WREL2001 World Religions in Context

Methodological Essay

This assessment requires that you answer **one question** on methodology in the study of religious phenomena. Your task will be to closely read and critically analyse the claims about religions/religious phenomena made by a particular author/text.

Your essay is to be 1,000 words in length, not including bibliography (but including in-text references), and must conform to the style guide for the journal *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*. The style guide is available on the WREL2001 Blackboard site.

This assessment is to be submitted by **4pm Friday 28 March, 2014**.

Questions

1. An Excursus; Provide a discussion of **one of the following points**, explaining the argument behind it and some of the reactions to it in scholarly discourse. You are to critically analyse the point made and explain how and why it succeeds and/or fails.

A. J.Z. Smith’s statement that “while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious – there is no data for religion” (*Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi).

or

B. Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s argument that religion is “man’s variegated and evolving encounter with transcendence” (*The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978 [1962]), 134).

2. Discuss some theoretical and empirical strategies by which one might demonstrate or refute Russell McCutcheon’s claim that the ‘sui generis religions’ position is ‘orbited’ by “an elaborate web of undisclosed claims and judgements that hold religion and the essence of all religious experience to be distinctive, irreducible, independent, autochthonous, ahistorical, generically distinctive, self-evident, unevolvable, an a priori category of the mind, original and underivable, unique, primary, necessary, universal, a fundamental structure of the human psyche, an archetypal element, and autonomous from sociopolitical influences” (*Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 55).

4. Discuss the theoretical implications of Tomoko Masuzawa’s claim that the category ‘world religions’ emerged from the 19th century Victorian era British cultural desire that “one should want to acquire, and acquire quickly, a sweeping knowledge of the multiplicity of religions in the world because a new techno-geopolitics was unfolding dramatically before one’s eyes, and it was necessary to come to terms with this strangely brave new world, indeed with a brand new sense of the world itself” (*The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 41).