# Manufacturing Religion

## The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia

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# Contents

With theology as a code of dogmas which are to be believed, or at any rate repeated, under penalty of present or future punishment, or as a storehouse of anæsthetics for those who find the pains of life too hard to bear, I have nothing to do; and, so far as it may be possible, I shall avoid the expression of any opinion as to the objective truth or falsehood of the systems of theological speculation of which I may find occasion to speak. From my present point of view, theology is regarded as a natural product of the operations of the human mind, under the conditions of its existence, just as any other branch of science, or the arts of architecture, or music, or painting are such products. Like them, theology has a history. . . . It is not my object to interfere, even in the slightest degree, with beliefs which anybody holds sacred; or to alter the conviction of any one who is of opinion that, in dealing with theology, we ought to be guided by considerations different from those which would be thought appropriate if the problem lay in the province of chemistry or of mineralogy. And if people of these ways of thinking choose to read beyond the present paragraph, the responsibility for meeting with anything they may dislike rests with them and not with me.

—Thomas H. Huxley, "The Evolution of Theology: An Anthropological Study"

It is well known that no groups love an "informer," especially perhaps when the transgressor or traitor can claim to share their own highest values. The same people who would not hesitate to acclaim the work of objectification as "courageous" or "lucid" if it is applied to alien, hostile groups will be likely to question the credentials of the special lucidity claimed by anyone who seeks to analyze his own group. The sorcerer's apprentice who takes the risk of looking into native sorcery and its fetishes, instead of departing to seek in tropical climes the comforting charms of exotic magic, must expect to see turned against him the violence he has unleashed.

—Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*

# Introduction: The Manufacture of "Religion"

> Thus, instead of there being a real thing, myth, there is a thriving *industry*, manufacturing and marketing what is *called* 'myth'. 'Myth' is an 'illusion'—an appearance conjured or 'construct' created by artists and intellectuals toiling in the workshops of the myth industry. Masquerading as an 'importer' of the exotic and archaic, the myth industry in fact fabricates one of the most sought-after 'exports' from the human sciences and humanities. In its myriad confusing forms, that 'export' supports the modern literature on 'myth'.
>
> —Ivan Strenski

## The Myth of Religious Uniqueness

This book is an adaptation and application of some methods of analysis developed by such critical theorists as Terry Eagleton, Edward Said, Fredric Jameson, Michel de Certeau, and Michel Foucault to the analysis of the often made scholarly claim that religion is sui generis. It is a study of the social and political implications of certain practices and habits of representation in the modern study of religion, for the common assertion that religion per se or private religious experience in particular, is sui generis, unique, and sociohistorically autonomous, is itself a scholarly representation that operates within, and assists in maintaining, a very specific set of discursive practices along with the institutions in which these discourses are articulated and reproduced. Insomuch as this discourse is institutionalized, it can be further identified by such related aspects as the need for distinct or unique methods for the interpretation of religious data and scholarly calls for the institutional autonomy of the scholarly study of religion. Accordingly, not only do these assorted claims arise from within, and assist in maintaining, this specific discourse on religion but the smooth functioning of the discourse has material and sociopolitical—even geopolitical—implications concerning such issues as individual expertise, social power, and politico-economic privilege. Simply put, the discourse on sui generis religion deemphasizes difference, history, and sociopolitical context in favor of abstract essences and homogeneity. When it comes to taking

account of the possibly messy overlap between issues of power and spirituality, it is a powerful "bracketing device" (a term borrowed from Rosalind Shaw [1995: 68]). In the broadest possible perspective, then, this discourse on religion, grounded in the scholarly privilege afforded by the sui generis claim, participates in a general liberal discourse that deemphasizes material difference for the sake of immaterial and abstract sameness.

Because this claim concerning religion's autonomy operates within and grounds much of the modern academic discourse on religion[1]—although, as I will argue, it is by no means the only modern discourse on religion—the data for this book arises from a wide variety of sources. They vary from the work of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars of religion, assorted instances drawn from various periodicals, comparative religion textbooks, media reports, contemporary theoretical works, and contributions to the *Encyclopedia of Religion*. However, because of the great volume of potential sources and the sheer complexity of analyzing an entire academic discourse whose existence spans more than one hundred years and bridges several continents, the book concentrates mainly on the discourse on religion as it has developed in North America and devotes its initial discursive and political analyses to two primary areas where the discourse on sui generis religion is most evident: the work of, as well as the secondary scholarship surrounding the life and work of, the foremost twentieth-century scholar of religion, Mircea Eliade.

This book, then, addresses one way in which the category of religion is portrayed, understood, and represented—in a word, manufactured—throughout an academic discourse as sociopolitically autonomous, critiques the assumptions or rules that make such a representation possible and normative, and, in the end, identifies the ways in which such representations sanction and sustain sociopolitical and material agendas. In this regard, Shaw is quite right to conclude that "by making it [sui generis religion] central to their discourse, scholars in the history of religions are effectively insulated from uncomfortable questions about standpoint and privilege" (1995: 70); like their Christian theological predecessors who claimed the Christian message to be equally autonomous and unique, they are effectively insulated from political and historical analyses.

Accordingly, a study needs to be written that would, in a way, parallel one already in print, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Hick and Knitter 1987).[2] This new book, however, would not be directed toward an audience of practicing theologians nor be concerned with promoting religious pluralism. Instead, it could bear the title *The Myth of Religious Uniqueness* and would reverse the current scholastic, institutional, and political insulation enjoyed by scholars of religion. It would be related to the work of such critics as David Carroll (1995), who finds links between assertions regarding autonomy—in Carroll's case, the autonomy of the category of literature—and political action. For example, as applied to the work of Paul de Man, Carroll argues that the "*literary* concepts and critical strategies on which de Man relied in his newspaper articles [in the World War II collaborationist

Belgian paper *Le Soir*] to defend the autonomy of literature and art . . . served rather than countered the extremist nationalist and fascist politics he also defended in these articles" (15). When first coming across such critical claims, largely in the work of the Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton, I was amazed by the degree to which such criticisms in the field of literary studies could be applied to the study of religion. I found that, as in the quotation from Carroll, one could just as easily substitute the category of religion for literature. Whether it is Christian, literary, religious, or even ethnic and nationalist uniqueness, all such claims of intellectual and sociocultural autonomy carry with them, and move within, political implications and relations.

Like the category of myth, as critiqued by Strenski in the opening quotation and much the same as literature is examined by Carroll, sui generis religion is a constructed, analytical tool with an occluded manufacturing history and disguised material implications. It is for this reason that the simple and possibly misleading title of *The Myth of Religious Uniqueness* fails to communicate the full scope of the criticism needed to dispel the long-standing assumption that matters of religiosity and spirituality inhabit a privileged, unblemished realm. Such a criticism must address not only the beliefs of those who assume religion to be unique but also the material, social, and political practices that are associated with, entrenched through, and supportive of, such assertions. Therefore, it is not so much a myth that concerns us (however one wishes to define this slippery term) but an ideological posture insomuch as the trace of the concept religion's construction is overlooked, ignored, or possibly disguised; sui generis religion is to that degree an ideological construct whose authority is based on its supposedly autonomous existence. Having identified a number of the strategies that bring about such occlusion and found them to be operating in numerous sites within the discourse on religion, I identify some ways in which an alternative, oppositional discourse on religion—constructing religion as but one aspect of the study of human history and culture—also operates within academia. Advocating such naturalistic approaches, my conclusions firmly support Arthur McCalla's conclusion that the "dream of a unified, autonomous study of religion must be dropped in favor of an interdisciplinary model" (1994: 435).

In detailing what he sees as the misplaced efforts of Talal Asad's critique of Clifford Geertz's definition of religion (which is examined in greater detail in chapter 5), Benson Saler has unknowingly summed up the aims of this book:

> Asad's essay . . . can be read as an outline for developing trenchant criticisms of the views of persons who do maintain that religious symbols, if not precisely *sui generis* themselves, nevertheless symbolically represent that which, in their opinion, is *sui generis*. . . . I have in mind Mircea Eliade and like-minded others. Those students of religion maintain that religion indicates irreducibly religious sensitivities, such as consciousness of "the sacred" or "the transcendent." Religion, they claim, is universally distinguished from all else by its references to, and represen-

> tations of that irreducibly religious element. Asad's essay, read with those people in mind, raises issues and makes points that could be incorporated into a major criticism of the idea that religion is "autonomous." (1993: 102)

Although I came across Asad's and Saler's work near the end of my own research, my hope is that this book makes a contribution to such a major criticism.

## Getting Our Hands Dirty

Having said what this book is, I must clarify what it is not. First, it is not aimed at making a substantive contribution to our knowledge about religion in general or about specific religions. Although I may discuss examples drawn from what many identify as religions, or what are generally considered to be aspects of them (e.g., myths or rituals) from time to time, these are not my focus. Second, this is not an attempt to develop a theory of religion. As important as such work is—and I see the development of testable, naturalist theories as extremely important to the future of this discourse—this book does not develop such a theory. It should be clear, then, that this book is not about describing, understanding, or even explaining religion, religious beliefs, religious practices, or religious experiences. Instead, it is a critical work in methodological, theoretical, and political analysis, as applied to a particular way of talking about, conceptualizing, and constructing religion as a discursive object in the context of the modern public university. It is metatheoretical in focus, aiming to work toward such a major criticism as outlined by Saler, so as eventually to contribute to constructing a discursive and institutional environment where naturalist theorizing can take place. If anything, then, it is a theoretical critique of "religion."

For some scholars of religion, such a metatheoretical focus will no doubt be troubling or possibly even perplexing. I say this because, on a number of occasions, I have been asked by colleagues, "But where do you get your hands dirty?" I take it that they are asking me what historical religion, which specific myth, or what particular ritual do I study. No doubt after coming clean as to what the book is concerned to address, some readers will still be asking what I simply refer to as the "dirty hands" question. "All this is fine and good, but what has it got to do with religion?" Another form of the question revolves around talk of hard data: Where is your hard data? Have you been in the field? Where is your ethnographic evidence? The prominence of this sort of questioning in the discourse has direct relevance for the critique I develop, for it presumes that religions, myths, and rituals are simply and self-evidently "out there," unique and easily identified, like ripe fruit on a tree just waiting to be picked.

For scholars intrigued by the ways in which implicit and nontestable theories, commitments, and contexts shape and construct our questions, our methods, and even the data we study, these questions are difficult to answer in a way that makes

sense to one's curious colleague who takes religion as a self-evidently real and distinct part of all human experience or consciousness. To answer such questions truthfully, I would have to say that, like all scholars, I do my fieldwork in a number of sites. For instance, it can be done at department meetings where colleagues are debating whether, for some particular student, to stretch the requirements of the major in the study of religion, or when they question whether this or that course ought to be required of students (in both instances, we are explicitly contesting differing conceptions of religion and what should count as a religious studies degree). Because I study the ways scholars construct religion, I do fieldwork in publications and at national and international conferences on religion, where the methodological and theoretical hegemony in the field is often most evident. So, to the question, "Where do you get your hands dirty?" I can honestly answer that I do it as a participant-observer-analyst of the scholarly profession of constructing and studying religion in North America.

Making the discourse on religion one's data, as it were, as opposed to religion itself, is generally not received very well by some scholars, however, for it often entails questioning and examining apparent self-evidencies and seeing methodological and theoretical consensus not simply as natural but as something that develops over time, is continually encouraged and contested, and may at times even be manufactured, all in the context of historical, social, and political factors. Much like historians or philosophers of science, at least for a time, suspend their participation in the scientific enterprise and become scholars of scientists and the scientific method, those with metatheoretical interests in the study of religion are historians, philosophers, and critics *of the study of* religion—which, of course, must be distinguished from historians, philosophers, and critics *of* religion (not to mention religious devotees and practitioners themselves). For the former, it is precisely these latter scholars, their work, and their institutional practices, that deserve our attention. It is for this reason that I can, at least in part, identify with Thomas Kuhn when he described the "drastic shift in my career plans, a shift from physics to history of science and then, gradually, from relatively straightforward historical problems back to more philosophical concerns" (1970: v).

So, my readers might ask, what has all this got to do with religion? It has everything to do with it, for it is an attempt to demonstrate why religion is what it is for us as scholars, what is at stake for keeping religion and its study that way, and what might be gained by changing it.

## The Scale Makes the Phenomenon



In the often-quoted foreword to his *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Mircea Eliade states that "it is the scale that makes the phenomenon" (1958: xiii). Without knowledge of the context in which this statement is made, its meaning is not immediately clear, because it suggests associations with contemporary social constructionist the-

# Notes

## Introduction

1. For a specifically feminist critique of sui generis religion, see Shaw's excellent article (1995). For another very useful critique—this time from the perspective of a historian—see McCalla's detailed survey of the history of religions approach to the study of religion (1994), an approach that is often coterminous with, but not necessarily exhaustive of, the discourse on sui generis religion.

2. On this particular occasion, their critics replied with *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* (D'Costa 1990).

3. The contemporary debate on reductionism is far too elaborate to recount here. For a useful introduction to this debate, see, for example, the numerous responses and rejoinders to Robert Segal's provocative essay, "In Defense of Reductionism" (1983) by Daniel Pals (1986; 1987; 1990a; 1990b), Donald Wiebe (1984a; 1990), Segal and Wiebe (1989), and Lorne Dawson (1990). More recently, a collection of essays by a number of scholars who have been involved in this current debate has been published: *Religion and Reductionism: Essays on Eliade, Segal, and the Challenge of the Social Sciences for the Study of Religion* (Idinopulos and Yonan 1994).

4. For an example of the degree to which the parameters of the debate on reductionism in the study of religion are problematic, see Tim Fitzgerald's critical review essay (forthcoming b) on Idinopulos and Yonan's collection of essays, *Religion and Reductionism* (1994).

5. As another way of putting the reductionist issue—I thank Ann Baranowski for this rather apt phrasing—I don't study religion. Rather, I study one particularly intriguing aspect of human behavior, beliefs, and institutions.

6. I am indebted to Donald Wiebe (forthcoming) for bringing to my attention both Eckardt's essay and the historical relations between the NABI and the AAR.

## Chapter 1

1. See Spurr's *Rhetoric of Empire* (1993) for an excellent example of a book whose chapters are each based on analyses of such strategies.

2. The quotation is translated by Ricketts from a newspaper article dated June 1935.

3. On the construction of national identities, which suggests a number of similarities to the construction of discourses, see Hobsbawm 1992a.

4. Pettazzoni (1967: 217–218) characterizes this same distinction as the historical and the phenomenological, or the exterior manifestation and the interior experience of the devotee.