

## Religion Within the Limits of History: Schleiermacher and Religion—A Reappraisal

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This article addresses the often overlooked but acute historical sense behind the theory of human religiousness presented in Friedrich Schleiermacher's influential *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, and highlights its significance for the contemporary discussion regarding the study of religion. Defining religion as a unique and substantive dimension in human experience does not necessarily entail doing violence to historical difference. For Schleiermacher, the religious disposition is dialectically woven into the fabric of historical life, language being its communal medium. Religion never occurs by itself in some pure form but always already exists modified and actualised by cultural-linguistic ways of being in the world. Hence genuine religious plurality is not reducible to some abstract, ahistorical core but rather is confirmed and accounted for by means of an anthropological condition of possibility which renders it intelligible. Schleiermacher's so-called 'subjective turn' opens out ineluctably towards history, substantiating the complex conditionings of historical life rather than ignoring them, as critics of this approach often assume. The article explores the implications of this position as a model for religious studies and argues for a modified version of its basic thrust in light of several postmodern concerns.

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### Introduction

For a student of religion such as myself to accept willingly the designation 'historian of religion' is to submit to a lifelong sentence of ambiguity. I cannot think of two more difficult terms than 'history' and 'religion'. Their conjunction . . . serves only to further the confusion (Smith 1982, p. 20)

Jonathan Z. Smith points to the heart of perhaps the most important yet problematic trademarks of the academic study of religion: its claim to both the particularly 'historical' and the generally 'religious' dimensions of its subject matter. It might not be too far off the mark to say that the identity crisis which religious studies seems to be undergoing is the outcome, among other things, of a growing alienation between these terms and what they designate. Stimulated by the almost overwhelming diversity and complexity of the data, the domain of history—understood as the ever-changing and multidimensional context of time and space that circumscribes, situates and thus renders all human events uniquely particular and contingent—has so grown in prestige that it has become increasingly difficult to speak of 'religion' or 'religious' meaning in any broad, cross-cultural sense, except perhaps as a more or less contrived taxonomic tool (see Smith 1988).<sup>1</sup> Of course, the term 'religion' is not a special or privileged case here, for the same problem applies to discussions of the delimiting character of, say, 'music', 'culture' or 'literature' in the varieties of human experience, varieties which are themselves bound in different ways to specific historical horizons of meaning and which invoke specific musical, cultural or literary forms and self-understandings. The post-modern celebration of plurality and difference only compounds this difficulty, so nourishing a sense of the inexorably local and conditioned nature of human discourse that all attempts to speak generally or comparatively become automatically suspect. For

example, is there a discernible sense of the term 'music' that enables the musicologist to make analytical judgments and comparative evaluations across temporal and cultural boundaries, or is there in reality no difference among Bartok's 'String Quartets', the complex percussive rhythms associated with a Santaria Bembé, a John Coltrane solo, and the street noise of Chicago, to suggest a few examples, that is not itself simply a matter of particular, socially negotiated frameworks of meaning? Analogously, this kind of question plagues the study of religion. A daunting historicism looms over efforts to construct larger-scale theories and interpretations of religion, the kind which dominated the field a generation ago, and the result has been a trend towards anthropologically oriented, contextualist studies trained more narrowly upon the microcosmic and historically specific, towards what Daniel Pals calls 'new particularist approaches' (see Pals, 1996, pp. 282–3).

While many celebrate this as an advance over the alleged ahistorical and totalistic musings of a figure like Mircea Eliade, I do not think it presents a very optimistic prospect. In fact, it has led to marked cognitive disorientation, if not fragmentation, and produced a kind of theoretical timidity, if not paralysis. Scholars shy away from the very critical and systematic reflections needed to define what it is they are up to. If we do live now in a post-Eliadean age in the study of religion, and it seems clear that we do, the question becomes whether there are enduring and transregional shapes within the multidimensional texture of historical life, continuities and patterns that may delimit some finite province of meaning able to carry the name 'religious'. If so, is it then possible to address this dimension as different from other dimensions in human experience without obscuring or distorting its inescapably conditioned and local character? It seems that the ability to identify persisting cross-cultural features in religious phenomena diminishes the more one directs attention to specific features. It then becomes impossible to differentiate between the 'religious' and the 'nonreligious'. The result is that either the study of religion loses its focus, becoming simply a nominal discipline, unable to locate its own frame of reference, or the scholar is compelled to conceal prior definitions and assumptions about the nature of religion, assumptions which then behave as clandestine and unformulated standards guiding the entire enterprise. The prognosis in either case is not good. Thus we are led to the basic question that frames this paper: can the historical and the religious coexist in religious studies without confusion or conflation? Is the 'historical' study of 'religion' a working oxymoron, operating under the self-deluding assumption that it can describe the varied histories and meanings of a datum that is at bottom ahistorical?

With this problem in mind, and in light of the fact that the two-hundred-year anniversary of its initial publication in Germany in 1799 has just passed. I suggest that Friedrich Schleiermacher's *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1996) is worth re-reading as a critical resource for the study of religion. The text is significant for us not simply because the history of its influence is so broad but because it formulates key questions. To a post-Enlightenment sensibility marked by historicism and a suspicion of abstract universals, its unique way of underscoring the irreducibly particular and necessarily plural character of religion may read surprisingly fresh. This is not to say that Schleiermacher's argument must simply be revived. Rather, I suggest that, when approached from a certain angle, the model of human religiousness outlined in the *Speeches* may prove itself to be more contemporary than commonly thought. By teasing out certain key themes in the text, I intend to show how Schleiermacher sets up a theoretical framework within which history and religion can become more than self-cancelling terms.

Schleiermacher shows how a generically religious disposition arises and how it is from the beginning woven substantially into historical life. Unfortunately, a preoccupation among scholars with the concept of religion found in the second 'speech' has tended to dampen the historical consciousness in the *Speeches*, which, while present all along in the argument, becomes thematised most pointedly in the fifth and final speech. To be sure, Schleiermacher's definition of religion as a 'sensibility and taste for the infinite' (p. 23) does function to locate the religious as an enduring ontological, even transcendental, feature of human experience irreducible to other spheres of existence. However, this feature of human subjectivity never exists in itself without relation to the lived world, mediated and modified by the linguistically saturated domain of history. Religion is always already 'given' and positive, concretely embedded in diverse cultural worlds, each governed by a specific process of self-interpretation. For Schleiermacher, because history is fundamental to the manner in which human beings exist in the world, religion must itself be historical, not accidentally but substantively. The turn inward to feeling and intuition becomes simultaneously a turn outward to the horizon of history. For the individual-subjective and the communal-historical live in an interfaced tension, each modifying the other and neither reducible to the other. If religion is a poignant symphony played in the human heart, then the language-bound specificities of historical life are its efficacious instruments, setting it in motion. Diversity is not unpacked programmatically from an inviolable core, nor is some foundational essence simply read off the messy conditionedness of history.

In the *Speeches* there is a sustained attempt to steer a middle course between religion and history, avoiding experiential subjectivism and disincarnate formalism on one side and mere confessionalism, and utter historicism on the other. The final implication then for religious studies is that discourse about religion neither reflects the temporal manifestations of an ahistorical mysticism nor simply describes the way a group of persons collectively comprise their world, but rather, indicates an historically constituted event, the power and intelligibility of which reflects a distinctive way of being disposed towards the world. Religion and history are balanced in an ongoing dialectical tension. The goal of this paper is to show how this is so, following the argument of the first edition of the *Speeches* in a way that draws out certain critical themes and reappraises Schleiermacher's significance for the contemporary study of religion.

### ***Religion as an Irreducible Sphere of Human Existence***

With his 'cultured despisers' in mind, and in a classically apologetic move, Schleiermacher begins by suggesting that religion is not what it appears to be. First, religion is not, as it is commonly understood, merely a collection of doctrines, myths, rituals or ethical practices. It cannot be identified strictly with one particular confession or another, grounded in some form of authoritative revelation. Second, neither can religion be defined by taking a kind of consensus of the world's varied religions and abstracting what is 'common' or 'best' out from among them. It cannot simply be read off the particularities of history, attested to by examining various religious histories and drawing out certain collective, universal truths. Nor still, third, can religion be apprehended through processes of ethical or metaphysical reduction, summed up as a peculiar way of thinking about the world or a means to direct social conduct or substantiate personal character. It is not a set of explanatory principles or a summons to virtuous behaviour, whether veridical or fictitious (see 1996, pp. 19–23). Here Schleiermacher criticises the Enlightenment concern for a rationalised and purely formal religion according to the 'natural' laws of reason.

Though in actuality religion does involve all three of the above negated elements, it is never presented directly in them, reducible to a set of doctrines, a collection of shared principles, a universal metaphysical world view or abstracted ethical code. Its authentic power is felt only indirectly, hidden in all the thoughts and practices of religious traditions:

I wish I could present religion to you in some well-known form so that you might immediately remember its features, its movements, and its manners and exclaim that you have here or there seen it just this way in real life. But I would deceive you. For it is not found among human beings as undisguised. . . . (1996, p. 19)

Religion in its original and formative state never occurs in pristine form, but is always mixed with and thus shrouded by conditioned finite perceptions. It thus requires an act of what I shall call the ‘reflective imagination’ to envision and redirect inquiry towards what can neither be pointed out explicitly in the various historical traditions nor abstracted through rational formulation, and Schleiermacher’s entire text is aimed at achieving this end. How, then, should religion be properly addressed?

Rather than focusing upon some specific faith content or even a vague and general content such as belief in the transcendent, Schleiermacher directs our attention inward to that initial and underived condition in the human spirit whereby any such content is made religious. It is not ‘what’ is believed or practised that is important here but the existential posture or disposition that founds it, inspires it and gives it its effective power. It is religion within the religions that Schleiermacher is looking for, that productive centre which makes religions religious. And by meticulously disassociating erroneous elements from his genuine subject matter, he aims to purge the reader’s inquiring gaze and redirect it towards that ‘incomprehensible moment’ (p. 14) of immediacy in human experience from which religion first proceeds. Schleiermacher makes his intentions clear:

I do not wish to arouse particular (i.e., religious) feelings . . . nor to justify or dispute particular ideas. I wish to lead you to the innermost depths from which religion first addresses the mind. I wish to show you from what *capacity* of humanity religion proceeds, and how it belongs to what is for you the highest and dearest. (1996, pp. 10–11 [italics added])

It must be noted, however, that this disassociation is only a momentary methodological suspension or bracketing, for as Schleiermacher would have it, religion cannot be what it is apart from the beliefs and practices that render it determinate and individual. His point is to illustrate how the thoughts and activities normally associated with religion are not what is distinctive religious about religion. They are not the source from which religion springs but traces of a more originary potency, signs of an inner impulse that while not unrelated to particular religious creeds, codes and ceremonies cannot be wholly accounted for by them.

By digging beneath the surfaces and doing a kind of archaeological search, Schleiermacher hopes to uncover this potency as distinct from those elements with which it is commonly identified. Considered from this vantage point, religion can be seen emerging independently and of its own accord, creating its own context as a qualitatively different dimension of human life:

It springs necessarily and by itself from the interior of every better soul, it has its own province in the mind in which it reigns sovereign, and it is worthy of moving the

noblest and the most excellent by means of its innermost power and by having its innermost essence known by them. (1996, p. 17)

Religion has an inner intelligible sense and integrity that is neither derived from nor reducible to theory or praxis, science or custom (see 1996, p. 23).

This kind of methodological move, by which Schleiermacher carves a distinctive space out for religion set apart from the language and behaviours surrounding it, constitutes a watershed for the understanding of religion, the impact of which has been enormous. Although its immediate intent was to defend and justify the viability of religion in a religion-weary age, its programmatic scope extended well beyond the horizon of the 'cultured despisers'. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith observes about the *Speeches*, 'It would seem to be the first book ever written on religion as such—not on a particular kind or instance and not incidentally, but explicitly on religion itself as a generic something' (Smith, 1991, p. 45). The idea that religion, first, is a unique and substantive experience underlying the beliefs and behaviours that surround it, and second, that it is therefore unable to be reduced to these overlaying perspectives or any specific explanations of them, entails that, third, it be examined and understood according to its own integral grammar. Because religion has its own province of meaning and posits its own world, it is the duty of the inquirer—or even the despiser, whom Schleiermacher is addressing—to comprehend it according to its own special frame of reference. It is then the business of the study of religion to delineate this frame of reference in terms of the many religions.

Put differently, by appealing to some common and irreducible form of experience behind particular historical experiences, the scholar is able to create a critical second-order discourse which formulates theories and makes systematic comparisons, while preserving the religious integrity of the first-order language surrounding the data. Religious ideas and practices, in other words, are important in their own right, saying something of significance about the world and human life in it. They are not dubious fictions grafted onto the fabric of existence but hold ontological weight, meriting consideration according to their own claims rather than measured strictly by non-religious criteria.<sup>2</sup> What is required is an interpretive apparatus that respects this fact as it seeks to re-construct what things mean to their original adherents in their own situation and to thematise the comparative significance of this meaning by placing it against the large-scope meaning of religion as a general trajectory. This is the kind of broad programmatic effort made by thinkers of the 'phenomenological' approach such as Rudolph Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Mircea Eliade, and Joachim Wach, who loosely employ Schleiermacher's model in order to account for the kinds of meanings religious worlds project.<sup>3</sup> The study of religion is thus a selective enterprise which yields a specific type of general knowledge, even while it may draw multi-disciplinary operations into its cognitive domain. It locates the distinctiveness and integrity of religion on the historical map. But precisely here lies the ambiguity between religion and history that Jonathan Smith identifies so trenchantly in our opening quotation, for by setting up religion as an autonomous and *sui generis* sphere of human life, this approach appears to render religion exempt from the flux and contingencies of historical life.

Consequently, many now criticise the use of substantive language in understanding religion, arguing that it obscures the interdimensional and conditioned character of human life by privileging and protecting one group of data over all others. J. Samuel Preus decries its outright apologetic and religious intentions, which instead of

representing critically and explaining religion, serves merely to legitimate it, promulgating often implicit and unexamined theological assumptions. Preus contends that religious studies is better served by using the more scientific approach proffered by the naturalistic (i.e., non-religious) paradigm (see Preus, 1987, pp. xviii–xxi). On a second front, Jonathan Smith questions whether religion is something that has reality and is capable of being described. For him, religion is not a quality history has. Thus it is not historically defensible to employ the term paradigmatically as if it defined an independent, unique, and universal dimension of human experience distinct from the scholar's own reflections.<sup>4</sup> Religion, like music or literature, is a reflective construction, the taxonomic product of a second-order act of the imagination; it does not exist *per se*. Put bluntly:

there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. (Smith, 1982, p. xi)

For this reason, it is not the inherent religiousness of the phenomenon that guides inquiry, but the scholar's own promethean act of decision to construct and constitute the phenomenon as religious, for 'no datum possesses intrinsic interest' (Smith, 1982, p. xi). In the vein of such philosophers as Sellars, Quine and Rorty, there is no secure starting point or foundations; there is no privileged 'given' (in our case, nothing uniquely religious) that exists isolated from the theoretical picture produced to render it intelligible. The scale really does create the phenomenon, 'for there is no primordium—it is all history' (Smith, 1982, p. xiii).

On yet a third side, Talal Asad takes this historicism one step further, more in the genealogical direction of Foucault. According to Asad, not only do global definitions and discourses that speak of shared religious qualities artificially privilege one group of data over others, but they also mask prior theoretical and ideological commitments which can distort other experiences when applied beyond their own context. Any use of the term religion is itself historically specific, the by-product of certain discursive processes that are themselves local and embedded in configurations of power (see Asad, 1993, p. 29). To extend its scope cross-culturally therefore is potentially to colonise the 'other', violating its integral difference. Indeed, this kind of radical historicism parallels the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment model of rationality and its celebration of difference. Meta-level questions about larger thematic trajectories that span across cultures are suspect because there is no way to get behind or beyond the constantly deferring reflections of multiple surface meanings, at least no way to do so without suppressing the perspectival play of genuine historical differences. Thus, as one writer succinctly summarises, 'History is not history when it is the history of religions' (McCalla, 1994, p. 435). History, with its complex and multidimensional networks of mediated meanings and actions, so circumscribes both the knower and the known that there is no way to get at some immediate or pristine 'religious' dimension without compromising history.

With these potentially disabling criticisms in mind, let us turn back to the *Speeches*. It argues against the position of Preus that religion holds ontological weight and is not illusory, presumes against Smith that religion is an actual dimension of potency in human life, and maintains against Asad that there is a kind of cross-cultural grammar to religious thoughts and behaviours. Yet it need not be constructed as necessarily protective and distortive of genuine historical experience. In fact, quite the contrary is

true. A closer analysis of Schleiermacher's *Speeches* will help us see how it affirms historical particularity, providing a framework for rethinking its significance in a contemporary context.

### ***Generic Religion as an Anthropological Potency***

What is religion? Couched in language to which his educated German audience would resonate, Schleiermacher identifies religion as a form of being-acted-upon which opens out to a transcendent dimension of the world as a whole, an intuitive perception of the living infinite woven into and shining through the fabric of the finite. Religion is an impression of the unconditioned in the conditioned, of 'something more' interfused within the texture of the world, of something extra-ordinary within the ordinary. In this way, it is more than a way of thinking about the world, and more than a set of moral obligations; it is a specific way of being in relation to the world. I quote here Schleiermacher's famous passage:

Religion's essence is neither thinking or acting, but intuition and feeling. It wishes to intuit the universe, wishes devoutly to overhear the universe's own manifestations and actions, longs to be grasped and filled by the universe's immediate influences in childlike passivity. . . . (R)eligion wishes to see the infinite, its imprint and its manifestation, in humanity no less than in all other individual and finite forms. . . . Praxis is an art, speculation is a science, religion is the *sensibility and taste for the infinite*. (1996, pp. 22–3, [italics added])

But religion is not merely an indispensable third term existing alongside theory and praxis, for Schleiermacher goes on to claim it is a touchstone which directs, measures and perfects them:

To want to have speculation and praxis without religion is rash arrogance. . . . Without religion, how can praxis rise above the common circle of adventurous and customary forms? How can speculation become anything better than a stiff and barren skeleton? (1996, p. 23)

Religion is the momentum behind thought and action. In the later (1806 and 1821) editions of the *Speeches* this is put in stronger terms, the sense for the infinite in the finite posing as the original unifying ground and centre of human experience and its impulses, the anterior guarantor of all thought and action (1958, pp. 29, 38ff.). But even in the first edition it is clear that religion is a constitutive act of the human spirit encountering the vibrancy of the universe, not just an isolated dimension of experience unrelated to other dimensions, but fundamental, opening up the domain of thinking to a 'higher realism', a higher way of encountering what is real, and opening up the domain of action to a deeper sense of its original participation in the infinite (1996, p. 24). Let us unpack what this means.

First, neither a mode of knowing nor a way of practice, religion is a prereflective receptivity that bears witness to the active and immediate impact of the 'universe' upon human consciousness. Schleiermacher uses the terms 'intuition' and 'feeling' to express both a subjective and an objective component. On the objective side, a certain kind of reality is co-presented—that is, is presented along with—the perceptions of finite realities, though never explicit and directly thematised as such. For Schleiermacher, this correlative 'object' is the living, infinite universe, which is an ultimate, transcendental unity that is more than the finite sum of the world's

multiplicity, more than the apparent infinity of space and time, and more than merely the operative harmony of all finite things. It is not God, however, at least in the first edition of the *Speeches*, for such theistic language is too closely associated with the theological constructs Schleiermacher wants to distance himself from (see 1996, pp. 51–4). Recasting essentially Platonic meanings in Romantic form, Schleiermacher sees the living infinity of the universe as the unbroken and unbounded horizon of all determinate and limited events, the world's encompassing formative activity springing forth into multiplicity (see Redeker, 1973, pp. 36f.). Yet this is no empty concept, for the infinite is an ever-active and fecund world-ground that impinges upon human experience through all finite perceptions. On the subjective side, the universe presents itself to us not merely as a speculative principle, as in Fichte, nor as a postulate of moral experience, as in Kant's Second Critique, nor as a regulative idea, as in Kant's First Critique, but *immediately* in every finite particularity. Schleiermacher puts it elegantly:

The universe exists in uninterrupted activity and reveals itself to us every moment. Every form that it brings forth, every being to which it gives separate existence according to the fullness of life, every occurrence that spills forth from its rich, ever-fruitful womb, is an action of the same upon us. Thus to accept everything individual as a part of the whole and everything limited as a representation of the infinite is religion. But whatever would go beyond that and penetrate deeper into the nature and substance of the whole is no longer religion. (1996, p. 25)

While Schleiermacher is trying to avoid reducing religion to a philosophical ideal or moral principle, he is claiming that religion involves a genuine kind of reality disclosure, an unmediated awareness of what might be called 'divine'. The undifferentiated unity of the universe is the experienced 'object' of religion, its *sine qua non*, but not through empirical or rational mediation. It leaves its vital mark upon consciousness indirectly through the receptive immediacy of feeling and intuition (see 1996, pp. 24–31).

Although Schleiermacher uses both terms, 'feeling' and 'intuition' come to mean virtually the same thing. Intuition receives an object's sense, and feeling is the inner activity it stimulates and generates, both antedating all mediated knowledge and activity. Though conscious reflection renders them distinct, at the pre-thematic level they involve each other and occur simultaneously (see 1996, p. 31). In fact, intuition and feeling are what they are because they are initially one, prior to the division of reality into subject and object. 'Intuition without feeling is nothing and can have neither the proper origin nor the proper force; feeling without intuition is also nothing; both are therefore something only when and because they are originally one and unseparated' (1996, p. 31). Their unity comprises the most basic experience of self in its interaction with the world. They are a pre-reflective receptive openness to the universe. And here, for Schleiermacher, religion emerges.<sup>5</sup>

It is this unitary and originary moment in experience, indescribable in itself, which receives the impression of the infinite weaving through everything finite, and accordingly 'is the natal hour of everything living in religion' (1996, p. 32). The first mysterious moment in every sensory perception opens out to the universe, revealing its impact upon us. But because it is immediate and pre-thematic, this experience must be pointed to indirectly and rhetorically, in a way that evokes recognition and harkens the reader back to an unexplored dimension of consciousness presumed in all thoughts and activities. This is precisely where Schleiermacher employs the 'reflective imagination' most pointedly. In an expressive passage reminiscent of Plato's 'myth



of the soul' in the *Phaedrus*, he waxes quite poetic in portraying how, at a primordial level of consciousness, each finite perception is simultaneously an impression of the breathing of the universe, transparent to the infinite (see 1996, p. 31, editor's footnote #17). Here, says Schleiermacher, we are at one with the universe and feel its life and power as our own, the effect of which opens us up to the world (see 1996, pp. 31–2). This moment is the birthplace of religion, its pure expression as the coincidence of finite and infinite, and every human being experiences it implicitly along with the experience of finite reality.

Schleiermacher is arguing that the intuition of the universe in and through the perception of the particular is what we might call an 'anthropological constant' forming an inbuilt religious capacity or potency, an inner constitution that disposes human beings towards being religious. Indeed, consciousness itself emerges in a pre-thematic religious moment. But because it is ever evasive, becoming mixed with other things as we stand out into the mediated world of knowing and doing, religion never appears in its immediate coincidence of intuition and feeling. Although its original impetus stems from an impression of the unbounded and living infinite, actual religious intuitions must have a definite focus upon the determinate and finite. The formative object of religion, the unconditioned, is never experienced as such but is always already presented indirectly in the particular and conditioned. The plural and finite particularities of worldly life function as revelatory windows to the infinite, each determinate event expressing an encompassing living whole. Thus it is that religion must fix itself upon one object or another, conscious that it is 'only a part of the whole', and that the possibilities for other and different intuitions are themselves infinite (1996, p. 27). As Schleiermacher concedes, 'Every original and new intuition of the universe is one, and yet all individuals must know best what is original and new for them' (1996, p. 49). Diversity is not a deficiency, for 'each has something unique' (1996, p. 39). These remarks are crucial because they intimate a distinction between religion pure—as a dynamic potency of the human spirit—and religion as it is actualised in concrete life.

Religion rises from the innermost sanctuary of human experience, having its own distinctive identity in the pre-thematic unity of subject and object. Clearly, however, this original potency is not 'a' religious experience or intuition, one among others, but rather is 'the' constitutive condition of possibility presupposed by religious experiences. Just as the infinite is only indirectly present in and along with the finite, so this indeterminate moment never exists purely in itself but only indirectly in *particular* intuitions and feelings. Yet religion is not based upon the occasional and more psychological emotions that occur here and there in reference to finite experiences. It is a formal transcendental feature of human experience implied by the character of perception and the impulses which govern conscious life. We might, echoing Heidegger, call it *existential*, one of the ontological modalities which structures human being in the world but which is itself never experienced. By working backward, bracketing all extraneous elements, Schleiermacher has isolated the generic 'what' of religion, pointing to both how and where it arises in human experience. But this is not the complete picture, for intuition and feeling involve an inner revelation which is always already taken up in association with an array of definite particulars, creating a specific modification of a generically religious potency. Relation to the whole is materialised and becomes a fact through the concrete relations, thoughts and actions which make up conscious existence. And because these relations are endless in variety, religious experiences will be too. Every human being is a 'compendium of humanity' and has an inner relation to the universe, but each bears forth the whole 'within

individual forms' (1996, p. 41). The finite mirrors the infinite, but in an infinite number of finite ways.

The peculiar dialectic to Schleiermacher's argument emerges here. What began abstractly as a concern to locate religion as a *sui generis* experience distinguishable from beliefs and customs now shifts inexorably back towards their concrete domain. And this is ironic as well, for religion construed as an intuition of the infinite can be never experienced directly, but only indirectly in the terms of that which it is not. Shifting back to the particular in this manner is Schleiermacher's deliberate attempt to break away from the Enlightenment penchant for religious formalism. It is exclusively through the differences set aside in order to address religion in its original form that religion actually does display itself in its manifold varieties. Each individual elements act as a living usher, opening up the infinite in the finite. The formal condition of religion is not, as might be expected, some kind of 'natural religion of intuition and feeling', everything devolving from it as secondary or accidental outgrowths. Nor is it some mystical subjectivism which expresses itself in terms that come only after the original religious fact. Rather, in itself religion is an indeterminate existential structure of experience that serves as the presuppositional possibility for particular religious intuitions and feelings without itself having definite content. It cannot have definite form without the mediation of finite reality, just as its correlative object, the infinite whole, has no definite form. The active presence of the universe is only felt indirectly along with and through finite perceptions.

Though in the *Speeches* Schleiermacher is not altogether clear at times about the distinction between what is presupposed and what is actual, mainly because his style is intentionally rhetorical, semi-poetic and evocative rather than philosophical or scientific, the concept of religion functions as a formal experimental structure implied in and modified by all particular religious experiences. What he calls the essence or enduring character of religion is that immediate intuition of the universe which serves to make possible the actual religions, but actual religions are the real playing field upon which the mark of the universe leaves its visible trace. The substantive movement is not from the general to the particular, not from some foundational and univocal experience to some derivative expression, but from determinate experiences to their presuppositional features, propelled by a kind of transcendental method infused with the reflective imagination.<sup>6</sup> Religion is that indeterminate yet formative capacity in the human spirit which makes religions what they are. Yet the starting point is the historically concrete—the religions.

### ***Religion Within the Limits of History***

Schleiermacher's dialectic comes to a climax in the fifth speech. The third and fourth speeches deal with the personal cultivation and social embodiment of religion, for if religion is to stir the heart it must not only meet the person in some definite form suited to person's capacity and point of view but must also take on a communal shape, as persons of similar dispositions gather together, share and cultivate their views in a common confessional language. Building upon this point, the fifth speech beckons the reader to follow the implications of all that has preceded to their final destination, the historically concrete religions. Schleiermacher now wants us to consider religion *only* as it is manifest in the religions. As a living reality, religion must be 'positive', embodied in an individual shape within a specific situation of historical influences that substantively determine its character. He states, 'Just as no human being can come into

existence as an individual without simultaneously, through the same act, also coming into a world, into a definite order of things, and being placed among individual objects, so also a religious person cannot attain his individuality without, through the same act, also dwelling in a determinate form of religion' (1996, p. 108). All religions presuppose the intuition of the infinite; it is their collective differentia. But they vary as each person and community is finite and is determined in a different way. Again, Schleiermacher contends that 'in accord with its concept and essence religion is infinite and immeasurable, even for the understanding; it must therefore have in itself a principle of individuation, for otherwise it could not exist at all and be perceived' (1996, p. 97). Religion is always already placed amidst finite relationships, relationships which inform the general intuition of the infinite in finite ways. Religion is (1) historical, (2) plural and (3) concrete.

First, submitted to the interactive influences of worldly events, religion becomes itself by becoming historical, modified by the particular way a group of finite persons exist in a localised configuration. The self is never a self in isolation but grows into a network of communicative relations that become its determinate life-world, collectively constituting a way of being together. Schleiermacher notes in the fourth speech that religion, like human nature, must necessarily be social (1996, 73f.). Mutual communication organises itself naturally into a common conversation or tradition where a definite intuition is discovered and celebrated. But as there cannot be only one community, for no determinate religion fully embodies the infinite, each takes a specific intuition of the universe to be its congealing centre and relates everything to it. The peculiar content and meaning of this intuition and the manner in which it fills in and modifies generic religious potency, depends upon the contingencies of historical interrelationships such as the working of various discourses of power and the cultural ethos. Concrete historical events are the medium through which religion is rendered determinate, a fact which helps explain why religious traditions place stress on origins and boundary maintenance (see 1996, 112). As religion is the response of the self to a prereflective engagement with the universe, so history is the relational web of the thinking and active self engaged with its concrete milieu. And as history conditions differently, there must therefore be many determinate religions.

We have already encountered the second point: because religion is limited by the horizons of historical life, it must assume multiple forms. In fact, Schleiermacher admits that he has from beginning 'presupposed the plurality of religions and their most distinct diversity as something necessary and unavoidable' (1996, p. 96). No one tradition can 'possess religion completely, for the human being is finite and religion infinite' (1996, p. 97). And because the universe can be intuited in as many ways as there are histories, countless shapes of religion are possible (see 1996, p. 100). There is no single historical essence of religion; every community of faith is modified in a way suited to its own peculiar intuition of the infinite in the finite (see 1996, p. 112). An integral plurality of cumulative traditions thus emerges, each facilitating unique religious experiences configured by particular presentiments of the whole. Each must then be understood on its own terms—socially, culturally, politically, economically, historically. Schleiermacher's approach thus leads quite naturally into a multidisciplinary format, which would contribute to opening up a specific community's complex way of negotiating concrete religious value.

Finally, as I have suggested, the historical and plural character of religious determinacy is a product of the fact that religion is not itself absolute but remains located in and limited by the finite sphere of time and space, subject and object. The allegedly

erroneous or foreign encroachments of theory and praxis upon religion are inevitable consequences of its material finitude (see 1996, p. 99). If the human person is fundamentally religious at the core, this is made real only as it is communicated and embodied in particular feelings, behaviours and modes of discourse. Religion forms itself through ways of thinking about and acting within the world that are marked by finite concerns and perceptions (see Forstman, 1977, pp. 65–79). In actuality, myths, beliefs, rituals and customs, far from hindering or depreciating religion as mere outer husks, serve as formulas for cultivating and conveying religion within a given relational context, binding a community together by shared finite categories and practices. This point seems obvious enough, but it can be lost by giving priority only to Schleiermacher's second Speech. Schleiermacher concedes that religion by nature inherits and becomes what it is through linguistically saturated historical experiences that are bound to a given cultural horizon. It does not occur beneath history. It is woven inseparably into history. It occurs only within the limits of history, within determinations of finite time and place.

In this, Schleiermacher sides with particularity over generality, the fifth speech actually framing his whole text.<sup>7</sup> This final speech effects a hermeneutical shift requiring the reader to reevaluate all that has come before. The idea of generic religion does not present some univocal or abstract belief, practice or experience shared everywhere by all religions, nor does it function to bolster one religion's claim to absolute authenticity over others. Rather, it is employed as a kind of abstraction from concrete historical events, an anthropological presupposition of possibility rendering intelligible and legitimating a peculiar set of phenomena as religious. Far from reducing all to a common essence, Schleiermacher accounts for historical plurality through an analysis of human experience and its finite conditions, placing diverse shapes within the wider schematisation of a critical anthropology (see Farley, 1997, pp. 21–2). The idea of religion is not an attempt to express *the* intuition of the universe, *the* univocal religious experience shared by all though in nebulous or inchoate form, for such an intuition always already occurs shaped by some particular network of finite events. There is not some general religiousness or universal faith experience which all seek to articulate in various ways, for, as Schleiermacher suggests, these articulations both modify and are modified by unique intuitions of the universe that are themselves contextually bound. Only through the material mediation of history is the formal potency of religion opened up and actualised.

History then is not merely an accidental addition to some trans-historical essence or wholly inner, mystical state of consciousness. Rather, it renders religion determinate and in fact constitutes it. And religious differences then are not simply expressions derived from a prereflective and universal experience. Rather, the conditioned particularities of history are the efficacious instruments setting the music of religion in motion. This is why I have chosen to interpret Schleiermacher's idea of religion as a 'capacity' or 'potency' (*potentia*) in the human spirit that is variously actualised and experienced, induced by different finite perceptions of the infinite. The turn to immediate experience to locate religion is at the same time a turn to history, a turn to the mediated realm of discourses and practices that condition human life. History and religion are balanced in tension.

### ***Conclusion: Appraising a Re-reading***

In conclusion, we must ask whether the model of religion offered by Schleiermacher measures up to the criticisms mentioned. The answer, however, depends upon the kind

of priority one grants to history. To be sure, the *Speeches* does manifest a version of relativism, giving a great deal of formative play to historical influence, but it is not the kind of hard relativism that goes 'all the way down'. Against the views of his immediate audience, those of the Berlin salon circuit who 'despise' religion, Schleiermacher does indeed defend religion as an authentic and substantive dimension in human life. It discloses something genuine and real, based in the human being's in-built orientation towards the living and infinite world. Religion is not an 'imagined' taxonomic category or the product of an empirical consensus of 'family resemblances', to use contemporary language. It both reflects and accounts for a 'family' of distinct phenomena, yielding explanations for the power and pervasive influence of certain kinds of thoughts and actions in human life. While an acute awareness of the interrelated and conditioned character of all human experience as historical does run through his argument, such an 'historical consciousness' does not categorically subsume religion, but is balanced with it. Precisely how, however, does Schleiermacher employ his understanding of 'religion' to map out the 'religions', placing them in a comparative context? What examples are there that might modify and give concrete historical content to religion as a potency?

At this point Schleiermacher's argument becomes problematic. Schleiermacher begins to get into trouble during the fifth speech when he describes and evaluates the concrete traditions and argues for the religious superiority of Christianity, forcing the reader to question whether he has not all along read a specific theological vision into his account of religion. Not only does he suggest that his readers must become religious in some form if they are truly to understand religion, but he goes on to defend Christianity as religion 'raised to a higher power' because it is polemically self-critical, non-prejudicial and inherently open to multiple religious forms, more fully embodying the character of religion (see 1996, pp. 113, 116, 123). Here Schleiermacher seems to suggest that because one must choose an historical religion, reminding his reader that there is no such thing as a pure religion floating above history, Christianity is the best option because Jesus actualises the idea of the finite straining with the universe in search of higher reconciliation. Suddenly religion is now filled in with historical content, and Christianity becomes the controlling example of what 'religion' is when instantiated concretely in history. For Schleiermacher, there may come a time when Christianity will be surpassed, but for now it is the most deeply infused with the spirit of religion. As our critics rightly might ask, is Schleiermacher then guilty of colouring his whole approach with a proselytising Christian bias, obscuring and even undermining his transcendental move by making it derivative and confessional in nature? Would this not do violence to the 'historical' in religious studies, confirming the worst of suspicions?

I maintain that these questions yield both positive and negative answers. One obvious implication of a positive answer is the potential for cognitive imperialism, where the religious 'other' is simply a distorted projection of Schleiermacher's own religious self. In this way, arguing for religion as a *sui generis* dimension of human life becomes simply one more way of obscuring what really is all along a theological agenda. Yet if historical particularity and interpretive context are prioritised, as Smith and Asad might grant, viewing one's own tradition in a positive light would be natural for any self-consciously religious person to do. Schleiermacher concedes that the world is experienced through the lens of the specific intuition or set of intuitions that constitutes a religion. Perhaps, then, the concern to see Christianity as the highest modification of religion does not finally contradict Schleiermacher's historical sense, but rather, is an expression of it. The conditioned religiosity of the Christian or the Buddhist or Muslim, is going to make a

certain prejudice inevitable, for all religious discourse is conditioned by a particular vantage point, rendered determinate by a peculiar way of grasping the infinite in the finite. In fact, foreshadowing Gadamer's understanding of effective history, Schleiermacher regards other forms of religious intuition from within the perspective of his own uniquely determined religious consciousness as a Christian, using an ontological analysis of human experience to locate this perspective—and others similarly shaped—as a particular region on the general landscape of human existence.

This perspectivism, however, does not simply beg the question, precluding or undermining the reflective imagining of religion and its ability to make sense out of certain phenomena. Granting the contextualising effects of 'history' does not invalidate talk of generic religion as a model but balances it and keeps it from becoming purely formal. While the universal can be thought only from the vantage point of historical contingencies, there are certain enduring patterns and continuities within the flux of history that the reflective imagination can discern through critical inquiry, even calling them 'religious'. Religion, as a generic potency, thus becomes an operative presupposition within the religions. But if Schleiermacher refuses to deduce material religious practices and world views from religion, what does it mean to claim that religion is 'found' in the religions?

Schleiermacher seeks to account for the distinctiveness of religious systems and experiences, isolating the unique grammar of religion as a way of rendering the infinite transparent in the embedded conditions of finitude, this made possible as an actualisation of a generic capacity woven into human consciousness. His analysis directs our attention to the general sense of concrete religion—i.e., within the limits of history—as a complex of prototypical attitudes, stories, gestures, rituals, symbols, beliefs, emotions, and institutions by which humans participate in perceived sources of unconditioned power and value that have cosmological, world-building significance. Specific religious meanings involve the thematisation of a horizon of transcendence which becomes the focal point for thought and action in the world and through which human life becomes organised and coherent, laden with ontological weight and worth. While the paranormal experiences, or 'showings', of Julian of Norwich may be explainable through psychological investigation, or the importance of pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca for Muslims illuminated through sociological analysis, the religious significance of such experiences and activities may be more appropriately considered as having a sense or grammar of its own rather than as being exclusively the product of nonreligious elements. Without distinguishing the character and intentionality of the meanings posited by religious symbols or ritual observances, for example, we have no real context for interpreting them as specifically religious subject matters. After all, what distinguishes the ritual drama of a sports event or a presidential inauguration from that of a Japanese tea ceremony or a Catholic Mass? Certainly there are important incongruities between different religious practices, but there also are incongruities between those practices (as religious) and other human practices that are not imbued with the same kind of intensity or value. Schleiermacher's model begins to aid us in accounting for such incongruities, considering as it does how and why human beings are drawn in certain instances to limit-experiences and meanings and, even more, showing how these kinds of experiences and meanings never occur in themselves but always already occur circumscribed by time and place. But this is precisely the kind of approach called into question by Jonathan Smith.

Smith sees religion as an academic invention needed to access certain data (see Smith, 1988, p. 234). The irony is that for Smith there are no religious data. There is no

religious dimension out there, nothing at all but historical flux. This viewpoint fits well with the branch of postmodernism that leans towards the radicalism of Nietzsche, Foucault and Derrida on the one hand and the anti-foundationalist discourse of Neo-pragmatism on the other. In the language of Richard Rorty, it capitalises on the 'sense that there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions' (Rorty, 1982, p. xlii). Accordingly, historicity so conditions both knower and known that knowledge is fundamentally an imagined construct, or as Nietzsche would have it, a lie needed for us to live in the world and pretend to do science (see Nietzsche, 1968, p. 451). Do imaginative models then simply replace reality and determine what is real? To use Jean Baudrillard's terms, is the real, or in our case, religion, merely a 'precession of simulacra'? If so, we lose the ability to distinguish not only between the religious and the non-religious but more fundamentally between illusion and reality. This is hardly footing on which to base an academic discipline, be it religious studies or literature or music. After all, does music history function to 'create' its subject matter, or does it strive to testify to the development of a dimension of human practice shaped by rhythmic, harmonic and melodic configurations, configurations that display certain continuities?

While it may be true to say that history conditions all human life, and that all human knowledge is in a certain sense constructed and tied to discursive conventions, it does not seem fitting to conclude that we can know nothing other than our own culturally bound constructs, that the category 'religion' is an artificial 'confessional' device projected onto history, and that historical subjects and their first-order self-interpretations exercise no control over the scholar's second-order reflection. As Ivan Strenski notes, this kind of historicist subjectivism 'invites unrestrained ideologizing' (see Strenski, 1998, p. 359). Such a position would render the philosophical problem of incommensurable life-worlds insurmountable and would indeed fall prey to Asad's claim that the idea of religion hegemonically distorts the perception of difference when applied cross-culturally. The question, however, is whether Asad is able to address this problem adequately without making substantive and cross-cultural claims of one kind or another. But Asad refuses to move in this direction, leaving no room for 'shared' languages, for in his mind such would only function to perpetuate semantic colonialism and foster asymmetries of power. Admittedly, neither Asad nor Smith advocate an utter relativism, but in different ways their strong claim is that there is much more 'imagination' in the study of religion than 'reflection' of something perduring and real. There is real danger here; pure imagination, far from valuing and upholding differences and incongruities, gets us nowhere beyond ourselves.

It seems more reasonable to acknowledge that any encounter with difference involves an ambiguous composite of generality and particularity, of comparison and contrast. The particular cannot be recognised and known without the general, just as a part cannot be understood except in relation to its position in the larger interconnected network of the whole. In fact, it is what is shared or general that allows us to find a symmetry between self and world, making communication possible. Schleiermacher's appeal to common humanity as an open-ended and indeterminate capacity for the infinite is one way of addressing the problem. This is a slippery and difficult track which cannot here be traversed in full. Suffice it to say that Schleiermacher helps us to imagine religion as something intelligible and disclosive of the real—something more than the illusory projection of an utterly historicised and

self-creative human being (*homo faber*) who out of various non-religious motives reacts against the chaos and tragedies of life by fashioning artificial semantic webs and placing them onto an alien environment.

While religious infrastructures are human products, created and maintained by human agents, and as such are subject to the relativities of historical life, they are also a function of a creative participation in the world's surplus of value and intelligibility. Religious faith is not just a negation, a protective mechanism against meaninglessness. It has positive ontological weight as a reflection of a dimension of reality, the religious imagination bearing the imprint of its strength. Peter Berger invokes a similar approach in contending that we may in fact project religious meaning onto the world because the world is already grasped as religiously meaningful, there being an original affinity between the structure of consciousness and that of the perceived world. Perhaps then it is justifiable to look for traces of religious reality, or as Berger puts it, 'signals of transcendence', in the ways humans live historically (see Berger, 1969, pp. 52–3, 59). The various thematisations of horizons of transcendence might be precisely such 'signals'. And Schleiermacher's approach may help us to account for these signals. As Schleiermacher might say, it may be that the religions intimate (read 'signal') a basic human capacity that itself reflects the greater activity of the living and mysterious world impressing itself upon us in manifold ways, all within the limits of history.

Certainly this kind of model offers a more hopeful outlook for the study of religion than does radical historicism, but its programmatic fruition, moving beyond Schleiermacher's apologetic approach, would depend upon both its theoretical proficiency and its capacity for self-criticism and revision. To be sure, any understanding of human religiousness is itself an interpretive construction, functioning paradigmatically to make sense out of a constellation of events that do seem to share enduring qualities and display certain shapes of continuity in the midst of historical flux and flow. If such an understanding is to aid the study of religion, its goal must be to re-present religious histories critically, developing second-order discourses that reflect and make sense of historical life through imaginative vision and critical tools, but which do not distort first-order self-interpretations. Here is the rub, helping us move beyond Asad. Any such model must (1) open itself up to being ruptured and falsified by the data and (2) submit itself to the ongoing test of conversation with other theoretical positions and frames of reference. A model is a heuristic device, a provisional way of seeing the world, but one that must be presented credibly and cogently as a possibility among many competing for viability. It thus can never be fully guaranteed, remaining open-ended, constantly reevaluating itself even while it makes certain reality-claims.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps this is the predominate fault of the 'phenomenological' approach taken by many of Schleiermacher's heirs, who thought that the nature of religion could merely be 'read off' the phenomenon through rigorous description. But description is already interpretation, in many cases obscuring 'theological' agendas present all along, and so we must become rigorously explicit about what it is that we are doing through argument. In the end then, even while we might argue for the integrity and intelligibility of religion as a generic human potency, it is illuminative power, durability, and ability to take into account multi-disciplinary approaches that are the criteria of adequacy for measuring the value of a particular interpretive framework.<sup>9</sup> The value of Schleiermacher's accomplishment lies not in its apologetic scope but in its heuristic capacity to open the 'sense' or 'force of intelligibility' of certain historical shapes and meanings, shapes and meanings that refer human existence to an ultimate context and designate a fundamental way of being related to the cosmos. Perhaps the scholar of religion can champion the integrity



and intelligibility of religion without doing injustice to its historical embeddedness and without becoming closed off to genuine historical difference.

And if, as has been argued, the success of a model of religion depends upon maintaining a tenuous balance between religion and history, Schleiermacher's approach, despite its ambiguity in some places, may still provide a promising starting point. Any inquiry that claims to direct itself towards a specifically religious dimension assumes an ambiguous tension between (1) describing and understanding the first-order meanings of particular events occurring within context-bound historical situations (Geertz's 'thick description') and (2) interpreting those meanings as common features of how human beings respond religiously to those situations, the second moment involving critical second-order thematisations that go beyond the 'said' of first-order discourse.<sup>10</sup> Put another way, there is a double task involved in studying religion: first, one must reconstruct the lived sense of the beliefs and practices of those who actually believe and practice them; second, one must provide an analytic cross-cultural vocabulary in which the lived-sense of particular beliefs and practices can be diagnosed as religious and explained accordingly.<sup>11</sup> However it is conceived, no interpretation of human religions can exist without some configurative coordination between the general and the particular, the similar and the different. The product of scholarly study always emerges as a kind of 'similarity-in-difference'. For the purified 'difference' and contrast of historical particularity is finally unintelligible. One cannot study the particular histories of the world's religions and decipher any grammatical order to the language without a larger comparative context for reading those histories and making connections. Conversely, without taking into account real incongruity and difference, comparisons and commonalities themselves become either vacuous or filled with the ethnocentric biases of the inquirer. Charles Taylor sums it up by saying that through comparison we develop a 'language of contrasts' which makes understanding possible, a language that cannot help but make 'general' claims about what is 'really' going on among a state of affairs (see Taylor, 1995, pp. 152–3; 1985, 125–6). In our case, then, second-order comparative reflections cannot help but involve making judgments about the reality of religion, invoking the question whether religion holds ontological weight. Whether the scholar sees religion as illusory or as truth-bearing, assumptions about the character of reality *for us* are always already involved in a 'language of contrasts'. The point is to be explicit about what it is we are up to when investigating religion, critically acknowledging and arguing for an interpretive position rather than taking it for granted.<sup>12</sup>

Schleiermacher's idea of religion as a presentiment of the infinite in the finite is a way of reading certain abiding features on the map of human history, one which discovers elements on that map that point beyond the network of cultural conditionings that constitute human finitude towards a transcendent dimension. And yet this transcendent dimension, the impact of which is found in the immediacy of feeling and intuition, is never experienced except in determinate relations towards the world, always already modified and mediated by historical activity. Religion and history are irreducible moments in delicate interplay. Schleiermacher opens us ineluctably towards history, for religion is an empty potency without being kindled by the fires of history. There is something shared among different religions, some element or dimension that pulls them together into a family grouping, though this 'sharing' is only made real through the distinct, culturally negotiated and constructed elements in each that differentiate them from the rest. As a category, then, 'religion' is an important vehicle aiding us in thinking of ways in which concrete events and meanings—in their complexity—can be held together as an identifiable and intelligible subject matter. And the task remains for us to

put forth a contemporary model of human religiosity that contains both the historical perspicacity and the philosophical nuance of Schleiermacher's model.

### Notes

- 1 Mircea Eliade observed this fact plaintively back in 1969; see *Eliade*, pp. 54–9. More recently, though in a somewhat different light, Carl Raschke echoed a similar concern: see Raschke, 1986, pp. 135–7.
- 2 This is not to say that religion is therefore 'true', but it at least opens the possibility for such a claim. Of course, such a claim would, as a second-order theoretical construction, need to be explicated and argued publicly, not simply assumed. One can study the meaning of religious texts or rituals for those involved without deciding the question of the reality status of their claims. But it becomes difficult to bracket the question of truth in second-order interpretive discourses, which shift the inquiry to investigating the meaning of religious texts or rituals, whether one adopts a Durkheimian or Freudian or Schleiermacherian frame of reference. Is the meaning of religious texts or practices connected to a dimension of reality not reducible to social or psychological causes? I explore this question further in the final section of this paper.
- 3 The 'search for origins' and 'functionalist' approaches also presume a congruous cross-cultural intelligibility to religious conceptions and practices, making theoretical claims about the basic character of religion as a unique dimension in human life. Schleiermacher, of course, would criticise these frameworks as tantamount to the reductionism of Enlightenment rationalism, seeing religion as a primitive way of explaining the world or as the product of social or psychological contingencies and not as something with substantive integrity on its own.
- 4 Sam Gill also defends a position like Smith's, claiming that the effort to define religion is artificial and ignores the diversity of historical and cultural subjects: see Gill, 1994, 1998.
- 5 In later revisions of the *Speeches*, stressing the non-cognitive and passive component, Schleiermacher drops the use of intuition altogether because of its potential for being misconstrued as an active grasping of knowing. But this does not then mean that feeling should be seen as some inchoate, oceanic or indefinite occurrence. It has a directedness which apprehends reality by reflecting the 'sense' of its impression. This is how Schleiermacher can argue that religion emerges in a distinct relationship with the infinite.
- 6 Here lies the methodological dialectic, which is akin to what Robert Williams discovers in Schleiermacher's later dogmatic work, the *Glaubenslehre*: a move from the generic or formal to its material actualisation and back again—the first phase momentarily bracketing the factual and temporal in order to lay bare the enduring conditions which make religion what it is, and the second removing the brackets to explore the ways in which this generic and empty structure undergoes modification and is filled-in (see Williams, 1978, p. 13). Edward Farley also makes a similar case for Schleiermacher's approach in his excellent essay on the question of whether Schleiermacher is passé (see Farley, 1997, pp. 18–22). I am indebted to both Farley and Williams in my own reading of the *Speeches*.
- 7 Noted Schleiermacher scholar Brian Gerrish argues that there is a similarity between the logical sequence of the *Speeches* and that of the *Glaubenslehre*, both works concluding with what actually is presumed from the start: historical concreteness (see Gerrish, 1978, pp. 35–40).
- 8 Thus a viable model of religion does not simply define religion 'before' studying the religions, fitting all into its pre-existing procrustean bed. It must constantly readjust its reference to take into account real historical differences. The observation of congruities and patterns across cultural-historical boundaries can emerge only among genuine differences, which also present important incongruities. In this way, not mere conformity to patterns but diversity and difference are integral to the study of religion. Religion and history are dialectically related terms. A productive model of religion should therefore emerge 'along with' careful historical study. Thus I am not convinced by Sam Gill's admonition to steer clear of definitional approaches to the study of religion because they ignore 'specific historical and cultural subjects' (Gill, 1994, p. 968). Nor do I see the need to avoid the concept of religion because of its tie to Western discursive practices and power relations, as Asad suggests. Asad is correct in arguing that the category 'religion' has functioned to repress real historical differences. But he is wrong to assume that it must by nature do so. It is a telling irony that Asad himself cannot help but employ the concept in his banishing of it: see Strenski, 1998, pp. 356–7.

- 9 This is a reply to Russell T. McCutcheon's argument that religion conceived substantively not only does violence to historical agency but cuts itself off from being accounted for by other frames of reference, presuming that one theoretical position is completely adequate: see McCutcheon, 1997, p. 19.
- 10 I am following Charles Taylor here. Taylor argues that the social sciences, in their effort to investigate human life, must not bypass but take seriously agents' own self-descriptions and self-understandings, which always arise in specific intersubjective contexts. This does not, however, entail simply adopting their point of view, for genuine understanding demands that we 'go beyond' self-descriptive language and strive to explain what is going on there *for us*, attempting to make sense of it within the broader framework of relations and categories available to us as inquirers (see Taylor, 1985, p. 118). But first-order self-description and second-order explanatory theory must be held in tension, neither moment swallowing the other, for no language of understanding is adequate.
- 11 Indeed, a second-order Durkheimian perspective may help explain a given practice, but this explanation need not be construed as exhaustive of the practice's religious significance. It simply is a way of attending to the data as it functions religiously. A Schleiermacherian model would encourage the nonreductive employment of multiple interpretive paradigms, for religious data are themselves multifaceted.
- 12 In a recent article David Ray Griffin advances such a claim against the naturalistic assumptions and domain uniformity he perceives demanded by the social-scientific approach to religion (2000). Against Griffin, however, I do not advocate an explanatory approach to religious studies in the form of a theistic philosophy of religion. There may be other genuine 'causes' at work in the Zen experience of Satori than what Christians understand to be God. Here is a case where second-order theory can ignore or distort first-order self-interpretations. As Preus argues in a following piece, particular cultures are what provide religious structures, and only through a detailed knowledge of the culture in which a religious experience occurs can one hope to understand the significance of that experience for a person (see Preus, 2000, p. 131). Yet I agree with Griffin's suggestion that critical investigation must not *a priori* rule out any explanation of a religious experience, including a 'religious' explanation. Methodological agnosticism or neutrality need not be demanded, but methodological openness should be, and this involves mutually critical conversation and real argumentation between different theoretical positions.

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