

# Agency and the Critical Study of Religion

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## Abstract

The critical study of religion is enchanted by modern problematics, and this limits the feasibility of the project. Both secularity and modernity have been deconstructed in recent decades, but the primacy of the modern and secular agentic human remains largely unchallenged. Tracing this trend back in European history shows that a definitive collapsing of agency was necessary for the development of modern political and social structures. Modern prescriptions on agency limit the study of religion – a domain which is largely constituted by narratives involving non-human agents. A remedy for the impasse may be found in looking to a nonmodern conceptual apparatus for new avenues in theory-making and applying these concepts to the critical study of religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Keywords:** Modernity, religious studies, nonmodern, agency, critical theory of religion, secular, posthuman

## Introduction

The critical study of religion is enchanted by modern problematics. The ongoing debate around the term ‘religion’ is indicative of this conceptual gyre, and evidenced in the interchanges between Bruce Lincoln and Tim Fitzgerald, published in the journal *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* (1996 to 2007). In a series of articles that serve as a conversation between these two scholars, the nature and study of religion is thoroughly contested, along with the value of the term itself.

## Lincoln's Theses

Lincoln sets the stage for this discussion in his 1996 article entitled, *Theses on method* (Lincoln 1996), and later admits that this publication was 'a deliberate provocation that invited critical response' (Lincoln 2007:163). In 2005, in an article that goes by the same title, he states that 'history is the method and religion the object of study' (Lincoln 2005:8) and follows this with a discussion of how history attends to critical and temporal domains, while religion attends to the eternal and transcendent. Within this dualist framework, he notes that the critical study of religion is 'a discourse that resists and reverses the orientation of that discourse with which it concerns itself' (Lincoln 2005:8). Based on this logic, he laments the 'the guilty conscience of western imperialism' (Lincoln 2005:9) that he believes is implicated in permitting 'those whom one studies to define the terms in which they will be understood' (Lincoln 2005:9). He condemns this method of studying religion as 'cultural relativism' that should not be 'confused with scholarship' (Lincoln 2005:10). Lincoln's succinct and rather perfunctory thesis embodies an early critical religion discourse, which is firmly committed to a modern, secular, and humanist approach to the study of religion. Claiming hegemonic privileges for the 'objective' position of the historian, he disregards the meat and bones of the religious domain entirely, comprised of the lived experiences of religious people. The unproblematized dualism in his conceptual framework renders his contribution to the debate around religion rather dated, and possibly only useful as a departure for critique.

## Fitzgerald's Response

Fitzgerald supplies this critique in an article entitled *Bruce Lincoln's 'Theses on method': Antitheses* (Fitzgerald 2006). Identifying as a critical scholar himself, Fitzgerald laments Lincoln's 'facility to create an appearance of critical discourse analysis' (Fitzgerald 2006:392) while presenting a list of theses that are 'hardly intelligible as a serious academic proposition about method' (Fitzgerald 2006:413). He argues that the essentializing stance that Lincoln declares, in which both the religious and the secular historic are reified, serves to confirm 'a network of categorical assumptions around which the world can remain polarized' (Fitzgerald 2006:392). Instead, Fitzgerald suggests that these polarized categories should be understood as 'rhetorical and

ideological' distinctions within a wider dynamic of power relations (Fitzgerald 2006:397).

Fitzgerald (2006:401) goes on to note that both religion and the secular are ideological constructs with 'no essential meaning'. In his earlier book, *The ideology of religious studies* (Fitzgerald 1999), he clarifies that his critical study of religion involves a radical deconstruction of the term and an abandonment of the academic project to understand religion as anything other than socio-political. In a publication entitled, *A critique of 'religion' as a cross-cultural category* (Fitzgerald 1997), he puts forward an argument for a critical study of religion in which religion 'dissolves or ought to dissolve without remainder into ideology or culture understood as institutionalized values and symbolic systems' (Fitzgerald 1997:93). Following this deconstructive reasoning, he suggests that critical religion scholars, in taking a non-theological position regarding religion, 'are fundamentally talking about culture' (Fitzgerald 1997:93). In Fitzgerald's *Antithesis*, Lincoln stands accused of 'merely recycling a series of empty dichotomies' through the essentialization of both religion and history (Fitzgerald 2006:403), thereby allowing religion to remain an unchallenged domain within academic discourse, despite being underwritten by Christian theological assumptions<sup>1</sup>.

## **Lincoln's Reply**

Lincoln responds to Fitzgerald's critique with a 2007 article entitled, *Concessions, confessions, clarifications, ripostes: By way of response to Tim Fitzgerald* (Lincoln 2007). In it he decries the 'plodding, misinformed and misguided' criticisms voiced in Fitzgerald's *Antithesis* (Lincoln 2007:163). Against the accusation of reifying religion as a universal category, he argues that his use of the term appears in a context in which he remains 'cognizant of the fact that language is neither the world, nor its reflection, but an imperfect instrument' (Lincoln 2007:164). He also argues that he remains committed to *redefining* these 'key terms' in the field – a project which he determines has critical value. Lincoln suggests that his use of the term 'religion' is

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<sup>1</sup> Fitzgerald's commitment to atheism is an ideological stance that he takes as necessary within what he calls the 'non-theological academic humanistic enquiry' into religion (Fitzgerald 1997:97).

therefore not ‘an act of imperialist aggression, but neither is it intellectually sufficient’ (Lincoln 2007:168). In this, both scholars briefly agree. However, as Lincoln defines the critical project, the object of religion remains, despite its mutable and contested form. This is the biggest criticism he levels against his conversation partner: Fitzgerald fails to bring that-which-was-previously-designated-religious into the ‘reach of critical examination’ (Lincoln 2007:168). In a rather tongue-in-cheek riposte, Lincoln remarks that in Fitzgerald’s hands, ‘religion simply melts into air, leaving nothing to discuss, save (naughty) Scholars’ misuse of a (now-naughty) word’ (Lincoln 2007:168). He argues that by reducing religion to culture without remainder, what constitutes religion is no longer visible.

## **Critical Reflections**

It is characteristic of the restless postmodern academy that many accusations of dualism are constructed, using logic that also succumbs to dualist rhetoric. As I will now demonstrate, both scholars are locked in a modern problematic, both are limited by modern horizons, and both have relevance only to modern thinkers. The limits that these scholars introduce to the study of religion impede critical thought. This impediment has political consequences. It masquerades as generative through the crackling energy of ferocious debate, but it retains the intellectual stranglehold on the academic world that was first instituted through the laborious construction of modern distinctions.

While Lincoln argues that distinguishing ‘religion’ as a separate object remains necessary, he defines this object within a Christian monotheistic cosmology, as Fitzgerald rightly notes. Lincoln’s reliance on notions like ‘eternity’ and ‘transcendence’ (Lincoln 2005:8) point directly to modern values shaped by theological reasoning. However, Fitzgerald’s insistence that the term itself be rejected by critical scholars, performs a radical amputation that relies on an unspoken atheistic relation to the world. As I hope to demonstrate, reducing the term ‘religion’ to the domain of cultural phenomena does not remedy the damage done through its deployment. A postmodern history of the field reveals that religion was constructed along with the modern project and whetted on the blade of European colonial expansion. As a category, it cut the ongoing becoming of the word into polarized dichotomies, circling incessantly around the Enlightenment infused notions of eternity, divinity,

and divine authority. The people of the nonmodern world were cleaved by this conceptual blade, and defined in relation to where they fell, as the successive cuts of modern thinking hardened around them. This cannot be undone by turning to the term and banishing it from the conceptual kingdom. It also cannot be undone by holding on to modern concerns regarding essential or eternal realities. Both these attempts hold the modern hegemony in place within the academy.

The academic question of *what religion is*, has dire political underpinnings. David Chidester's retelling of the Khoekhoen<sup>2</sup> genocide that took place in Southern Africa during the early colonial years, demonstrates this. In his book, *Savage systems* (Chidester 1996), he details the tragedy that unfolded on the Cape Peninsula at the start of the colonial era.

## **Historical Considerations**

Leading up to the establishment of the first way station at the Cape in 1652, the literature published in Europe regarding the native inhabitants of this region asserted that they lacked religion and natural reason (Herbert 1634; Chidester 1996). Once the colony had settled on the African shoreline to some degree, new publications lauded the recently discovered 'moon worship' of the Khoekhoen people, who then apparently showed signs of natural religious intentions (Nieuhof 1654; Heek 1665; Herport 1669). This condition did not prevail, however, as the expansion of the colony prompted conflict with the local Khoekhoen tribes, and responding European sentiment began to associate 'moon dancing' with 'laziness' and the Khoekhoen's unwillingness to engage in colonial labor practices (Chidester 1996:39). The Khoekhoen were therefore represented as having no religion, and this fed into colonial policies on the borders and frontiers in Southern Africa. By early 1700, many Khoekhoen people had been co-opted into the colonial economic system as laborers, and into the colonial religious system as Christians. During this period of relative social stability, the Khoekhoen people were again reflected within an ongoing academic and theological discussion as having the ability to show natural Christian values. However, by late 1700, a final

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<sup>2</sup> Formally called 'Khoi', 'Hottentot', or 'Khoisan', these peoples were populating the Cape region before the Bantu expansion, and at the time that the first European settlers began making territory claims.

tragedy relegated the question of Khoekhoen religion to the archives. The Cape colony once again expanded past its ability to provide resources for its people, and this led to growing conflicts over limited grazing land for livestock. Colonial civilians formed armed militias and received hunting licenses from Cape officials to genocide the remaining Khoekhoen people, who at this stage were understood to have no religion, no reason, and therefore no humanity. By 1800, the academic interest in the Khoekhoen religion consisted of archival research, as no independent societies remained.

This chilling example from our recent past reminds the contemporary scholar that the category of religion, constructed and contested in the debate between theological and secular scholars, has been instrumental in inflicting extreme levels of violence on the peoples of the world. Critical religion responds to this charge with a morbid focus on the term ‘religion’ itself, and a preoccupation with whether it should be ‘cancelled’ or not. This appears, on the surface, to be a constructive project. In making the category account for itself, the modern gaze can turn along with a pointed finger towards the transgressor, the very term, which encompasses the whole of Christian imperial insistence within its eight letters. However, what remains invisible is the hegemony of the modern humanist position, the position that keeps its back to the nonmodern world and defends the academy against nonmodern values. This humanism is what provides the fuel for the debate of Lincoln and Fitzgerald as they try to define the project of critical religion within its confines. Lincoln’s supposition that religion references eternity while history references temporality, is perhaps more theologically motivated than Fitzgerald’s assumption that religion references nothing at all, but both remain firmly entrenched in the notion that the human agent is the sole focus (and limit) of the current critical project. From this perspective, they argue themselves to a standstill around the human use of a human term.

## **Agency and the Modern Project**

What about the accounts of multiple *nonhuman* agents that characterize nonmodern, indigenous, and folk practices, whether they be called religious or not? (Pierotti & Wildcat 2000; Salmon 2000; Kessler 2019). Crucially, this question is not answerable within the humanist framework that Lincoln and Fitzgerald have adopted. Lincoln’s grasp on nonhuman agency reaches its

limit at the point where he introduces an absolute, essentialized, and eternal divinity. This monotheistic conception of religion places the nonhuman God as Agent beyond the reach of human examination. In opposition to this, Fitzgerald does away with any possibility of nonhuman agency, by insisting simply that human culture is the category that will finally and sufficiently explain religious phenomena.

When responding to this modern conundrum, it is important to note that a definitive *collapsing of agency* was necessary for the development of modern political and social frameworks over the last few 100 years. Pre-modern Europe embraced multiple nonhuman agents in the construction of its ongoing social and political relations. Even the overarching authority of the Catholic Church, which shaped the religious narrative on the European continent for over 1,000 years, contained space for the nonhuman agency of saints, demons, and angels. With the Protestant Reformation at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the role of nonhuman agents in Europe's social and political landscape reduced dramatically. Paul Johnson, professor of history and Afro-American and African studies at the University of Michigan, notes that modernity 'is the name for the attempt to strictly separate agents from non-agents and the persons from things' (Johnson 2014:5). French philosopher, Bruno Latour characterizes modernity by 'the total separation of humans and nonhumans' (Latour 1993:37), which relies on a clear demarcation of human agency. From this position, ethnologists and others working with nonmodern collectives are obliged to 'define one entity as animal or material and another as a free agent; one as endowed with consciousness, another as mechanical, and still another as unconscious and incompetent' (Latour 1993:15). Charles Taylor, in his discussion of the exclusive humanism that shapes the modern project, writes that within the modern imaginary, 'the only locus of thoughts, feelings, spiritual élan is what we call minds; the only minds in the cosmos are those of humans' (Taylor 2007:30). This definitive closure of agency around the human mind makes nuanced enquiries into nonmodern religious practices implausible. That said, the modern social sciences operate within a secular mandate, and perhaps because of this have long had a fascination with the category of human experience labeled as *possession*, a phenomenon which is 'most arresting for observers' (Bhavsar, Ventriglio, & Bhugra 2016:553) and therefore forms a pole against which the 'self-possessed' modern individual has been defined.

The modern, buffered formulation of the human agent emerged as Europe began its colonial invasion of the Americas, and then Africa. In a fascinating look at the Afro-Caribbean religion, Johnson discusses how the ‘backdrop of slavery in the New World...provided the material conditions for and conceptually cast into relief the appearance of the rational, autonomous individual in Europe’ (Johnson 2014:7). In his edited compilation, *Spirited things* (Johnson 2014), he documents a history of European encounters with the indigenous peoples of Africa and the Americas, during which the problematics around spirit possession fueled the ongoing construction, through a legal and philosophical precedent, of modern human agency.

As European thinkers contended with the spirit possession phenomena encountered in their colonial contact zones, ‘possessed action came to be viewed as the opposite of *individual* action – accountable, contract worthy, transparent, and properly civil’ (Johnson 2014:1; emphasis added). During this time, the nonmodern spaces of Africa and the Americas became intrinsically associated with spirit possession, and as such, the people populating these regions were regarded as having ‘deficient personhood or capacity to act as agents or to act as rational authors of future and present contracts’ (Johnson 2014:6). According to the modern social contract, rational individuals are those who allow that agency resides only in the person, the company, and the state.

## **Bodies, Possession, and the Law**

One of the founders of modern philosophical thought, Thomas Hobbes, links his discourse on *contract law* to the problem of spirit possession, using the idea of the spirit possessed individual as a negative identifier against which he constructs a framework for legally binding contractual agreements. Seeking a coherent response to the centuries long oversight of the Catholic Church, Hobbes’ social contract relies on his emerging sense of ‘Reason’ as separate from ecclesiastical authority. In *Leviathan*, he writes that the ‘generall, eternall, and immutable Truth’ (Hobbes 1968:Ch 46) produced by ‘Reason’ provides a firm foundation on which to build the developing nation state. Hobbes links the problematics around legal contracts to the burgeoning discourse on spirit possession in the nonmodern world, and labors to secure a secular framework for human agency in this context. According to Johnson,



Hobbes has identified that ‘the problem of contracts and of spirit possession were linked because contracts’ authenticity, identity, and agreement as to mediating authority are all rendered uncertain by spirits’ occupation of bodies’ (Johnson 2014:33). As Johnson (2014:32) notes, ‘constructing a civil society...depended on predictable and regulated rules of property ownership and exchange’. For this to be possible, human agency needed to be ascertained, contained, and prescribed.

A distinction needs to be made between philosophical-phenomenological discussions of agency, and the politico-legal notions of agency that have been written into the constitutions of modern states. Political acts of lawmaking around agentic structures *matter*, inasmuch as it has a clear and measurable material effect on the world. During the formation of nation states in Europe after the Protestant Reformation, conditions of human agency were ascertained to be directly correlated to human *rationality*, and then firmly linked to *property rights*. The *Declaration of the rights of man and of the citizen* formalized in 1791 in France, referred only to the rights of French male property owners over the age of 25 (Censer & Hunt 2001). Human agency was acknowledged in the political process inasmuch as it related to defensible claims to rights, and only within that context. As the modern secular project found its ground in the socio-political turn from ecclesiastical oversight, the individual human agent took shape within the confines of agreements made with the ruling state powers. These powers acknowledge individuals, corporate people, and the person of the state, as the only legally prescribed agential relations that matter to the ongoing becoming of the world. As such, early political notions of modern agency were not designed with the global population in view, but with a gendered, privileged, and geographically located few.

## **Considering the Nonmodern**

The modern project focused on property rights as the foundational framework for the emergence of civilized and rational societies. In the process, the social contract laws that come out of a modernizing Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries cemented ‘the opposition between those who possess property and those who could be possessed *as* property’ (Johnson 2014:10; emphasis added) and ‘constructed the free individual and citizen against the backdrop of emerging colonial horizons’ (Johnson 2014:24). While this is not the forum

to debate property rights and the formation of modern nation states, it remains necessary to attend closely to the ongoing relation between religion and the secular state. Of importance to critical religion theorists, the phenomenon known as ‘spirit possession’ became a defining feature of the nonmodern world, while not referencing to ‘religion’ *per se*. From this it becomes evident that there are *three* domains to be considered in the critical re-evaluation of the term ‘religion’. This three-body problem is comprised of secularity, religion, and *religion’s shadow*, the nonmodern/folk/indigenous world that was relegated to the sidelines of religious and political discourse in Europe as the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium progressed. The critical gaze discerns a split between religion and its shadow as secular discourse picked up pace. While this may be a functional distinction, it loses all relevance when this ‘shadow of religion’ is eclipsed entirely by the continuing debate on rationality that characterizes modern discourse. The nonmodern, indigenous, and folk becomings of the world never disappeared, despite the concerted efforts of both religion and the secular. By admitting this, the scholar is allowing the nonmodern to share the stage with the secular and that-which-was-previously-deemed-religious-in-European-tradition. The dichotomy explodes into intricate relations that have previously been overlooked.

Dipesh Chakrabarty describes the domain of social science as predicated on ‘the idea of a godless, continuous, empty, and homogenous time...bereft of gods and spirits’ (Chakrabarty 2000:75-76). This description of the secular academy points to the definitive limits introduced during the modernizing of Europe. From Martin Luther’s initial disruption of the Catholic Church to the political and social upheaval that followed, successive generations of European scholars have claimed authority for human reason and rejected the idea of a transcendent and sovereign God as Agent. In the process of this rejection, the notion of human agency has been refined and written into the basic tenets of modern practice and policy making. Key to this process was the rejection of the agentic authority of the Abrahamic God who had featured as the foundation of authority structures in medieval Europe.

The political process of distilling the authoritative essence of the One God into a human-scale system of secular government left no space for any agencies other than the human. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this ensured the continued disenfranchising of nonmodern and indigenous collectives, often comprised of people who engage both politically and socially with nonhuman and invisible agents. Cultural anthropologist, Talal Asad, who focuses on generat-

ing postcolonial discourse, reminds the critical scholar that modernity is a political project that relies on the ongoing relations of power to maintain a privileged status in world affairs. He writes that modernity is best understood as ‘a series of interlinked projects – that certain people in power seek to achieve’ (Asad 2003:13). How does the project of modernity still impact the study of religion, even as religious studies engages a critical turn? The modern imperative is clear in the refusal to attend to the ongoing agential becomings of the nonmodern world, which remain conspicuously out of sight in the current discourse. Critical religion scholars are not yet able to provide a conceptual apparatus for ‘the subaltern (in whose activity gods or spirits present themselves)’ (Chakrabarty 2000:77), and as such are not allowing nonmodern subjects to be ‘subjects of their own history’ but relegating them to the relics of modern discourse (Chakrabarty 2000:77).

### **Towards a Critically Inclusive Theory of Religion**

Both Lincoln and Fitzgerald overlook the complexity of nonmodern, folk, and indigenous religious practices in favor of modern problematics. Neither of them cast a critical eye on their own positions regarding human and non-human agency, and as such both are firmly committed to a modern humanism that can no longer claim hegemonic preference on the world stage, and particularly not in relation to questions on religion.

While both of these scholars may have justifiable *anti-clerical* motivations, this does not necessarily require a definitive *ontological* closure. Arguably, Lincoln retains an ontological opening with his insistence that the domain of religion is an essential category that refers to an eternal divine being. However, as this allows no conceptual frameworks for examining temporal and relationally bound nonhuman agencies, he remains firmly ensconced in a modern hegemonic discourse, shaped rather conspicuously by a Christian worldview. Fitzgerald follows the secular mandate with as much tenacity as possible, rejecting any possibility that nonhuman agency is a significant category in the study of religion. While he argues that religious practitioners be given the right to define their own means of analysis, he also begins from the assumption that human *culture* can account for any categories that religious people may construct. Although he does not say this directly in his response to Lincoln, with his call to reduce religion to culture, he suggests

that nonmodern, folk, and indigenous constructions of nonhuman agentic relations are just that – constructions – and need not be given a distinctive onto-epistemological status.

This is the point where Fitzgerald's commitment to an unspoken but exclusive humanism betrays his attempts to successfully theorize a critical study of religion. His dismissal of knowledge claims generated through relations with nonhuman agents, points to an ideological commitment to modern epistemology, which is hard to justify in 21<sup>st</sup>-century scholarship. Where is the humility that is needed in the critical scholar who faces the burden of accounting for past and present violence? While Fitzgerald criticizes Lincoln for his belief in his own objectivity, he makes the same error when he confidently insists that the entirety of the world's religious phenomena are best understood as 'the study of institutionalized values in different societies and the relation of those values to power and its legitimation' (Fitzgerald 1997:95). This partial turn towards a critical study of religion is important in that it wrests the conversation around religion from the grasp of Enlightenment theology, but it remains firmly imperial in the closures it maintains.

As Donna Haraway has noted almost 50 years ago, there is a 'very strong social constructionist argument for all forms of knowledge claims, most certainly and especially scientific ones' (Haraway 1988:576). Fitzgerald acknowledges the construction of terms like 'history', 'religion', and the 'secular', while simultaneously finding assurance in the domain of 'culture' as a foundational category of description. Perhaps this is an attempt to resolve the specter of relativism that the deconstructive lens engenders, one which leaves many modern thinkers in a quandary. While Fitzgerald productively deconstructs the terms that Lincoln relies on to structure his analysis, he actively defends his own terms that he has chosen. For the modern scholar who is afraid of being cast adrift in a sea of relativism, any ground on which to base certainty is enthusiastically protected. Neither of these critical scholars therefore grapple with the underlying ontological problems in their positions.

Haraway notes that the summary dismissal of all categories that come to matter as being merely *constructed* results in a relativism, is 'the perfect twin mirror of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well' (Haraway 1988:584). As per Haraway and others, acknowledging the human agentic capacity to construct the world, does not necessitate a Cartesian *disbelief* in the world. The constructed world ceases to matter

if the measures of ‘eternal’ and ‘unchanging’ are applied to its continual becoming. It also ceases to matter when gatekeepers of knowledge take it upon themselves to decide which constructs are ‘real’, or most ‘objective’, as Fitzgerald may declare.

Barring theological and modern metrics, the constructed world matters in ways that these critical scholars have a hard time reckoning with. Reducing religious constructions to cultural relations (another form of construction) only passes the buck, leaving cultural scholars with the job of accounting for phenomena that religion scholars are unable to. Both Lincoln and Fitzgerald embrace the quest to deconstruct but are left with no means to generate new positions. Without new positions for engaging the ongoing religious becomings of the world, the study of religion in the academy faces an uncertain future (Day 2010). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, onto-epistemological turns in multiple disciplines have provided a view of an academy in which ‘the production of objects and subjects and matter and meaning’ is constituted by a dynamic and material process of ‘experimenting and theorizing’ practices (Barad 2007:56). However, this task remains beyond the capacity of critical thinkers like Lincoln and Fitzgerald. The labor of active theory making in the critical study of religion remains undone, revealing a strong antitheoretical tendency that this is damaging to the field as a whole (Flood 1999:4).

## **Generative Positions**

In a reflexive response to mistakes of early religious studies, the academic study of religion veered sharply away from explicit theory making as the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed. Renowned scholar of religion, Ninian Smart, has presented a study that describes ‘the gods and the spirits who inhabit the phenomenological environment of a given cultural group’ (Smart 1973:52), while not taking a theoretical stance on the matter. His aim is ‘to provide, where necessary, what may be called a structure-laden account which is not theory-laden’ (Smart 1973:58). However, offering no conceptual apparatus for theorizing these nonhuman agents, Smart’s contribution to the field provides no cohesive method of accounting for nonhuman agents, aside from confessional positions. That said, Smart’s efforts to at least acknowledge the relevance of nonhuman agents in his account of religion drew sharp criticism from Fitzgerald, who dedicates an entire chapter in his book *The ideology of religious*

*studies* (Fitzgerald 1999:54-71) to discussing Smart's possible theological complicity. As evidence of this, he cites Smart's 'starting point within the theology of religions [that] has generated an essentialist, reified concept of religion and religions' (Fitzgerald 1999:55). Fitzgerald takes particular exception to the result of this reification, in which religion is examined as 'a phenomenon, a distinctive and analytically separable kind of thing in the world that can be identified and distinguished from non-religious institutions throughout the vast range of human cultures' (Fitzgerald 1999:55). In his critical study of religion, the accusation of reification rings a Cartesian death knell. Reified things are not *real* things.

However, this rather facile dismissal of reification bears closer examination. Anthropologist, Sonia Silva steps back from what she calls the 'historical context of late capitalism' in order to strip the process of reification of its colonial baggage. Instead, she enquires into reification as 'the universal human tendency to apprehend abstractions as things' and argues that reification as a natural process reflects responsiveness and involvement in the world, rather than an inert detachment (Silva 2013:83). In critically deconstructing modern reifications, the postmodern academy rejects reification itself as a continuing technology for making the world. In an ironic twist, the *reification of reification* obligates scholars to treat it as a *thing* that can and should be avoided. In response, Silva argues that 'it is not sufficient to adopt a critical stance and come to terms with the "objective" fact that our reified world is after all our own creation, and what we did ourselves we can undo' (Silva 2013:83).

What is also needed is an ongoing acceptance of our constructive natures, and the many ways that this needs to be accounted for within current discourse and theory making. Another theorist worth noting in this regard is philosopher and physicist, Karen Barad, who uses the language of 'agential cuts' through the continuing material process of becoming, to structure a *politics of mattering*. Barad engages the world as a continual and dynamic material process and discerns multiple agential relations within this ongoing flux. Agency, no longer confined to only the human, but regarded as a property of the material world itself, is enacted through agential cuts, which continually give shape to the world in a process of entangled intra-actions. Barad (2007:175) contributes to the post-Cartesian discourse with the observation that 'different agential cuts produce different phenomena'. In this regard, the construction of the world through agential relations is one that bears account-

ing for. To inform this accounting, Barad suggests a politics of mattering, where what ‘comes to matter’ in the construction of the world is understood to be political and in need of continual critical engagement.

Both Silva and Barad provide conceptual frameworks for understanding reification as an inherently generative process. This does not negate the danger of domains in which reified things come to gain a static and inert material significance. What it does, is to allow for an accounting to be made, an enquiry into those reified objects that come to matter in such grave ways within human collectives. Of particular significance to the critical study of religion, Silva links reification (the making of *things from non-things*) with animation (the making of *people from non-people*). Based on her work among the Luvale-speaking peoples of northwest Zambia, she argues that reification and animation are best understood as ‘a simultaneity, a co-presence, a coincidence, even – momentarily – a unity’ (Silva 2013:87-88). Silva’s work leads her to conclude that humans regularly ‘infuse’ their ‘products’ with both ‘reality and anima’ (Silva 2013:87-88). She argues that, in this regard, ‘reification is not an impediment to action but a condition for action’ (Silva 2013:91). Based on Silva’s observations, it could be argued that reification as a *positive* process provides the means by which the human body constitutes a generative site of knowledge (Haraway 1988). Bodies reify through the boundaries they enact, boundaries which are materialized in social interaction (Haraway 1988:595), while bodies generate objects of knowledge through this ongoing process.

## **Materializing the Invisible**

Allowing for this, what do the bodies of nonmodern and indigenous people generate, when they engage nonhuman and invisible agents as part of their continuing world making? Openings in anthropological thought and practice have recently allowed for a *material* study of invisible agents in numerous different contemporary collectives. The ‘ontological turn’, which has led contemporary anthropology back to the indigenous world with a fair degree of philosophical humility, has made possible the empirical project of tracking the *material effects of invisible relations*. Ruy Blanes and Diana Espirito Santo edited a compilation in 2014 entitled, *The social life of spirits*, in which a wide selection of anthropologists, each working with particular nonmodern or

indigenous collectives, discuss the material outworking of people's engagement with invisible and nonhuman agents. This new-materialist account of nonmodern practice produces a wealth of data around agency, relationality, personhood, and embodiment, and invites the critical scholar of religion to attempt a theoretical framework that takes nonhuman agency into account. The nuanced data sets being produced at an ethnographic level in the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot be sufficiently examined within the rubric of 'culture', despite Fitzgerald's concerns about the Christian theological influence on the formation of the category 'religion'. To fuss around either of these terms seems a rather modern prerogative, and altogether misses the point.

How would Lincoln characterize the Dorvod people of Mongolia, who engage with 'invisible things' (*üzegdeh- güi yum*) through their supposed agential presence in the material world (Delaplace 2014:54)? What about the Toba people of Argentina, who relate to 'entities, that, although not human, possess an intentionality capable of directing and exerting actions on the world and on human beings' (Tola 2014:71)? Where is the space for non-human religious agency in a worldview where religion is ultimately transcendent, and therefore unexamined within its own context? Would Fitzgerald be comfortable relegating the complex and intimate relationships that Matsigenka shamans have with their spirit companions, characterized by 'closeness...similarity, trust, and co-operation' to power-driven figments of a cultural imaginary (Rosengren 2006:810)? Sociologist Munyaradzi Mawere notes that on the African continent, 'spiritual beings are very much counted among the living as important participants in shaping everything that may happen' (Mawere 2011:62), while David Gordon points to the role of spiritual agents in contemporary Central African countries, with a focus on Zambian political history. In his book, *Invisible agents*, he concludes that 'accounts of human agency [in Zambia] must include spirits' (Gordon 2012:202), and describes in detail the contemporary political context in Zambia that includes an ongoing debate 'about the relationships between the individual, the community, the state, and spirits' (Gordon 2012:199). Can Fitzgerald's reduction of religion to culture sufficiently account for the Zambian will to debate spirits as political and social agents? Are there other options apart from the modern reductions that Lincoln and Fitzgerald champion? Religion scholar, Matthew Day insists that mistaking nonhuman agents as 'ciphers' for society or culture, maintains the marginalization of specific collectives. Following the work of Bruno Latour, Day suggests that a practical method for theorizing



nonhuman agents begins with the empirical observation that nonhuman agents populate many human networks, and ‘make their presence felt by sharing the labor required to gather, attach, move, motivate or bind their fellow actors together into a social aggregate’ (Day 2010:278). With this shift in focus, he suggests an opening for critical theory of religion, should scholars wish to look beyond the agentic limits of the modern era. By applying a politics of mattering to the question of nonhuman agency, the question becomes, How do spirits come to matter? rather than the Cartesian question of how ‘real’ spirits are, and therefore how much attention they have the right to demand within academic discourses.

New-materialist anthropological thinkers are also recognizing that there is academic relevance in ‘the mechanics and effects of so-called invisible or intangible domains, whether these are constituted by spirits, quarks, the law, or money value’ (Blanes & Espírito Santo 2014:1), and are working to ‘draw out their theoretical and methodological implications’ (Blanes & Espírito Santo 2014:8) rather than neutralizing these agents through a blanket reduction to culture. As Blanes and Espírito Santo (2014:15) note, ‘the attribution of agency to the nontangible and even nonhuman dimensions of life is more than mere philosophical speculation: it is quite natural for most people’. They examine this domain of relation through attending to the effects that nonhuman agents ‘produce in space, in human bodies, and in human subjectivity’ (Tola 2014:71). How does critical religion respond to the suggestion that ‘folk religious practices, diverse as they are, all share a common focus on managing relationships with a complex world of nonmaterial entities’ (Wirtz 2014:126)? In dismissing the term ‘religion’, how does the critical academic venture intend to account for nonmodern and indigenous practices involving reciprocal relations with nonhuman agents? Conversely, by retaining the term to refer to monotheistic cosmological values like eternity and transcendence, is Lincoln able to give a critical account of the intricacies of nonhuman agentic relations? There appears to be no pressing need within modern religion studies to theorize the complex multiplicity of nonhuman agents. By allowing the modern reduction of agency to the individual, the company, and the state, critical religion scholars adopt a modern mandate that perforce hinders the academic project.

## Conclusion

Have scholars like Lincoln and Fitzgerald, who set the tone for the discourse at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, decided that nonmodern and indigenous collectives do not matter to the ongoing conversation? If so, they reveal a critical blind spot. Theorizing the role of nonhuman and invisible agents in current global practices offers an avenue for keeping the category ‘religion’ academically active, while moving definitively away from ecclesiastical theology, as per the foundational mandate of the critical project. Perhaps at this point a new term is needed. Discourse around religion could follow the folk trend towards distinguishing between spiritual practices as those involving personal relations with nonhuman agents, and religious practices as those involving collective structures that take place within shared socio-political spaces.

Whatever is finally decided, the fact remains that this is a modern problem, created by modern conceptual structures. As long as key thinkers remain locked in a battle of wills around the use of modern terms, the ongoing becoming of the nonmodern, folk, and indigenous worlds remain opaque, eclipsed by the spectacle. Critical religion faces an important choice. Stay oriented towards the past, arguing the terms by which the moderns understand religion, or move beyond this fascinating and self-referential conflict towards a generative basis for a new theory and practice. The nonmodern, folk, and indigenous worlds await.

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