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## Ideological Critique in the Study of Religion

### Real Thinkers, Real Contexts and a Little Humility

by

IVAN STRENSKI

Among the newer approaches both to religion and to the methods by which we study religion is what one might call "ideological critique." By this, I mean a delving into the biographical, religious and ideological presuppositions shaping the theories of leading thinkers in the study of religion for the purpose of understanding those theories and bringing them to the bar of criticism. In essence, ideological critique attempts to understand theories in terms of the larger contexts in which they may be embedded—in the biographies and intellectual projects of theorists, in certain social and cultural contexts and strategies, in definite institutional settings.

We in the West are fortunate to live at a time when ideological critique and critical studies of knowledge have been among the most creative endeavors in the humanities. Consider the critical history of *mentalités*, begun with the *Annales* historians of the early part of the twentieth century, and in a way succeeded by historians like Michel Foucault and Edward Said.<sup>1</sup> They have, among many other things, made us consider the proposition that ways of seeing the world are themselves suitable subjects for critical investigation. No longer is history just about the machinations of diplomats or the movements of armies, but also about the categories we use to "think" things. Then one might also cite the revived historicism of the history of science, most often associated with figures like Thomas Kuhn or Paul Feyerabend for the natural sciences, but also carried forward by the University of Edinburgh's Science Studies Unit under the direction and inspiration of Barry Barnes. In areas more closely related to the study of religion, one can list Arthur Mitzman's classic study of Weber, *The Iron Cage*, Fritz Ringer's brilliant account of the genesis of philosophical and social thinking in turn of the century Germany, *The Decline of the German Mandarins*,<sup>2</sup> British historian of ideas Quentin Skinner's studies of

1 Said 1978 and Michel Foucault (1980), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*. New York: Pantheon.

2 Ringer 1969; Mitzman 1969.

Renaissance political theory, and historian of sociology, Robert Alun Jones' numerous articles on the sociology of Durkheim.<sup>3</sup> My first book, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History*, was an attempt to learn from these.<sup>4</sup> Without passing judgment on their ultimate worth, here are researchers committed to telling the story of the past *critically*—in telling how the past has been systematically, though sometimes unintentionally, constructed by the ideologies and *methods* used to view or apprehend the past. We live in a time when we should be sensitive to the ways our *beliefs* about the nature of religion and the nature of the history of religion shaped what we in the West take religion and its history to be. Said's work on orientalism, for instance, seems to me a good example of how critical study of the study of religion can matter to the study of religion—and in the "empirical" way for which I have argued. Primarily for the case of our "knowledge" of Islam, Said attempted to show the wider cultural and social significance of how European historians constructed the category of the Islamic "orient" ready-made to be studied in a certain way, typically prejudicial to Islam. Whatever else Said achieved, he should make us cautious about how our ideological commitments may shape the way we in the West apprehend and conceptualize others, and thus how practical policies and social attitudes may be informed as a result. Ideological critique such as practiced by these founders of the practice presupposes such stocks-in-trade of today's thinking as the idea that knowledge is "socially constructed" or culturally conditioned.

In the present discussion, I would like to bring out some of the key elements of "ideological critique" and reflect these off the criticisms that have been and might be made against ideological critique. The good news about ideological critique in the study of religion is that it has already attained a degree of maturity. As will be clear from my mention of several books and authors in the study of religion practicing "ideological critique," this approach has made a good solid start. But, as far as the future or as far as "new approaches" to the study of religion go, ideological critique is ready to advance to the next plateau of rigor, to a new level of maturity. Thus, the bulk of my argument here involves showing how ideological critique can be more successfully employed as the study of religion moves forward. In its present forms, ideological critique does not always avoid crass or facile misuse. This is because ideological critique can at times be a misleadingly easy approach to religion and theories about religion. With an eye to the future, then, I shall devote a good portion of the following discussion to the ways in which a more

<sup>3</sup> Jones 1999; Skinner 1978.

<sup>4</sup> Another fine example of this approach in religious studies is Harrowitz 1994. David Chidester has also set out on the same path, although I shall register some reservations about the way he does so. See his *Savage Systems* (Chidester 1996).

rigorous approach to ideological critique in the study of religion can be achieved.

### Ideological Critique Is Post-Modern

The very term "ideological critique" itself buzzes with paradox, and hence cries out for explication. Not so long ago, when the modernist paradigm of inquiry reigned, the very idea of a "critique" which was at the same time "ideological" would *ipso facto* disqualify the project as hopelessly naive. Of course, all thinking is ideologically grounded! What is new in this? In a time when thinkers were not so impressed by or persuaded that the object of putatively scientific study was conditioned by the knower, the term "ideological critique" might itself seem a surd. But, for good or for ill, our fashion has become to believe that the subjective conditions of knowledge about religion—and everything else for that matter—are significant.

The problem is, however, that we may come to believe this proposition with as much vigor as previous generations of modernists believed in the "objectivity" of their knowledge of the world. We will have made a dogma out of the "working principle" that we should attend to the subjective determinants in the construction of scientific objects. If that were to happen, then the very prospects of ideological critique would be threatened. It would be in danger of inviting a sterility of thought issuing from its own methodological dogmatism. How can those who seek a future for ideological critique escape this fate?

In having devoted a considerable part of my career to ideological critique—to exploring the very "subjective" or "ideological" dimension of thought about religion characteristic of post-modern approaches to inquiry, I think I have learned a lesson or two about what it would take to advance the fortunes of ideological critique. In short, I think we need to insure that ideological critique proceeds with more rigor than has come to be common today. To achieve this higher level of rigor, we need, I shall argue, to be *empirical* about our criticism. We need to advance theses about the ideological content of theories that are testable and certainly falsifiable in appropriate ways. Accepting this principle entails that we should be skeptical of the main tenets underlying ideological critique itself—namely, we should retain a skepticism of declaring dogmatically that all knowledge is subjectively conditioned in significant ways. We need to be open to degrees in which knowledge is so conditioned not least of all because the statement itself that all knowledge is conditioned is putatively objective! At worst, it is thus not significantly subjective at all, but rather a way of "laying down the law" from a privileged position on high.

The more one reads the literature of ideological critique in the study of religion, as I shall show, the more convinced, I think, we will become of the need for the constructive refinements in method that I wish to spell out. Studying

history of knowledge, for example, has a funny way of tempering one's conviction about epistemological certainties, such as about the bases of ideological critique itself. What really is the basis for our conviction that knowledge is "constructed," and that its construction matters, to mention only a pair of items in our list of present day certainties? Indeed, it is a humbling experience to read the works of otherwise great scholars only to stumble across what seem to us astoundingly obtuse views. Whether these are the more noxious racist opinions of our forebears or distant relatives now so widely exposed by scholars like David Chidester,<sup>5</sup> or their simple errors in reasoning, can we really put the certainties of our own time above such criticism itself? Odds are that we and our verities will look as foolish and full of ourselves to "them" as those of the past look now to "us." Anyway, one does not imagine some referee, endowed with God's eye vision, suddenly appearing on the scene to settle such arguments any time in the near future.

The only way I know to plan for this sort of potential embarrassment is to refine the sweeping generality of the claim inherent in ideological critique that, for example, all views are constructed, ideologically conditioned and that such a constructed nature matters. In this spirit, claims about the ideological intrusions into thinking about religion should be empirical, testable, falsifiable and the like. Let us proceed on a case by case basis, and see how and to what extent ideologies do in fact shape what our scholarship produces, and whether such intrusions really make a difference to the product.

In order, most instructively to make the case for the development and refinement of ideological critique, let us consider some cases where dogmatism has taken over and where the utility of ideological critique in the study of religion as a result suffers. My first examples come from the attempts of a range of recent neo-orthodox and liberal Christian theologians, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, to exploit the postmodern mood embodied in ideological critique to undermine the cognitive status of the study of religion in the interests of re-establishing the legitimacy of Christian theologizing within the secular university. Their attempts to re-theologize the study of religion will show those of us committed to religious studies how ideological critique can go very wrong and be turned against the study of religion.

5 David Chidester, "Anchoring Religion in the World: A Southern African History of Comparative Religion," in: *Religion* 26 (1996): 141-60; Chidester 1996.

### Post-Modernism and the Re-theologizing of Religious Studies

Scientism's "myth of objectivity" seems long and well dead—at least among self-styled postmodernist critics of science. Notably, this critique of objectivity in science has been taken up lately by a range of Christian theological critics of religious studies. Without pretending to be exhaustive in my survey of these Christian re-theologizers of religious studies, I have selected a representative sample from among their number. These include a Barthian neo-orthodox figure like Garrett Green, liberal Protestant Delwin Brown and the Anglican John Milbank. Each of our re-theologizers is important enough both in their own academic circle as well as beyond. Green's manifesto for re-theologizing religious studies, "Challenging the Religious Studies Canon: Karl Barth's Theory of Religion," declares its intentions explicitly in a recent volume of a major University of Chicago journal, *The Journal of Religion*; Delwin Brown, of Iliff Theological College has been for many years a persistent and widely published advocate for "theology" within the secular university.<sup>6</sup> What knits two such different kinds of theologians together is the common grounding of their arguments for the inclusion of Christian theology in religious studies in what may be called principles of postmodernism linked to a certain construal of the method of ideological critique.

Green, for instance, wants Karl Barth's analysis of "religion as unbelief" as theoretical position on religion considered on a par with, say, the theories of Freud, Durkheim, Max Weber and so on. In classic postmodernist style, Green argues that since all viewpoints are grounded in relative positions, and no such thing as objectivity exists, then none exists in the so-called "sciences." Green thus embraces what he identifies as the "postmodern turn," saying that it "can be summed up in the oft-cited motto, 'all data are theory-laden.'" For Green this means that all views, say, about religion "are socially and historically located and necessarily implicated in paradigmatic commitments to certain values, concepts, and methods."<sup>8</sup> Since this is so, the door is now wide open for including "theology" in the canon of religious studies.

Others in the theological camp like liberal Protestant theologian, Delwin Brown, have argued for the inclusion of "theology" (never identified by its sectarian nature) on similar grounds as Green. Like Green, Brown declares that the scientific pretensions of a "theory" of religion, such as Durkheim's, for

6 John Milbank, holder of a major named chair at the University of Virginia and author of the estimable, *Theology and Sociological Theory*, makes use of postmodern thought to undermine the scientific study of religion, although as a major voice from the side of contemporary Catholic theology; see Milbank 1990.

7 Green 1995: 473-86.

8 Ibid.: 473.

instance, is unwarranted. Sociology is thus no better than theology, since both are socially constructed discourses. Further, since religious studies cannot hope to "explain" religion, it must be more humble and accept the role of promoting "analysis" or interpretation. It is the ideal of interpretation, Brown believes, which gives theology its opening into the academy. The kind of knowledge for which the university should stand, in their view, is knowledge as understanding.

Critically for Brown, not only is all understanding interpretive, but all interpretive activity is "constructive" and transformative. The investigator is never free from the subject of investigation, since investigators bring to the subject their own subjectivities. And, since "theology" is interpretive as well, there should be nothing much objectionable in theology—at least a non-"confessional" theology<sup>9</sup>—bringing its presuppositions to the subject under study. It should be free to go about its constructive and transformative tasks in the public university, just like any other practitioner of interpretive methods in the humanities.<sup>10</sup> Fair is fair. Indeed, Delwin Brown would go beyond just recognizing "theology" as merely another interpretive discipline within a standard university curriculum. He aims to deploy his "constructive theology" inside the citadels of secular public learning like some sort of intellectual Trojan Horse, as an agent of radical change. Thus, Brown claims that what "we need now is not the retreat of constructive theology into the churches, but a methodological critique of the university discourses that, among other things, clarifies theology's location within them."<sup>11</sup> Brown thus assumes that "science" (so-called) or the interpretive activity long central in the humanities cannot claim epistemological privileges against "theology." For others sharing Brown's type of thinking, the constructive activity of the so-called social "sciences" really just masks their own ideologies, indeed "theologies."<sup>12</sup>

9 Brown 1993: 8. "Confessional theology" is one bound to the "conceptual symbols of particular traditions of inheritance."

10 Ibid.

11 Delwin Brown, "The Location of the Theologian: John Cobb's Career as Critique," in: *Religious Studies Review* 19/11 (January 1993): 14.

12 With Durkheim in particular in mind, Anglican theologian, John Milbank follows the script written by postmodernism. To wit, since all discourses are constructed by subjective interests, all discourses are, in effect, equal as cognitive entities. Tellingly, Milbank rather baldly asserts that "theology encounters in effect, in sociology only a theology, and indeed a church in disguise, but a theology and a church dedicated to promoting a certain secular consensus" (Milbank 1990: 4).

### Learning from Said

Now, as stimulating as theological critiques of contemporary knowledge may be, they illustrate why ideological critique needs the kind of refinement and further development that I am trying to articulate. We need in particular to be alert to a serious drawback with the critical and skeptical attitudes encouraged by Foucault, Said, and others. Like the theologians, they seem to have spawned a new orthodoxy and risk laying the dead hands of dogmatism and cynicism on doing the study of religion. Thus, it is common enough, sad to say, in our "politically correct" academic world, to encounter on a regular basis the claim, that only members of particular subgroups can fairly write the history of those subgroups, and that those who are not, cannot. Made explicitly or implicitly, this amounts to saying that because a writer can be classified as one sort of person or another, this is sufficient evidence to justify the view that the work they do will be necessarily and seriously biased in terms of the interests of these societal subgroups.<sup>13</sup> While I can understand how such a shortcut saves the time and energy of actually reading and studying seriously the authors and works involved, one can hardly be pleased with such a sweeping writing off of writers. In particular, it would be well to recall that even Said himself distinguishes between historians of Islam such as Maxime Rodinson and Louis Massignon, both equally white, male and European from others he believes practice their craft in the classic orientalist style that he attacks.

Following the presumptions of the approach taken by Said and others, I thus believe that ideological critique of the study of the history of religion may help those committed to the study of religion to get purchase over their own conceptual framework—to take responsibility for their own concepts. Now I take it as a first principle that whenever we use theoretical notions, like "myth," "ritual," "mysticism," "religion" and so on, we should be clear how we are "conceiving" them. We can do this initially by simply introspecting or by analyzing our writing and speech—what passes as garden variety conceptual or methodological analysis in the study of religion. But, it is at this point where it becomes important to know about the historical "other." It is not enough to assume or guess or imagine what I would think if I were Durkheim, Eliade, etc., we must really have some grounds—the best grounds that we can have—for thinking we know what they meant when they proposed certain theoretical constructions round the term, "sacrifice," for example. I can think of no better grounds for understanding what a theorist meant than to understand their actual intentions, the meaning of their language and concepts in the context in which they wrote, the actual empirical *Sitz im Leben* of the theory or theoretical idea in question.

13 This question is discussed from many perspectives in McCutcheon 1999.

Further, at least some of the theological critiques owing their inspiration to the likes of Foucault, Said and others are self-refuting. Why should we grant plausibility, for example, to the view that the theory-ladenness of, say, Durkheim's theory of religion puts it into the same epistemological class as neo-orthodox Protestant—unless it be *objectively* true that "all data are theory-laden?" The question is painfully simple: are all data, in fact, theory-laden or are they not? Unless, this question can be answered in the affirmative, the principle of theory-ladenness really amounts to a new kind of dogma—relativism asserted absolutely. If the question as to the factuality of the theory-ladenness of data can be answered in the affirmative, then, as practitioners of ideological critique we need to get on with the job of exposing the actual ways in which thought is "laden" with actual theories. This excursus into some recent attempts to re-theologize religious studies by invoking features of the epistemology of ideological critique points out how very important, then, it is to prepare for a defensible, durable and creative program of ideological critique in religious studies. To reiterate, the claim of theory-ladenness means nothing unless it is seen as an *empirical* matter, a fact waiting to be either discovered or dismissed, rather than one of absolute principle, as, I believe, our relativizing theologians have done.

Refining ideological critique by bringing out the necessity of being empirical in our critiques is my belief that it is not worth doing ideological critique unless doing so *makes a difference*. The quest for theory-ladenness is about ferreting out real hidden agendas, actually agent, yet undisclosed, determinants in thought. What could the value of asserting theory-ladenness of some particular matter possibly be unless things would be different in the absence of the theory "laden" therein?

### On Being Empirical about Eliade

Another way of showing how ideological critique should be refined along empirical lines is to focus on the temptations of an easy impressionism that sometimes afflicts our fledgling enterprise. Thus, some writers practicing what may seem like a form of ideological critique seem to think making allegations about the ideological determinants in a person's thought is sufficient unto the day. Put otherwise, they seem to imagine that just because one can "place" someone in a context that a given thinker *actually* occupied such a context. They further imagine that just because a thinker they may have occupied such a context, that their occupation of such a location was consequential for their thought—that it "made a difference." In order to secure the future of ideological critique, one must insist that ideological critique can never be a blanket excuse, allegation, accusation or smear. To illustrate my point, consider, take

some attempts to bring the "life and letters" of Mircea Eliade before the bar of ideological critique.

For some years, it has been known that as a young man in Romania, Eliade had given his heart to the ideology of the radical "fascist"<sup>14</sup> Legion of the Archangel Michael. It is still deeply disquieting that a man so gentle, refined and deeply religious in person and manner seems to have published vicious political tracts in the religio-fascist Romania between the wars referring to the "pests brought to us (Romanians) by the Jewish invasion"<sup>15</sup> or, in a thinly veiled reference to Romanian Jews, to have called for the elimination of them from the body politic as so many "toxins"<sup>16</sup>—as one of Eliade's "ideological critics," Adriana Berger claims. If we accept all of the material which Adriana Berger has dug up here, the case for Eliade's vicious anti-Semitism seems overwhelming. If Berger is right about the actual "fascist" formation of Eliade's thought, then a devastating kind of ideological critique has begun—namely one which could in theory link Eliade's actual "fascist" ideology and thinking to other domains of his thought—such as Eliade's theories about religion—not hitherto recognized as related to an underlying political ideology like fascism.

I indeed attempted to do precisely this in my *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History*.<sup>17</sup> There, for instance, I showed the remarkable parallels between the actual ideology of the Romanian Legion of the Archangel Michael—its Romanian "traditionalism," its adulation of the peasant, its "nostalgias for the archaic, cosmic and telluric" and so on—with familiar themes in Eliade's theory of religion.<sup>18</sup> I further showed that Eliade was personally linked at the highest levels with the leadership of this movement, and therefore that the parallels between his theory of religion and the ideology of the Legion of the Archangel Michael were no longer merely speculative, but indeed that the burden of proof rested with those who would assert that Eliade and his theory of religion were totally independent of this form of indigenous Romanian fascism. I had done as best I could to make my ideological critique of Eliade's theory of religion *empirical*. Moreover, my ideological critique made a palpable *difference*, as the numerous attacks and imitators of my position poured out from all quarters testified. If my arguments had made "no difference" to our

14 For a thorough and nuanced treatment of this notoriously misused term see Wiles 1969: 176. Cited in Strenski 1987: 213, n. 102.

15 Adriana Berger, "Mircea Eliade and Romanian Fascism and the History of Religions in the United States," in: Harrowitz 1994: 59.

16 *Ibid.*: 58.

17 Strenski 1987, chs. 4 and 5.

18 *Ibid.*: 102f.

evaluation, appreciation and understanding of Eliade's theories as they bore on religious studies, why all the fuss?<sup>19</sup>

Yet in any volume where moral and political elements so highly charge the atmosphere, the temptation to push things along is enormous. Berger occasionally fails to support claims with appropriate by citations, for example, in connection with Eliade's supposed endorsement of anti-Jewish laws.<sup>20</sup> And here, Berger's case is itself "tainted" by sometimes tendentious readings of the nature and extent of Eliade's participation in Romanian fascism. Her claims simply lack the kind of *empirical* grounding they need in order to make for good ideological critique. Berger thus asserts that Eliade wrote about the Iron Guard as a full formal member (a point of dubious importance anyway, as I shall argue), because he addressed a particular article to "the Christians outside the movement."<sup>21</sup> But although Eliade was quite likely what Berger says he was, it does not follow from the *empirical* evidence and arguments Berger presents here. For example, for Eliade to write as if he had intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the Iron Guard may only reflect Eliade's long and intimate association with the *spiritus rector* of the Iron Guard, Nae Ionesco, and indeed the whole crowd of "young generation" types he led, as I have argued in *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth Century History*.<sup>22</sup> What matters for good ideological critique, in any event, is not formal membership, but actual intellectual and spiritual affinities. Did the Legion believe what Berger says it does; did Eliade do the same? Here, I think we have solid empirical evidence to make such connections. To wit, Eliade's closest friends were almost all deeply implicated in Guardist thought and politics; Eliade's intellectual and spiritual vision was moreover basically isomorphic with the structure of fascist thinking of the time as I have argued in *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History*.<sup>23</sup>

19 Cave 1993 and Rennie 1996 may be listed among the most vociferous critics of *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History*, while McCutcheon 1997 ranks as one of the most prominent imitators.

20 Adriana Berger, "Mircea Eliade and Romanian Fascism and the History of Religions in the United States" in: Harrowitz 1994: 59.

21 Ibid. 63f.

22 Strenski 1987, chs. 4 and 5.

23 Berger further leads one to suspect that her hold on the reality of the situation for Eliade and the Legion in Romania may not be very solid, and thus that her ideological critique may be mostly impressionistic and not as empirically grounded as it ought to be in order to "make a difference." She never, for example, puts up her case against the well-known and widely publicized, but admittedly abject, apologetics of MacLinscott Ricketts, Eliade's biographer and tireless defender. Ricketts strains normal credulity by claiming that Eliade could never have actually authored the anti-Semitic articles upon which Berger in key places relies. Berger at least should have noted this. But instead she does not even cite Ricketts at all! Having noted these infelicities in Berger's

I raise these points not only because Eliade is a well-known figure in religious studies, but also to make the point about what *good* ideological critique is. In the case of Eliade cited above, refining the way we do ideological critique requires distinguishing the many *actual* ways anti-Semitism *empirically* operates. To go beyond slogans, ideological critique needs to be a *critical* approach to theories and to resist the uncritical lumping of things that should be kept apart—that is if we want (and I certainly think we do) to understand how real—as opposed to fictional—anti-Semitic politics worked. Let me explain with another example drawn from the world of recent religion and politics.

### Why Blame Luther?

It seems to me worth making a distinction between anti-Semitic thought which had *actual and direct* consequences for real Jews and that which did not. A critical ideological critique would want to understand, say, whether a given Christian theology or theologian was an anti-Semite of the sort who *directly* contributed to the death of Jews, or perhaps someone whose work may have been commandeered for anti-Semitic uses. Now, Eliade, Heidegger, and others all were involved in *deliberate and direct* ways with real policies which turned out immediately to be deadly to Jews—even if they were not lodged in the innermost centers of power in various ministries dealing with so-called Jewish affairs. In Eliade's and Heidegger's cases, they both reflected a fascist cultural reality and then contributed to articulating an ideological vision in which actual anti-Semitic policies flourished. Their thought both participated in the anti-Jewish spirit of their milieus as well as articulated deeper conception of a spirit unfriendly to Jews. In tracking these leads through their lives and thought, we are thus face to face with the real causality of anti-Jewish history. An ideological critique that grasped the historical reality of the *actual* situations of Eliade and Heidegger would then be contributing to the future of a durable ideological critique because uncovering the "fascist" ideologies to which Eliade and Heidegger *actually* ascribed would "make a difference" to any argument made thereafter that their academic and scholarly work reflected those political ideologies.

By contrast, although an egregious Jew-hater, Luther, by contrast, seems himself and in his theology to have had little or no effect on the lives of real Jews in the twentieth century. This was so not only because of the gap of time

treatment of Eliade, it is just important to maintain perspective. Thus while we may note that Berger overreaches or lacks nuance in the interest of moral outrage, her attacks are surely aimed in the right direction. The charge of Eliade's anti-Semitism now seems solidly established by the publication of Mihail Sebastian's wartime diaries (Dee 2000).

between him and us, but also because Lutheran tradition had concealed and suppressed Luther's anti-Semitism throughout its history. It was not until the Nazis recovered, rebroadcast and exploited it that "Luther"—the Nazi reading of Luther—entered the world of Nazi politics and ideology. Say what one will about Luther's anti-Semitism, in point of fact, Lutheran history is probably no more or less anti-Semitic say than Catholic or Calvinist history because of the things which Luther said against his Jewish contemporaries. If we are to believe Carter Lindberg's arguments, Lutheran history generally seems to have taken shape in respect to the Jews as if Luther had never uttered an anti-Semitic word at all!<sup>24</sup> So, although Luther's anti-Semitism remains as deplorable as ever, it seems to have little to do with the role played by the Lutheran tradition and its theology in relation to real Jews and in particular to Nazi political policies to Jews as well. Just the opposite is true of Eliade and Heidegger.

In my judgment, the kind of second generation, refined (and thus, effective) ideological critique I am advocating, requires that more effort should be expended on consequential thinkers like Eliade and Heidegger—on thinkers whose thought really "made a difference," who were actually part of an historical anti-Semitic politics. Thinkers of the distant past who became icons of Jew hatred do not seem to me priority targets of ideological critique. It is the *empirical* historical causality linking anti-Jewish thought and anti-Jewish policies which I think deserves top priority as a "showcase" for a refined ideological critique. This does not in the least mean that I believe we should dismiss the power of the *symbolic* role of an anti-Semitic Luther. But, it would be immeasurably better to know more about the nameless, faceless, obscure, but consequential Nazi *Religionsforscher* who retrieved Luther for modern uses than to dwell on the prejudices of a man on the margins of the late middle ages. He, not Luther, "made a difference." A refined, second generation ideological critique would seek to undercover the hidden ideological foundations of his activity. How and why did he act as he did? Why did he know where to look? What politics was involved in getting his recommendations heard? Once made, in the case of Luther as well as in the case of Berger's Eliade, these distinctions let us paint a truer picture of the mind of the consequential anti-Semite.

Are these distinctions without a difference? I think not. If I have been persuasive, I hope I have convinced readers that ideological critique should place a premium on *actual historical* relation. Imagine how differently we would speak of Luther's anti-Semitism had his church not only kept his anti-Semitic teachings in full view, but had broadcast and reaffirmed them on their own? What matters is a sharp understanding of the kind of thinking which has effectively made our world inhospitable for our Jewish brothers and sisters,

24 Carter Lindberg, "Tainted Greatness: Luther's Attitudes toward Judaism and Their Historical Reception," in: Harrowitz 1994: 25.

even when that thinking may not be overtly or totally anti-Semitic, but only tainted with hatred of Jews.

### Making a Difference in South Africa

Another, and even more prominent, example of how much more *close empirical* work we still need to do to attain a level of maturity and refinement in ideological critique emerges in David Chidester's *Savage Systems*.<sup>25</sup> In his pioneering exploration of the conceptualization of "religion" and its social consequences in southern Africa, Chidester seeks what we would all recognize as ideological critique of the history of various attempts—some deliberate, systematic and even academic, others haphazard, *en passant* and amateurish—to study religion in South Africa. Reflecting this variety of sources, Chidester surveys a vast corpus of writings from missionaries, explorers, travelers and scholars from the redoubtable Dutch (and German) language intellectual world, many of whom laid the bases for European theorizing about religion. In doing so, Chidester thinks he brings forth an ideological critique of the very discipline of religious studies. His thesis is in brief that "the study of religion was entangled in the power relations of frontier conflict, military conquest and resistance, and imperial expansion" and that "it arises out of a violent history of colonial conquest and domination."<sup>26</sup>

But at least two ambiguities afflict Chidester's claims. Both the notion of the actual empirical and historical nature of the "study of religion" and the idea of what is it to be "entangled in" or "to arise out of" the colonial enterprise lack empirical support. Thus, by "study of religion" Chidester says he means "comparative study of religion"—"a particular science."<sup>27</sup> That Chidester says he means a "particular science" gives the impression that he has in mind the likes of someone like Gerardus van der Leeuw, Mircea Eliade or Ninian Smart—someone who is both a professional academic and someone constrained by the norms of university institutional setting—someone with a (relatively) disinterested stake in the data. But, it is distinctly odd then of Chidester to include within this "particular science" the ragtag bunch whom he studies—the travelers or casual observers, to mention but one set upon whom Chidester lavishes attention. Nor would this "particular science" include others to whom Chidester gives his attention—those with explicit religious or political roles and agendas, such as Christian theologians and missionaries or British colonial administrators. Yet, Chidester applies the description, "study of reli-

25 Chidester 1996.

26 *Ibid.*: xii.

27 *Ibid.*: 1, 2.



gion" and "comparative study of religion" precisely to these sorts of folk—to precisely those with religious or political axes to grind, and not to so-called disinterested scholars going by the name of the discipline of "comparative studies of religion." In a bizarre wrenching of language in Chidester's hands, brazen Protestant mission theology is called either "Christian comparative religion"<sup>28</sup> or "Protestant comparative religion"—as if the undertakings of missionaries and scholars were on a par with one another.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the main problem with these claims is that Chidester's ideological critique fails to identify the actual people or institutions and ideology against whom he claims to be offering a critique. Just on empirical grounds alone, Chidester's ideological critique seems to have missed its mark. Chidester aims his book at today's profession, religious studies. Yet, those who practice a real "particular science," called comparative students of religion, like Eliade or van der Leeuw or Smart, are not the same as those Chidester would indict. Chidester's attempt at ideological critique by identification of two such differently motivated modes of production needs, at the very minimum, some argument. Failing so to do, Chidester misrepresents both the colonial past and the study of religion. This is not to say that scholars never gave aid and comfort to colonial administrations, Christian missions, or apartheid governmental policy—often eagerly. Nor is it to say that they should not be criticized for doing so in the name of racist ideologies. It is only to say that he does not show that a general case can be made that the "particular science" of comparative study of religion does so.

It is unfortunately typical of Chidester, therefore, to labor the cases of people distant from the "particular science" of the comparative study of religion, but to silently assume that anyone comparing religions or studying religions *ipso facto* should be said to belong to the institution we have come to know as religious studies—to the "particular science" of comparative study of religion. One example is the way Chidester indicts two eighteenth century German travelers to southern Africa, Peter "Kolb" (sic) and Otto Friedrich Mentzel. Kolbe is particularly interesting in that he stayed on in southern Africa as secretary of the *landdrost* of Stellenbosch for about eight years, and wrote a reputedly influential book on life in the southern Cape. Now, while Chidester's case against Kolbe has initial plausibility, it misses the mark of indicting the "particular science" of comparative study of religion. While Kolbe was a tireless fieldworker and interviewer of Hottentot folk, and even attempted to construct a method of "self-conscious" comparative study, it hardly makes him

28 Ibid.: 37, 41.

29 Ibid.: 85. Note also how Chidester ignores the overwhelming role of the Dutch Reformed church missionizing in dealings with the native folk of southern Africa, even in a work Chidester cites for his own purposes. See Elphick/Giliomee 1979, especially articles by Elphick, Leonard Guelke and Martin Legassick.

the equivalent of Karen McCarthy Brown. Thus, while Kolbe is impressive in his practice of many skills which contain the makings of scholarship on religion, none of this marks Kolbe as someone representing "particular science" of the comparative study of religion. Kolbe, for example, operated alone, and outside the context of the university or research institute. Had Kolbe occupied a place like C.P. Tiele or Friedrich Max Müller, self-identified with a science of religion and with the institutions making such an enterprise possible, Chidester would indeed have a case. But Kolbe does not, nor do the countless individuals who have contributed to the study of religion, but who do not do so as part of any institutional scientific or professional community. It is at best anachronistic to project onto the informal scholarship of the eighteenth century the norms and identity of the professions of our own time. Put brutally, no such thing as "particular science" of the comparative study of religion existed in the time and place of which Chidester often writes.

Further, even if Kolbe can be identified with the "particular science" of the comparative study of religion, the question for a refined ideological critique is whether his book "made a difference." Chidester accuses Kolbe's book of having contributed to "the dispossession and displacement of Khoisan people in the Cape" by the publication of his book, in part because Kolbe expressed the view that the Hottentots had "religion."<sup>30</sup> He also tells us that Kolbe's book was influential in Europe and among ethnologists there. But Chidester says *nothing* about whether or not anyone with the power to "dispossess and displace the Khoisan people in the Cape" read it, or used it to justify such policies. He cites *no* sources of persons responsible for such policies of dispossession and displacement showing that they took into account what Kolbe said—no diaries, no official reports, no newspaper articles, no testimony of contemporaries to this effect—nothing! Even if it be granted that there is a formal congruence or even an affinity of values between what Kolbe wrote and the ideology of the colonial policies that Chidester rightly indicts, this would not show that Kolbe's book "made a difference" to colonial policy. Failing this ability to show that Kolbe's work "made a difference," we cannot resist wondering about the missing steps along the way connecting a book of the eighteenth century with the social policies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. No amount of textual analyses—something Chidester does excellently—will substitute for establishing the patterns of real causality Chidester claims. Once more, we can see how a failure at the level of making ideological critique "empirical," to demonstrate actual causality between ideologies in books and policies on the ground may undermine the efforts of the program of ideological critique for attaining the plausibility and long-term durability for which I have been arguing.

30 Chidester 1996: 71–72.

There is then a lesson to be learned here about insuring that our ideological critique really makes a difference. While so much of what Chidester writes is useful and worthy to be celebrated, a great deal more care is required so that ideological critique really "sticks." The context in which we try to "locate" a theory must *actually* be the context in which it is claimed to reside—and not, as I think Chidester has done in mis-locating the ideas he criticizes within a non-existent (at the time) location called "comparative study of religion." We also need to be sufficiently empirical in our location of ideologies and theories in order to show moreover that they "made a difference,"—that they actually informed the policies Chidester and other critics want to indict. We need to work harder to take the idea of theory-ladenness as an *empirical possibility*. That there are significant underlying intellectual strategies shaping thought is something for which we need to be prepared to test, and not simply to assume.

### Getting Past the "Best" to the "Good"

A major moral emerging from the cases I have examined is that dogmatism or absolutism in ideological critique can lead us into many errors of mis-identification and mis-location of the thought under consideration. I have argued instead that sweeping claims about the ideological nature of thought require grounding in the facts of the situation—that an empirical and densely historical approach to the way thought is in fact shaped should be our ideal. If thought is conditioned by its biographical, religious and ideological locations, then discovering how it is should become a matter of *empirical* research. Thus, Chidester's confident "identification" of Kolbe's work as having lent itself to official mistreatment of native Africans fails, because Chidester provides no evidence that anyone in a position of power to mistreat Africans was informed by what Kolbe wrote. Furthermore, Kolbe's "location" in the "comparative study of religion" is at best an anachronism, since no such thing as this institution existed when Kolbe wrote. Further, the assumption of Luther's "place" in history as a proto-Nazi, because of his personal anti-Semitism likewise ignores the fact that the Nazis themselves had deliberately to reconstruct a Luther in their own image to achieve this effect. Berger's "situation" of Eliade in the front lines of the Iron Guard, while looking more and more likely as we discover more of Eliade's past, cannot be defended by the evidence Berger brings to bear.

From these examples alone, it should be clear that we might gain some confidence for moving beyond at least one more related dogma bedeviling the progress of ideological critique. This is the view that just because all viewpoints rest on assumptions, principles, axioms, and such that therefore all views are equally well or non-trivially "conditioned," "partial" and the like. Instead, I am arguing that ideological critique needs to move forward by accepting the pro-

visional and corrigible nature of human knowledge, rather than lusting after absolutes. This is to argue that some "conditioned" or ideologically informed theories may be better than others. I should like to conclude my discussion then by coming round full circle by arguing why I have been so consistent in my assertion of the criterion of an *empirical* conception of what ideological critique can be—at least within the compass of the value world of the West.

While from an absolute or God's-eye or Buddhist Sunyata view, it may be correct that every human effort at knowledge is partial and inadequate, not many of us can successfully make the claim to be able to speak from so lofty a height or so profound a depth. We live in a world where we must at least assume as a first approximation that anything we say might in theory be reasonably contradicted or contested. To say we "know" in a strong sense would itself be to take the God's-eye view of absolute knowledge. But, living in this world where we can expect ideas to be contested and changed is not the same as living in a world in which views have no value, or in which every view has the same value in every context as any other view. Living in the world is not really served by in effect a wholesale delegitimizing or relativizing of all viewpoints. It may just be the case that some views in some contexts are to be *preferred* over others. Ptolemaic astronomy will not get the International Space Station positioned correctly, although modern astronomy will. I think the proposal that ideological critique ought to proceed *empirically* likewise makes for better ideological critique than other alternatives, such as those canvassed in the works of Berger, Chidester and others.

A wholesale delegitimizing of views because they rest on relative foundations, such as we saw with a neo-Orthodox Protestant theologian, like Green, for instance, also leaves us spinning our wheels in the nihilistic mud. This is not the future we want for religious studies, I would submit. While we want to continue to be alert to the ideological underpinnings of our programs, I am recommending that we ought not be too routinely nihilistic about it. Ideological critique, as I believe it ought to be practiced, does not require massive cynicism about theories. In religious studies, for example, we have many fine projects to accomplish; we have many fine efforts in which to enlist people. It is hard to see how human society of any sort could be possible were such positive and constructive values not in some way on the whole in the ascendent—at least as working principles.

In this everyday world, different communities make, often sheerly practical, decisions to value certain viewpoints. Indeed, part of what defines and constitutes communities at all are decisions about the "givens" of knowledge about the world. Bible-based churches, for example, are what they are because they take the Bible as axiomatic, as given, as "revelation"—criticisms of it (ideological or not) notwithstanding. Some other text might occupy the place of the Bible instead—say the Vedas or Koran—and there may well be mutual knowledge of these different foundational literatures. So, the matter is relative

and not absolute. But it still remains necessary to have some values, if life is to go on. Likewise, Euclidian geometry rests on certain axioms—treated for all intents and purposes as if they were absolute and uncontested. Of course, we do have geometries in which parallel lines, for example, meet, and thus in which Euclidian axioms are violated. Other geometries are of course possible with a simple change of axioms. But the assumptions or axioms grounding such a new geometry are in a way still as (relatively) absolute *within that world* as the Euclidian axioms were in their world, given their circumscription of things. Religious studies ought not be the kind of community in which, say, the theological sophistry of a Karl Barth stands on the same footing as work done by such founders of the modern study of religion as a Max Weber, Louis Dumont, Ninian Smart, to name only a very small few. Although the work of these scholars will in time be superseded, and is in no way regarded as the “best” last word in the field, they have helped us move things along toward the “good.” Thus whatever the ideological underpinnings of their work, they in no way delegitimize it in the way the Protestant apologetics of a Karl Barth would. All views are not equal, simply because they have ideological bases. It depends in part on the ideology at issue.

Now these practical considerations about getting on with life, about what Voltaire called preferring the “good” to the “best,” are of the highest importance to the existence of civilized life even beyond religious studies. They are embedded in the epistemological principles undergirding our judicial and legal systems of the West—but not exclusively so.<sup>31</sup> Our Western judicial system, and thus Western culture, for example, assumes the foundational or axiomatic status of the priority of sense perception or empirical knowledge. Eye witness testimony, material evidence, even down to rarified DNA samples, all presume the foundational nature of empirical evidence, of knowledge through the senses. Extra-sensory perception, retro-cognition of past lives, so called “spectral evidence,” the otherwise authoritative declarations of popes, gurus, buddhas or psychics—all are literally “ruled out of court.” This does not, however, mean that popes, gurus, buddhas or psychics may not get to the truth, or that they might not someday become part of what we accept as “knowledge.” Not at all. At the very least, however, their words are neither as “accepted” nor as foundational as, for example, the epistemological foundation of our legal and judicial systems. Drawing the line at the empirical, as we in the West do in our legal and judicial systems, is our *practical* way of getting on with having a civilized society.

There was a time, of course, in the history of the West when “spectral evidence”—literally the testimony of spirits or of those claiming to see or hear spirits—was acceptable in courts of law. The witch trials of county Essex and

31 Jayatilekee 1971; Villacorta 1972.

Salem in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries all relied on such “evidence.”<sup>32</sup> We in the West no longer do so. This decision to draw the line this side of the spirit world for such foundational parts of our civic life is our way of saying that we get along better in enabling life to prosper by doing so. Such a decision does not in itself mean that spirits do not exist. It only means that we have rejected everyday dependence upon a system which assumes that they exist. We in the West reject basing a legal system on evidence which would include the testimony of spirits or the testimony of those in communion with them—at the very least out of strictly practical considerations. Namely, we are in effect betting that it is not possible to have an orderly system of justice if we accepted “spectral evidence” into “evidence,” as the development of a witch “crazes” attested. Given who we are, there are simply no reliable ways in which to check “spectral evidence.” We in the West are not confident in being able to assess it, and thus what we call “knowledge” needs to have at least a strong *empirical* component.

For much the same reasons, our so called “secular” political systems in the West in a way rest on the wager that civilized society stands a better chance of success if we remove religion, or better yet, any single religion, from a foundational role in our society. We in the West learned from the various wars of religion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the social consensus necessary for a civilized society could not be based upon the kinds of transcendental beliefs over which people had been so fiercely divided. Such beliefs had to be declared neutral to the maintenance of our social life. Social peace was not possible, the wager stipulated, if religion was a matter of public civic contest. Such beliefs mattered far too much, and divided our populations too sharply to make them the measure of citizenship. Settling the score in favor of one or the other risked endless social unrest and violence.

Being Protestant in a state insisting upon Catholic principles of citizenship, for example, created a situation ultimately intolerable for Protestants. Social harmony is better served—again in a practical way—by eliminating religious tests or preferences as standards of citizenship. Better, again we in the West reasoned, as it were, to tolerate all religions, than to risk the potential for social disruption by privileging one.

Of course, social peace and a civilized society may not finally be preferable to living by the “true” religion—especially if there is one! These tensions are still with us. Everything from Operation Rescue to the Civil Rights Movement rests on the preference for “truth” over social peace. Even civilization’s defining property—the rule of law—is flaunted in pursuit of a truth which offends existing social consensus and harmony, typical of these movements of reform and resistance. But, at least, as our societal “default,” we in the West have

32 Thomas 1971: chapters 14–18.

opted for the rule of law and social peace over the continuous revolution promised by religious movements, marching as they do to the sound of often distant and different drummers. Likewise, what we in the West call "science"—including the scientific and interpretive study of religion—too rests on certain axioms or assumptions about what counts as knowledge. But this does not make it indistinguishable in this respect from other schemes of knowledge—including "theology."

For these and other reasons, I have proposed that *empirical* study and broadly scientific approaches should characterize ideological critique. While we may discover that these ways of governing ideological critique are not best, we must be on guard, as the saying goes, not to let our quest for the "best" become the enemy of the "good."

### Conclusion

I have thus been arguing that the study of the ideological bases of the study of religion is part and parcel of the study of religion, and that we might just as well turn in our union cards as intellectuals, if we pass over it. How *could* an ideologically critical study of the study of religion *not* have *something* to do with the study of religion? How is it possible that any self-respecting thinking person in the study of religion could pursue academic goals in the present without some reference to the underlying ideological features of what they are doing—to the social and historic contexts of the work in question, to embedded ideologies informing the agendas of the research itself? Well, in conclusion, here are a few reasons why some might not go along with my attempts to advocate ideological critique. Let me speak to these objections.

To some students of religion, many of those inspired by theological interests, emphasizing the need to study the ideological bases of the study of religion will seem either irrelevant or offensive. They are often passionately *engagé*, and therefore contending with many pressing existential, political and social problems, such as race, gender, poverty, violence and so on. It is hard enough getting them interested in the comparative and phenomenological dimensions of religious studies as it is, without expecting them easily to become committed to the critical study of the ideological roots of religious studies. While I share their politics, the path to durable and long-term activism is not always as clearly marked as one may think. Their allergy to critical study comes from the kind of mentality that bent the study of the religions of India in the 1960s and 1970s into a concern either with Gandhi as a mentor for our own anti-war or non-violent political protest or toward an interest in yogic and mystical experience as confirmation for counter-cultural experimentation into drug experience—or just as often into "detoxing" from them. I would not want to gainsay these interests or efforts. Every time casts its spell on the things we do.

Furthermore, I shall be the first to admit that perhaps the *engagé* among us may have a point in not caring about the critical study of the ideologies informing religious studies. Are we really sorry, for example, that Martin Luther King, Jr. spent most of his time studying social ethics and Christian theology, rather than being critical of the ideologies underlying the study of religion? Like Martin Luther King, Jr. many of us too may be pressed with the demands of current social problems, and judged by our reactions to them in terms of present-day values. Thus, given the pull of such heady and heartfelt political and moral engagement, studying the ideological underpinnings of the history of religions seems only to rankle: those dead men of the past of the study of religion have the nerve now to insist that we use up our valuable youth paying attention to their aged interests and often discredited ideologies. Really! Who do these dead men think they are!?

To be sure, there may be other objections to engaging the ideological critique of theories in religious studies hailing from, those less inclined to being agents of social change than to advancing the study of religion in the humanistic or academic sense. They may agree with me about the need to understand the ideological roots of the study of religion, because their interests are primarily scholarly and rather than activist. But, still some of them may not be prepared to act upon my recommendation for the practice of the ideological critique of theories in religious studies. They might reply, "Sure, it would be *nice* to know the historical ideological circumstances lying behind the study of religion, just as it's *nice* to keep snapshots of our grandparents and great grandparents in some bureau drawer for occasional perusal. Thanks for the memories; and that's about it." For them, the question is whether or not being historically informed about the ideological roots of the study of religion *matters* in some significant way.

Then another group of noddors might add, "Oh yes, it would be *nice* to be critical of the study of religion's ideological roots—and it may even matter in some *significant* way for some purposes, but I want to get on with the primary task of studying *religion*, and if I am going to stray into second-order inquiry, my top priority there should be something practical such as *methodology*—what *methods* to use in studying religion. I don't want to spend my time learning about *how and why* religion *has been* studied in the past!" I mean, while physicists may read Newtonian physics, do they really care about the Newton's biography or about the world of English Puritanism and his immersion in it? Would we as a society and even as an academic discipline called religious studies be richer, say, in our knowledge of Islam or Buddhism because of historical sensitivity to the ideological commitments taken by those studying these religions in comparison, say, to the knowledge acquired about Islam or Buddhism thanks to Wilfred Smith or Stanley Tambiah directly? How much of the ideological background of the work of W.C. Smith or Tambiah will help us understand how they studied religions?

To counter these arguments, we can always resort to the old saw that knowledge is good in itself. We can always say that being aware of the ideological commitments of those who study religion and of the ways they promoted the study of religions really needs no defense. For this reason, I have tried to argue for students of religion to be critical about the underlying ideological commitments behind the study of religion *empirically and historically*—in particular times and places. But, the more we engage in a socially and historically critical approach to the study of religion the more we learn how these so-called “ideological” substrata are in many cases religious themselves. What we do today rests on what *happened* yesterday, and also on what we *believe* happened yesterday and how we *conceptualize* both what we believe happened yesterday and actually did happen yesterday. These conceptualizations are often religious themselves, or at the very least kindred to religion in being “ideological.”

For those who find themselves existentially committed, and want to change society, I hope to remind them of what they already surely know—the critical study of *culture, society and history* can reshape our definitions of the present, and thus become decisive in bringing about change in the present. This is why one often hears passionate complaints against those who would *re-write or revise* history. Or, more benignly, consider how recent work on women’s critical study of Christianity in the West has armed feminist reformers with weapons for challenging religious institutions such as the male priesthood. For those others who are hell-bent to study their subject matter of religion with little or no dallying in the glades of critical methodology and history, I hope I have persuaded them to follow through on the idea some may widely embrace already—that the “religion” they seek to study, along with all the main concepts included in it—myth, ritual, magic, witchcraft, sacrifice and so on—are historically and culturally derived concepts. Those concepts and the ideologies behind them are especially worth studying critically in their real empirical settings.

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