Religious Negotiations at the Boundaries

How religious people have imagined and dealt with religious difference, and how

scholars have imagined and dealt with religious people's imaginings and dealings

Postmodern critiques of so-called essentialism are by now numbingly familiar to

many humanities scholars. We have been schooled in the costs inherent in speaking of

cultures, nations, ethnicities, ideas, or philosophical tendencies as if they were fixed,

unchanging, hermetically sealed, self-generated entities. Many scholars engaged in the

study of religion, however, have not yet taken these critiques seriously. And even

scholars who do take them seriously have not yet arrived at satisfying alternative ways of

speaking about the things (if they are "things") formerly imagined as the stable "isms"

populating curricula and textbooks on the religions of the world. Meanwhile,

postmodern-style analysis has focused almost exclusively on the "sins" of modern

Western discourse without often pausing to ask whether other cultures "sin" similarly or

not. If religions are not "essences," then what are they, or how ought we to characterize

them? How have people in other times and places, operating in different language

families—or even through other modes such as ritual action or visual representation—

performed what we in modern English call "religions" and, more especially, the

interaction of multiple religions? How, in other words, have they negotiated perceived

religious difference?

With this project we want to do two things simultaneously. First, we seek to

analyze and better understand the ways in which religious studies as a loosely organized

discipline has constructed its objects—specifically the plural "religions" of history and

their mutual interactions. (We are particularly interested in dynamic processes of *interaction* across religious boundaries.) But we are not content with cataloging the conceptual and metaphorical pitfalls of previous work. We also want to explore new ways of imagining and speaking that will generate new research paradigms. This first agendum of our project, then, focusing on how religion is studied, is both critical and constructive.

Secondly, however, we are not content simply to analyze Western constructions of "religions" and interreligious interactions without also investigating the shape of indigenous ways of imagining and performing those very phenomena. We feel that philologically and ethnographically informed inquiry into how people in various places and times have ideationally and metaphorically construed matters analogous to (which is emphatically not to say "the same as"!) what the modern West has labeled religious difference will open up new directions for research. For example, it has often been asserted that many cultures simply lack words for what we in English call their "religions" (or their "isms"), and perhaps in many cases this is true. On the other hand, it is an open question whether some premodern, non-Western cultures have developed ways of writing that identify and denominate purported entities that seem functionally equivalent to what we think of as the plural religions. (One of us has argued in print that such phenomena can be observed in the case of early medieval China.) Through what sorts of metaphors, cultural processes, and expressive media have people in earlier times imagined the sorts of phenomena Western discourses have labeled "religions" and their interactions—if they have done so at all? And how, in recent times, have modern Western constructions been taken up, used, and modified in non-Western societies, and to what

effects? We wish to study ways in which people have continually invented and reinvented what we are provisionally here calling their religious traditions and, more especially, how they have constructed and reconstructed, metaphorically imagined and reimagined, and thereby negotiated perceived religious difference, however they have characterized what we thereby name. It is of course inevitable that the metaphors and categories we use can never be made to completely fit or mirror what we study. We reject both the assumption that the phenomena we study will necessarily be found to fit our initial categories and the assumption that it would be possible to somehow elide cultural, conceptual, and linguistic differences and simply speak, as contemporary scholars, in the same terms as those we study, without remainder. To modify a famous utterance of Wilhelm Dilthey, absolute difference would preclude the possibility of speaking about this topic, while absolute sameness would render speaking about it redundant. It is precisely in the lack of complete fit between the ways we are defining our interest and what we find in our source materials or our contemporary subjects that the creative work of interpretation gets done.

Two caveats. First, we by no means intend to limit the phenomena under study to "theoretically" natured or meta-level written texts. Both oral discourse and ritual and other cultural performances can be scenes for the construction of "religion"-like entities and the renegotiation of interreligious boundaries and relations, as can narratives in various media. Second, we recognize an Escher-like difficulty inherent in our enterprise: we must use conventional language in order to effectively convey what we are about while at the same time arguing the limits of that language and trying to reach toward alternate ways of speaking and thinking.

Some of us have done previous work along these lines, and in doing so we have drawn significantly on the work of other scholars. Tony K. Stewart, both in the statement of purpose for the Islamic Exceptionalism project and elsewhere, has used metaphor theory to criticize the usually taken-for-granted scholarly use of "syncretism" and has proposed "symbiosis" as a better alternative, which carries its own problems of metaphoric entailment that are resolvable only by turning to the processes of negotiating these interactions, offering translation theory as one alternative. Rob Campany, building in part on Jonathan Z. Smith's critique of the impact of Christian exceptionalism on cross-religious comparison, has also applied metaphor theory to an analysis of dominant modern-Western metaphors for conceptualizing and talking about "religions" and their mutual interactions; has challenged Wilfred Cantwell Smith's once-influential argument that the category of "religions" was not only a Western invention but also lacks analogues in any other traditional cultures; and has proposed two alternate metaphors for imagining religions—as repertoires of cultural resources and as imagined communities. Bryan Lowe has looked at ritual purity, often considered a hallmark of Shintō, to show that it was central to Buddhist merit-makng practices throughout premodern East Asia. He has also focused on the literary quality of dedicatory prayers to argue that in these texts worldviews seamlessly combine assorted images that are never labeled as corresponding to a single tradition. Tiffany Hodge's ethnographic research in rural Bangladesh examines the discourses and practices of religious piety that create more rigid boundaries between Muslims and Hindus, as well as those that eschew such boundaries. Her close observation and analysis provides a more fluid depiction of competing normative ideologies than the totalizing terminology of "Islamization" and "orthodoxy."

In this project some of us may refer to some of this earlier work if it seems useful, but we hope to strike out in new research directions, we encourage criticism, and the project is by no means conceived simply as an extension of these earlier efforts of ours.