tree I have watched for almost fifty years. The shrines are in the place that used to be my parents' bedroom, and my meditation seat may well rest over the spot on which I was conceived. Days of ceaseless effort turn into weeks. But for the fact that I am chanting in English, I could just as well be in Tibet, given what I am doing. And they say "whites can't meditate"!

But I am getting ahead of my story. I became a Buddhist theologian only after first becoming a historian of religions. In my circumstances, the leap straight from milking cows to meditating was too great to be possible. My route out of the provincialism and extreme religious dogmatism that I experienced in my early life was to study the history of religions at the University of Chicago. Nothing I learned as a historian of religions gave me

even a hint of permission to become a Buddhist theologian. In fact, the opposite was true. Every message I received insisted that whites shouldn't meditate because then they won't be good (read "objective") scholars. So how is it that I became a Buddhist theologian not only against the odds of my girlhood on a Wisconsin farm but also against the explicit scholarly training that I received?

If there is an explanation, I suspect it may well lie in the differences and difficulties entailed in being a woman in my field, especially at the time when I entered graduate school (1965) and experienced my formative years as an academic. I suspect that my unwillingness to buy into the "normative-descriptive" dichotomy that most of my male colleagues insist upon so adamantly has everything to do with what I experienced as a woman in the field.

The Education of a Feminist Historian of Religions

The chain of cause and effect that links the girl milking cows with me (whoever that might be)—what remains constant in that karmic continuum—is the desire to be a good student of religions. That meant then, and still means, two things. It means that I want to understand, as much as possible, the infinite variety and wonder of religion as it has appeared in human life through time and across space. It also means that I want to understand, as much as I can, which end is up and what makes the world go round. In other words, I want both to understand "the other" as best one can, and to explore questions of meaning and truth, to engage in world construction. Furthermore, I cannot really separate these two tasks and goals. Nor can I imagine anyone caring about religion enough to go through the horrors of obtaining a Ph.D. in the field unmotivated by both visions simultaneously.

Very early on, I realized that neither task could be well performed if I confined myself to the study of religion as it had appeared in the culture of my birth. Therefore, I chose graduate work in the history of religions. At that time, my conviction that I could never be an adequate student of religions if I remained culture-bound did not involve any intention whatsoever to become a Buddhist theologian. I chose the discipline of history of religions rather than the discipline of theology because the impulse to study religion cross-culturally was more intense and overriding than the desire to publicly engage in questions of meaning, truth, or world construction. Initially, I was willing to abide by the division of labor that stated that my task was to *study homo religiosus*, not to *be homo religiosus*. I tried to agree that any inclinations toward being *homo religiosus* were irrelevant to scholarship and were best kept private lest one incur the dreaded label "cryptotheologian," more damning by far than "feeble-minded." In fact, my theological heart

and my history-of-religions head³ remained separated for quite some time—until I had safely completed graduate school—though they reunited before I got a “good job” (one that rewarded scholarly activities and allowed for graduate students), a “mistaken” reunion for which I have paid a certain price, albeit less of a price, I believe, than my remaining methodologically schizophrenic would have paid.

I believe that what eventually promoted the reunification of my history-of-religions head with my theological heart was the formative event of my entire scholarly life, and probably of my entire life—my lonely discovery of feminist methodology early in graduate work. During the spring of 1967, I wrote a massive paper for Mircea Eliade called “The Role of Women in Australian and Melanesian Religion.” Though I strictly listened to my history-of-religions head in my research and analysis, that paper was motivated, at least in part, by my theological heart. I was heartsick over the limited roles allowed to me in any culturally available Western religion, including both Christianity, from which I had already been excommunicated for heresy when a senior in college (I was a philosophy major who took historical scholarship about the Bible seriously), and Judaism, to which I had converted as a more intellectually and spiritually welcoming refuge from which I could ask questions of meaning and truth. I wanted to find out “if things were that bad” elsewhere in the world. My project became so formative, in part, because Mircea Eliade liked the paper very much and insisted that I continue such research, both because it was important and because I, a woman, was seeing things in the materials that he had not seen earlier. His insistence and encouragement were literally life-shaping.

Even more formative about the project, however, was the discovery I began to make through doing research. I did not really answer my question about whether things were as bad for women in Australian and Melanesian religion as in Western Christianity and Judaism. But what I started to discover was even more shattering—the methodology of the history of religions was at least “that bad”; in fact, it was devastatingly worse. Women were usually omitted from descriptions, but when they were included, they were dealt with as objects exterior to “mankind,” objects to be analyzed, described, classified, and prescribed for. Their own religious lives and meanings were never considered, never thought interesting or important. Important elements of today’s sophisticated feminist methodology were searing themselves into my consciousness, yet I lacked adequate linguistic and conceptual tools, as well as a community of discourse, in which these insights could be grounded, and I found myself in the midst of an academic environ-

³ My use of the terms *head* and *heart* is modeled on Wendy O’Flaherty’s use of these terms in her book *Other People’s Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (New York: Macmillan, 1988).

ment that, with very few exceptions, was hostile to me because of what I was discovering.

Nevertheless, I realized that I *was* an outsider (which is the common fate of good historians of religions, whether male or female), not only to the given culture or religion that I might be studying, but also to my own discipline in a way that was different from what any male historian of religions would ever experience. That experience reunited my theological heart and my history-of-religions head, because I had to engage in world-constructive thinking to survive in the world I had chosen to inhabit—the world of scholarship in the history of religions. I might be able to consider myself an outsider to the class of “all Australians,” studying them phenomenologically, but my heart would not permit me to perpetuate scholarship in which Australian women were presented as less human than Australian men. Before I could proceed with my research and analysis about the role of women anywhere, I had to reconstruct the questions and methods of the field to be able to deal with women as real human beings, not merely as the objects of Australian men or Western androcentric scholars.

Through the exceedingly head-oriented task of thinking past the inadequacies of the androcentric model of humanity that guided the research process, and into more adequate methods and models of humanity, I grew used to critiquing and reconstructing world-views as a necessary part of my task. Furthermore, because I had to deconstruct and reconstruct worlds to be a historian of religions, I no longer bought the division of labor that said that I, as a historian of religions, should study the worlds of others while the task of world construction should be left to theologians. That distinction simply made no sense to me, given the world construction I had to do regularly to be able to work as a historian of religions. Many years elapsed before I became a Buddhist theologian, but the fateful steps in that direction had already been taken. Because I had been the primordial outsider to the androcentric world of Western scholarship, in gender, in class, and in prior education, but had found a way to let myself into the world of scholarship by circumventing its androcentrism, other worlds did not seem inaccessible or incomprehensible. I grew used to moving between worlds, and I became more familiar with some of them than I had ever been with the world of my supposed cultural origins.

I think it is no accident that as soon as I had completed my methodological demonstration of the necessity of feminist methodology in the history of religions in my dissertation on Australian women, I began to traffic between theology and the history of religions, developing both simultaneously. My early publications in Jewish feminist theology, including “Female God Language in a Jewish Context,”⁴ coincided with my early publications on femi-

⁴ Rita M. Gross, “Female God Language in a Jewish Context,” in *Womanspirit Rising*:

nist methodology in the history of religions and on the role of women in Australian aboriginal religion. Nor is it an accident that the trafficking has moved in both directions. I have used materials from "other" worlds to deconstruct and reconstruct the world of Western theistic discourse, especially in my suggestions that Hindu goddess imagery might be inspiring to those seeking a corrective to male monotheism. Likewise, I have used prophetic methods that are originally at home in Western discourse to deconstruct and reconstruct Buddhism, which is now my own world as much as, or more than, Western religious discourse ever was.

If there is a surprise in this simultaneous pursuit of theology and the history of religions, as I have sought to reunite my theological heart with my history-of-religions head, it is that my major "theological" work has been done as a Buddhist rather than as a monotheist. Why should a farm girl from northern Wisconsin end up as one of the first Western Buddhist feminist theologians? To narrate that story fully would take us too far from the methodological issues central to this essay. But clearly, both my history-of-religions head and my theological heart were involved, for I would never have known enough about Buddhism to convert myself to it if it were not for my academic training in and teaching of that religion.

Suffice it to narrate that in September 1973, I was walking across the parking lot toward my office on the kind of almost unbearably beautiful fall day that makes living this far north so pleasurable, thinking about how to teach the Four Noble Truths (which I didn't think I understood very well) in my upcoming Buddhism class. I was also quite miserable, for I had spent the previous year living with the trauma and grief of discovering that the young philosopher with whom I was in love had a terminal brain tumor. I had just moved to Eau Claire following my first teaching appointment, truly a "job from hell," and, though I knew no one in Eau Claire, it was already apparent to me that I was far too radical religiously to find much collegiality at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire. So there I was, experiencing at one and the same time both intense misery at my own situation and intense appreciation for the beauty in which I was immersed. By conventional standards, one of these experiences was clearly "desirable" and the other "undesirable," but their coemergence, rather than their contrast, impressed itself upon me. Something suddenly snapped in my mind, and I said to myself in wonder, "The Four Noble Truths are true!" This experience was not superficial or short-lived, for it motivated me to seek out Buddhist meditation disciplines and set my life on a course that previously I had never deemed possible or appealing.

A Feminist Reader in Religion, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 169-73.

Yet, because I am a Western, academically trained historian of religions engaging in Buddhist world construction, I have no obvious single home and few companions on my quests. I have yet to see a job ad for a Buddhist feminist theologian; those who hire people to teach Buddhist studies generally are suspicious of people who understand Buddhism well enough to engage in Buddhist world construction, and it never occurs to those interested in hiring a feminist theologian that she might do feminist theology in an Asian, rather than a Western, context.

Some contend that my lack of “success” is due to the fact that I have improperly mixed my media. It is often claimed that historians of religions should not become the other, should not be influenced by what they study, because that messes up their scholarship. Besides, according to some of my students cited at the beginning of this essay, “whites can’t meditate.” In other words, I shouldn’t work as a Buddhist theologian because I can’t become the other, however much many of my students have wanted me to do that for them. However, I would contend that, although I have indeed mixed my media—my worlds or the symbol systems in which I discourse—my more basic heresy is the way in which I have mixed my disciplines—the descriptive history of religions and world construction or theology. Furthermore, I contend that such mixing, though unconventional, is not off base.

Mixing Media: Becoming a Western Buddhist Theologian

The first of these issues is that of mixing media, of using Buddhist constructs in my own world construction, of utilizing Indian symbols constructively in Western feminist thought, or of bringing the prophetic voice into Buddhist feminist discourse.⁵ The objection made by some is that such exercises inappropriately mix symbols from different religious milieus. It is claimed that instead of confining myself to studying and reporting on the other, I use the other’s symbols to think with, and that appropriation of the other’s otherness is improper, as well as impossible, since “whites can’t meditate.” If I want to do world construction (which is not the task of a historian of religions anyway), I should confine myself to my own cultural milieu rather than borrow from others.

In dealing with these issues, I want to appeal to certain Buddhist understandings of “otherness,” which are quite different from the usual feminist understanding of “otherness,” and to Buddhist understandings of the process

⁵ For examples of this “media mixing,” see Rita M. Gross, “Steps toward Feminine Imagery of Deity in Jewish Theology,” in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 234–47; and *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 125–35.

of interaction between self and other. In certain Buddhist psychological interpretations of the process of ego formation, the *skandhas*, we literally constitute ourselves by means of the other. That is to say, the first *skandha*, of form, the sense of being centralized in our bodies, does not really establish ego. What begins to establish ego is the experience of "that," of "other." The second *skandha*, with its vague, preconceptual perception of otherness, confirms ego. "If that is there, I must be here" is the logic by which ego becomes more solidified. But without "that," "this" is very shaky, so that self emerges and evolves not alone, but only in interdependence with "that." Of course, ego formation involves problems in Buddhist thought, but ego formation is also inevitable in having "precious human birth," as well as being the working basis for enlightenment. The relevant point here is that "other" is not really extrinsic to "self" but is the raw material that confirms and constitutes self.⁶

That we literally constitute ourselves by means of the other strikes me as an incredibly accurate description of how a mature, educated, reflective person actually becomes whoever she may be. Throughout our lives, if we continue to reflect, we become who we are by incorporating symbols and concepts into our world-view, our understanding, our manner and mode of being in the world, through the method of contemplative study. In the kind of world we live in today, no cogent argument can be made that the concepts and symbols we incorporate must somehow belong to the culture into which we were born. Interpreted narrowly, such a claim would mean that I should never transcend a culture of poverty, provincialism, and religious conservatism. Interpreted more usually, such a claim would mean that as my cultural horizons expand, they should expand into the world of European high culture and liberal Christianity, rather than into the world of Asian religion and Buddhism. Such a claim constitutes cultural imperialism at its worst. Because I was disinherited from androcentric European high culture, both by gender and by class, it did not in any way appear self-evident to me that that was the world I should embrace in order to constitute myself. I would also contend that the world of Asian religion and Buddhism was in no significant way more "other" to me than the world of European high culture, that it was as learnable as the world of European high culture, and that, to me, it was more interesting and more valuable.

Several issues still remain, however. Although we inevitably constitute ourselves by means of the other, that task can be done well or poorly, either sloppily and lazily or with style and clarity. In suggesting that it is proper for me to constitute myself through Buddhism rather than through liberal

⁶ This understanding of the process of ego formation can be studied more fully in Chogyam Trungpa, *Glimpses of Abhidharma* (Boulder, Colo.: Prajna Press, 1978).

Christianity, I am not suggesting that I be excused from the hard work of learning Buddhism well, accurately, and thoroughly. The great drawback of people constituting themselves by means of any "other" is the spectacle of those who simply don't understand what that other is saying, sounding off about their newfound and lightly worn philosophy of life. Like any well-trained historian of religions, I am made extremely uncomfortable by blatant misinterpretations, by cheap syncretism, and by mindless shopping in the great spiritual supermarket. Moreover, we must also recognize that any symbol system, not merely one of "exotic," non-Western origins, can be, and frequently is, so misappropriated.

We must return to my students once more—both those who want me to immerse them completely in Asian religion and those who claim that "whites can't meditate." If one may constitute one's self by means of any set of symbols and concepts, how much does one distort their "original" meaning? Again, I believe the problem is the same, whether the appropriated symbols derive from one's own culture—Western culture, broadly defined—or from an Asian culture, but the problem is perhaps more obvious when dealing with a culture that many Westerners regard as exotic. One must ask whether the symbols and concepts even have any original meaning—whether we are not in fact dealing with nothing but mirrors, interpretation influenced by interpretation, rather than with an "original meaning" and cultural outsiders' distortions of that meaning.

Let us assume that both sets of students are looking at Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism. Some of them wish to merge completely into this religious phenomenon, whereas others say that whites simply cannot comprehend it, by virtue of their genes. Certainly Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism is both "other" and "exotic." It is helpful to distinguish what makes it exotic from what makes it other, for what is other may become something through which I may eventually constitute myself, whereas what makes it exotic will probably always remain culturally foreign and "not-me."

Though I can come to understand more about Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, I can never become a Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist, because my memories are of milking cows in Wisconsin, not of drays in Tibet, and no amount of study or fieldwork can ever change that basic fact. But, though white, I can meditate. Therefore, I can perfectly well constitute myself as a Vajrayana Buddhist, albeit an American Vajrayana Buddhist, not a Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist. When talking about otherness, it is important to distinguish what is unassimilable from what is now other but could become that through which I constitute myself. It is also important to remember that symbols and concepts that originate in Asia are no more inherently other than symbols or concepts that originate in ancient Israel, Greece, Europe, or even America. The only thing that differentiates them is the attitude toward them as "exotic" or "familiar," and the seriousness and frequency

with which they are taught to the general public. Thus, my students who demand that I teach them Asian Buddhism as Asians would experience it, simply do not understand that although one may be changed by assimilating what is "other," one cannot merge with or become that other. Likewise, my students who insist that whites like me can't meditate because it's not in our heritage do not understand the extent to which each of us constitutes himself or herself by assimilating that which is originally "other," whether it derives from ancient Israel, ancient Greece, or somewhere else.

Finally, it is also important, to me at least, to discuss the charge that constituting myself as a Buddhist somehow makes me incapable of doing good scholarship on Buddhism. Clearly, there is some realistic base to this fear, for many adherents of Asian religions seem to be mere apologists for their traditions when those traditions are subjected to the canons of Western academic scholarship. But this tone is due, I believe, not to their adherence to an Asian religion, but to their lack of training in or commitment to the standards of Western scholarship. A historian of religions who constitutes herself partially through Buddhism does not automatically sell out to the standards of Western academic scholarship any more than does one who does not so constitute herself.

Furthermore, I would contend that the best kind of historian of religions needs to be not only an outsider, in the way that someone who really pays attention to academic analysis is always an outsider to traditions, but, in some sense, also an insider to the tradition being studied. By this I do not mean that only card-carrying members of non-Western religions can do history of religions, but that a good historian of religions must somehow be able to participate in that which is being studied, must be able to "feel with," not just to know about that which is being studied. Having chosen to constitute oneself by means of what one studies is not required, though it is no inherent obstacle to good scholarship. However, deep experience of and empathy with what one studies are required. To achieve these, I think it helps to be an outsider to the normative culture, to have not inherited white, male, elite, Western European culture. Most great recent historians of religions, in fact, have been outsiders to the culture that defines itself as the norm.

So much for mixing media, for using Asian symbols and concepts with which to think my thought, and also for using Western values with which to reconstruct Buddhism. Though mixing media is important to my interface between studying Eastern religions and being a Western woman, I think that what constitutes my stamp is the manner in which I mix disciplines. This mixing of disciplines is also what is unconventional, for if I had merely privately constituted myself by means of Buddhism but continued to confine my scholarly writing to the methods, techniques, and issues of history of religions only, my career might have been very different. I might have a

good job by now, but I would not have reunited my theological heart with my history-of-religions head—and I would not undo that path.

Mixing Disciplines: Making Judgments as a Historian of Religions

The justification for mixing disciplines is already clear from my story. No matter what anyone may claim, the history of religions is willy-nilly a world-constructive discipline. This realization forced itself upon me with my discovery of the androcentric construction of the history of religions, as I had been introduced to it, and was doubly reinforced by the reactions to that discovery. It was an intensely radicalizing experience to have mentors resist adamantly the claim that the history of religions could be flawed by androcentric methods and practices. Obviously, they were working out of a particular, but unacknowledged and unadmitted, world construction in their intense but largely unexamined commitment to the androcentric model of humanity. Ever since then, I have been convinced that, because the history of religions depends upon a specific way of constructing the world, we might as well be self-conscious about world construction, admit that we do it, and try to do it well.

And so, how do we do it well? That project begins when we realize that to understand religion in the manner that is routine in the history of religions intellectually prohibits some methods of being religious or of understanding religions, and promotes others.⁷ Furthermore, historically, such understandings of religion have not been appreciated by many religious authorities. Thus, positions about religion common to many historians of religions involve theological or world-constructive judgments. Having inevitably taken such a step, there is no cogent reason to advocate shyness or denial of the values and choices that guide one's work as a historian of religions. Since we are all cryptotheologians anyway, we might as well try to become theologians who know what we are saying and have something worth saying without losing our stance as historians of religions.

Nevertheless, in my view, there is a definite procedure that should be followed by those who mix disciplines, by those who want to adhere to the scholarly requirements for doing history of religions but who also choose to be responsible for the inevitably value-laden character of their work. I would argue that the only responsible basis for engaging in evaluative, world-constructive judgments is a thorough grounding in the cross-cultural descriptive study of religion. Thus, one's work as a theologian is best preceded by a thorough and ongoing apprenticeship in the history of religions, because such an apprenticeship is the most effective safeguard I am aware of

⁷ See William E. Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 35–49.

against doctrinal and cultural chauvinism and imperialism. And this dimension of one's work must be guided by the conventional historian of religion's values—objectivity and empathy.

When we mix disciplines, "objectivity" is still important, but the limits of objectivity must be clearly conceded. Objectivity cannot mean that the scholar has no stance, outlook, or limits that guide and inform his work and color his conclusions. That is impossible, as we have seen already. Nor does objectivity mean that the scholar has no interest or involvement in her subject matter. Rather, objectivity involves several things about those interests and involvements. The first and central meaning of objectivity turns on the scholar's own methodological self-awareness. She declares her methodologies and interests clearly, rather than hiding behind a façade of being value-free.

Second, objectivity means that the scholar strives for what Ninian Smart has called "descriptive success," which means that she does not function as a apologist for her point of view.⁸ To achieve some descriptive success and to not function as an apologist, she must consistently apply what I call "the unity-of-methodology rule." This involves using the same standards to describe all positions and points of view, whether or not one finds them palatable. Thus, although pure objectivity is not possible, neutrality should be cultivated at the descriptive stage of one's work. Scholars do not suppress negative information or highlight positive information concerning their own evaluative or confessional stance. We do not engage in hierarchical evaluations or rankings of religions. We do not use one standard when talking about "us" and another when talking about "them." We are more interested in accuracy than in promoting any specific religion or point of view. We have a deeper loyalty to honesty than to any specific religion or philosophy. Because we value such honesty, we do not pretend that we can present "the objective picture," a stance that brings us what level of objectivity we can have. Without partisan apologetic loyalties, we state, "This is the point of view, the story out of which I work. These are the values central to me as a scholar of religion, and these are my analyses and conclusions, derived in the following manner."

Protecting and promoting the development of genuine objectivity even further is the most central and critical value necessary for any student of religion—empathy. Empathy both deabsolutizes every symbol system and creates a powerful tool for understanding any symbol system, which is why it is so basic. To quote the definition I use in my introductory classes, empathy involves "mentally entering into the spirit of a person or thing

⁸ Ninian Smart, "Comparative-Historical Methods," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 3, 572.

and developing appreciative understanding of that phenomenon.” Any good scholar of religions should have developed the ability to speak in many voices or from the point of view of many different outlooks and symbols. She should be able to speak convincingly from any of these positions and to switch from one to another readily. She should also be able to translate between the voices or positions. And in all these vocalizations, her own voice should be quite hidden. The historian of religions who is competent in the requirement to be unapologetic can present with great empathy points of view that she may find personally unappealing. It is difficult to overemphasize this need to develop empathetic skill in order to do good work in religious studies. It is also impossible to recount the number of failures to do so; lack of empathy is probably the most serious failing in most discussions of religion and in most teaching methods in the field.

Eschewing apologetics and practicing empathy are widely recognized values for historians of religions, and most practitioners of the discipline pay some attention to them. However, rather than being content with them as a sufficient orientation, I regard them as the necessary foundation for doing constructive, reflective thinking about religion relevant to the crisis situation of our world. This is the point at which one truly begins to mix disciplines, to cross forbidden lines, and to risk one’s reputation as a reputable scholar. But, if I am correct, such a step only makes explicit what is already implicit—that all scholars have their agendas.

The distinguishing trait of the history of religions among the subdisciplines of religious studies is its insistence that the scholar be familiar with and trained in a number of religious traditions and be able to engage in comparative studies. These capabilities point to the critical, constructive tasks that are especially relevant for the engaged historian of religions. They also point out the additional perspectives that such a scholar may have that the more traditional theologian, trained only in his or her own tradition, may lack.

That we live in a world of competing, conflicting, multiple religious symbol systems is news to no historian of religions. That the historian of religions has some responsibility to think constructively and ethically about that situation would be debated by many. Yet no task is more central than somehow finding, promoting, and fostering genuine pluralism in our world. To think and to act critically and constructively about such issues is not usually considered part of the job assignment of a historian of religions, because dealing with competing truth claims is usually thought to be a theological task. But if we do not accept that dichotomy, what happens? We might recognize that no one is in a better position to say something intelligent and helpful about the problems of living with diversity and pluralism than someone whose life training involves empathy for diverse and various symbol systems. What else justifies the expenditure of time, resources, and

energy spent on cross-cultural studies? This reasoning explains, at least in part, another chapter in my life: my work in interreligious dialogue and in the theory and practice of religious pluralism⁹—a task that most of my more conventional colleagues in the history of religions avoid.

Finally, I make a suggestion that goes far beyond the usual agenda of the conventional history of religions, though it will not seem very radical to a feminist. An advanced task of the fully engaged historian of religions involves taking a critical stance against some values espoused in some of the symbol systems one studies. This task is far more delicate when one works as a historian of religions and an outsider than when one works only as a theologian and an insider. Even within feminist studies of religions, we have discovered how difficult it is to make fair judgments that do not derive from or promote ethnocentrism and chauvinism. The example of the bitterness that has developed between some Jewish and Christian feminists all too clearly demonstrates that it is difficult to critically assess religious systems that one does not claim as one's own.

Nevertheless, some traditional values studied by the comparative scholar (such as, for example, the patriarchal values common to many religions) undermine the dignity of some members of the religion studied. Some traditional values of a religion studied by the comparativist may directly contradict the vision of genuine pluralism in a global village by promoting militancy or hostility toward "others." Someone has to name such values for what they are, rather than simply presenting them as neutral options in a religious smorgasbord. Not all the points of view that one can describe and understand deserve to survive. To describe the negative effects of some values in the symbol systems one studies is essential to the task of the historian of religions. If the well-trained and empathetic comparativist is too timid to speak out, who can speak with wisdom and authority? Had I not been pushed into making judgments about the inadequacy of androcentrism and patriarchy long ago, I too might well shirk from regarding the task of making such judgments part of my job as an engaged historian of religions. But a feminist cannot afford such luxury.

Obviously, it is important to avoid ethnocentrism and colonialism when one takes up the difficult critical task of making evaluations. Here again, the "unity-of-methodology rule" and an unapologetic stance are necessary. Empathy, too, enters the picture once again. To be able to explain, for example, the world-view of patriarchy with empathy is a required assignment. To do scholarship that extends, perpetuates, legitimates, or justifies patriarchy is not acceptable. To meet this double assignment, one must not

⁹ See Rita M. Gross, "Religious Diversity: Some Implications for Monotheism," *Wisconsin Dialogue* 11 (1991): 35–48.

only describe but expose patriarchy, militarism, fundamentalism, and other deeply held but destructive traditional religious values. The great fear and danger is that many give themselves permission to engage in critical world construction without first engaging in objective and empathetic cross-cultural study. That problem is not remedied by disallowing or discouraging from critical world construction those who continuously pursue objective and empathetic study of the many competing world-views, for the world remains quite unfinished and incomplete without their input.

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