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Notes

1. Although Lincoln, with some justification, includes *Marxism* in his list of more recent, "para-religious" ideologies, this is not the same as *Marxian* critical social theory that distinguishes a method of thought from a programmatic system oriented to the realization of specific political goals. See Lincoln, 2003, 129, n10).

Scholars Are Demons, Not Gods:

Meta-Theoretical Reflections Sparked by Bruce Lincoln's *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars*

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The book is made up of a series of conference papers and previously published essays. No attempt is made at relating the essays, so the reader gets no real sense of structure for the book as a whole or sense of what the author intends the book to accomplish, other than a kind of Bruce Lincoln's "Recent Hits." This is not necessarily a critique, unless one thinks that explicitly stated coherence is a requirement of scholarly books. If a red thread can be traced in this very rich assortment it must be found already (and perhaps only) in the title, where we find that the book is about the relationship between gods, demons,

priests, and scholars. The book is very much about the discursive positionality of scholars of religion in relation to their object they study. The title, like any good structuralist analogy, relates four elements:

Gods : Demons :: Priests : Scholars
(A : B :: C : D where A is the inverse of D)

So Gods are to Demons as Priests are to Scholars, and Gods are the inverse of Scholars. By associating scholars with demons, Lincoln in particular wants to suggest that *critical* scholarship has something in

common with the demonic. In particular, gods are related to demons in a way that priests are related to scholars. This point comes out clearly in a few chapters, especially Chapter 5, "Anomaly, Science, and Religion" and Chapter 11, "In Praise of the Chaotic." In the latter, Lincoln recollects a fascinating story of his first year of study as a graduate student at the University of Chicago in 1971 (117). He was taking a class with Jonathan Z. Smith, and one day his professor entered class "visibly shaking with frustration" after having an argument with Mircea Eliade. In his book, *Relating Religion* (2004, 39-41) Smith says that this was an argument about whether order or disorder came first (in Hesiod's account of creation). Smith thought disorder was first, while Eliade thought order. Lincoln suggests they both got it wrong: what comes first is a potentially rich, yet neutral, primordial situation Lincoln calls "the chaotic" (117). Chaos and Order emerge out of this primordial situation, so neither can in fact be said to come first.

The reader may ask, what are we actually talking about here and why does it matter? For Lincoln (and by extension for Smith and Eliade), the argument is important because on one level this discussion is about ancient myth, but on another it is about *discourse* in general. Almost engaging in creating theological cosmologies himself, Lincoln suggests that if he were posing his own cosmology like Hesiod, his story would involve a martial god called Power emerging at some point early in Creation. Power would take "the chaotic" captive, enslave it, and put it to use in the form of propaganda—analogue to the way in which regimes of power "develop the habit of describing their predecessors and adversaries . . . as manifestations of 'chaos'" (118).

Power thus situates itself in opposition to disorder, delivering order in the face of its threat. Eventually Power allows his prisoner to choose a new set of clothes, whereupon it chooses "a Harlequin costume, a riot of colors." This delights Power enough that he sets his prisoner free and suggests they both take new names, whereupon Power calls himself "Order" and his prisoner "Chaos." Power then "advised the public to choose very, very carefully between them" (119).

What we learn is that in Lincoln's cosmology, "the chaotic" comes first, but Power eventually emerges as the dominant god, who domesticates "the chaotic" and uses it for his own purposes. This cosmology

sums up Lincoln's attitude toward the intellectual masters who influenced him and whom he updated for the better (Lévi-Strauss, Dumézil, Eliade). These scholars "misrecognized products of their own imagination and desire . . . for objects having historic, prehistoric, and/or transhistoric actuality" (122). Despite the influence of these thinkers on Lincoln, the voice of the later Foucault seems loudest; for as we see in Lincoln's cosmology, it is a local and contextual form of Power that is the earliest strong god—one whose primary mode is as a shaper of discourse—in particular, discourse about order and disorder.

Though this is incredibly valuable point and model that Lincoln offers to scholars of religion (it was the bread and butter I was raised on in graduate school), I simply cannot see how Lincoln's cosmology escapes the problems he saw in his ancestors. Any *story*, even a local one about specific uses of power, assumes an "actuality." The difference seems to be only whether the scholar holds a reflective irony and meta-theoretical awareness (*ala* Smith) about this assumption of "actuality."

In other words, once we are reflectively aware of the construction (of discourse), on what basis do we claim that Power is the strong god who emerges early in creation? We have no ground to do this if Power is in fact our basis for judgment.

Here we find ourselves returning probably to the original argument between Eliade and Smith, Eliade arguing that we need an orderly base on which to form disagreement and disorder (117). In this sense, the present cognitive approach in the study of religion that is so much in fashion is a return to the Eliadian search for order. Some god, let's call her Cognition, or better yet Situated Cognition (a bit wordy), is the strong god who emerges before Power. Or perhaps Power is her princely consort, for these two surely must come along together; she provides the primordial ground on which Power can martial.

NAASR

Speaking of power, cognition and cultural wars: at the meeting of NAASR this year, held in conjunction with the AAR, a debate emerged on whether NAASR should do one of the following: 1) change its name to be a more accurate description of the society (either to the Society for the Study of Method

and Theory, or something with the word “science” in the title), 2) to break the group apart into those interested in critical theory and those interested in studying religion from a “scientific” perspective (mostly CSR), or 3) keep the society as it is.

The debate relates directly to the points discussed above. Can Power and Cognition get along or is it better that they get divorced?

On the one hand, the two camps have vastly different projects. The best way to understand how their projects differ is in terms of their methods. Science (of which the cognitive study of religion aims to be a part), unlike the humanities, is completely defined and guided by its method (the scientific method). Though theories are important, philosophers of science argue that at any particular point in time a scientific theory is ephemeral and will be likely be replaced by another. In other words, for science, theories are temporary reifications of the state of the art and on which further theories can be built and operationalized within empirical research. This summary is, admittedly, normative in its attempt to characterize scientific methodology. But scientists have much more in common with demons than priests or gods, despite rhetoric to the contrary.

It is important in this regard to distinguish what scientists do from what they think they do and how they publicize their findings. For the most part, scientists are the worst people to ask if you want to understand science. This is because scientists tend to *project* the scientific method as a kind of worldview, as something that can apply outside the strict conditions necessary for harder science to work (closed systems, operationalized discourse, etc.) Scientists are, for the most part, simply not in the business of reflecting, in a meta-discursive way on what they do, on science. For example, when forced to think about it, scientists tend to say they are in the business of producing a general body of positive knowledge, but this is not true, it is a kind of scientific mythology. Though collectively speaking modern science is the best method we know for the intersubjective replication and falsification of theories, at the level of the temporal individual the “knowledge” produced, say, in any particular scientific study, is *deeply* specialized and liquid and is only *temporarily* solidified as theory or materially as technology.

In a sense, science has no theory. Science is *not* the so-called body of knowledge that scientists and lay-folk alike claim it generates. So it is wrong to view

science as necessarily part of the technological modernity of disenchantment where people operate under the assumption that anything we can think of could be explained in principle. It is probably the fact that we have been able to create such powerful technologies on the basis of science, and that so few people understand them, that leads people to such a false conclusion. In this sense it makes a lot of sense to separate the “scientific” from the “technological” (i.e. used in such terms as “technoscience”).

So the scientific method does not lead one to a sense of greater general certainty about the world. Science does however lead one to greater senses of certainty about increasingly smaller parts of the world. But the cliché is true: the more we submit the world to the scientific method, the more questions are opened, and thus, in a sense, the less we know. Science is not the proper genre for getting at big questions. The big questions belong to philosophers, writers, moralists, and cosmologists, and the better answers incorporate states of art from all fields of knowledge, including the hard sciences. I include religion within the area of big questions where most ideas of vertical integration and consilience simply miss the point. Despite this argument one more editorial opinion must be thrown in: scientific literacy must be a central part of a liberal arts education. But this is entirely different than a research strategy on the part of scholars meant to explain religion in scientific terms.

There is a philosophy that deeply influenced the scientific method, is indeed meant to apply outside the tight boxes necessary to do good science, and probably represents our best hope for moving forward out of the culture war between scientists and humanists: philosophical pragmatism. This is a way of thinking that maintains that the concepts of truth and falsity are real concepts that cannot be relativized. At the same time, most pragmatists deny naïve forms of correspondence and coherence views of truth (terms popularized in philosophy by Donald Davidson, see Davidson 2001, especially Chapters 10 and 14; see also Rorty 1979).

A correspondence view of truth misunderstands the relationship between language and the world, seeing truth as a kind of one to one linear mapping of the world. This is indeed a view of scientific truth we see in the popular media and traded by many scientists when they reflect on their aims. A coherence theory of truth sees truth merely as a product of the language games in use at any particular time. Truth

is merely an agreement between communicators and is not tied in any way to the “world.” This position risks relativism, among other notorious problems (see Davidson 2001), but is also a reactionary position against correspondence theories of truth.

It is extremely difficult to construct a nuanced position between these two theories of truth, but a few scholars within the tradition of logical pragmatism, and some outside of it, can serve as useful examples (see Brandom as a recent example). Though the empirically harder sciences have built a methodological machine that can bear down beautifully on truth and falsity, these concepts, of course, have broader application than those relatively tight confines. In most cases we should use extreme caution when exporting scientifically derived truth claims. At the same time, humanists must learn to appreciate the findings of science for what they are (our closest approximations of truth and falsity within their relatively tight confines). Scientists, yes, but *especially* humanists, must drop the theologizing of science. Science is simply not a worldview.

This argument is of course directly opposed to “New Atheist” scholars and public intellectuals, who have an avowed political agenda. The agenda is not itself based on science, but, as noted, is a projection of a supposed scientific worldview. As a political project I tend to sympathize with New Atheists; ironically, I am arguing that from a scientific perspective their arguments do not hold much water, because in their attempt to offer a counter position to theology they are forced to theologize science into a coherent account, which it is not.

The popular publication of science is a genre where a writer (scientist, scholar, or otherwise) attempts to collect and connect all the various spots of deep singularities produced within the confines of science. Some scholars, like Steven Pinker, are particularly good at synthesizing a great deal of scientific findings into an interesting and relevant narrative. But the narrative is not the science. When scientists like Pinker present such narratives, petty personal gripes and other aesthetic considerations become as important as the scientific considerations themselves. The beauty of science (and also its danger, perhaps) is that such personal and aesthetic considerations simply have no place. Such considerations amount to serious confounds that would jeopardize any scientific project.

On the other hand, the main point in common be-

tween the two camps (cognitivist and critical theorists of religion) is that they see most of the members of the American Academy of Religion (and similar groups from other parts of the world) as the kind of people they in fact study. In other words, for both camps, the SBL and AAR annual meeting are sites for *fieldwork*; these *are* the droids they are looking for. From the critical perspective, this study amounts to trying to understand the way in which concepts like religion and the secular are wielded in public and private discourse, and even how they come to define that discourse. A large part of this task includes understanding how scholars themselves wield these categories.

From a scientific perspective, particularly that of cognitive science, scholars are interested in explaining the mechanisms that produce religion in the human species (and maybe outside of it). Most scholars in this field would agree that the category religion is not a natural term (either) but a hybrid, floating concept made up of many features, some of which are amenable to scientific redescription and explanation. So scholars in this camp are interested in understanding the psychological, evolutionary, and neurological basis for something like the American Academy of Religion, instead of its (bio)political emergence in the modern episteme.

CSR claims to be outside because it aims to explain how thinking about religion is possible in general, while critical theory claims to be outside because it aims to grasp how certain kinds of talk can *count* as talk about religion based on its social, historical, and political context. Similarly both camps think they transcend the other: on the one hand, CSR scholars do so with reference to universal characteristics of the human species; on the other, critical theorists do so with reference to the fact that institutions of language and power always precede any production of knowledge. Rather than seeing the obvious tension here between competing claims of “outside” status (or whose “outside” is bigger), there may in fact be a useful productive tension between these vying claims of outsider status.

Unfortunately, both these camps also tend to share the problematic assumption that the content of religion is not important (even though we all have to teach this content to undergraduates, with a wink), and this is perhaps where Lincoln’s soft Foucaultian structuralism comes in as a useful reservation. For the critical theory crowd, there is a tendency to see

religious content as epiphenomenal to more political material interests (hence the accusation that McCutcheon is a sociologist of science, not religion). For the cognitive science crowd, universalistic explanations rarely can get down to the local granularity of religious content, and religious semantics is notoriously not subject to the kinds of regularities (“laws”) that scientists find relevant to their pursuits.

Universals

The first footnote in Lincoln’s Chapter 12, “Theses on Comparison” is germane to these issues. The chapter is a collaboration between Lincoln and the late Cristiano Grottanelli. Aside from very useful methodological reflections on comparison, Lincoln lays out three “strong” types of comparison: those that claim to reveal universal patterns, those that demonstrate genetic relations, and those that trace diffusion (122). With regard to the first, Lincoln argues that “there are no true universals, save at the level of generalization so high as to yield only banalities . . . Real interest emerges only as one pays attention to . . . differences [of history, class, and culture].” In the footnote, Lincoln says, “Grottanelli and I disagreed somewhat on this point,” though he does not say how, except to lay out Grottanelli’s side of the argument (Lincoln does not offer a response). To put it simply, Grottanelli thought that there is a finite list of “generally human problems” that are “of course . . . always solved in different ways by different societies.” This does not mean that all cultures are the same, but that it is “only when one has understood what is not specific can one go on to specify. This is the very (implicit) basis of comparison itself” (193).

In light of the discussion above, Grottanelli’s language is the kind of middle ground we need. Cognitive science and other scientific approaches to religion help us get at universal, non-specific characteristics of the human species (and further, so as not to reify the “human,” characteristics of animal and plant life on earth in general). This is a difficult, resource-demanding form of research that up until this point has been full of problems, but nonetheless made important, and potentially revolutionary, discoveries. Humanistic disciplines, like the study of religion, study the particular and specific content of religion in context. They study how human beings in particular address Grottanelli’s “generally human problems.” One such problem is how scholars of reli-

gion themselves reify categories like religion to gain and maintain various types of status.

Luckily for us, there is a diversity of scholarly interest: scholars are interested in studying different things. One person’s banality is another person’s passion, lucky for us.

Anomaly

Lincoln’s Chapter 5, “Anomaly, Science, and Religion” also has bearing on these questions. Lincoln juxtaposes the way in which sixteenth and seventeenth-century European science dealt with observations of the retrograde motion of planets with the way Zoroastrian cosmologists of the first millennium CE dealt with the problem. This juxtaposition gives Lincoln the opportunity to contrast the way science deals with anomaly with the way religion deals with it. Basically, following Kuhn, he argues that when science is confronted with a serious anomaly, it has a crisis moment where theories— those temporarily solidified structures I noted above— must be revised so as to account for the anomaly.¹ Such was the case with the retrograde motion of planets like Mars, which only seem anomalous when working under the assumption of a geocentric solar system with circular planetary orbits.

Lincoln argues, using the Zoroastrian example, that by contrast when religion is confronted with anomaly it exhibits cognitive dissonance, what he calls a certain “immunity” and a “limitless capacity” to rework “aberrant data” in a way that conforms to the systems presuppositions (45). The way the Zoroastrian sources dealt with the anomaly of planetary motion was to view planets as related to mixed states of imperfection, associated with the demonic (Evil Spirit, Ahriman). We are perhaps reminded of the way in which Fox News or similar “news” outlets like CNN deal with “inconvenient truths,” like global warming, that do not conform to the given narrative or talking points (Levy 2006, 72).

Lincoln goes on to suggest some reasons why anomalous observations did not provoke a revolutionary crisis in religious cosmology, in contrast with science. This question “begs for a general theory of the difference between those styles of cosmology we are inclined to call ‘religious’ and those we regard as ‘scientific’” (51). The former can deal with anomalies with reference to The Demonic, for “with modest ingenuity, knowledgeable experts can disarm and ap-

appropriate virtually any peculiarity by consigning it to the category of The Demonic, just as the robust category of The Miraculous does similar service in other styles of cosmology" (51). By contrast, such reasoning is not "attractive" to science. Lincoln argues that instead, the very idea of "Nature" must be revised; that is, in the face of anomaly science must view its understanding of Nature as defective and thus seek revision. Lincoln thus argues for a "double restructuring of the category of Nature" in modern science: 1) an expansion of the category of Nature to include what was once "outside its grasp" in such categories as The Miraculous; 2) a "contraction" of the category of Nature "to deny the reality of all that was previously placed" in the category of The Demonic. In this domestication we get the sense that, in principle, nothing can lie outside the grasp of science.

While these points are insightful and useful in the ongoing project to understand the relationship between religion and science, I think it repeats the problem of reading a certain kind of metaphysics or worldview into the scientific method. In other words, the kind of science Lincoln is talking about is *bad* science, it is the science of priests and gods instead of demons. This conception of science is partly justified if we look at the discourse of many scientists themselves and the picture many people have of it in modern liberal, industrialized societies. Like scientific culture, moderns valorize novelty and genius (52), partly because doing so justifies ever more consumption. However, I am trying to argue that a truly scientific perspective on these issues (one with sympathies toward logical pragmatism) does not represent the imperial picture scholars like Lincoln paint for it, as a kind of Death Star, sucking in all points of difference.

Since scientists are modern men and women, products of their culture, historically situated, I do not think it is fair to blame science for these values. With that said, there is simply no legitimate basis for a scientist to think the scientific method can apply everywhere to all things. Of course we can apply reason, logic, and argument to our thinking, but these ideals are only necessary for science, they are not sufficient. In this respect, scientists need to join with scholars, stop thinking like priests, and embrace the demonic.

If we resist viewing science as a religion, we can see that science can make no claims beyond the constraints of any particular scientific experiment or empirically tractable closed system. First, as stated, of course a person can (and perhaps should) use the results of such experiments to make claims beyond those closed systems, but that "grasping" is not itself science. Second, as science digs down, more, not less, room is open for difference. The bridges that bridge the gulfs between scientific specializations are not themselves science. So even though the pylons are grounded in empirical reality, any particular bridge is only as stable or shaky as the narrative logic in which it is framed. When Weber said that "in principle" there are no mysterious incalculable forces [daß es also prinzipiell keine geheimnisvollen unberechenbare Mächte gebe] (Weber 1919) in modern disenchantment, the key word here is *prinzipiell*, which only applies if we view scientific disenchantment as a worldview rather than a method.

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Notes

1. Unfortunately there is not space in the present forum to compare and contrast my own view of science noted above with Kuhn's.