

The Island of Theology and Religious Studies in the Global Age

Remarks on the Discipline and Its Prejudices

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When I was packing in 2011 to travel from Iran to Glasgow to start my PhD, I insisted on putting my heavy Hebrew Bible, Greek New Testament, and Vulgate in the suitcase. I had got these Bibles by spending much of my savings, and asking American friends who travelled to my hometown, Qom, to kindly bring them. With all its difficulty, buying the Bibles and dictionaries was easier than finding self-study facilities. A couple of good university libraries were helpful, but I mostly relied on hacked books. (Perhaps that is one of the most legitimate things that hacking has ever been used for.) I had done literary studies, and then went back to where I thought should be my home: religious studies. I decided to study at the University of Glasgow, because it offered PhDs in literature and Theology. I thought I needed to study the Bible in a Christian setting. I had got a positive response from advisers, who were based in poststructuralist approaches to the Bible. A romanticized image of freedom of thought had overwhelmed my imagination and motivations. My dream was to pursue religious studies, *religionswissenschaft*, disinterested study of religion. I imagined I could study what I liked, I could do historical or literary studies as the authors of the books that I read had done. I only needed to try.

But upon embarking on my journey in Biblical studies, in what I thought would become a rhetorical analysis of Luke-Acts, I was soon startled by the underlying presumptions of the literature I was studying. The soil was fertile

for me to gradually move to the nascent field of reception studies, where I found myself at home for quite a few years even after my PhD. In my literary studies before the PhD, I had learnt postcolonial theory, and yes, even though I would not succumb to the temptation, I could not help but write in my book, *Paul's Letters and the Construction of the European Self* (Bloomsbury, 2017), that I was looking at Paul 'from Arabia', as it were. I was trying to demonstrate that European scholars had missed Paul because they were trying to construct their favorite hero. Historical critical scholarship had got it wrong, it was anything but unbiased. When the book came to a close, I returned the bulky Bibles without having used them. What is traditionally called philological study of the Bible required them; and that is not what I had done. By that time, I had learnt that biblical scholarship was a thoroughly Christian discipline, that a Muslim woman is not assumed to be interested in the Bible for reasons other than comparison, dialogue, or post-colonial approaches. (Well, by then I was myself proof thereof.) With this personal story about my own academic journey, I come to some remarks on the discipline of Theology and Religious Studies.

(1) There are those who do 'rigorous' studies of the Bible, and there are those others who do other things, with a little help from Derrida (as in the title of Yvonne Sherwood's edited volume, *Derrida's Bible*, 2004).¹ A myth of 'freedom of thought' or 'freedom of knowledge' or 'disinterestedness of religious studies' had driven me along to first imagine myself in the former approach. That a scripture could be studied philologically by anybody with scholarly interest regardless of their backgrounds had traditional precedents in the discipline of Oriental studies, including Qur'anic and Islamic Studies. And that is what I also had in mind when trying to write my dissertation on a philological study of the Bible. Soon, I learnt that it was not a two-way street. It is true that no one had in any way stopped me, but just as no one really stops a wheelchair in the entrance of a building with stairs and no ramps. Here also the infrastructure was not – as it were – either theoretically and practically suitable for the kind of questions I had in my mind. I felt that the literature upon which the research was to be built was itself questionable; so my job was to correct them in the first place. Besides, the ice-breakers in the conference coffee breaks could not but revolve on my 'anomalous' presence in biblical studies.

(2) The University has opened itself to the subaltern. But the subaltern goes in the Department of Subaltern Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, Women's Studies. Instead of patronizing the subaltern, we ask them to

¹ Yvonne Sherwood (ed.), *Derrida's Bible: Reading a Page of Scripture with a Little Help from Derrida*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

speak on their own behalf. The subaltern academic becomes the voice of the voiceless, the voice of the brown woman, who was rescued from brown men by white men, the brown woman, who cannot otherwise speak. The subaltern is also happy doing this. They can play the role of revolutionaries, fight prejudices, they can create a more ethical world, they are good at it (they have the ‘standpoint’ of the native), and they can build bridges with their native home.

(3) The Orientalists of Edward Said’s book do not do Oriental Studies. Where are they now? In Theology and Religious Studies. There are the white disciplines of historical critical scholarship of the Bible, Systematic and Fundamental Theologies. When the white goes out to the other, it is through other white disciplines of theology of religions, comparative theology, and intercultural studies, the disciplines of the nice, friendly person, who is remorseful of the past and is not negligent of the other. Yet the discipline is hardly aware of the power dynamics of its own approach. The Western Christian cannot just go to the Hindu, the Jewish, or the Muslim and say: “Oh, I am sorry for our animosity towards you. Now I have come to learn from you and enrich my own faith.” This gesture of genuine humility and vulnerability in learning cannot be detached from the long history of Christian missionary-colonial encounters. When the Western Christian is reading a theme in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism or Islam as relating to another theme in Christianity, they run the risk of becoming like their older missionary brother who taught the native that they had been unwittingly worshipping Christ all along. Here the force of Ulrich Schmiedel’s suggestion that we need *political comparative theology* becomes clearer.² Even in their attempts at self-reflection and self-critique, intercultural theologies have failed in understanding the others in their own terms. Then, there are these other disciplines of postcolonial studies, global Christianities, which are reminding the earlier disciplines of their biases, but could not overcome the myth of unbiased theology, and have only remained a “theme park theology”, nice exotic things that are not meant to hurt anyone’s biases/prejudices.³ Indeed, more than two decades after its publication, Marcella María Althaus Reid’s critique speaks to the current situation of Theology and Religious Studies, which has not been critical enough, which has retained the image of the savior, without problematizing theology in critical terms.

² Ulrich Schmiedel, *Terror und Theologie: der religionstheoretische Diskurs der 9/11 Dekade*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021.

³ Marcella Maria Althaus-Reid, “Gustavo Gutierrez Goes to Disneyland: Theme Park Theologies and the Diaspora of the Discourse of the Popular Theologian in Liberation Theology”, *Interpreting Beyond Borders*, ed. F. F. Segovia, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, 36–58.

(4) Theology and Religious Studies, as an academic discipline, has two targets – the politician and the parishioner. It has done the two groups favors. The politician should not make policies that undermine the integrity and right of belief and expression. The parishioner needs to be educated against populism and fundamentalism. Indeed, Theology and Religious Studies protects the politician and the parishioner from each other. To the politician, religion becomes liberal; to the parishioner, religion is protected against being liberal. But in this dual attempt, Theology and Religious Studies risks its own integrity. And it still ignores the other who is outside the politician-parishioner game. Political theology should be targeted to and integrated with the understanding of the other. That is what Schmiedel has argued for both in *Terror und Theologie* and his co-authored work with Hannah Strømmen, *The Claim to Christianity*.⁴

(5) Within this kind of structuring of the disciplines, Islamic studies/theology belongs elsewhere. At points Islam is religion par excellence, even replacing the nineteenth-century tropes of Judaism. And at other points, Islam is the other of theology. ‘Theology’ is Christian theology, with clear-cut borders.

(6) Theology and Religious Studies has failed to open itself up to the ‘religious other’. In as much as taxonomies are challenging, they cannot be dismissed. Still, this does not mean that we allow ourselves to be ethically irresponsible toward the ‘religious’ other. In my book, *Paul and the Construction of the European Self*,⁵ I tried to show how modern biblical interpretation needed to be ethically responsible to the Jews and Muslims. In my later work in Farsi, I reminded Muslims that they have an ethical responsibility to followers of other religions. In order to be global and contextual, theology of any religion cannot stay on a safe island. It has to acknowledge its accountability to the others.

(7) It is true that the vocabulary of liberation, postcolonial, diaspora, and other subaltern theologies looms large in different disciplines, not the least theology and religious studies, but we have run the risk of creating different ‘bubbles’ for particular disciplines and approaches. It may be time to make the followers of different approaches, disciplines, and religions confront each other. Nowadays we seem to have plenty of tools and devices to critically construct theology and religious theology. It is true, after all, that the criticism of religion is the beginning of all criticism. Decades after the emergence of liberation, postcolonial, diaspora, and other subaltern theol-

⁴ Hannah Strømmen & Ulrich Schmiedel, *The Claim to Christianity: Responding to the Far Right*, London: SCM Press, 2021.

⁵ Fatima Tofighi, *Paul and the Construction of the European Self*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.

ogies, and in a time that we avoid attributing wars and bloodshed to scriptures and their right and wrong interpretations, we should take the audacious step of making people confront each other. To be global, Theology and Religious Studies must not stop rethinking its own categories with the help of humanities.

Conclusion

I started with my personal story to highlight the boundaries within the discipline of theology and religious studies. In what seems like an audacious orchestration of clichés, I tried to uncover the biases of the discipline, precisely in the moment that it was exposed to critical theory. Indeed, theology and religious studies has yet to be ‘provincialized’. It has yet to engage with the other, perhaps through co-contamination with the ‘religious’ other, as Ulrich Schmiedel in this collection also emphasizes. ▲

SUMMARY

Theology and Religious Studies is still fraught with biases that in different ways underline the (religious) other. I try to uncover some of these biases, by calling attention to the infrastructures that do not allow certain people, questions, or themes to feel at home in the discipline. This is a call to provincialize theology and religious studies in Europe and North America.