

# *Critical Hermeneutics as a Paradigm for Comparativism: Insights from Contemporary Japanese Religious Thought*

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## ABSTRACT

Both Russell McCutcheon (for religious studies) and Richard Rorty (for philosophy) advocate the practice of “redescription” on the part of the critical scholar. While Rorty (1989, 90–92) insists on keeping redescription within the bounds of a more generalized “liberal ironism”—thus avoiding the temptation towards the power dynamics inherent to a realist redescriptive method—McCutcheon (2000, 207) focuses on the power of redescription to forestall “all human efforts to construct a place beyond criticism, then to equate particular instances of human society and culture with the ‘place beyond criticism.’” Using redescription as a leitmotif, in this paper I outline a prospective paradigm for an engaged and critical comparativism in the field of religious studies, using insights from Western philosophical hermeneutics and modern Japanese thought, including the work of the Kyoto School and Critical Buddhism. The latter movement, in particular, with its emphasis on the critical imperative in Buddhist scholarship—and or *as* Buddhist practice—provides valuable insights into alternative approaches to contemporary comparativism.

Comparative scholars of a cautious sort frequently find themselves caught between universalists who attempt to establish a firm connection between cultures and faiths—often in order to combat the rising tide of religious fundamentalism and/or rampant secular consumerism—and isolationists who insist that, given the cultural and linguistic boundaries separating the world’s belief-systems, we can never hope to draw anything fruitful out of comparative study and must be content with ever deeper analysis of specific traditions. As Ben-Ami Scharfstein writes, however, “The whole discussion for and against the possibility of comparative philosophy flies in the face of the history of thought. For the truth is that actual contacts have been made and influences exerted by cultures that might have been supposed to be incompatible” (35). While problems remain—not least concerning the danger of comparative studies lapsing into a “dialogue of accommodation” (Hakamaya 78; Heidegger *Bremer*)—if scholarship in the twenty-first century is to have relevance, it has to take risks, and must be up front about admitting these risks. This is especially true of comparative work, which always has something of the fictional about it (Isischei 379–90; Krymbowski and Martin 195).

Both Russell McCutcheon (for religious studies) and Richard Rorty (for philosophy) advocate the practice of “redescription” on the part of the critical scholar. While Rorty insists on keeping redescription within the bounds of a more generalized “liberal ironism”—thus avoiding the temptation towards the power dynamics inherent to a realist redescriptive method (*Contingency* 90–92)—McCutcheon focuses on the power of redescription to forestall “all human efforts to construct a place beyond criticism, then to equate particular instances of human society and culture with the ‘place beyond criticism.’” (“Myth” 207). In what follows, I will attempt to outline a prospective paradigm for an engaged and critical comparativism in the field of religious studies, using insights from Western philosophical hermeneutics and modern Japanese thought, including the work of the Kyoto School<sup>1</sup> and Critical Buddhism.<sup>2</sup>

## Comparativism as Cultural Critique

*I suspect that the most interesting results of comparative religion in the next generation will result from investigating the socially and politically embodied forms of religion which have been neglected by the classical religionists.*

– W. E. Paden, “Elements of a New Comparativism,” p. 13

“Comparative philosophy,” says Archie Bahm, “is not really a comparison of philosophies... it is itself a kind of philosophy” (x)—or better yet, a kind of *hermeneutics*. While some (e.g., Paden “Elements”) have contrasted comparativism with socio-historical, cognitive, and hermeneutic approaches, it can be argued that comparativism emerges from the basic process of comparison as “a fundamental cognitive property” (Lawson 32). As such, comparativism is an essential and inescapable element in any descriptive, analytical, or interpretive study. And yet comparison, as Thomas Lawson (34–35) aptly notes, can be better or worse, for comparison is only as good as its theoretical support. W. E. Paden develops the notion of loose comparativism, in which “Comparative patterns are not fixed archetypes for carrying the connotation of timeless values or meanings which are simply replicated in historical material, but rather are refinable concepts for uncovering, sorting out, and testing selected commonalities and differences between religious expressions” (Paden “Elements” 7–8, 12–13). In this way comparative patterns are themselves always open to change and reformulation—just as are models within the natural sciences.

Perhaps the single-most debilitating theoretical paradigm for past comparative studies in religion (and, some have argued, for the study of religion more generally) has been the universalist-progressivist model derived from Eliadean premises.<sup>3</sup> “This move from the fact that any pair of the great Ways have commonalities to the affirmation of a single common ground of all of them is not supported by evidence. It expresses instead a deep need on the part of many people to believe that ‘religion’ has an essence such that all religious people can be seen to be engaged in a common enterprise.”<sup>4</sup> Beyond the psychological-political appeal to this approach,

there is a deeper philosophical issue at stake. The debate on whether a general and (thus) comparative study of religion is possible and how it could be pursued has been debilitated by ontological confusions of the positivist and inductivist sort, as a result of which “an unholy alliance was formed between the metaphysical realism of the religious religionists and the conceptual realism of positivist, historical scholars” (Jensen “What Sort?” 115). Thus, the problem with comparative studies in the past is largely a problem of the theoretical framework for comparison, which has been and continues to be a realist one. Archie Bahm, for instance, claims comparative philosophy’s greatest boon will be the creation of “a world philosophy to which all can subscribe” (ix). Even leaving aside the massive assumption that non-academics—let alone non-philosophers within the academy—are in need of a philosophy by which to live, the notion that it would be better if we all shared a universal philosophy is highly questionable. There is perhaps no more depressing fate for humankind than for us all to believe in the same things. Much more important is that we have access to as many ways as possible to talk about and consider various problems and issues.

In his comprehensive study of the philosophers of the Kyoto School, James Heisig says:

If we assume, at least for the sake of argument, that philosophy needs a world forum in which Europe and the Americas do not enjoy privilege of place; that the time has come for the west to accept as part of its philosophical inheritance ideas that have flourished in non-western cultures but foundered in the west; that the age of isolating traditional eastern thought from the full weight of western criticism is drawing to an end; and that these were precisely the assumptions of the Kyoto School thinkers; then one has to conclude that they belong to that tradition of philosophy in-the-making more properly than any leading movement in western or eastern philosophy of our day. Of course, having reviewed their achievement, one may also conclude that they have demonstrated that it is too early to think in terms of a world philosophy except as a general idea to be aimed at in the future. (260–61)

Heisig’s view differs from that of Kyoto School insider Abe Masao, who writes, “to cope with the human predicament we face in this global age, a new cosmology, not a new humanism, is needed. It is urgently necessary to clarify authentic religiosity within human existence, not only in order to overcome the anti-religious ideologies prevailing in our societies, but also in order to establish a spiritual foundation for the hoped-for unified world” (*Zen* xxii). *Pace* Abe, such a drive for a universal cosmology cannot replace the need for new humanisms culled from the various belief systems or cosmologies that we already possess.

Comparative studies should not be a process by which one erases or glosses over difference; rather, out of truly critical comparative work will emerge conflict, disagreement, and argument. After all, as Jonathan Z. Smith reminds us, “comparison is, at base, never identity. Comparison requires the postulation of difference as the grounds of its being interesting (rather than tautological) and a methodical manipulation of difference, a playing across the ‘gap’ in the service of some useful end.”<sup>5</sup> It is time to look more closely at

the gaps and fissures, as well as the constructive and symbiotic possibilities, not only *between* different traditions but also *within* each tradition. Comparative studies must work inter-traditionally as well as intra-traditionally, creating in the process a dynamic feedback loop. Past comparativists have often blithely assumed that there are coherent traditions that can be compared *in toto*. This is simply not the case, despite the fact that apologists and critics of virtually all traditions have attempted to rewrite history so as to project a kind of monolithic voice. (see Faure 55; Wright 18 n.42)

Archie Bahm (8) writes of the three “rewards” of the comparative philosopher: 1) Revelation of “evidences providing bases for feasible generalizations about prevailing tendencies within each major civilization.” This approach is most clearly evident in the work of two classic mid-century comparativists, D. T. Suzuki and F. C. S. Northrop; 2) Gaining “new understanding of the philosophies in his [i.e., the comparative philosopher’s] own civilization by seeing them contrasted with those in the other.” One might see in this regard the work of John S. Dunne on “crossing over” from one religious tradition to another and then back to one’s own;<sup>6</sup> 3) Discovering “that the philosophies in different civilizations have a complementary character and that mankind has engaged, even if unwittingly, in a division of philosophical labor on a large scale.” This third and final “reward”—which sounds more like an a priori assumption than a conclusion based on research or observation—might be called the Grand Design Theory of comparativism.

While these three aspects certainly reflect the way comparative work has worked in the recent past, they all fail to sufficiently acknowledge the diversity within traditions themselves, to say nothing of an appreciation of the *uncomplementary* differences between traditions. The first, especially, runs the clear danger of overgeneralization and stereotyping of traditions, while the third evokes the idealistic (or frightening) vision of a united world where everyone thinks the same way. Of the three, the second gives most room for specific questions and problems faced within one tradition that can help in dealing with similar issues raised in another. Yet, this stance must be balanced with the recognition that, while “societies or cultures can excel at developing a distinct set of virtues that can be admired even by outsiders to that society...that society will also, it seems, develop the political skills needed to twist or manipulate those same virtues into tools of oppression or dissolution” (Kasulis “Introduction” 86). The following remarks of Dale Wright are relevant here:

Signs now exist that some form of alteration has begun to occur in western historical thinking as a result, in part, of the twentieth century encounter with the rest of the world.... It would be a mistake, however... to regard this present activity of placing two traditions of historiography in critical relation to one another as itself occupying a position outside and ‘beyond’ these traditions.... What is possible, however, is that, through the encounter with other cultures and epochs, particular traditions of historical reflection will become in some way richer, more comprehensive, more self-critical, and more applicable to cultural ends which are themselves open to similar transformation.<sup>7</sup>

Bahm's criticism of the tendency of comparativists to sacrifice internal divisions in the name of making broad cross-cultural links is well-taken: "The same ideal, even one which dominated a culture during some periods in its history, has been repudiated in other periods... The more intricately one studies the details of the life of particular persons or of particular times, the more likely, perhaps, is he to despair of ever finding bases for broad generalizations about persisting cultural traits" (46). The point here is quite simple, though often still overlooked: these vast cultural ideals are themselves, as often as not, products of discourse, and one cannot treat them as if they were 'real'; one must always wield a critical mirror at all turns when traversing the labyrinth of comparative work.

Jonathan Z. Smith has argued something similar in his assertion that it is "far more important and interesting" to examine the way a group of people theorizes its ritual actions, than to focus simply on the actions themselves (*Imagining* 62). Particularly important for Smith are the "gaps" which inevitably arise between theory and actual practice: the critical scholar "is obligated to find out how *they* resolve this discrepancy rather than to repeat, uncritically, what one has read. It is here, as they face the gap, that any society's genius and creativity, as well as its ordinary and understandable humanity, is to be located. It is its skill at rationalization, accommodation, and adjustment." The point here is that *there is no pure cultural 'fact'*—everything undergoes a process of theorization the moment it is expressed in language; particularly the highly loaded or over-determined acts which occur in religious life. Failure to note this is the biggest failure of Eliadean and successive so-called phenomenological approaches to religion.

### The 'Imparative' Imperative

*Strictly speaking, comparative religion, on its ultimate level, is not possible, because we do not have any neutral platform outside every tradition whence comparisons may be drawn.... We cannot compare (comparare – that is, to treat on an equal-par basis), for there is no fulcrum outside. We can only imparare – that is, learn from the other, opening ourselves from our standpoint to a dialogical dialogue that does not seek to win or to convince, but to search together from our different vantage points.... Each encounter creates a new language.*<sup>8</sup>

– Raimundo Panikkar, "The Invisible Harmony," p. 141

James Heisig rightly recalls that the most compelling aspect of early twentieth-century Japanese philosophy is precisely its counterculturalism in method, if not always in content.<sup>9</sup> The deliberate conflation of philosophy and religion, combined with the willingness to enter seriously into cross-cultural analysis, allowed the Kyoto School thinkers to approach old questions in highly original ways (see Heisig 88). While attempting to work out a transformative philosophy, utilizing the many resources of a vibrant Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition as well as Christianity, they were at the same time free to use philosophy to analyze religious beliefs. And yet, there is a latent philosophical idealism in the Kyoto School approach to religion. Nishida, Nishitani and Tanabe all fell into one or another version of the same isolationist fallacy that has bedeviled the Eliadean tradition of study of religion in the West: "the determination to preserve religion unsullied by the

muck and mire of politics, of ideology."<sup>10</sup> That is, they tend to speak of religion (and, for that matter, culture) as if such were completely disconnected from the real world of politics and society; as a consequence, their works lack self-critical analysis.<sup>11</sup> Thus, though the existential aspect is central to Kyoto School thought, the historical and critical dimensions of religion are insufficiently developed.

What is sought in the method of critical comparativism is the mode in which beliefs are understood in a particular text or context, the way these are expressed in practice, and the relation of such expressions to historical foundations, interpretations and living traditions. Such an approach reflects what has been called discourse theory, in which "discourse as ensembles of language, constitute the text (i.e., are inside it), but the text itself is made up of braids of discourse which both precede the text and lead out of it."<sup>12</sup> In short, such an approach is concerned with a critical understanding of the relations between beliefs, doctrines and historical actions in a particular religious tradition and/or between traditions, with reference to the larger socio-political and religious contexts and to the larger history of the tradition(s), combined with further reflection on the way in which scholarly analysis is itself made into and performed as discourse. Religious criticism thus falls between the earlier movement towards comparative philosophy/religion on the one hand, and the more recent trend of 'purely' socio-historical studies on the other (see Heine 179). Whereas the former involves the danger of decontextualized and idealized readings of religious ideas and doctrines,<sup>13</sup> the latter all too often falls prey to philological or sociological reductionism, without giving due respect or attention to the wider application of the ideas themselves—beyond the texts and their immediate contexts.

As John James Clarke (12–13) suggests, here we might utilize hermeneutics to develop a paradigm for comparative interpretation,<sup>14</sup> specifically Hans-Georg Gadamer's insights on the significance and even necessity of "prejudice" or "foreunderstanding" (*Vorurteil*). Gadamer establishes three spheres from which we can best understand the nature of hermeneutics, as well as its claims to universality: art, history, and language (*Wahrheit*). This corresponds to a discussion by Gerhard Ebeling on three senses of the Greek word *hermeneuein*: expression (utterance/speaking); explication (interpretation/explanation); and translation (acting as interpreter) (243). All three senses refer to carrying across, which, incidentally, is the way Diotima describes the work of love in Plato's *Symposium*. As an embodiment or extension of *metapherein*, hermeneutics, at least in classical understanding, reveals itself as more art (*technê*) than science (*epistêmê*). Yet the Greeks, for the most part, tended to view the work of the poet and hermeneut in terms of a 'translation' or carrying across of inner thoughts into externalized language, thus perpetuating and reaffirming a commitment to the duality of *dianoia—hermeneia*. As Jean Grondin notes (21), this reached an apex in the Stoic distinction between the *logos prophorikos* and the *logos endiothetos* (between uttered and inward *logos*). Unsurprisingly, there is little conception here of the notion of speech, poetry, or language as *creating* thoughts and images.

### Comparativism as Critical Hermeneutics

*Let me begin by noting that the approach I take stands directly opposed to those who insist on objective and value-free scholarship. My standpoint is subjective and value-laden*

throughout. In “Science as a Profession,” Max Weber argued for “freedom from values” (*Wertfreiheit*), and held up as the ideal an objective approach that eliminates subjective value judgments, an ideal in which technical scholarship is restricted to its own specialization and refrains from excursions into other fields. This runs directly counter to my own ideal of scholarship, which is fundamentally subjective and thus forever informed by values.

– Matsumoto Shirō, “Buddhism and the Kami: Against Japanism,” p. 356

Already in Plato we see echoes of the double role of the interpreter—as both *hermēneutikos* or *prophētikos* (*Epinomis* 975 c 6, *Politikos* 260 d 11). The former term designates the figure who receives direct inspiration from the divine and communicates it to others, in a sort of divine-demonic mania, and the latter he who explains the words of the divinely inspired person. As Grondin notes, in spite of some ambiguity, the sense of *mediation* is retained in both cases. “The mediatory function of the hermeneutic led antiquity to make an etymological linkage between the semantic family of *hermeneus* and the mediator-god *Hermes*. This connection is probably more plausible than true, and philologists today regard it with almost universal skepticism. Yet a better etymology is still to be found, and none that has met with consensus” (22).

Communication is the *nec plus ultra* of hermeneutics, but we might be advised to reflect upon the German *Vermittlung* as a polysemic term, implying as it does mediation as well as communication—the sense of total human engagement that produces or in which is produced a new reality. Externalization, one might say, becomes the means to truth, thus paving the way for a constructivist and potentially non-foundationalist metaphysics, or perhaps even a rejection of metaphysics in favour of ethics as the basis for critical philosophy. Thus, though the hermeneutical task is primarily one of interpretation, interpretation always already implies consideration of mediation and communication. In any work of interpretation, context is key, because concepts “are not part of free-floating philosophical discourse, but socially, historically, and locally rooted, and must be explained in terms of those realities” (Hobsbawm 9). More than anything, hermeneutics is ‘embedded thinking’ of a sort that is frequently, though not always correctly, contrasted with Cartesian rationalism based on a separated ego-consciousness. Moreover, a hermeneutically inclined religious criticism, while critical-analytical, is also creative-persuasive, partly as a result of the realization that true criticism must be world-building as well as world-destroying,<sup>15</sup> and partly out of a recognition that comparative work must be willing to take risks. As Clifford Geertz put it, “Religion is sociologically interesting not because, as vulgar positivism would have it..., it describes the social order (which, in so far as it does, it does not only very obliquely but very incompletely), but because, like environment, political power, wealth, jural obligations, personal affection, and a sense of beauty, it shapes it.”<sup>16</sup> This shaping is not, to be sure, confined to the *objects* of study, but very much comes into play with respect to the *practice* of scholarship itself.<sup>17</sup>

As Jürgen Habermas argues, objectivism “deludes the sciences with the image of a self-subsistent world of facts structured in a lawlike manner; it thus conceals the *a priori*

constitution of these facts... and it prohibits discerning the *a priori* element of this system of reference and calling into question in any way its monopoly of knowledge” (McCarthy 41ff). The so-called scientific approach relates to what Pierre Bourdieu has referred to as “hagiographic hermeneutics”—a style of interpretation which, posing as scientific analysis, remains “superbly indifferent to the question of the social conditions in which words are produced and circulate” (1). The approach of Critical Buddhist Matsumoto Shirō is more reminiscent of Nietzsche, and even, more surprisingly, certain currents of contemporary criticism such as can be found in the writings of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. While giving Max Weber credit for touching on the heart of the matter—namely, the significance of values and neutrality in scholarship—Matsumoto takes the German scholar to task for expecting scholars to be non-human, i.e., value-free. Here we see the political undercurrent to Critical Buddhism emerge: assuming scholarship is objective allows for a) an acceptance on the part of scholars of the socio-political status quo, and b) an acceptance on the part of the powers that be that scholars or scientists will stay out of socio-political concerns, thus eliminating an important avenue of social criticism, and resulting in the phenomenon of Japanism (“Buddhism and the Kami” 356).

Thus at one important level, Critical Buddhism provides a critique of the entire modern academic system, particularly the division of knowledge into separate and independent disciplines. Hakamaya and Matsumoto would no doubt concur with John Cobb’s remark that within the modern university: “The vast majority of faculty take the disciplinary origin for granted and devote themselves to working within it, judging themselves and their colleagues by their contributions to the discipline rather than to human beings and the world... They are accustomed to thinking of themselves as critical thinkers, but this criticism is rarely directed to their own institution and the assumptions in which it operates” (Cobb “A Challenge” 128–29). Regarding the issue of neutrality, phenomenologists, siding with the tradition objectivist paradigm, adamantly refuse to offer criticism of the beliefs, doctrines, or practices of the so-called insiders they study.<sup>18</sup> As Levine (“Response” 385) remarks, however, “Neutrality in the study of religion should never be confused with some kind of politely principled but misguided refusal to critique the beliefs of others.” However, what Levine and other secular-minded critics of phenomenology seem to forget is that the critical approach they frequently employ itself rests upon certain guiding moral and ethical principles, which may have parallels in the traditions they study but more often than not emerge from their own cultural traditions (i.e., Enlightenment liberal humanism). Though this does not render their criticism invalid, it is an issue that needs to be raised. In other words, a critical analysis must not only expose the metaphysical and ethical assumptions of the scholar but should also strive—if it is to be truly critical—to establish foundations for the critique within the tradition being interpreted.<sup>19</sup> In doing so, however, the scholar becomes something more than a distanced observer, neutrally weighing the ‘data’ before her gaze. Steven Sutcliffe has argued that the true scholar of religion accepts that her work is “but a secondary order procedure dependent upon the primary phenomenon... what is at stake is not the truth and its operationalization, but more modestly, knowledge” (*Beyond* 267). Such an approach only works,

however, if we cling to the kind of objectivist epistemology such has been under attack for well over a century.

### Comparativism as ‘Realism’

Sutcliffe writes about a “realistic” study of religion that “is not interested in which epistemological system most clearly conforms to the religion as it really or essentially is, but in the coherence, consistency and subsequent etic usefulness of the representations it seeks to construct, which it naturally wants to test in as wide an area—the local, the regional, the national, the international—as possible” (*Beyond* 268). Religious criticism is, in the final analysis, an engaged, critical hermeneutics whose focus is the relation between religious texts, ideas, doctrines, beliefs, and history—including the lived practice of believers.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the political nature of critical comparative work in religion can hardly be overstated. On one level, this can be explained simply as the facility of making choices, which is essential to any theoretical work. As Jeffrey Carter notes, “Theory is the organizing principle that stipulates boundaries and defines, not just similarities, but any number of possible relations between description. Furthermore, like all logical types, a particular purpose or intentionality underlies the development of every explanation and explanatory comparison” (142). Similarly, with respect to the ideological role of theory, Harootunian writes that “[a]t bottom, all historical practice is an act of criticism. At the same time that theory enables us to imagine the framing operation involved in the formulation of any analytic program, it must teach us that our own perspectives possess no privilege over others, since its power lies precisely in the capacity to make visible the frames from which our categories for representation derive” (2). Jonathan Z. Smith has pointed to the relational or interactional aspect of any comparative work (and perhaps of any interpretive work at all), such that “otherness” becomes “preeminently a political category” (“What a Difference” 10). Marsha Hewitt takes this further, arguing that comparativists must become conscious of the overtly political nature of their enterprise. Moreover, though this dimension of power “can never be abolished... it can be radically revised toward a consciously interrelated, intersubjective, and thus democratic relation between the theorist and her/his chosen object of knowledge” (17).

In the study of religion, the phenomenological or religionist position has been undercut because it seems to rely on a version of transcendental realism that is itself a Platonist hangover.<sup>21</sup> Within philosophy and more specifically epistemology, a movement called Critical Realism has emerged in recent decades whose main impetus is to develop a form of ‘realism’ that does not fall prey to essentialism or substantialism. According to Roy Bhaskar, one of the principal proponents of Critical Realism, it is also a form of scholarship that is decidedly political:

Whereas the non-human world in no way depends upon us thinking about it for its existence and is therefore to be understood as an ‘intransitive’ dimension of being, the human being and especially the social world is in large part so dependent and is therefore ‘transitive’ as well as ‘intransitive’... [thus] because the thoughts and actions of social scientists can affect the nature of the social world in a way that they can not affect the nature of the non-human

world, we ought to be committed to the removal of the sources of social injustice. (Pearce and Woodiwiss 52).

Behind Critical Realism lies an idea that has become something of a commonplace in contemporary thought: philosophy or any other form of interpretive enquiry “does not consist solely of *a priori* thinking. Rather we utilize knowledge of the world even as we reflect upon it” (Pearce and Woodiwiss 52).

One of the most significant tasks for Critical Realism is examining the relationship between language and the social world. As López and Potter argue, though Critical Realism admits, with many contemporary thinkers, that the social world is “concept-dependent (made up of discursive structures),” it also holds, against many of those same thinkers, that the social world “is also made up of non-discursive structures” which may or may not have causal power. The question of the relative power of “social structures”—especially in terms of their causal efficacy, which is, really, just another way of saying their “reality”—is hotly debated among Critical Realists.<sup>22</sup> Rom Harré takes a particularly Rortyan stand on the matter of language and political change:

It is only a change of discursive conventions that changes the lived narrative that is a social order. Where does political action start? It starts in the everyday stories that you tell, it starts in the ways in which people tell each other what sort of persons they are, how they live their lives, but not in terms of grand taxonomic concepts. Real change, that is permanent amelioration of the conditions of life, occurs on a very small scale.<sup>23</sup>

Important here is the fundamental constructive element which connects the contemporary movements of Critical Realism and Critical Buddhism. Neither of these approaches can be reduced to empiricism—or at least naive empiricism—since they are committed to reshaping the world as much or more so than to discovering it (Cobb “A Challenge” 13).

Within Buddhist studies, Gregory Schopen has emphasized an “on the ground” approach to tradition, wherein “texts would be judged significant only if they could be related to what religious people actually did” (Schopen 114). While this may be a laudable step away from earlier forms of scholarship in religion based on Eliadean or purely philological grounds, it denudes religious and Buddhist studies of any constructive or engaged element, and in fact may fall prey to the problems of Weberian-inspired objective studies. As Lele notes (2), “This increasingly influential position investigates solely ‘what religious people actually did’ in the past—not what they might have to offer in the future,” in addition to ignoring the possibility that “many ideas advocated by historical Buddhists... are profound and worthy of serious consideration” in their own right. On the other hand, the work of scholars such as Rita M. Gross—which self-consciously attempts not only to understand, but to critically evaluate and in some cases even modify Buddhist ideas about gender and women—clearly emulates the type of constructive religious criticism presented here.

The work of Critical Buddhists Matsumoto and Hakamaya unrepentently blurs the lines between religion and scholarship and also confounds the traditional polarity

between outsiders and insiders in academic scholarship. Certainly there is something to be said for the way such an approach can be used against the “obscurantist” tendencies in religious studies (see Braun “Religion” 4–5), whereby the category “religion” gets sucked up into the ineffable realms of the holy and the sacred, untouchable and indefinable.<sup>24</sup> Yet unlike those reductionists who would choose to eliminate the category altogether, and collapse the study of religion into a larger “cultural studies,” the Critical Buddhist approach makes religion itself—or at least Buddhism so understood—into scholarship. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere (Shields §7.3) Critical Buddhism can perhaps be best conceived as a form of engaged Buddhist theology.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The prominent philosophical school of twentieth-century Japan, the Kyoto School (*Kyōto gaku-ha* 京都学派), was founded by Kyoto University professor Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945). Though not affiliated with or grounded in religion per se, the philosophy developed by Nishida, Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 (1900–1990), and Tanabe Hajime 田辺元 (1885–1962), is deeply indebted to Buddhism, and at least for the former two, to Zen in particular.

<sup>2</sup> A number of factors in the early 1980s, including a perceived rise in the rhetoric of Japanism (*Nihon-shugi* 日本主義), planted the seeds of discontent among a number of Japanese scholars, which broke into a full-fledged storm in 1985, with the publication of several essays by two Komazawa University 駒沢大学 Buddhist scholars affiliated with the Sōtō Zen sect, Hakamaya Noriaki 袴谷憲昭 and Matsumoto Shirō 松本史郎, thus bringing to birth a movement known as Critical Buddhism (*hihan Bukkyō* 批判仏教). In a forthright manner rare to modern Japanese academia Hakamaya and Matsumoto proceeded to launch a full frontal assault against not only past and present advocates of Japanism and various wartime Buddhist leaders who collaborated with the wartime regime, but also prominent Japanese philosophical figures (e.g., Nishida Kitarō, specific Buddhist doctrines (e.g., *tathāgata-garbha* [Jp. *nyoraijō* 如來藏] and ‘original enlightenment’ [Jp. *hongaku* 本覚]), and even entire sects (e.g., Zen), all of which were judged by the Critical Buddhists to be lacking in certain critical criteria, thus forfeiting any and all claims to being “truly Buddhist.” The ferment reached a peak in the early 1990s, with the publication of Hakamaya’s *Hongaku shisō hihan* 本覚思想批判 (Critiques of the Doctrine of Original Enlightenment, 1989), *Hihan Bukkyō* (Critical Buddhism, 1990), *Dōgen to Bukkyō* 道元と仏教 (Dōgen and Buddhism, 1992), and Matsumoto’s *Engi to kō: Nyoraijō shisō hihan* 縁起と空—如來像思想批判 (*Pratītya-samutpāda* and Emptiness: Critiques of the Doctrine of *Tathāgata-garbha*, 1989) and *Zen shisō no hihanteki kenkyū* 禅思想の批判的研究 (Critical Studies on Zen Thought, 1993), followed by a session at the American Academy of Religion’s 1993 meeting in Washington, D.C., entitled “Critical Buddhism: Issues and Responses to a New Methodological Movement,” out of which emerged the English-language collection of essays, *Pruning the Bodhi*

*Tree: The Storm over Critical Buddhism* (1994). As with all storms, this one, we might say, eventually passed the critical stage. Indeed, looking back now, with a full decade’s hindsight, the Critical Buddhist movement seems to have had little effect beyond the academy; even within such, its lasting effects seem minimal. This is lamentable, because CB, for all its flaws and imprecision, raised a number of important issues for contemporary Buddhist and comparative studies.

<sup>3</sup> See Paden “Elements” 13. — A number of scholars have argued convincingly that the immensely influential writings of Eliade and Rudolf Otto have transported a “theological/metaphysical assumption” into “a theory of religion” (Fitzgerald 92, 96–98; see also, e.g., Segal 98; Smart 176; B. Smith 52; McMullin 85). This assumption, however, while perhaps “metaphysical”, cannot be so easily labeled “theological”—indeed, similar assumptions can be found in the very work of those who most vociferously oppose the phenomenological or religionist brand of scholarship. Moreover, the problem has little to do with theology or with the holding a priori metaphysical assumptions (even Fitzgerald admits that this may be inevitable), but simply that the *specific forms* of metaphysical bias imported by phenomenologists (and many of those who call for a ‘scientific study’ of religion) are problematic for a number of reasons. There are a number of levels to this debate, so it would be best to look at them one by one, while recognizing that they are deeply interconnected (and sometimes confused). At one level, this debate hinges on the longstanding tension between ‘theology’ and ‘religious studies’—a tension that has been evident since the attempt to found a secular ‘science of religion’ over one hundred years ago, but which has become even more critical since the institutional separation of theology from religious studies in the academy in the 1960s and 1970s. Of course, in the Western academy this problem has been one largely confined to Christianity. But in recent times, with the proliferation of Buddhist studies and the simultaneous growth in the number of practising Buddhists in the West (and among Buddhist studies scholars) it has become a more general concern about the nature of confessional and scientific scholarship. Though this issue has recently been a matter of some concern to religious studies scholars, it is still mired in confusions and often slipshod (frequently *ad hominem*) disputations.

<sup>4</sup> Cobb 606. — Cobb goes on to say that while such an approach is naive at best, it is paternalistic or imperialistic at worst: “For my part I fail to see the gain involved in offending everyone for the sake of an elusive mutuality” (607; see Hakamaya 78).

<sup>5</sup> J. Z. Smith *Imagining* 35. — See also Poole 417; Cobb “Responses” 607; and Wilhelm Dilthey: “Interpretation would be impossible if the expressions of everyday life were totally foreign. It would be unnecessary if there was nothing foreign in them” (Clarke 182).

<sup>6</sup> In terms of comparative religious ethics, Levine writes: “Recognizing the logical primacy of understanding a different cultural system (i.e., adequate description) over evaluative and normative concerns need not rule out the legitimacy and importance of these latter concerns. Examining the acceptability of one’s own ethics, norms and values by juxtaposing them with other, vastly different and not so different ones may also be part of a comparative task” (Levine “Holism” 142). See Moody-Adams 291–92; Ames 3; and

Richard Shweder's vision of "postmodern humanism" in which "Going native amounts to traveling abroad or across ethnic boundaries to find some suppressed aspect of the self valued and on public display in another land or neighborhood, which one can then bring back as theoretical or cultural critique. The unity of human beings is no longer to be found in that which makes us common and all the same, but rather in a universal original multiplicity which makes each of us so variegated that 'others' become fully accessible and imaginable to us though some aspect of our own complex self" (Anderson 157).

<sup>7</sup> Wright 118. — See also Smart (*Beyond*) for another version of this, and the following remark of Richard Rorty: "We cannot leap outside our Western social democratic skins when we encounter another culture, and we should not try. All we should try to do is to get inside the inhabitants of that culture long enough to get some idea of how we look at them, and whether they have any ideas we can use. This is also all they can be expected to do on encountering us. If members of the other culture protest that this expectation of tolerant reciprocity is a provincially Western one, we can only shrug our shoulders and reply that we have to work by our own lights, even as they do, for there is no supercultural observation platform to which we might repair. The only common ground on which we can get together is that defined by the overlap between their communal beliefs and desires and our own" (Heidegger 212–13).

<sup>8</sup> Panikkar 141. — In Panikkar's "imparative" method, the process of mutual learning has no end, and is counter-universalizing. "In a word, the dialogical character of being is a constitutional trait of reality" (142). Panikkar blames Descartes for being responsible for the notion that diversity of opinions is the cause of philosophical anguish (146). See Allen 6: "When I try to compare and contrast alternative self-construction, I would agree that I am 'confusing' the issue by 'mixing' different perspectives, but only if I were to retain some inadequate, essentialist, ahistorical, absolute, de-contextualized interpretation of texts. What I am trying to do instead is to provide new creative readings, interpretations, and constructions of texts that are always to some extent contextualized."

<sup>9</sup> "On the one hand, the idea of using religious belief or practice as a foundation for philosophy is something the west has resisted vigorously.... On the other, protagonists of Zen in the east had brandished their irrationalities and paradoxes around like a sword that cut through the presumption of rationalism and protected them from outside criticism" (Heisig 38).

<sup>10</sup> McMullin 85. — McMullin provides many examples of this in his critique of the Eliadean *Encyclopedia of Religion*, for instance, its reading of modern Shinto without mention of any political or ideological agenda.

<sup>11</sup> "The wider sociological and anthropological context of culture which embraces the genesis, transmission and transformation of the social order of human relationships, work, commerce, entertainment, political power, and so forth, is left out of the picture. As a result of this dimming of the connections between culture and the social order, the former is able to criticize the latter without itself becoming an object of criticism, and the harmony between religion and culture goes unquestioned. As a result, the tendency of the Kyoto

philosophers to distance religious consciousness from social conscience, a tendency it shares with much of Japanese Buddhism, has helped to stifle the emergence of overriding principles critical of Japanese culture at the same times as they are free to call on their own traditional ascetic and moral values to abet critiques of western culture and society" (Heisig 15, my emphasis; see Blocker and Starling 120).

<sup>12</sup> Murphy 397. — Murphy provides a detailed overview of discourse theory, including its three main sources in a) the New Rhetoric school of I. A. Richards and Kenneth Burke, b) Russian formalism and Mikhail Bakhtin's writings in particular, and c) structuralism and its heirs (396; see Todorov 3–6). In terms of religious studies, Lincoln and Masuzawa are two recent, however distinct, examples of the application of discourse theory. Also to be considered are all four of Sumner Twiss's various methods of interpretive and comparative inquiry: 1) formal/conceptual, 2) historical/philological, 3) ethnographic, and 4) dialogical; emphasis has to be on the first and fourth of these.

<sup>13</sup> Heine remarks that comparative studies frequently "give a misleading and idealized impression of Buddhist thought by conflating sectarian polemics with truth-claims, for example, or by mistaking bids for patronage and political power for metaphysical arguments shorn of historical contingencies." While the general point is well-taken, Heine seems to present here an idealized understanding of things like 'sectarian polemics' and 'truth claims'. Can such be so easily distinguished? Here, at least, the dichotomies are not so straightforward as Heine seems to assume. Who's to say that bids for 'political power' cannot also be 'metaphysical arguments'?

<sup>14</sup> Clarke notes three stages of East-West philosophical encounter: 1) universalism—characterized by the search, from Leibniz through Huxley to the 1949 East-West Philosophers' Conference in Hawai'i, for a *philosophia perennis*; 2) comparative; and 3) hermeneutical. The last, he says, "goes beyond the earlier goals of comparative studies by seeking more explicitly to engage the East in philosophical argument, and by developing a more reflective and self-critical stance, therefore drawing such studies into contemporary debates about language and the limits of philosophical discourse" (125).

<sup>15</sup> In terms of the biblical "destruction and edification" (*destruam et aedificabo*; see Deut. 32:39; Jeremiah 50, 51). See also Heidegger 29; Johnson 1.

<sup>16</sup> Geertz 35–36. — Geertz, however, locates this 'creative' aspect squarely within religion, as opposed to philosophy, whose task seems to be confined to 'interpretation' (40). Contrariwise we find Gadamer's reiteration of Goethe's dictum that: "Difficult though it might be to detect it, a certain polemical thread runs through any philosophical writing. He who philosophizes is not at one with the previous and contemporary world's ways of thinking of things" (Johnson 5).

<sup>17</sup> A practice-oriented form of hermeneutics is not found simply in modern Western tradition, but has distinct parallels within East Asian and Buddhist scholarship prior to the modern period. Indeed, according to Charles Muller (2), along with "essence-function" and "interpenetration," "study-as-practice"—interpretive scholarship which must be fully absorbed and lived in order to be meaningful—is one of the

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key themes underlying East Asian religious and philosophical thought from a very early period, including Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism.

<sup>18</sup> Roger Corless, in article expounding a certain vision of Buddhist theology entitled “Hermeneutics and Dharmology,” (Corless 96) cites the case of a “prominent scholar of Tibetan Buddhism” who was denied tenure because “it was said, he *merely* translated the commentaries of the lamas...he did not criticize them.” Corless uses this example to question the priorities of the “objective” study of religion in favour of a “dharmalogical” (i.e., insider’s) one, but a critic could just as soon retort that a) the university system is based upon certain values, which include critical inquiry and analysis rather than simply reiteration; b) as Dale Wright would argue, in many cases, criticism might actually be required as part of a real attempt to come to terms with a text, even—or especially—on the part of an ‘insider’.

<sup>19</sup> In respect to this, Martin Jaffee has argued that, instead of “caring for” religion itself, as sundry AAR presidents have suggested, the scholar of religion should rather “care for” her students, which seems to mean, for Jaffee, making them into Rortyan liberal ironists—“cultivating their awareness of the contingency of all perspectives—including that of ‘religion’” (Jaffee 336). Perhaps this is, itself, a “religious” goal; it certainly is a “political” one.

<sup>20</sup> See Heidegger’s remarks on Schleiermacher’s “Hermeneutics and Criticism”: “Hermeneutics and criticism, both philological disciplines, both methodologies, belong together, because the practice of each presupposes the other. The first is in general the art of understanding rightly another man’s language, particularly his written language; the second, the art of judging rightly the genuineness of written works and passages, and to establish it on the strength of adequate evidence and data” (*On the Way* 10). See also Maraldo’s plea for a new form of hermeneutics of practice, in which “application is not a separate moment of interpretation, and appropriation does not follow upon but forms truth” (43), as well as Jeffrey Stout’s understanding of philosophy as “conceptual archaeology” (2).

<sup>21</sup> “[Transcendental realism] may be said to be Platonic in the sense that the sacred essence is manifested in the phenomenon (*universale ante rem*) or Aristotelian in that it is intrinsic in the phenomenon (*universale in re*). The assumption is that behind the diversity of religion(s) in history, society, and culture there must be something universal—an essence or unity—which is ontologically real” (Jensen “What Sort?” 115). Jensen proffers an alternative to transcendental realism that he calls “intuitive” or “commonsense” realism. “By this I mean that is a fair intuition that there is something real in this world but we also know that there is a very vexed epistemological problem to argue rationally in defense of this tradition” (118). But to admit that there is “something out there” is not to admit to any form of “realism.” Indeed, though Jensen criticizes Rorty’s “relativist syllogisms” as being unable to defend the “purpose of critical scholarship” against “religionist obscurantism and existentialist mysticism,” his blithe acceptance of “realism” seems to be itself a form of “realist obscurantism.”

<sup>22</sup> Rom Harré and Roy Bhaskar being the two most prominent Critical Realists who take opposite stands on this issue; Harré rejects what he sees as Bhaskar and others’ “reification of categories”; Bhaskar retorts that Harré is guilty of “social

reductionism” and wonders, if causal agency is located solely in human beings, why it is so difficult to create a better world.

<sup>23</sup> Rorty would add that this kind of “local” change often occurs, or at least can occur, from reading books in the manner of a “sentimental education.”

<sup>24</sup> Braun discusses these obscurantist tendencies by alluding to Derrida’s “discourses of hauntology,” which, for Braun, “subvert a reserach strategy whose aim is to enlist the study of religion as a contributing partner in the pursuit of a science of human life, an exercise that could be credible within the family of human and social sciences within the university” (“Religion” 5).

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