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Review symposium

Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western  
Construction of Religion*

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**Abstract**

In *The Western Construction of Religion* Daniel Dubuisson argues that the concept of 'religion' is too historically and culturally contingent to serve as the basis for a comparative discipline. The concept is indigenous to Western culture and is inherently theological and phenomenological. He argues for a constructionist view of the discipline and proposes the concept 'cosmographic formations' as a replacement for 'religion'. Religious phenomena should be taken as discursive constructions that link embodied individuals to the social, cultural and cosmic orders. The following reviews evaluate Dubuisson's arguments, relating them to broader currents in the theory of religion. Daniel Dubuisson responds to each of the reviews.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The reviews by Engler, Hughes and Segal were presented in a session of the Critical Theory and Discourses on Religion Group of the American Academy of Religion meeting in San Antonio, Texas, in November 2005. Ann Taves' contribution is adapted from her response to these commentators at that AAR Session. An additional review from that session, by Gustavo Benavides, is not included here because portions were previously committed for publication elsewhere. Dean Miller gathered the three additional reviews. Dubuisson's responses were edited and translated by Steven Engler.

## Agency, order and time in the human science of religion

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In *The Western Construction of Religion* (2003) Daniel Dubuisson criticises religious studies on the grounds that its axiomatic category, ‘religion’, is too historically and culturally contingent to serve as the basis for a comparative discipline. He argues that ‘the West invented religion’ (a legacy of Christian concepts and nineteenth-century colonial scholarship) (p. 12).<sup>2</sup> He faults scholars of religion for propagating this deception: ‘the history of religions should not have exported this singular notion, found nowhere else, and issuing from a history that took its own unique course, without having subjected it beforehand to a rigorous critical examination’ (p. 191).

In two respects Dubuisson goes beyond similar arguments by others, such as Talad Asad, Russell McCutcheon and Timothy Fitzgerald. First, he argues that ‘religion’ is not just another construct. Rather, the concept has filled an ‘architectonic function’ in Western culture: it has ‘supplied the nucleus about which the West has constructed its own universe of values and representations’ (pp. 117, 39). Second, he proposes as a replacement the concept ‘cosmographic formations’, which he roots in a universal instinct for creating conceptions that relate cosmic, cultural and social orders.

The value of Dubuisson’s book lies not just in its critique of religion but also in the threads that he draws upon in beginning to suggest a way to move our discussions forward. I will argue four related claims. (1) Dubuisson’s discursive link between the themes of religion and order is very useful. (2) An ambiguous appeal to science presents a misleading dichotomy, leaving us to choose between naively essentialist and radically constructionist views of the study of religion, with Dubuisson throwing his weight behind radical constructionism. (3) The claim that ‘cosmographic formations’ offer a truly universal category for cross-cultural comparison needs further clarification. (4) A clearer conception of agency can reframe and supplement the argument, reclaiming the practical dimension of religion.

The key question is, What is to be gained by replacing the concept of ‘religion’? For Dubuisson, religion is too limited a construct. If ‘religion’ is a construct, then a substitution is possible. If ‘religion’ is a limited concept, then a substitution is desirable.

The concept of religion, according to Dubuisson, is limited in three related ways. First, it draws on metaphysical presuppositions. Dubuisson suggests an alternative, because using ‘religion’ as an analytical tool imports insider concepts, resulting in circularity: ‘A regrettable confusion constantly arises between religious ideas and ideas about religion’ (p. 55). ‘How could it leave this magic circle when the object that it is supposed to study is supplied by its own cultural tradition which also surreptitiously imposes on it the means and frameworks for its inquiry?’ (p. 192).

Second, ‘religion’ is culturally specific: ‘Religion, that is, the word, the idea, and above all the particular domain that they all designate represents an entirely original creation that the West alone conceived and developed after having converted to Christianity’ (p. 190). The ‘history of

<sup>2</sup> All unattributed page references in all reviews are to Dubuisson, 2003.

religion thus reveals itself to be not only a Western discipline but a science born of the closing decades of the nineteenth century' (p. 155).

Third, and most significant as a motivation for replacing it, the concept of religion has played a foundational role in generating the 'major paradigm' of the West that has constrained not just the history of religions but Western thought in general: religion plays a 'decisive role in the constitution of Western culture.... [R]eligion is at the heart of our 'world'' (p. 190). Religion is 'the most ideological of Western creations' (p. 147). This increases the risk of accepting the concept uncritically: 'religion' is so foundational to the biases of Western intellectual perspectives that we can only leave behind its distorting influence by abandoning the concept entirely.

Dubuisson's constructionism asserts that Western culture, in the wake of Christianity, is constrained by an underlying conceptual framework:

Western thought ... (is) disposed of only a small number of theses and models.... a huge system of fractal shapes ... dominated by the incessant activity of polemic and controversy. ... This immemorial movement, inscribed in our oldest intellectual tradition, ... offer(s) our fields of knowledge the system of references and coordinates in which they inscribe themselves. Every new idea or hypothesis immediately generates its antithesis, whose position is a priori predictable.... We are advancing in a familiar, well-mapped universe, in which the same ideas never cease to be revived and recombined with one another. (pp. 132–3)

The study of religion works itself out within this 'tacit contract that a priori binds every Western thinker to the vast complex formed by its interpretive grids' (p. 144).

Dubuisson turns to the relation between religion and science. There is a misleading ambiguity here. Usually, he uses 'science' to refer to the social, or 'human', sciences, but occasionally he uses the term to refer to the natural sciences. Dubuisson clearly holds that the two are different: 'Unlike the natural sciences, the various human sciences never have to deal with raw data' (p. 175). However, this distinction and its implications are not evoked consistently. Talk of 'raw data' offers a misleadingly positivistic view of the natural sciences. It is all too easy to hold that the human sciences cannot live up to this ideal, but the portrayal is distorted, lending support by default to a constructionist view of the human sciences: 'Contrary to the received opinion implicit in common parlance and embodied in a kind of scientific positivism, people do not live the THE world, ... since each human group lives only in *its* world (p. 204).

Dubuisson distinguishes two levels at which the concepts 'science' and 'religion' work. At one level we find 'the canonical opposition, religion versus science', but 'on another more global level, religious explanation and scientific explanation offer ... undeniable affinities and amusing similarities' (p. 150). Dubuisson means the human sciences here, and the affinity is constructionism. For Dubuisson, the human sciences are like religion, because both are constructs: scientific knowledge reflects the perspective of a specific culture; it is not universal and objective (see p. 203). And it manifests inevitable progress (see p. 161).

Dubuisson offers us a stark choice in conceptions of science: radical constructionism or simplistic realism. But this is made possible because in these passages he is referring to 'the human sciences'. This excessively stark view of the natural sciences is easily discounted as a model for the social or human sciences (see Engler, 2004). He thus neglects the possibility of a trans-cultural middle ground, neither naively objective nor purely Western. I take Dubuisson's term 'human

sciences' as equivalent to 'humanities and social sciences', but here again, a constructionist view seems to be evoked by default, in opposition to an overly positivistic account of the natural sciences. A middle ground between 'natural science-like' social sciences and softer humanities seems ruled out of bounds by *fiat*.

The concept of cosmographic formations is intended to broaden our attention from the overly limited construct 'religion' to the general intellectual paradigms of our culture, the 'cosmographic models [which] are few in number, and at bottom are summarised in a few simple prototypes' (p. 137). These two levels of concept—religion and cosmographic formations—correspond to what Dubuisson calls 'two distinct universes': the concept of religion is an artifact within 'the historical universe'; cosmographic formations participate in a higher universe, 'the hypertext that ideally gathers in all the texts of our culture' (p. 138; see also p. 210). By moving from the former level to the latter, Dubuisson hopes to allow the discipline to remove its conceptual blinders and shift its focus to the most general of all possible cross-cultural frameworks—'the human conditions such as it is' (p. 199). He seeks to move past the *Western essentialist* concept that human nature is universal and inherently religious (see pp. 184–5) to a *cross-cultural relational* focus on the processes by which humans create the worlds in which they live. This is why he wishes to replace 'religion' with 'cosmographic formation'. 'Religion' is Western, whereas 'cosmographic formation' is more effective for comparative studies. 'Religion' implies that all religions somehow converge on a common object or refract a common referent, whereas 'cosmographic formation' finds commonality in the process of construction, not in the object constructed.

Dubuisson offers an interesting variety of constructionism: relativist over the phenomena constructed but universalist over the raw materials and the process of construction. Constructionist views do not necessarily commit us to a radical relativism if we focus on cross-cultural parallels on the raw materials. As Gustavo Benavides notes, talk of constructs leads us not to a sterile relativism but to 'the problem of the relationship between constructs and raw materials.... [A]lthough one can manufacture all sorts of things using all kinds of raw materials, certain raw materials lend themselves to fashioning certain objects whereas other raw materials do not' (Benavides, 2000, p. 116; see also Benavides, 1997a, p. 130; Benavides, 2001, p. 107; Engler, 2004).

For Dubuisson, cosmographic formations link 'simple factual existence' to specific cultural contexts, embodying a 'teleology' oriented to a 'principle of order' (p. 18). They offer stories that link cosmic, cultural and social order. They offer a set of 'images, symbols, and myths concerning humankind, the world, and society... so intrinsically tied to the existence of the group itself that it finally appears ... as its exclusive reference' (p. 69). The 'cosmographic operation' that produces these formations has 'the capacity to modify the nature of immediate experience, simply by replacing it at the heart of an ordered, all-encompassing world' (p. 49).

Yet there are difficulties with an attempt to ground comparison in a universality over the raw materials of 'simple factual existence'. Dubuisson recognises that we cannot escape the always already present web of language. Nevertheless, to ground his cross-cultural comparison of 'cosmographic constructions', he points to lived and embodied experience, which underlies all the different worlds of human cultures (see p. 209). It is 'by putting ourselves in this existential position (what people do in this world, how they have constructed it, and what they expect of it) that the study of cosmographic formations ought to be addressed' (p. 203).

The body is the primary raw material, and textualisation is the primary process of construction:

A cosmographic formation ... forms a functional and nearly harmonious whole with the texts that utter and incarnate it.... All cultures have composed texts in which we find elaborate descriptions and genuine theories of the body in actuality, theories charged with coordinating, interpreting, explaining the phenomena of death, suffering, sensation, memory, and dreaming. Here, given that we are dealing with the most perishable and fragile portion of our being, textualization is indispensable.... The translation of the body into texts allows it to become an element of cosmographic formation. (pp. 210–11)

What does it mean to translate the body into texts? Dubuisson would no doubt agree that the translation means the transcription of culturally specific ideas about lived experience, which are always already a part of language. Translation cannot be a matter of bringing across into texts some universal human experience from outside of language. But given the necessary situatedness of embodied experience, how we compare one ‘translation of the body into texts’ with another in any rigorous manner. How do we evaluate comparisons made between ‘translations’ of an irretrievable original? What ‘body in actuality’, prior to texts, is accessible as that which is to be translated? It seems that we can do no more than simply assert similarity or difference—beyond any possibility of verifying or falsifying claims about the accuracy of such translations—because ‘individual life is already necessarily a cosmographic creation’ and ‘the ‘real world’ is never more than an abstraction’ (pp. 207, 203).

It is, of course, possible to compare beliefs or practices concerning the body. But the selection of what we compare always presupposes a certain perspective. This perspective must always be interrogated for historical and cultural biases, whether we apply the term ‘religion’ or propose an alternative concept to perform its task.

There is a problem here of translation (see Engler et al., 2004). What guarantees that we preserve meaning when we translate descriptions of cross-cultural phenomena into talk of cosmographic formations? This problem is not the same as that of preserving meaning when translating between the texts of different cultures, for cosmographic formations allegedly hold equally across all such boundaries. Can we really claim to translate specific cultural discourses into such a universal meta-discourse? Certainly ‘religion’ is a term with a long history and many biases. But can Dubuisson attempt to avoid any hint of insider discourses really establish a truly outside perspective from which persons of all cultures can compare all cultural phenomena?

There are difficulties in translating the one into the many—for example, the body into texts. Talk of ‘the sacred’ faces a variant of this dilemma. The field of religious studies is haunted by the claim that all religions are comparable because all are rooted in the same core of experience or perception. That is, all religions are ‘religions’ because they all reflect or refract the same essential reality of the sacred.<sup>3</sup> This claim is rooted in a naïve appropriation of the phenomenological tradition in continental philosophy. We face a problem if we hold the sacred to be some non-rational, non-propositional ‘given’ that is brought across into the rational, prepositional

<sup>3</sup> This claim is not presupposed by cognitive theories of religion (see, for example, Pyysiäinen and Anttonen, 2002), prototype theories of religion (see, for example, Saler, 2000), or relational theories of religion (see, for example, Benavides, 1997b).

languages of religions: ‘If the content of the given is non-propositional, then translation or interpretation becomes impossible’ (Penner, 2002, p. 168). It is untenable to respond that religious language refers in some non-literal manner, through metaphor or symbol. Labeling this response ‘the theology of symbolic forms’, Nancy Frankenberry argues that

either a translation can be made of symbolic language, or it cannot. If it is translatable, then it is possible to say what it ‘literally means’ for it has a syntax and a semantics.... On the other hand, if it is not translatable, because the symbolic meaning is supposed to exceed the literal meaning as something ineffable, then Symbolic Formists are obligated to explain what the ‘extra meaning’ is, and how they are in a position to know it is different from any translation or paraphrase. (Frankenberry, 2002, p. 187)

In the first case religious language has lost its mystery. In the second case it has lost its purchase on meaning. Translating between cultures moves from one discrete language into another. The case is different when allegedly translating from the pre-linguistic body or the sacred (wholly other and ineffable) into the many languages of specific cultural traditions.

There are also difficulties with translating the many into the one—that is, translating disparate cultural phenomena into cosmographic formations. Dubuisson is appropriately critical about translation between the levels of data and theory:

Although it is fortunate that cultures mutually translate themselves and try in this fashion to understand each other somewhat better, we should not conclude that what we translate into our European languages, and because we translate it without any too great difficulty, refers back to universals to which we have the key. All scientific study today ought to have as its *sine qua non* the critical, uncompromising study of its own language. (p. 197)

Dubuisson’s optimism about translation across cultures may be justified to some extent, but the possibility of a universal cross-cultural frame for comparison works at a different logical level. Dubuisson faces a dilemma here: either the embodied foundation of his comparative framework is outside language, in which case talk of translating it makes little sense, or it is inside language, in which case it is trapped within distinct perspectives. Either way, the goal of universal comparison is undermined. Pointing to relations between bodies and texts cannot provide a firm foundation for a universal comparative framework: bodies and worlds—beyond the relativised perspectives of different cultures—cannot be accessed in a manner (rational, linguistic, literal, univocal, semantically robust) that would allow for verifiable comparison. The raw materials of cosmographic constructions cannot provide a universal basis for comparison, though Dubuisson points to a very useful approach for the more limited comparative work of Western scholars, including scholars of religion.

With greater success, Dubuisson points to the process of construction itself as the ground for cross-cultural comparison. He claims universality and above all heuristic value for the concept of cosmographic formations. The heuristic approach is appropriate, but the basis for universality seems to overemphasise the role of discourse. His concept does not rest on essentialist universals. After all, he is firmly against all essentialist views of religion. His universality is rooted instead in ‘functional similarity’. He holds that it is possible to ‘determine a general concept capable of encompassing the heterogeneous totality of facts and notions that ... we habitually call religious ... inasmuch as these perform the same anthropological function’ (p. 199). This ‘functional homology’ is

rooted in an extremely general similarity: cultures ‘possess a remarkable point in common in the sense that they all contribute ... to constructing a particular world.... It is because each culture resumes a world in itself that they all are globally similar and at the same time different’ (p. 202). Different cultures engage in parallel processes of constructing worlds drawing on the commonalities of lived experience.

I think that this approach is headed in precisely the right direction, but it seems to place too much emphasis on discourse as the axis of comparison. In this sense, we might say that Dubuisson’s book is very French. To say that all cultures are similar in that they construct world views is an overly general claim. To suggest that the process of construction offers a basis for comparison is valuable, but not enough is said about what this process is, and how we can ensure that construction is in fact comparable across cultures. Why can it not be the case that incomparable modes of construction are to be found in different cultures? Dubuisson spends much more time on criticising ‘religion’ than on developing this aspect of ‘cosmographic formations’.

Given that ‘the world such as it really is and our own worlds are only abstractions deduced a posteriori’ and that our ‘representations of the world are a part of this fabric and are inseparable from it’, we must ask what point of view offers the comparative leverage that Dubuisson seeks (p. 204). Where do we stand to compare the processes that lead to the ‘bizarre, unexpected, ephemeral constructions’ that are cosmographic formations (p. 206)? The textualisation of some pre- (or trans-) linguistic reality, whether body or world, cannot provide this comparative frame. Nor is it clear what precise processes of construction are being compared and where we stand to identify them in a universally comparable mode.

A less developed theme in Dubuisson’s book seems to offer a more promising avenue of comparison: a linkage between individual agency and a broad concept of social, cultural and cosmic order. Dubuisson’s account of cosmographic formations emphasises the agency of discursive construction. ‘Archetypical agencies’ are culturally specific concepts—for example, those of ‘primitive’ and ‘progress’—that are closely related to ‘religion’. This characterisation underlines his equation of agency with conceptualisation or construction. The primary action he acknowledges is the act of description. He discusses action only insofar as it is textualised. On the one hand this position simply acknowledges the necessary role of discourse in academic work: a treatise on ritual presented by a mime would be more intriguing than useful. On the other hand this position does not force us to follow Dubuisson in privileging discourse as that which is compared. He insists that ‘religion’ must be abandoned because it should be an object, not a tool, of study. Yet he presents discourse as both object and tool. The point is not that we can stand outside language to get our hands on something more worth comparing than processes of discursive construction. Rather, the functional homology that grounds comparison can shift from an exclusive focus on discourse to attention to the practical work of religion, with its ritual, social, political and economic effects.

This greater emphasis on agency would require more dynamic sense of temporality, not inevitable progress or the atemporality of radical relativism. But Dubuisson’s dichotomous view of science rules out this possibility. The natural sciences invoke progress, and the human sciences invoke a relative temporality. Dubuisson contrasts ‘a timeless objective mind, concerned uniquely with scientific rigor’ to ‘a historical community preoccupied above all with a concern to present the order that dominates its own conception of knowledge about the world’ (pp. 155, 71). He is certainly correct to flag the importance of community for the study of religion, but he

presents a misleading dichotomy. He holds that the human sciences of religion are wrong to see the object of their study as having any purchase on an objective world, as being engaged with progress. Instead, he proposes ‘an ontology based on the sacrilegious categories of the mixed and interlaced, ... the grandiose perspective of perpetual metamorphosis’ (p. 205). ‘Writing’ of the human sciences, he unhooks science from objective truth claims: ‘Scientific progress occurs only on the condition that the prejudices of an era are overcome and the walls of a tradition breached’ (p. 176). This tactical and relative conception of progress is sharply opposed to the conception of progress, positivist found in the natural sciences. Our choice here is between unacceptable views of change: either radically situational or universally determined by an objective world.

This overdrawn dichotomy occludes the possibility of a richer concept of agency, which enacts change in a manner neither wholly determined nor radically free. Dubuisson ignores the middle ground of a more relational concept of agency, where progress is measured not by convergence on an absolute but in relation to ongoing engagement in the process of elaborating the raw materials of social and cosmic order. Emphasis on the agency of human beings, including social scientists, would temper Dubuisson’s claim that ‘the world of science ... lacks the ability to become a world for human life’ (p. 203). His exclusive focus on discourse leads to an overdrawn distinction between lived experience and texts.

This is not to suggest that Dubuisson has nothing to say about ritual. But he discusses ritual as textualised rather than as part of a broader conception of agency’s role in the process of cosmographic construction. He catches us up in discussions of myth and discourse, making valuable points, but failing to take broader sociological themes into account. To a large extent he is writing in the context of European studies of religion, where an emphasis on discourse is prominent. However, reintegrating these themes could strengthen his argument.

To sum up, Dubuisson moves too far towards constructionism, and for two reasons: an overly sharp dichotomy between the natural and the human sciences, and an overemphasis on discourse. Discourse is, of course, central to processes of construction, but Dubuisson presents it as the object as well as the tool of study. A greater emphasis on other forms of action would broaden possibilities for comparison. His argument, when reframed, makes an important contribution by casting ‘religion’ in terms of agency and order. This theme lies at the heart of his concept of cosmographic formations, but it is obscured by his ambiguous discussion of science and by his constructionism. His claim that ‘religion is indefinable’ has merit, but his account of the raw materials and of the process of cosmographic construction has problems in providing an account of a universal cross-cultural frame for comparison (see p. 152). The frame seems either too general to gain a useful purchase or still too tied to Western academic perspectives.

Once the overstated dichotomy between essentialism and radical constructionism is tempered, Dubuisson’s book makes an important contribution to the study of religion. With a clearer sense of what the discipline might consist of, we need not abandon ‘religion’ for ‘cosmographic formation’ or any other term. We need merely clarify both what we mean by ‘religion’—whether or not it conforms to typical understandings of that term—and the extent to which the concept contains epistemological, theological and ideological presuppositions. *The Western Construction of Religion*, to the extent that it points beyond the forest of myth and discourse analysis to perceived relations between human actions on the one hand and social and cosmic order on the other, makes a valuable contribution to that effort.



## Haven't we been here before? rehabilitating 'religion' in light of Dubuisson's critique

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One of the most important of current trends emerging from the critical discourse on religion is the full-scale questioning of the use of the term 'religion'. Is the term helpful or insidious? Does it accurately fit the historical record of other cultures, or is it a Western will to power over them? Many scholars have begun the process of documenting the overtly ideological, political and Protestant-based assumptions that form the foundation upon which the modern edifice of the academic study of religion is constructed. Even though the history of religions has as its goal the noble dream of cross-cultural understanding based on appropriate methodology, many would argue that the term 'religion' has actually created an insurmountable cognitive dissonance because at the heart of the discipline resides a colonialist and orientalist agenda in which we inscribe ourselves and our values onto others.

Dubuisson enters this discussion with his *Western Construction of Religion*. He argues that the academic study of religion emerges at a particular moment in the development of Western civilisation and that, like it or not, we ultimately remain prisoner to the genealogy of its terms, its tropes and its thinking about the world. For him, 'religion', as a Western construct, dictates a set of antitheses—for example, God/humanity, soul/body, sacred/profane and orthodox/heterodox—that help us understand Christianity, in the image of which they were initially crafted, but that are often irrelevant to other, especially non-Western, cultures. The result is that even though we think we have encountered and understood the Other on its own terms, all we have really done is to document and discover ourselves. The academic study of religion is therefore a series of hopelessly outmoded attempts to force misinterpreted and misconstrued data into a cumbersome and biased theoretical framework.

Dubuisson's criticism revolves around the notion that the terms we employ to study the 'being-in-the-world' of other cultures are not innocuous. Whether or not we realise it, whether or not we choose to acknowledge it, ideology haunts these terms. The task of purifying or demythologising these concepts and terms is a Sisyphean one. Dubuisson contends that the only solution to the malaise created by these terms and by the discourse that they undergird is to discard the entire foundation upon which they rest. He is not content simply to problematise or interrogate the discipline. He wants to establish a new foundation, one that allows for the construction of new architectonics.

In place of 'religion', Dubuisson opts for 'cosmographic formation'—a term that for him avoids a term that the West has invented in its own image and has then projected onto different cultures. Dubuisson argues that we should envisage the term 'religion' as the Western installment of 'cosmographic formation'. This new term will ideally avoid using the West as the reference point for understanding other cultures.

I like Dubuisson's critique. It is wonderfully provocative and self-critical. He offers a much needed, if by now increasingly familiar, challenge to the academic study of religion. Even those

who disagree with him will be forced to wrestle with his thesis. I also appreciate his attempt to provide not only a critique of the discipline but also a positive reconstruction.

Yet, I am troubled by his heavy-handed dismissal of the term ‘religion’. Do we have to throw away the term simply because some who have claimed to study religion ‘objectively’ have appealed to all kinds of privileged categories and a historical comparisons? And more to the point, is this past tendency reflective of the discipline today?

The history of religions is certainly a Western project. It is an Enlightenment activity that was based, in theory, on the acknowledgment of the superiority of reason over religion. Although medieval Islam created a discourse that we can today label as ‘proto-comparative’, that discourse was created to demarcate heresies or people to tax. The Other, according to this model, truly is Other, and this Otherness is, more often than not, based on metaphysical or ontological differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Although some might argue that what we do today is not much different, I contend that it really is. For what is new with the modern academic study of religion, even in its nineteenth-century manifestation, is that the Other is not regarded as fundamentally different but rather is conceived of as existing on a different level of some ‘evolutionary’ scale. As bothersome as we might find this evaluation today, we still need to appreciate what was original here and just how revolutionary it was for its time.

Like it or not, we are the heirs to this discourse. Yet when done properly, the modern academic study of religion actually gives voice to, rather than silences, non-Western cultures. Admittedly, this discourse often forces non-Westerners to speak about their religions or cultures in ways that seem forced or contrived, but this discourse need not be a colonialist imposition based on stereotypes or archetypes that we have created. On the contrary, this discourse enables conversation between cultures. Certainly all knowledge is ultimately political, but this need not lead directly into a colonialist agenda.

In what follows, I hope to do two things: to show that Dubuisson’s critique of religion is not particularly new, and to analyse his use of the term ‘cosmographic formation’. If I am correct, Dubuisson’s category is in danger of becoming as ‘Western’ and as ‘ideological’ as those who still employ ‘religion’. In short, before anyone engages in the dismantling of a discipline, we must surely see whether the critique upon which the dismantling is based is sound.

Before examining Dubuisson’s employment of the term ‘cosmographical formation’, it is necessary to look more closely at his critique of the term ‘religion’. According to Dubuisson, the Christian West has developed a discourse of religion influenced by its own idiosyncratic history—for example, the Gnostic ‘threat’ and the Crusades. There have been created show a number of concepts—‘God’, ‘church’, ‘faith’, ‘prayer’, ‘paradise’, ‘providence’, ‘crucifixion’, ‘communion’ and ‘sin’—that are considered canonical, or the *sine qua non* of religion. These terms were ultimately responsible for the formation of ‘religion’. Religion, in other words, did not antedate these concepts but instead was produced by them. Hubris, racial superiority and cultural ethnocentrism have all led Western scholars to assume that all cultures must possess these concepts. And even if other cultures do not possess the actual words for them, we have assumed that they must have such concepts. Consequently, we have translated, both literally and metaphorically, other texts and cultures into our own terms. The result, for Dubuisson, is self-affirmation, a reassurance that the world works as we assume it does.

To support his argument, Dubuisson pulls out the list of usual suspects, invoking the spectres of Otto, Durkheim, Eliade, Dumezil et al. As well formulated as his thesis may be, his critique is

certainly not new. Indeed, much of it can be found in the work of Bruce Lincoln, J.Z. Smith, Ivan Strenski and Russell McCutcheon not to mention their panoply of indictments and subsequent convictions. Consequently, the hidden or silent assumptions in early and even relatively modern comparative analysis—for example, anti-Semitism and the privileging of a particular kind of Christianity—are now well documented, and this acknowledgment is slowly becoming *de rigueur*. So even though we have inherited the troublesome legacy of Eliade, it is not so simple an inheritance as Dubuisson wants to claim.

I think that Dubuisson misreads the theoretical study of religion at least as it has existed within certain quarters in the North American Academy over the past ten to fifteen years. Increasingly, this study is highly, one could almost say obsessively, self-critical. Every term or category that our predecessors held dear—for example, ritual and sacred—has undergone interrogation at the most fundamental of levels. Even though the terms we use today may be the same as those of our predecessors, the trajectory from there to here has made their redeployment possible. Surely this redeployment answers Dubuisson's charge that 'all scientific study today ought to have as its sine qua non the critical, uncompromising study of its own language' (p. 197).

It is precisely this *questioning* of the tropes, terms, metaphors and genealogies that the discipline has bequeathed to us that is at the heart of the contemporary study of religion. This questioning has been responsible for the shift in the history of religions from the global to the local. One no longer sees monographs devoted to 'patterns' of religion. Instead, one frequently finds studies of a particular text, a set of texts or a particular community, including certain conclusions that may be of use to others working with different data but with similar problematics.

The result is that we are slowly calling into question the autonomy of 'religion'. The discipline has enough checks and balances that the racist, the fluffy and the harmful are ultimately weeded out. Dubuisson, however, seems to be unconcerned with recent trends in the history of religions. A perusal of the references in his notes, for example, shows that his interest in theorists of religion stops around the mid 1980s.

In place of 'religion' Dubuisson opts for the term 'cosmographical formation'. Common to every group, he argues, is the development and preservation of a 'set of ideas, opinions, and diverse theses, themselves passed on and deepened by images, symbols, and myths concerning humankind, the world, and society' (p. 69). Religion is the 'cosmographic formation' of the West. Every culture, then, is not a 'religion' but a 'cosmographic formation' that tells its members about the world and about living meaningfully within it. But surely this substitution is just semantics. Has he not simply replaced the murkiness of 'religion' with an equally murky term? I am not convinced that by changing the name, we have changed the reality.

Dubuisson argues that every 'cosmographic formation' is its own world, which, although different from any other, is nonetheless 'structurally and functionally homologous' to other worlds (p. 201). Is this not the same thing as saying that cultures are similar yet different, that religions are similar yet different? Does the present-day academic study of religion really assume that, for example, canon functions in the same way with the exact same modalities in oral and textual cultures? Do we truly presume that the interpretation of these canons will work in the same manner? Structural or functional homologues do not require jettisoning religion.

'Cosmographic formation', from what I can tell, is religion minus the metaphysics and the various polarities and dualisms that go with it. Humans are 'thrown into' the world and subsequently interpret this world in ways that need not always refer back to transcendental Ideas. The modes of

analysis to study such worlds is that of a phenomenological (presumably in the Heideggerian sense) anthropology that works on the level of ‘fleshy’ humans, upon whose bodies have been inscribed the cultural and cosmographic values that compose their world. Dubuisson asks, ‘Why is our discipline so often content to see and invoke only conceptual ideas, transcendental categories, unconscious process, logical mechanisms?’ (p. 199). In their stead, he calls for an analysis of the ‘tangible’, the ‘banal’ and the ‘explicit’. Implicit in this language is Heidegger’s philosophy of temporality, in which the true task of analysis is not to provide an intellectual grasp of the Absolute (à la theology) but to gain a deeper appreciation of human finitude. Both Dubuisson and Heidegger, in other words, contend that a theistic metaphysics is responsible for our inability to develop a deeper understanding of various human contexts and structures.

I myself have frequently employed Heidegger and his existential ontology in my own work and have found his to be much more fruitful than that which usually passes for phenomenology in the likes of van der Leeuw and Eliade. But there is a price to pay. Heidegger’s anti-Semitism, involvement in Nazism and refusal to apologise explicitly after the war have made his legacy problematic. If I am correct in discerning a Heideggerian influence in Dubuisson’s work, we have to acknowledge that Heidegger is not only a Western philosopher but one worse in his support for fascism than either Dumezil or Eliade. Certainly Heidegger is a much more profound thinker, but are we not back to where we started: a Western edifice constructed on shaky ideological foundations?

This observation aside, I agree with Dubuisson that there is a real historical bias in the academic study of religion that privileges the order of philosophy and texts over the messiness of culture. This bias has been changing over the past twenty years, especially since Geertz’s ‘Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight’. But here again Dubuisson misreads the state of the field. Surely his call to replace ‘theology’ and Idealism with ‘anthropology’ and a Heideggerian-inspired phenomenology is not new. Yet it is under the category of theology and Idealism that Dubuisson situates the contemporary academic study of religion. Again, maybe things are radically different in the French Academy, but is not anthropology one of the major directions that the study of religion has taken in the North American academy?

In the last twenty pages of his monograph Dubuisson sketches out his desiderata for the new discipline. The results are extremely mixed because he himself stays on the level of theory (a new metaphysics?) rather than offering any specifics. How can we understand a group’s ‘being-in-the-world’ (Dubuisson’s/Heidegger’s term) or a culture without examining what Heidegger would call the ‘existential ontology’ that structures lived and temporal worlds? Rather than ‘the things themselves’, Dubuisson is more interested in how a cosmographical formation shows us, for example, ‘a common world in which people live and age together’. Okay. But what does this mean? We need to be walked through a couple of examples to see ‘cosmographic formations’ in action. Otherwise we are left with very little to analyse.

To conclude, it seems to me that Dubuisson is calling for a return to some form of anthropologically inspired area studies, where, each text or phenomenon can only be understood on its own terms, as *sui generis*. Yet if we explain every culture simply on its own terms or the way it understands itself, are we better off? Is this not simply a return to W.C. Smith’s claim that it is our job to explain a religion in such a manner that its practitioners can see themselves?

Near the end of the work, Dubuisson writes that ‘The tenacity with which some will continue to defend the use of the word ‘religion’, perhaps for a long time, betrays a superstitious fear that with the word might disappear the idea, too, that is, the very thing that it claims to designate’ (p. 200).

I could not disagree more. Let me give an example. In calling Judaism a ‘religion’, in calling Islam a ‘religion’, I do not, consciously or otherwise, invoke the good old days of colonialism and imperialism. I acknowledge that the only way to understand these traditions is through sustained philological, historical, sociological and cultural analyses. I can call Muhammad a ‘prophet’, but I also acknowledge that how he is conceived to be a prophet for Muslims is both similar and dissimilar to that in either Christianity or Judaism. Likewise calling the Buddha a ‘prophet’ and seeing how Buddhist constructions of the category prophet are both like and unlike Muslim constructions of Muhammad neither blurs distinctions nor constitutes cultural imperialism. Indeed, in places such as South Asia, competing and overlapping constructions of the Buddha and Muhammad have probably been bouncing off each other for centuries. Dubuisson’s framework seems to take little account of historical interactions between religions.

Moreover, by replacing ‘religion’ with ‘cosmographic formation’, I am not convinced that we are better off. Every study of a religion, a culture or a group has to involve the importation of certain categories of analysis. Without categories, we simply describe. Analysis involves connecting such data to larger questions and issues.

Dubuisson is calling for a revolution that has already happened. For younger scholars, including me, this is the only theoretical world that many of us have inhabited: self-reflexive, aware of the ontological baggage that ‘religion’ travels with, and attuned to our use of language. This is what I call ‘religion’, and I am not convinced, after reading Dubuisson’s call to arms, that we need to abandon it.

## Dubuisson’s *The Western Construction of Religion*

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In its breadth, its erudition, its skepticism and not least its tenacity, Daniel Dubuisson’s *The Western Construction of Religion* represents the finest work to date on the ‘construction’ of religion. Dubuisson does not simply invoke the notion of construction as a mantra but actually strives to trace the process. He seeks to show, not merely to assert, what ‘religion’ is constructed out of. Furthermore, he tries to demonstrate, not merely to assume, the limits of the constructed concept. I have learned much from the book. Nevertheless, I disagree with many of his claims, and I want to explain why.

*The Western Construction of Religion* lies at one end of the ‘use of “religion”’ spectrum. At the other end lies J. Samuel Preus’ 1987 *Explaining Religion*. Preus takes for granted the suitability of the term ‘religion’. For him, the category identifies more or less obvious characteristics of a worldwide phenomenon. Where Dubuisson writes to challenge the universal applicability of the category ‘religion’, Preus writes to explain how the category has come to acquire its universal applicability. Where Dubuisson spurns the category ‘religion’ on the grounds that it in fact never gets beyond its Christian origins, Preus touts the category on the grounds that it eventually comes to encompass even Christianity. Where Dubuisson lambastes the social scientific study of religion

as theology in disguise, Preus glories in the social scientific study of religion as liberation from theology.

Preus traces the step-by-step emergence of the social scientific ‘paradigm’ out of the theological one. Initially, all religions get accounted for irreducibly religiously (Bodin, Herbert of Cherbury). Next all religions save Christianity—or save Judaism and Christianity—get accounted for non-religiously (Fontenelle, Vico). Finally, all religions get accounted for non-religiously (Hume, Comte, Tylor, Durkheim, and Freud). The social scientific paradigm is at last complete, though of course ever subject to revision.

Preus credits the social sciences with forging the comparative approach that overcame Christian ethnocentrism and thereby allowed for the recognition of the universality of religion. For Preus, the identification of the universal category religion led to universal explanations of religion. In other words, it led to theorising. For Dubuisson, who never cites Preus, there has been no progress, so that there is nothing to celebrate. Dubuisson insists that even those theorists who have prided themselves on breaking with what Preus calls the theological paradigm have in fact not escaped from it. Theology has continued to ‘set the agenda’ for the study of religion. The only solution is the elimination of the category religion itself.

Dubuisson begins by posing three questions:

1. Is Christianity [not simply] the special form taken in the West by something that has always existed and that similarly exists elsewhere, if not everywhere, namely, religion or the religious phenomenon?
2. As the legitimate daughter of Christianity, is religion not rather than an element wholly unique to Western civilisation, one of its most original creations?
3. Should we not, moreover, go somewhat farther and ask whether religion is not effectively the West’s most characteristic concept, around which it has established and developed its identity, while at the same time defining its way of conceiving humankind and the world? (p. 9)

His answers to these three questions are clear: 1. no, 2. yes and 3. yes. To cite one of his many summary statements of his position:

Whatever term we choose—*weltanschauung*, cosmography, vision, conception, figuration of the world, and so on—the fact remains that all global conceptions of the world, all utopias, all messianic movements, all theologies, all the imaginary worlds that the West has conceived of (and eventually tried to impose) have always been realised by taking as model (whether it was admired, envied, hated, imitated, deformed, or denigrated) that or those promoted by the Christian religion in its capacity of appearing to offer the most complete, most hegemonic conception of the world. (pp. 37–8)

I demur.

(1) If Christianity is the common model on which modern theorists have blindly based their conception of religion, why have they differed with one another so sharply on their conception of religion? For example, E. B. Tylor and Emile Durkheim, to name two theorists cited by Dubuisson, begin their key works on religion (*Primitive Culture* [1st ed. 1871] and *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* [1912]) by rejecting the many standard definitions of religion offered by fellow theorists. How constricting can deference to Christianity be when so many theorists who purportedly defer to it castigate one another’s definitions?

(2) If Christianity is the common model on which theorists have ethnocentrically based their conception of religion, how have they managed to find so many other cases of religion? One would think that a model so particularistic—as Dubuisson’s answer to his first question claims—would never fit any other case, let alone hundreds of other cases.

(3) Conversely, if Christianity is the common model on which theorists have blithely based their conception of religion, why, as Preus shows, did it take them so long to find commonality? One would think that a model so readily presumed to be universal would easily fit, or be easily taken to fit, every other case.

(4) If Christianity is the model on which theorists have based their conception of religion, why have so many theorists emphasised the *differences* between Christianity and other religions? True, Dubuisson would retort that those theorists are still using Christianity as the standard against which they are measuring other religions:

The Christian religion ... rests on a system of antithetical categories or principles. It is par excellence the domain that constituted itself ‘against’ what was external to it (pagans, heretics, atheists, etc.), while at the same time defining itself through a series of clear-cut dichotomies. Of these complementary orders, the principle [sic] expressions have long since been enumerated and have become commonplace in our anthropological and theological thought: true religion/false religions; orthodoxy/heresies; soul/body; God/humanity; magic/religion; reason/revelation; knowledge/faith; theology/anthropology; believer/atheist; clergy/laity; sacred/profane or religious/profane; monotheism/polytheism; papacy/empire; religion/science, and so on. (p. 105)

But why cannot one argue contrarily that the openness to departures from the Christian norm shows that theorists are capable of rejecting that norm?

For example, William Robertson Smith devotes his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1st ed. 1889) to showing how different Christianity has always been from the ‘primitive’ Semitic state out of which it emerged. Whereas for Smith early Semitic religion was materialist, ritualistic, collectivist and amoral, Christianity from the start, even if still more so since the Reformation, has been spiritual, creedal, individualist and scrupulously moral. So great for Smith is the hiatus between lower and higher religions that only revelation can account for the leap. And in his first lecture he warns against viewing primitive religion as if it were *like* Christianity:

And here we shall go very far wrong if we take it for granted that what is the most important and prominent side of religion to us was equally important in the ancient society with which we are to deal.... Our modern habit is to look at religion from the side of belief rather than of practice.... Thus the study of religion has meant mainly the study of Christian beliefs, and instruction in religion has habitually begun with the creed, religious duties being presented to the learner as flowing from the dogmatic truths he is taught to accept. All this seems to us so much a matter of course that, when we approach some strange or antique religion, we naturally assume that here also our first business is to search for a creed, and find in it the key to ritual and practice. But the antique religions had for the most part no creed; they consisted entirely of institutions and practices. (Smith, 2002, p. 16)

It is the ultra-devout Christian Smith who warns fellow scholars against automatically taking Christianity as the model of religion universally. Christianity, together with Judaism and Islam, is for him different from all other religions. Smith here sounds just like Dubuisson!

(5) Not to be overlooked either is J. G. Frazer, who in *The Golden Bough* (1st ed. 1890; 2nd ed. 1900; 3rd ed. 1911–15) aims to show not that primitive religions are like Christianity but the opposite: that the seemingly higher Christianity is really just another primitive vegetation cult, simply the most successful one. Yes, Frazer is leveling all religions to their lowest common denominator, but he is doing so to make Christianity primitive, not to make primitive religion Christian-like. (In his *Folk-lore in the Old Testament* [1918] he does the same to biblical Judaism.)

(6) If theorists have based their conception of religion on a single religion, why have so many theorists stressed the differences between kinds and between stages of religion? For Tylor, primitive religion is materialist, explanatory and amoral, whereas modern religion is spiritual, metaphysical and moral. For Tylor, primitive religion is like science, and modern religion is unlike it. For Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, who goes unmentioned in Dubuisson, Tylor is wrong to assume that the mentality underlying primitive religion is the same as that underlying science. For Emile Durkheim, whom Dubuisson does consider, the change from mechanical to organic solidarity makes for changes in the nature of religion. For Max Weber, also considered by Dubuisson, primitive, or magical, religion has no gods, priests, ethics or metaphysics. It is concerned with immediate, worldly ends. By contrast, higher religion has gods, priests or prophets, ethics and metaphysics. It is preoccupied with the need for meaningfulness. How are these theorists any less attentive to differences within the category of religion than is Dubuisson in his proposed replacement of ‘cosmographical formations’ for religions: ‘All cultures are thereby similar, and likewise, all are different’ (p. 201)?

(7) While Dubuisson, to his credit, does not take the postmodern route of dispensing altogether with categories, or similarities, his criticism of the category religion does appeal to the litany-like argument made by particularists against comparativists. Dubuisson asks rhetorically, ‘Does the fact that a human being—a Benedictine monk, a Roman augur, or Tungus shaman—addresses a supernatural suffice to authorise us to speak of a common religious phenomenon?’ (p. 13). He thereby echoes Clifford Geertz, particularist par excellence:

[T]he notion that the essence of what it means to be human is most clearly revealed in those features of human culture that are universal rather than in those that are distinctive to this people or that is a prejudice we are not necessarily obliged to share. Is it in grasping such general facts—that man has everywhere some sort of ‘religion’—or in grasping the richness of this religious phenomenon or that—Balinese trance or Indian ritualism, Aztec human sacrifice or Zuni rain-dancing—that we grasp him? Is the fact that ‘marriage’ is universal (if it is) as penetrating a comment on what we are as the facts concerning Himalayan polyandry, or those fantastic Australian marriage rules, or the elaborate bride-price systems of Bantu Africa? The comment that Cromwell was the most typical Englishman of his time precisely in that he was the oddest may be relevant in this connection, too: it may be in the cultural particularities of people—in their oddities—that some of the most instructive revelations of what it is to be generically human are to be found. (Geertz, 1973, p. 43)

When Dubuisson declares that ‘If we do not respect the structural uniqueness of each cultural continuum, all cultures in effect become comparable, but at the price precisely of that which made them unique’ (p. 65), he also almost mimics Geertz’s charge that generalisations miss the distinctiveness of the particulars they amass:



Within the bloated categories of regime description, Feudalism or Colonialism, Late Capitalism or The World System, Neo-Monarchy or Parliamentary Militarism, there is a resident suchness, deep Moroccanity, inner Indonesianness, struggling to get out. Such a conception of things is usually called nationalism. That is certainly not wrong, but, another bloated category, grouping the ungroupable and blurring distinctions internally felt, it is less definite than it seems. Every quiddity has its own form of suchness, and no one who comes to Morocco or Indonesia to find out what goes on there is likely to confuse them with each other or to be satisfied with elevated banalities about common humanity or a universal need for self-expression. (Geertz, 1995, p. 23)

To begin with, this argument is tautological: of course, similarities cannot identify differences, for if similarities could, they would not be similarities. But this argument is also question-begging: only if one presupposes that differences are somehow deeper than similarities can one dismiss similarities as superficial. If one were to presuppose that differences are trivial, then they become superficial. Moreover, similarities are by no means confined to the surface. They often lie beneath the surface. An emigré to a foreign country is typically struck first by the differences between it and home, and only later comes to notice the similarities. And apparent differences can turn into underlying similarities.

(8) At the same time similarities do not mean identities. Similarities mean no more than similarities. Similarities allow for differences, and exactly at the point at which no further similarities can be found. No one claims that Christianity is identical with Buddhism or Christianity of one time and place identical with Christianity of another. Rather, the claim is that they are akin, and sufficiently akin to be categorisable as cases of religion and in turn explicable similarly.

It is a logical truism that any two entities, however much alike, are still distinct. Therefore the categorisation of phenomena as cases of religion can never yield identity, only similarity. Even to seek only similarities is not to eliminate differences. Conversely, to seek only differences is not to eradicate similarities. The options are neither wholesale identity nor total uniqueness but only further similarities or further differences.

Like Geertz, Dubuisson counters vaunted similarities with sheer differences:

In the minds of many for whom religion in the final instance means communication with superhuman interlocutors, there can no doubt about it, so seemingly similar are these various situations. In reality, matters are neither so simple nor so obvious. What is scientifically comparable in this instance is solely the fact that these people address themselves to an imaginary being that their own pronouncements in some fashion transform into a real interlocutor, and a close analysis of the varying cultural and pragmatic contexts would quickly reveal important, irreconcilable differences. (p. 13)

But those who seek similarities do not deny differences. They deny the importance of differences. To argue from the fact of differences, which are never denied, to the importance of them is to beg the question: why are differences more significant than similarities? The argument in favor of similarities—that similarities are weightier than differences—may be question-begging, but so is the argument in favor of differences: that differences are deeper than similarities. Geertz's asking whether the universality of marriage is 'as penetrating a comment on what we are as the facts concerning Himalayan polyandry, or those fantastic Australian marriage rules, or the elaborate

bride-price systems of Bantu Africa' is a less rhetorical question than he realises (see Segal, 2001, p. 350).

(9) Because Dubuisson, despite his seeming dismissal of similarities and therefore of categories, in fact wants to find more suitable similarities and therefore more suitable categories, he cannot be faulted, the way postmodernists can, with failing to see the indispensability of similarities. As I have argued elsewhere, similarities and categories, which is to say comparisons, are indispensable to the explanation of specific cases, no matter how unique (see Segal, 2001). The quest for differences depends as much on similarities as the quest for similarities does. Geertz himself compares Indonesia with Morocco in order to illuminate the differences between them (see Geertz, 1968).

(10) Just as similarities do not mean identities, so they do not mean essences, which Dubuisson nevertheless equates:

Only a cavalier, superficial vision would be capable of ignoring these radical differences [among Siberian shamanism, Roman augury, and Christian monasticism] in order to recognize, despite everything, the ghost of one and the same anthropological fact. On this we would probably all agree. It is consequently obvious that the essence of religion... is to be found neither in restricted, delimited experience... nor in totalized complexes. (p. 14)

But similarities are merely empirical claims, whereas essences are metaphysical ones. No theorist, however brash, claims to have uncovered the essence of religion. At most, theorists claim to have identified the necessary and sufficient conditions for the existence of religion, and few theorists claim to have identified both. Indeed, most explanations are merely probabilistic (see Segal, 2001, pp. 356–7). While the essence of any category would obviously have to be universal, universal characteristics need not be essential ones. Saying that a table must have four legs is not saying that four legs are the essence of a table. The postmodern 'anti-essentialism' so commonplace today is thus misplaced.

(11) If theorists assume the universality of religion, why do so many of them assume that religion faces extinction? Dubuisson quotes Tylor on the antiquity of religion. But even though Tylor does maintain that, as far as reliable records show, there has always been religion (see Tylor, 1958, II, p. 9), he hardly maintains that there will always be religion. He pits religion against science, animism against materialism. Science has bested religion from the physical world and has forced religion to retreat to the domain of either metaphysics or ethics—both of them for Tylor come-down. Tylor even investigates spiritualism as a possible way of saving religion.

For Freud, religion has proved hard to dislodge, but not impossible, and in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) he envisions a world with science in place of religion. Durkheim seeks secular religion or the cult of the individual as a substitute for the loss of traditional religion, which again has been bested by science. Weber laments that religion is dying out, and with nothing to replace it. Jung laments the same, though he offers psychology as the substitute for religion. The precariousness of religion in the modern world for so many leading theorists hardly bespeaks confidence in its universality—unless universality is taken to mean merely that every culture has at least had religion, not will always have religion. Even Mircea Eliade, who is Dubuisson's *bete noir*, has to scamper to find what he concedes are degenerated, corrupt forms of religion amidst modernity.

(12) If theorists assume the irreducibility of religion, why do they account for both its origin and its function non-religiously? For all social scientists, religion originates and functions to serve

secular ends. And whatever end is named reflects the discipline—the discipline outside of religious studies—from which the theorist hails. Far from isolating religion, social scientists link it to something else—society, culture, or the mind. For some theorists, religion fulfills its function admirably (Tylor, Jung); for others (Durkheim), indispensably; for yet others, disastrously (Freud). Still, for all, religion is a secular product, and its longevity derives from its effectiveness in fulfilling its secular function. Against whom, then, is Dubuisson pitting himself in stating that ‘From the outset, the accumulation of evidence in this book has established a hypothesis that religion is not a simple, obvious phenomenon of which it suffices to say that it exists *sui generis* as one of the fundamental characteristics of humanity’ (p. 189)? Against the religionist tradition of Müller, Van der Leeuw, Otto and Eliade? Yes. Against any of the social sciences? No.

Social scientists start with the stage before religion and seek to account for the emergence of religion. Whatever origin they postulate must be non-religious because that origin necessarily antedates religion. Once for them religion arises, they seek to account for the persistence of religion—for Preus, the distinctively social scientific issue. Whatever function they propose must likewise be non-religious because that function is the fulfillment of the need that gave rise to religion. I therefore fail to see any beholdenness on the part of social scientists to religiosity or to Christianity. Religion, including Christianity, is the *subject* of study, not the *student*. The aim is to make religion as nearly non-religious in its origin and function as possible. The aim is to reduce religion as nearly as possible to something secular.

(13) Almost in passing, Dubuisson asserts that ‘for many Western minds, denying the idea of religion is tantamount to denying the existence of the divinity’ (p. 55). But however commonly this linkage is invoked, it is atypical of theorists of religion, most of whom vaunt what Peter Berger should have called ‘methodological agnosticism’ rather than ‘methodological atheism’. Put summarily, theorists strive to account for *religion*, not for *god*. They seek to explain the origin and function of belief in god but not of god himself/herself/itself.

(14) Dubuisson evinces his expertise in matching up modern theories with ancient ones—for example, matching up the Sophist Critias with Marx (see, for example, p. 136). I agree that some modern theories do have hoary counterparts. But what makes modern theories, at least social scientific ones, distinctively modern is their basis in evidence rather than in speculation. The differences summed by the anthropologist John Beattie apply to the other social sciences as well:

Thus it was the reports of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century missionaries and travellers in Africa, North America, the Pacific and elsewhere that provided the raw material upon which the first anthropological works, written in the second half of the last century, were based. Before then, of course, there had been plenty of conjecturing about human institutions and their origins.... But although their speculations were often brilliant, these thinkers were not empirical scientists; their conclusions were not based on any kind of evidence which could be tested; rather, they were deductively argued from principles which were for the most part implicit in their own cultures. They were really philosophers and historians of Europe, not anthropologists. (Beattie, 1964, pp. 5–6)

(15) It may well be that all attempts at finding a categorisation of religion that fits all assumed cases have failed. But the corrective is not to abandon the attempt. The corrective is to try anew. To jump from the difficulty of finding commonality to the impossibility of doing so is illogical. To

jump from impossibility to impropriety, as not Dubuisson but many postmodernists do, is to leap from ‘is’ to ‘ought’.

(16) Finally, what is the force of the claim, made by Dubuisson and so many others, that the category religion is ‘constructed’? What is the alternative: revealed? Unless the category was already in the world when humans arrived, of course it was created. And of course it was created by someone at some time and place. Are scientific theories, which Dubuisson contrasts to social scientific ones, any less constructed? The issue is not the specificity of the origin of a category but its applicability beyond its origin. To restrict the applicability of a category or of a theory to the time and place of its origin is to commit the genetic fallacy. It is to collapse discovery into invention. To take a common example, Freud undeniable generalised from the cases of largely middle-class Viennese Jewish women at the turn of the twentieth century. The issue is whether his universalisation still holds. To assume that it does not because of its constricted origin is fallacious. To avoid the genetic fallacy, Dubuisson must actually prove, not simply assert, the following claim:

the history of religions ... was itself a unique historical construction, intimately tied to the ideas of its time, on which it was dependent at every stage of development.... The study of its first syntheses, drawn up in the second half of the nineteenth century, reveals, among the intellectual factors that surrounded its birth, the constant presence of the most ordinary prejudices of that period. (p. 147)

Certainly Dubuisson does seek to prove these claims. The question, which will not be answered here, is whether he ever falls back on the sheer specificity of the period of origin as an argument against the applicability of the category religion or of theories of religion.

## Comments on Daniel Dubuisson’s *The Western Construction of Religion*

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As Steven Engler notes, Dubuisson goes beyond the arguments of authors such as Talal Asad, Russell McCutcheon and Timothy Fitzgerald in arguing (1) that ‘religion filled an ‘architectonic function’ in Western culture’ and (2) that in order to escape this past, we need to replace the concept of religion with that of ‘cosmographic formations’. In referring to religion as filling an ‘architectonic function’, Dubuisson does not mean to suggest that other cultures have not asked similar questions or engaged in similar practices but rather that the West conferred on the complex of ideas and behaviours that it deemed religious ‘a kind of destiny or essential anthropological vocation: humans are held to be religious in the same way they are omnivorous, that is, by nature, through the effects of an inborn disposition’ (p. 12). It is this ‘anthropological vocation’ that Dubuisson hopes to escape from through the use of the new term ‘cosmographic formations’.

While Dubuisson repeatedly returns to the point that ‘religion is not a simple, obvious phenomenon of which it suffices to say that it exists *sui generis* as one of the fundamental characteristics of

humanity' (p. 189), this point was not in dispute among his commentators at the annual meeting. Disagreements instead clustered around two issues, one historical and the other methodological: first, whether Dubuisson provides an adequate characterisation of the history of the concept of religion either in the history of the West or in the modern era; and second, whether the concept needs to be replaced. Others in this symposium raised questions about the adequacy of Dubuisson's history, and none appears interested in replacing the concept of religion with 'cosmographic formations'. Although for Dubuisson the historiographical and methodological issues are joined, I think that the discussion can be advanced more effectively if they are separated. Since other contributors address the historiographical question at some length, I will focus on the methodological issues related to the use of the term 'religion'. I argue that whether we employ the term should be decided on the basis of the questions we want to ask and the methods that are most appropriate for answering them, not on the history of the use of the term.

Dubuisson's underlying question has to do with human universals. He insists that we need to replace the concept of 'religion' with that of 'cosmographic formations' because he cannot see '[h]ow a concept so determined by its exclusively Christian and western history [can function] as a universal paradigm in the study of humanity'.<sup>4</sup> Bracketing the question of whether the concept of religion was or is largely determined by an exclusively Christian and Western history, we need to recognise that Dubuisson's interest is not so much in 'religion', whatever that means, as in universal paradigms that can be used to study humanity. Like the theologians and phenomenologists he criticises, Dubuisson is interested in human universals. But in contrast to them, he does not view humans as naturally and therefore universally religious. Thus he thinks that we need to employ a more encompassing term that truly is universally applicable. He proposes 'cosmographic formations' because the phrase not only 'includes what in the West, we call "religions," but ... can also apply to the cosmographies of atheists, agnostics and materialists'.<sup>5</sup>

Whether we follow Dubuisson in adopting a term such as cosmographic formations depends, as far as I can see, on what we as individual scholars are trying to accomplish. If we want to compare a variety of 'world constructing' strategies, some commonly considered religious and others not, as he wants to do, then a broadly encompassing term such as 'cosmographic formations', which does not require a definition of religion, seems to be required. If our goal is to study what *we* take to be religion, then we will be obliged to provide a definition of religion, either substantive or heuristic.

Dubuisson rejects this second option because he thinks that previous efforts to ground religion as an analytical category have been founded on arbitrary distinctions (pp. 76–8, 189–90). Western thinkers, he argues, have excluded 'from the putative religious field magic, divination, hero cults, popular superstitions, alchemy and astrology, and it remains quite uncomfortable when it meets them among others, at the heart of what it, despite everything, calls religions' (p. 190). In his view we should either accept this whole range of phenomena as 'authentic religious facts' or persist 'in excluding them from this sphere' and found our 'analytical categories on arbitrary distinctions' (p. 190). I suggest that we can concede up front that the concept of 'religion' is founded on disputed, if not arbitrary, distinctions, so that identifying 'authentic religious facts' will always be a theoretically, if not theologically, laden enterprise. This concession does not, however, preclude studying what we define as religion. It simply requires us to acknowledge the limitations inherent in our

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Dubuisson, e-mail comments on AAR panel abstracts, November 2004, trans. Steven Engler.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Dubuisson, e-mail response to comments of Steven Engler, November 2004, trans. Steven Engler.

definitions, not the least of which is that our definitions tell us more about what we as scholars take as religion, substantively or heuristically, than about the views of our subjects.

In saying this, I do not mean to downplay the import of Dubuisson's observation that Western thinkers have excluded any number of phenomena from the realm of 'religion' on arbitrary grounds. This important observation raises the crucial question of what counts as 'religion' and why. This question, like Dubuisson's question about universals, is one that cannot be addressed if we start with a definition of 'religion'. To answer this question, we need to identify a common feature of the set of phenomena in question—religion, magic, divination, hero cults, etc.—for the purposes of comparison. This feature would not have to coincide with what scholars or their subjects take to be religion.

In his introductory chapter, Dubuisson briefly considers and then rejects a definition of religion that he considers more logical and scientific than most but that proponents of the universality of religion would consider too broad. If, however, we are interested in the question of what counts as religion, a stipulated focus on occasions in which 'people address themselves to an imaginary being that their own pronouncements in some fashion transform into a real interlocutor' (p. 13) would make an excellent starting point. The knowledge that imaginary beings are invoked 'in the most diverse contexts (magical rituals, sorcery, alchemy, superstitions, spiritism, demonic possession, childish beliefs, fetishistic practices, hallucinatory neuroses, paranoid or amorous delirium and so on)' (pp. 13–14) would be an advantage rather than a liability. Moreover, if these related concepts are not any more stable than religion—and I doubt that they are—then a focus on occasions when people address themselves to imaginary beings would allow us to focus on the processes of category formation of religion, magic and divination that are typically suppressed when we begin with a definition of religion.

Methodologically, I would argue that Dubuisson's call to replace the concept of 'religion' with that of 'cosmographic formations' is rooted in his desire to ask questions about human universals that definitions of religion tend to suppress. His questions, however, are not the only questions that can be asked. We should decide whether to use the concept of religion as an overarching scholarly rubric for to particular scholarly questions. Viewed in light of his own scholarly questions, Dubuisson's call makes sense. Moreover, his critical appraisal of the concept challenges us to recognise the limitations inherent in the use of the term 'religion' and to consider asking questions that may encompass what we or others take to be religion under broader headings.

## Critique and challenge: some remarks on Daniel Dubuisson's critique of the concept of religion

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Daniel Dubuisson's provocative work is marked by a double objective. On the one hand he aims at a radical reassessment of the history of religions as a discipline of the human sciences,

and of the concept of religion as the basis and indication of Religious Studies programs; on the other hand, he seeks to comply with the demands of an adequate anthropology that is entirely in tune with the human situation and with an epistemology that accords with basic experiences. The tension between these goals runs like an invisible thread through the whole text. It shapes its vision and gives body to its arguments. In the connection of extremes, this tension reveals itself as a source of amazing creativity.

In the following review I want to concentrate on four themes: first, the critical intention of the author and the thesis he intends to defend; second, the meaning of religion in Western tradition and as a typical construction of this tradition; third, objections against Dubuisson's approach; and fourth, the study of cosmographic formations as a necessary feature of cultural reality.

### **Task and thesis**

The main concern of Dubuisson's book is the meaning of religion and the usability of the concept of religion as the name for a particular discipline and as the subject of cross-cultural investigations. Dubuisson is convinced that 'religion is not only the central concept of Western civilisation, it *is* the West itself in the process of thinking the world dominated by it, by its categories of thought' (p. 93). In order to understand both the history of Western conquests and the impact of hegemonic tendencies, we have to remember that 'through the idea of religion, the West continuously speaks of itself to itself, even when it speaks of others. For when it does so, it is implicitly in relation to the perfected model that it thinks itself to be. This is narcissistic objectification' (p. 95). And conversely: if we concentrate on the history of religions as one of the disciplines of human sciences, we have to acknowledge that this discipline not only is a child which has been formed within the context of religious entanglements but perpetuates these entanglements by adding the glamour of apparently scientific reasoning.

In the light of his assessment of Western religion, Dubuisson argues for the abandonment of this concept 'and, with it, everything that is conventionally attached to it' (p. 51). As an alternative, he proposes 'to organise the nascent discipline around a more neutral concept (in a word, one less European), which might have been capable of subsuming the whole of what are here called cosmographic formations, in order to give the discipline truly universal status' (p. 90). With the concept of cosmographic formations he defends the vision of 'a vaster anthropological perspective' which enables us 'to subsume the totality of human activities whose objective is the creation, preservation, or consolidation of all-encompassing symbolic universes, capable of receiving and lending sense (value, orientation and a rationale) to the totality of human facts' (p. 51).

To achieve this goal, it will be necessary to revise the anthropological premises that lie at the bottom of the human sciences and to connect them with an epistemology that accords with the basic condition of being human and that does not close its eyes to the atrocities which have been committed by ideological prejudices. We must learn to differentiate the various planes and levels of the complexity we are studying. Otherwise intellectual activities are doomed to 'remain sterile' (p. 138).

Dubuisson does not want to be caught in the great (dichotomous) paradigm of Western thinking (Plato, Lucretius). He abhors metaphysical malaise (p. 40) and refuses to have recourse to the 'Platonic paradise of eternal ideas' (p. 164). But he also knows that it would be imprudent to skip or to repress these issues: 'Metaphysical concerns, even anxiety, as well as everything that derives

from them, belong integrally to the history of humanity. This is why, as long as the human sciences persist in excluding from the symbolic productions they chose to study the metaphysical component that they contain—that they contain only because they are fully human creations—just as long, I fear, they will also fail to grasp what is perhaps the essential characteristic of all human activity, no doubt made up of other than simple utilitarian concerns, and they will then cut themselves off from a good portion of their critical objective’ (p. 233). If we respond to the human situation as it presents itself throughout history, no less is required than ‘an ontology based on the sacrilegious categories of the mixed and interlaced, themselves returned to the grandiose perspective of perpetual metamorphosis, an interminable gestation’ (p. 205).

### **The burden of tradition**

To prove his thesis, Dubuisson concentrates on the genesis of the concept of religion. Though the Latin term *religio* precedes the emergence of Christianity, its meaning underwent dramatic changes when Christian apologists, especially Augustine, adopted this term and connected it with the belief that *their* religion was the true, and the only true, religion. If the cults and creeds of other traditions were not outrightly false (which they were), they were definitively inferior and therefore unsuited to be treated on equal footing with Christianity. Since Christians believed in the same divine origin of all human beings, this attitude created its own paradoxes. On the one hand there could be no doubt that the basic features of human nature appear in all people. On the other hand it was equally clear that the Christian view of nature provided the only valid standards for the assessment of others. Since this gift was given by revelation and not by nature, one had to find something that the others lacked or that existed only in distorted forms.

In analysing the missionary, political and intellectual conquests of the West, Dubuisson sees ‘a close, genetic relationship between the historical destiny of Christianity in the West and the reconstruction of the idea of religion with its very specific signification’ (p. 102). In retrospect, he contends, we have to grant that ‘religion is effectively the West’s most characteristic concept, around which it has established and developed its identity, while at the same time defining its way of conceiving humankind and the world’ (p. 9). But to be precise, we have to add that ‘while religion remains largely the incarnation of an atemporal notion or indestructible essence, it is, more prosaically put, only the result of a discriminatory act performed in the West and there alone’ (p. 14). Religion is an idea through which the West ‘has constrained other cultures to speak of their own religions by inventing them for them’ (p. 93). ‘What the West and the history of religions in its wake have objectified under the name ‘religion’ is then something quite unique, which could be appropriate only to itself and to its own history’ (p. 90). In giving ‘religion to the world’, the West necessitated the world to give it back, ‘to the West’s greater glory’ (p. 114).

The central point in Dubuisson’s argument is the theological appropriation of cult and creed in the concept of (true) religion to the extent that this concept became the focus of Christian identity and became a substitute for the life that this concept claimed to understand. In the process of this transformation, religion came to represent the ‘core or central axis’ of the world in which, and with which, the West developed. ‘This is why it seems to us as indispensable as it is irreplaceable’ (p. 89).

To the extent that the theological appropriation of cult and creed generated the myth of religion as one of the cosmographic elements of the Western world, Dubuisson is right to reject the concept of religion as a disciplinary focus of human sciences, especially when this concept



is based on a strict and rigid model that claims to be absolute as well as universal. In castigating this ‘ephemeral universalism’ (p. 140), he opens valuable perspectives that expose the distorting impact of Western attitudes on the world, as well as on Western scholarship inasmuch as that relationship it perpetuates these attitudes. His analysis of symbolic interactions and their nets of relations presents itself as a conceptual mirror which reveals the caricatures of the human sciences and especially of religious studies. But does his approach also do justice to the meaning of religion as a cultural reality which, even as part of the Western heritage, has nevertheless a life of its own independent of theological transformations, and despite the deeply influence on it by the history of these transformations? I do not think that it does, and for the following reasons.

### **Objections**

Since one of the arguments against the Western concept of religion is the supposed inability of other traditions to recognise themselves in the categories of religious scholarship, it would only be fair to ask whether religious people in the West do recognise themselves in these categories. I doubt that they do for the simple reason that religious people in the West do not necessarily believe that other religions are wrong or that they are religions only to the extent that they share in the same rigid and timeless essence as Western religions. But even more important in this context is the distinction between ideas with which people live and ideas which are used and developed in order to understand the various expressions, forms and modes of being human and cultural. I sorely miss this distinction in this and numerous other books. Neglecting it is a cause of many confusions. An example in Dubuisson’s book is the discussion of a distinct religious domain (p. 43). If we consider the ways in which the conflicts of the religious wars have been solved, it is true that the West invented the separation of powers—of state and church, of the private and the public spheres. The institutionalisation of this invention is a Western idiosyncrasy that might or might not be comparable with solutions developed by other traditions. But the situation is different when we enter the theoretical plane and distinguish various areas of variously related meanings. The distinctions and non-distinctions that we observe in various traditions are not irrelevant and have to be accounted for on the level of theoretical considerations. But they are not decisive as far as theoretical distinctions are concerned. Whether such distinctions are adequate is, again, a question of theoretical considerations and of our evaluation of the adequacy of our theories.

Another feature that I miss in the book concerns the emergence and development of philosophical and scientific thinking in the West. Dubuisson is not afraid to confront the reader with the spiritual heroes of Western history and the mental dynamics that they have initiated, but the ‘invention’ of philosophy as a particular way of thinking in which reason relates to itself and unfolds within the horizon of the myth of being as being remains dim. The ‘underexposure’ of this feature, though in itself nothing to complain about, is nevertheless disturbing because the whole history of Christian and Western thinking is marked by the fusion of ‘God’ with ‘Being’ and by tensions that fusion has caused to the unfolding of reason within a double horizon of ultimate meaning. The effects of this tension also concern the concept of religion and the idea of studying other traditions not merely in the light of the god-symbol (or of its negation) but in the light of Being as well. If we disregard this feature, an important aspect of the concept of religion and of what has been done with it will be obscured.

A key argument for the typically Western conception of religion is the distinction of Arnobius between ‘our’ and ‘their’ religion (p. 25). Dubuisson points out that the Romans ‘sought to co-opt the goodwill of the gods of an enemy city’, that ‘the Greeks spoke of the Egyptian gods with the greatest respect’, and that this is ‘equally true of the Jews of the Old Testament’ (p. 28). This claim might be partly true, but it did not hinder the Greeks from inventing the concept of *magia* as the denigrating designation of Persian cults or hinder Jews from proclaiming that the heathen ‘idols’ have mouths but cannot speak, eyes but cannot see ... and that ‘they that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them’. Nor did Cicero abstain from observing ‘that each city and state has its own *religio*’ and that ‘we have ours’ (Pro L. Flacco Oratio. nr. 69). I agree with Dubuisson that the difference between our own gods and the gods of other people ‘ought to prompt us to regard exotic cultures with a curious eye instead of persisting in describing them by means of our unique religious code’ (p. 28). But neither should we disregard the observation of the reversal of *devas* and *ahuras* (*asuras*), or the recurring pattern of seeing in the gods of neighbours the devils of one’s own tradition.

Another point concerns the theological appropriation of cult and creeds. The confusions and distortions that have been part of this appropriation, in the cultivation of actual religiosity and the theoretical assessment of its manifestations, deserve Dubuisson’s scorn. They underline a problem that has haunted Western history and that still causes practical as well as theoretical turbulences. But the problem is not exclusively Christian. It was already present in ancient Greece when Xenophanes and the Sophists approached religious beliefs as a variation on their philosophy, instead of letting them be what they were. Plato stressed the necessity of having and following true theology (Republic II, 379a). And Aristotle distinguished theology as ‘the highest science’ which is ‘universal’ because the ‘separable’ nature of the ‘eternal and immovable’ is the first we can think of (Metaphysics VI.1, 1026a). The Christian authors interpreted these thoughts in their own way, but the form in which they connected the *cultura dei* with their notions of the ‘highest genus’ has not been so very different from the form that their Greek predecessors had introduced.

Finally, I wonder whether the arguments against the concept of religion can be used against the concept of culture as well. In both cases we rely on notions and symbols that have been developed in the course of Western history and that have been used to designate subjects of scientific investigations. At the same time we are challenged to do justice to the experiences, symbols and notions of all other traditions. Again, it is important to distinguish the scientific discourse from the modes and manners in which people in the West and elsewhere realise their humanity. How we distinguish cultures from one another and connect them to one another is a matter of the perspectives we use. Dubuisson offers the concept of cosmographic formations as a way of dealing with the meaning of cultural unity and differences. But why should not religion have a place in the enclosure of these formations?

### **Cosmographic formations**

In order to bring the various features of humanity into perspective, Dubuisson introduces the concept of cosmographic formations. The key to the meaning of this concept is the unfolding of being human and cultural. We have to think of the various situations in which human beings find themselves and try to make sense of their life—this is, how they relate to themselves variously

under ever-changing conditions how they do or do not get their chances to become what they can be. But the concept itself refers to the limits and fringes of the worlds which, by implication and design, are the result of the processes of unfolding. In cosmographic formations we come to think of reality as the all-inclusive horizon of all things, and we relate to it as if our vision of things belonged to just one and the same common world. This process repeats itself in each human being. But because it repeats itself differently in each of us, we realise that the common world is actually a shared world which changes as different communities share different worlds. Though the worlds which we form and occupy differ from individual to individual and from community to community, they are also similar to one other. If we consider them in their comprehensiveness, they are ‘structurally and functionally homologous’ (p. 201).

The dynamics of the world in which we live, and of which we become aware through the contrasts we experience in the encounter with other people and other traditions, allows us to put ourselves in the ‘existential position’ of others; to follow them in what they ‘do in this world, how they have constructed it, and what they expect of it’; and to see that none of all the other worlds is so different that it ‘is not THE world in the eyes of those who live there’ (p. 203). The relativism of this perspective is extreme, but it is extreme to the point that it relativises itself (see p. 201). ‘In every human project, we find the same paradox, for every creation presupposes that in its most primitive stage, it had already glimpsed the totality to come and had subsequently ceaselessly pursued the achievement of its realization at each stage of it’ (p. 202). Dubuisson cites Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) for the idea that the universe appears as a point that enfolds everything, (p. 137) but he could have quoted him again in his outline of the meaning of cosmographic formations.

The significance of the theory on cosmographic formations consists in the anthropological vision that it provides and in the possibilities that it offers for the study of culture and cultures. Cosmographic formations are key to the constitution of cultural phenomena. Without them, an adequate reconstruction of cultural realities is impossible. The question about them ‘has until now been neglected by scientific thought’ (p. 204). Since this theory is open and flexible enough ‘to envisage the creation of an anthropology of transcendence that would study all forms of the beyond, all the categories of imaginary beings, all the messianic utopias, all the systems of cosmic laws, all the ideal moralities intended to bear up the weight of living, such as humanity has imagined them, it would be imprudent, and scientifically unsatisfying, to recognise in these only the exotic variations of an obscure religious instinct. The concept of cosmographic formations has precisely the goal of subsuming this totality of human creations in a scientific project that does not itself presuppose specific orientations or values’ (p. 46).

Inasmuch as cosmographic formations are a necessary feature of the worlds in which we live, they are not identical with religion. They indicate the limits of our worlds and are defined by them with the same necessity in which they determine the space of meaning which is the signature of these worlds. But even if they are not identical with religion, we have still to answer the question about the processes that in each world lead to cosmographic formations and become structured as they return from them into their own origins. Dubuisson gives a few hints of this problem when he writes about the disincarnation of our bodies in texts and the incarnation of cosmography in our bodies (p. 212). But he writes nothing about the centre of this mediation, which is no less important than the reversal of the extremes. This centre might be the ‘black hole’ that keeps human worlds spinning (with all the ambiguities encapsulated in the word). If we intend to give

a name to this centre, I do not see why we should not use the term religion. I think that it is at least one of the associations that are contained in the use of this word.

## Conclusion

In this assessment of Dubuisson's challenging book, only a few of the points that deserve to be treated comprehensively have been considered. His critique of the concept of religion is convincing insofar as it reveals numerous distortions that undoubtedly have to be abandoned. But I disagree with him as to his overall assessment of this concept and its history. In contrast to his radical 'solution', I argue for a critical revision of the concept of religion that includes his insights without excluding the insights that have been gained in the brief history of religious studies and that may be gained in the light of his theory of cosmographic formations. The reason for this 'tenacity' is not 'a superstitious fear that with the word [religion] might disappear the idea, too, that is, the very thing that it claims to designate' (p. 200) but the realisation that the dynamics of cultural reality are not thinkable without foci of mediation in each and in all worlds, and that it makes sense to use the term, religion, as an indication of their centres of mediation. This understanding of religion needs to be elaborated. Since this is not possible now, it might help if we connect *homo cosmographicus* with *homo symbolicus*, *religiosus*, *historicus* and many more *epiteta* that seem to be indispensable to a complete description of the nature of female and male human beings, and to use this connection to explore the possible meanings of religion.

# The Cosmographic Situation of Psychology

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Daniel Dubuisson's concept of cosmographic formations provides a perspective for understanding the ideological entanglements of the human sciences. While most of these disciplines have recognised their differences from the natural sciences, psychology has continued to maintain its claims to scientific objectivity in the face of compelling criticism of this self-image. In part, this claim is traceable to special features of the history and current structure of the discipline, but it is also true that psychology, as science, offers a metaphysically sanitised alternative to religion in the cosmographic structure of Western culture. This alternative provides a welcome way for Western culture to maintain its conception of human nature as normative, even if religion can no longer perform that cosmographic function.

It is a beguiling idea to imagine that a comprehensive natural science of human behaviour and experience is possible. The Enlightenment dream of reducing all human problems to matters of calculation remains alive in this enterprise. However, as Dubuisson notes, 'Unlike the natural sciences, the various human sciences never have to deal with raw data. Today, outside of naive epistemologies, we no longer think that there are "objective" facts on one side and their interpretation on the other' (p. 175). Why psychology does not see its work in this way is something of a puzzle.

I want to deploy Dubuisson's concept of cosmographic formations to understand the peculiar epistemological situation of psychology among the human sciences and in relation to religion.

Sigmund Koch, the most eminent historian of psychology, has concluded that psychology 'cannot be a coherent science' and that many of its branches have more in common with the humanities than with biology or the more exact sciences (see Koch, 1969). Later, in his 1979 Presidential Address to the Divisions of General Psychology and of Philosophical Psychology, Koch said,

Fields like sensory and biological psychology may certainly be regarded as solidly within the family of the biological and, in some reaches, natural sciences. But psychologists must finally accept the circumstance that extensive and important sectors of psychological study require modes of inquiry more like those of the humanities than the sciences. And among these I would include areas traditionally considered 'fundamental'—like perception, cognition, motivation, and learning—as well as such more obviously rarefied fields as social psychology, psychopathology, personality, aesthetics, and the analysis of creativity. (Koch and Leary, 1985, p. 94)

Less diplomatically, Princeton's Psychologist George Miller has declared: 'I was educated to believe that psychology is a biological science;... I discovered that psychology is an intellectual zoo.... Parts of psychology are clearly scientific, in the best sense of the term, and other parts are pure moonshine' (Koch and Leary, 1985, pp. 40–1).

The incoherence of the discipline has splintered university departments, spawned alternative professional societies, and produced freestanding professional schools for practitioners, offering the Psy.D. (Doctor of Psychology) as a practice-oriented alternative degree to the traditional Ph.D. Still, most psychologists and psychology texts continue to describe the totality of psychology as a science, and many American universities count the completion of an introductory course in psychology as work done in the natural sciences. In both its public image and its self-understanding, psychology appears to enjoy a kind of immunity to criticisms of its illusory status as a natural science.

This situation originates with the abrupt founding of academic psychology as an experimental science by the formal establishment of a psychological laboratory at Leipzig in 1879 by Wilhelm Wundt, a physician and physiologist with an appointment in philosophy. A few years earlier, William James, also a physician and physiologist with an appointment in philosophy, had set up a small informal psychological demonstration laboratory at Harvard.<sup>6</sup> In 1889 James was appointed Professor of Psychology, apparently the first person anywhere with that title. Asked some years later if he remembered the first lecture on psychology he had ever heard, James reportedly answered, 'Yes, it was one I gave'.

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<sup>6</sup> Freud, too, was a physician and physiologist, but psychoanalysis developed outside of academia and found its way into universities primarily through the humanities. Academic departments of psychology have most often treated the work of Freud and his followers as peripheral matters at best. Those departments have benefited from the enormous public interest in psychology generated by psychoanalysis, but its influence on them has been otherwise minimal.

So academic psychology was blessed (or cursed) with undeniably scientific parents who were eminent and productive scholars.<sup>7</sup> It was a child of biology, but born and nurtured in the household of philosophy, the tutelage of which it soon disclaimed. Granted precocious independent status both intellectually and administratively, ‘scientific’ psychology was freer than the other human sciences to set its own agenda and to be judge of its own success. And its early years were a time when scientific aspirations in any field were likely to be applauded.

With few exceptions, the pioneers of the social and behavioural sciences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were energised—one might say intoxicated—by a vision of their work as objective science. Science seemingly provided an escape from ideological influence, a way to find meaning without resort to interpretive imagination. Stated baldly, it was widely believed that as factual information accumulated, meaning emerged spontaneously as a natural byproduct. In 1910, Albert Hart’s Presidential Address to the American Historical Association includes the remark that, ‘History, too, has its inductive method, its relentless concentration of the grain in its narrow spout, till by its own weight it seeks the only outlet. In history, too, scattered and apparently unrelated data fall together in harmonious wholes’ (Hart, quoted in Novick, 1988, p. 38).

This was a time when seminars in philosophy and history were sometimes described as laboratories, as were gymnasiums and kitchens, the passion for scientific methodology having become remarkably ecumenical.<sup>8</sup> And for would-be scientists, there was a sense of eschatological urgency, since the time was thought to be fast approaching when all the important facts would be known:

Finally, as American historians considered what it meant to be ‘scientists,’ they encountered the repeated suggestion that they were joining a finite venture, that science was approaching ‘completeness’. When Max Planck chose science over classical philology or music in the 1870’s, he did it against the advice of the professor of physics at the University of Munich, who warned him that there was nothing new to discover. Robert A. Millikan had the same experience at Columbia in the 1890’s. ... At the dedication of the Ryerson Laboratory at the University of Chicago in 1894, Albert A. Michelson thought it ‘probable that most of the great underlying principles have been firmly established’. He quoted approvingly the remark of an eminent physicist, probably Lord Kelvin, that ‘the future truths of Physical Science are to be looked for in the sixth place of decimals’. (Novick, 1988, p. 37)

Of course, latent reverberations of Christian apocalyptic expectations pervade Western discourse. Frank Kermode developed the notion of ‘concord fictions’ to explicate the apocalyptic

<sup>7</sup> James’ publications add up to several thousand pages of print, but Wundt’s prodigious productivity totally eclipses his. E.G. Boring calculated that Wundt ‘wrote about 53,735 pages in the sixty-eight years between 1853 and 1920 ... Wundt wrote or revised at the average rate of 2.2 pages a day from 1853 to 1920, which comes to about one word every two minutes day and night, for the entire sixty-eight years’. Boring quotes James about Wundt and his critics, ‘Whilst they make mincemeat of some of his views by their criticisms, he is meanwhile writing a book on an entirely different subject. Cut him up like a worm, and each fragment crawls; there is no *noeud vital*, in his mental medulla oblongata, so that you can’t kill him all at once’ (Boring, 1950, pp. 345–6).

<sup>8</sup> The emergence of ‘domestic science’, later to become ‘home economics’ and ‘human ecology’ is one of the best examples we have of genuine science really revolutionising a traditional activity. The founding mother of this movement, Ellen Swallow Richards, was a brilliant chemist and educator whose life and work are insufficiently celebrated. She was MIT’s first female graduate and then a member of its faculty. A woman of many accomplishments, she is most widely remembered for her book on homemaking (see Richards, 1882).

structure implicit in western literature (see Kermode, 2000). This idea is far narrower than Dubuisson's 'cosmographic formations', but it, too, exposes and relativises the assumptive world of Western culture. The same might be said for Hayden White's analysis of historical writing as narratives embodying various forms of 'metahistory' (see White, 1973). In the philosophy of science the ideas of Thomas Kuhn and Norwood Hanson reflect a similar viewpoint. Kuhn's 'paradigm' can be seen as a kind of cosmographic formation found in mature natural sciences (see Kuhn, 1962). Earlier Hanson had argued that there is an inevitable conflation of observation with theory in all science (see Hanson, 1958). Something more like Dubuisson's idea of cosmographic formation is involved in the term meta-narrative, as used in Lyotard's much discussed definition of postmodernism as 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv), and Wittgenstein's concept of 'a form of life' is closer still:

What Wittgenstein means by a 'form of life' is this: it is the underlying consensus of linguistic and non-linguistic behavior, assumptions, practices, traditions, and natural propensities which humans, as social beings, share with one another, and which is therefore presupposed in the language they use;... The form of life is the frame of reference we learn to work within when trained in the language of our community; learning that language is thus learning the outlook, assumptions, and practices with which that language is inseparably bound and from which its expressions get their meaning. (Grayling, 1988, p. 97)

Dubuisson's remark 'that the last resort of all realist illusions is there, in this mutual, reciprocal coincidence of words and things become a conflation of the world and discourse about the world' (p. 162) also resonates with Wittgenstein's central concern about the distinction between 'material' and 'grammatical' propositions:

The distinction between the two types of proposition lies at the heart of Wittgenstein's entire philosophy: in his thinking about psychology, mathematics, aesthetics and even religion, his central criticism of those with whom he disagrees is that they have confused a grammatical proposition with a material one, and have presented as a discovery something that should properly be seen as a grammatical (in Wittgenstein's rather odd sense of the word) innovation. (Monk, 1990, p. 468)

These ideas all resonate with much older notions such as *weltanschauung*, *zeitgeist* and *volkgeist*, and with Vaihinger's philosophy of 'As If' (see Vaihinger, 1925), which found its way into psychology in Alfred Adler's fictional finalism (see Adler, 1927). For psychologists, an appreciation of Dubuisson's thought would be facilitated if it could be articulated in relation to this already familiar family of ideas, a task beyond the scope of this essay. However, making Dubuisson's ideas more approachable cannot soften the threatening nature of his conclusion: that our cosmographic complicity is rooted in the profound need 'we feel each time that we recall that we ourselves, our lives, and the meanings that we had assigned them until now could abandon us for ever and be replaced by nothing' (p. 213). That threat can only be evaded, as Dubuisson notes, by continued cosmographic complicity.

For psychologists, this evasion has generally meant defending the scientific pretensions of their discipline. That this strategy, involves a conflation of the world with discourse about the world is hard to notice because that conflation is already present at the point of naming what is to be studied. To take learning, intelligence, perception, motivation, cognition and emotion as scientific

subject matter is to assume at the outset that these are objective characteristics of persons. This assumption yields fallacies of reification or hypostatisation—treating interpretive abstractions as objects. The appearance of objectivity is maintained by defining psychological concepts in terms of the procedures invented for measuring them. This method of ‘operational definition’ came into psychology in the 1930’s as a loan concept from Percy Bridgman’s analysis of scientific methods in physics (see [Bridgman, 1928](#)). It is a useful but easily abused notion. For example, intelligence can become defined as what intelligence tests measure, and the IQ (Intelligence Quotient) can be taken as an objective personal characteristic like height and weight. Though few psychologists would any longer be so crude about this particular concept, it illustrates the general phenomenon. When one looks at the tests of intelligence involved, it also shows the way operationism can foster what Dubuissou describes as the ‘insidious confusion of science and ideology’ (p. 148).

So psychology has been able to preserve the fact-interpretation distinction in its disciplinary cosmography by creating ‘facts’ to which it directs its attention and by misinterpreting those linguistic inventions as discoveries. Wittgenstein criticised Freud’s notion of the ‘unconscious’ as an example of this process but also pointed out that such ‘grammatical innovations’ could be useful, as he believed Freud’s to be (see [Monk, 1990](#), p. 468). In other words, concepts of the unconscious may be vindicated pragmatically even if incapable of being verified empirically. And psychology is certainly a pragmatic success in contemporary Western society. What amounts to a cultural conversion to psychological mindedness was characterised by Philip Rieff in 1966 as ‘the triumph of the therapeutic’ ([Rieff, 1966](#)). The continuation of the religious core of Western ideology in this transition is emphasised by the sub-title of Rieff’s book: ‘uses of faith after Freud’.

One might, then, argue that, even if psychological concepts are constructions rather than discoveries, they are vindicated by their usefulness in ameliorating human problems. What easily escapes notice in this line of thought is that it takes human beings to be varied approximations of an ideal Western ‘homo psychologicus’ (see [Rieff, 1959](#), ch. 10) a metaphysically sanitised version of the West’s ‘homo religiosus’, making psychology an effective, if unwitting, substitute for religion as the conceptual bastion of Western culture. As Dubuissou puts it, ‘The West is installed at the prow of the ship of moral and intellectual progress; all other cultures are behind it, at times very far behind. But, provided that they imitate it and absorb its lessons, a comparable if not identical fortune will one day befall them’ (p. 153). Approached from the perspective of Dubuissou’s analysis, psychology seems to be carrying out the cosmographic functions of religion under the disarming banner of science. The normative status of the western conception of human nature is seamlessly maintained.

Despite the learned absent-mindedness of most psychologists, the ideological entanglements of the discipline have been evident for some time to well-qualified observers in the discipline and to distinguished colleagues in other fields. For example, Dorothea Braginsky, herself a psychologist, writes:

The mainstream of American psychology is far from the objective science that it purports to be. As a scientific enterprise, it is woven from the political, economic, and moral threads of mainstream society. Rather than pursuing the value-free search for truth and understanding in order to help solve human problems, much of psychology is merely the handmaiden of the status quo and of society’s prevailing values. ([Koch and Leary, 1985](#), p. 880)

After remarking that psychology often provides ‘inappropriate solutions to misconstrued problems’, she concludes that



If psychologists continue to encourage society to avoid confronting its real problems, then meaningful solutions and necessary reforms cannot occur. Finally, by serving as handmaidens to the social order, psychologists degrade their profession and destroy all that it has the potential to become. (Koch and Leary, 1985, p. 890)

In *The Servants of Power*, a classic study of the origins of industrial psychology, historian Loren Baritz writes of Elton Mayo, a leading figure in the establishment of the field, that “His illusions of objectivity, lack of integrative theory, concern with what many have called the ‘wrong problems’, and, at least by implication, authoritarianism, virtually determined the types of errors he committed. Such errors are built into modern social science” (Baritz, 1960, p. 203).

Richard Shweder, in his admirable effort to forge a ‘cultural psychology’, offers an anthropologist’s view of the situation of psychology:

Ontologically speaking, knowledge in general psychology is the attempt to imagine and characterize the form or shape of an inherent central processing mechanism for psychological functions (discrimination, categorization, memory, learning, motivation, inference, and so on). Epistemologically speaking, knowledge seeking in general psychology is the attempt to get a look at the central processing mechanism untainted by content and context, and so on.... Unfortunately, even if the presumed inherent but hidden central processing mechanism does exist, the psychological laboratory is probably not the mythical enchanted doorway through which we can step straight away into a more fundamental reality.... The ideas of a context-free environment, a meaning-free stimulus event, and a fixed meaning are probably best kept where they belong, along with placeless space, eventless time, and squared circles on that famous and fabulous list of impossible notions. (Shweder, 1991, pp. 80–1)

Few psychologists will even notice these criticisms as long as the effective service of their discipline as ‘handmaiden to the status quo’ continues to generate career opportunities. The remarkable success of the discipline in attracting recruits and now selling its services, minimises the practical effects of thoughtful criticism. There are about 200,000 psychologists in the United States alone. More than 40% work as self-employed professionals. Popular psychological works fill the shelves of bookstores, and professional publications continue to expand exponentially, with more than 40,000 articles per year now noted in *Psychological Abstracts*. A diminishing minority of psychologists, probably fewer than 25%, hold university positions, and many of those have predominantly applied interests. The discipline is thus increasingly preoccupied with issues of professionalisation.<sup>9</sup>

By the end of the twentieth century, psychologists had succeeded in having licensing laws passed throughout the United States and Canada. Thereby they achieved something unique among the human sciences, though not for lack of trying by other disciplines, including history:

Carl Russell Fish of the University of Wisconsin thought there were two possible ways to deal with the problem. One, which he thought impractical, was ‘the recognition of the

<sup>9</sup> In this and what follows, the situation in the North America is taken as paradigmatic, but a similar development is evident in much of Europe. The rise of professional psychology in Nazi Germany is a particularly interesting example of professional opportunism and cultural complicity (see Geuter, 1993).

historical profession as a definite discipline... such as the medical profession, and its recognition as such by the licensing of historians who can show proper training.’ His preferred solution was a ‘statutory declaration that the truth (not opinion) in history is a public property and misstatements of the truth liable to grand jury indictment and prosecution by the proper authority’. (Novick, 1988, p. 194)

Since Adam Smith’s analysis of guilds and corporations, it has become a commonplace that professions are conspiracies against the public, or contrivances to extract excess profits. The best-known statement of this notion is George Bernard Shaw’s remark in the preface to his play *The Doctor’s Dilemma* (1906):

The only evidence that can decide a case of malpractice is expert evidence: that is, the evidence of other doctors; and every doctor will allow a colleague to decimate a whole countryside sooner than violate the bond of professional etiquette by giving him away.... The effect of this state of things is to make the medical profession a conspiracy to hide its own shortcomings. No doubt the same may be said of all professions. They are all conspiracies against the laity.

It is a beauty of these ‘conspiracies’ that the perpetrators are generally taken in by their own rhetoric. The view from within obscures the self-serving features of strategies of professionalisation such as licensing laws, accreditation of training programs and the establishment of ethical codes. The laity can be counted on to collude in this process by its indifference to the self-regulating autonomy of professional guilds, barring outrageous incidents of misconduct.<sup>10</sup>

In the light of these considerations, the contemporary rapprochement of psychology with religion is a marriage of considerable convenience.<sup>11</sup> The ambition of Western psychology to include every aspect of human behaviour and experience within its scope is coupled with the need of religion to maintain its relevance in an age of increasing skepticism and apostasy. The psychology

<sup>10</sup> Durkheim observes that ‘The distinctive feature of this kind of morals and what differentiates it from other branches of ethics, is the sort of unconcern with which the public consciousness regards it. There are no moral rules whose infringement, in general at least, is looked on with so much indulgence by public opinion. The transgressions which have only to do with the practice of the profession, come in merely for a rather vague censure outside the strictly professional field. They count as venial.... They cannot be of deep concern to the common consciousness precisely because they are not common to all members of the society and because, to put it in another way, they are rather outside the common consciousness. It is exactly because they govern functions not performed by everyone, that not everyone is able to have a sense of what these functions are, of what they ought to be, or of what special relations should exist between the individuals concerned with applying them. All this escapes public opinion in a greater or lesser degree or is at least partly outside its immediate sphere of action’ (Durkheim, 1957, p. 6).

<sup>11</sup> The history of this detente is documented by Robert Emmons and Raymond Paloutzian (see Fiske et al., 2003, pp. 377–402). The authors note that prior to 1982, current books on the psychology of religion were virtually non-existent. Now there are a dozen or more textbooks for this field, and chapters on psychology of religion are becoming commonplace in introductory psychology textbooks. In 1976, what had been an informal association of psychologists interested in religious issues became established as the American Psychological Association’s Division 36 (now under the rubric Psychology of Religion). This field was first deemed worthy of a review chapter in the Annual Review series in 1988. The 2003 article makes clear that the growth of the field will require increasingly frequent reviews. It also (p. 379) takes approving notice of the idea that the human being is by nature *homo religiosus*. More on this topic can be found in Crystal Park’s, 2003 APA Division 36 Presidential Address (see Park, 2003).

of religion serves the apologetic needs of theology by affirming the universality of religion and its contribution to human flourishing and mental health. At the same time seminary education increasingly employs faculty trained in psychology to teach pastoral psychology and pastoral counseling, which produces clergy who work with people in ways that blur the distinction between psychotherapy and spiritual direction.<sup>12</sup>

This polite collaboration between religion and psychology is the diplomatic face of competing claims to precedence as the central pillar of Western cosmography. For in spite of their attempts to achieve symbiosis, and their shared ethnocentrism, *homo religiosus* and *homo psychologicus* represent substantially different conceptions of human nature. Unfortunately, no alternative cosmographically powerful and inclusive view of human nature is as yet in play.

But even if psychology has not yet replaced religion as the central cosmographic formation of Western culture, it is making discernable progress. Ironically, religion is providing aid and comfort to its potential cultural successor. Yet it may be that religion is beginning to heed those of its thoughtful advocates who decry its collusion in cultural imperialism and urge a much more modest agenda.<sup>13</sup> Until psychology joins the other human sciences in giving up objectivist fantasies, it will continue to provide support and comfort to the status quo in the name of science. The fruitfulness of Dubuisson's ideas in the explication of this issue should be obvious.

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<sup>12</sup> There are currently more than 3000 members of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC), which operates a certification program for practitioners. It also accredits pastoral counseling centers and approves training programs. AAPC describes pastoral counseling as 'a unique form of psychotherapy which uses spiritual resources as well as psychological understanding for healing and growth'. The Association for Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE) certifies seminary faculty members to be CPE Supervisors, accredits CPE Centers, and forms partnerships with Theological schools and religious organizations to promote its activities.

<sup>13</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach must be reckoned the most influential agent provocateur for a humanistic interpretation of religion. In his powerful critique, anthropology replaces theology, and metaphysics is swallowed up by ethics and politics. In 1841 Feuerbach wrote that 'there is no other essence which man can think, dream of, imagine, feel, believe in, wish for, love and adore as the *absolute*, than the essence of human nature itself' (Feuerbach, 1989, p. 270). In his 1851 *Lectures on the Essence of Religion* Feuerbach writes that his purpose was, 'to demonstrate that the being which man, in religion and theology, sets up as a distinct being over and against himself, is his own essence. It was my purpose to demonstrate this so that man, who is always unconsciously governed and determined by his own essence alone, may in future consciously take his own human essence as the law and determining ground, the aim and measure, of his ethical and political life'. And 'The purpose of my lectures as of my books is to transform theologians into anthropologists, lovers of God into lovers of man, candidates for the next world into students of this world, religious and political flunkies of heavenly and earthly monarchs into free, self-reliant citizens of earth' (Feuerbach, 1967, pp. 22–3). On the contemporary scene, Episcopal Bishop John Spong is particularly visible (see Spong, 1988, 2001). His works spell out a non-theistic, historically and culturally relativised vision for the church. In this, he follows his mentor and friend, Anglican Bishop John A.T. Robinson, who achieved notoriety by making much the same case in his *Honest to God* (1963). Both Robinson and Spong appeal for support to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose martyrdom may save Bonhoeffer, sadly truncated movement towards a Christianity without religion from the anathemas pronounced against some of his admirers' ideas. Most internal critics of religion have laboured in relative obscurity within the academic world of historical and textual criticism. Those who seek to apply the insights of scholarship to ecclesial reform cannot expect to lead quiet lives.

## The resiliency of conceptual anachronisms: on knowing the limits of ‘the West’ and ‘religion’

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‘We are bound to employ novel terms to denote novel ideas’. (Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*)

In the second chapter of Anthony Grafton’s *Bring Out Your Dead* (2001), we learn of the case of Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457), the Italian humanist now remembered for his early enthusiasm for using the comparative and historical methods when studying documents from antiquity. According to Grafton, in studying the historicity of the *Donation of Constantine*—a legal text, in use since the Middle Ages, which was once believed to date from the fourth century, documenting

Constantine’s transfer of the governance of Italy and the Western Roman provinces to Pope Sylvester I (d. 335), in appreciation for his having been cured of his leprosy—Valla quoted lavishly from texts of several kinds, and proved that the document represented the Romans as using words that had not yet been coined to describe institutions that they would not have recognised. A text that contained these anachronisms could hardly have been written at the purported time of its origin. Valla’s demonstration threatened not only cherished beliefs but the political and economic powers of the popes. (Grafton, 2001, p. 52).

With typical irony, Grafton concludes his story of Valla by noting that ‘[s]ince he could not be convinced of his error, he was offered a good job in Rome.’ In the words of Michael Corleone, recalling one of the lessons his father taught him, ‘Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer’ (‘The Godfather’, Part II [1974]).<sup>14</sup>

Given the manner in which the *Donation* functioned as part of a system that—until scholars such as Valla got their hands on it, that is—legitimised papal control by seamlessly linking the present with what was then seen to be an authoritative past, it is understandable that the historicisation of such documents—that is, identifying the gaps between present and past—does not normally win scholars friends in high places. For example, consider that in its article on Valla, the entry in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* informs its readers that Valla was arrogant and quarrelsome (Montano, 2002, p. 377). In its very brief article on Valla, the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* concludes that although Valla certainly wrote a lot, he leaves behind a deplorable, or at least a regrettable, reputation (‘une fâcheuse réputation’) (Vacant, et al., 1908–1950, vol. 15, p. 2526). To be fair, these minimalisations are no more significant than the popular *Christian History*

<sup>14</sup> Of course this line is believed to come from Sun Tzu: ‘When we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near’. It should be noted that Valla was tried for heresy by the Curia at Naples, a trial cut short by King Alfonso’s intervention. That Alfonso, King of Aragon, Sicily, and Naples, was intent on extending his control over what were then papal lands, should not go unnoticed when trying to understand his interest in Valla’s case, whose study of the *Donation* was written under Alfonso’s protection. However, Valla eventually wrote *Apologia ad Eugenio IV*, in which he asked to be excused for his shortcomings, and under Pope Nicholas V was appointed as scriptor, and ended his days as the Canon of St John Lateran (the Pope’s own church).

magazine's sensationalist portrait of Valla in *Christian History* magazine as a proto-Reformer and hero who uncovered 'Church history's biggest hoax' by means of his quest for the 'authenticity' of historical documents (Prosser, 2001, p. 35).

The case of Valla, along with both the jabs at his character and praise concerning his role in blowing the lid off of the so-called Catholic hoax, nicely sets the table for current efforts to historicise the primary taxon of our field, the classification 'religion' itself—what I shall refer to as a 'resilient conceptual anachronism', adapting a phrase from H.A. Drake's impressive study of Constantine (see Drake, 2000, p. 17).<sup>15</sup> In the case of Valla we have an early modern episode in the clash between systems of authority, or what others might simply call 'regimes of truth' (see Lincoln, 1996, p. 227, Thesis 13), a clash that had something to do with contesting not only the perceived continuities between the present and the past, the local and the universal, but also the perceived continuities between the presumed inner essence of persons, texts and institutions on the one hand and their material worth, social status and thus continued legitimacy on the other. Moreover, the tale of Valla's attempt to contest the Rome of his day, by tackling the historicity and thus the authority of one of its central legal texts, only to end up acting as the Canon of the Pope's own church, provides a sobering example of what can happen when one tries to pull the rug out from under some cherished assumptions. For all too predictably, perhaps, '[e]ven those who set out with the most honorable of intentions,' concludes Grafton, 'could easily take wrong turnings in this rebarbative intellectual country' (Grafton, 2001, p. 53).

Although Grafton is writing about fifteenth-century Italy, he might have been writing about contemporary scholarship as well. For despite the critiques of a number of scholars—and Daniel Dubuisson's recently translated *The Western Construction of Religion* is one of the most thorough—'religion' has proved itself to be an example of one of those surprisingly resilient holdovers from a previous era. ('World religions' is one as well (see Masuzawa, 2005). Its resiliency, Dubuisson argues, is linked to the fact that, like 'meaning' and 'intention', it is a signifier that is believed by its users to refer not to anything in the observable world of mere appearances but instead either to unseen beings or to inner feelings, both of which are thought to exist wholly apart from the causality of the contingent world of mundane human existence. By definition, then, religion—both the signifier and that which it apparently signifies—defies definition. Yet it is precisely in this defiance that its legitimacy is supposedly found, inasmuch as one's inability to define it somehow validates the presumption that the term refers to some stable yet unseen world, either within the human heart or somewhere out there in the great beyond. Although it is hardly news to many scholars that all signifiers are empty, arbitrary signs that derive meaning from their circulation within a series of relationships with other equally empty signifiers, this playfulness of meaning-making apparently stops at the door of 'religion.'

Dubuisson therefore rightly characterises religion as an 'empty core' (p. 68) that is said to be in-step with an ever-changing reality. It therefore serves as a pretty handy rhetorical device to have in one's toolbox (whatever the toolbox), for it allows one to weather the kinds of storms regularly

<sup>15</sup> Drake uses this phrase to characterise the manner in which modern scholars of Constantine seem incapable of distinguishing their own viewpoint from that of people in ancient times, such as Jacob Burckhardt who, in writing his influential *Die Zeit Konstantins des Grossen* (published in 1853, and translated as *The Age of Constantine the Great*), assumed that 'the disdain for established institutions which he [Burckhardt] saw all around him prevailed in the fourth century as well' (Drake, 2000, p. 17).

thrown at us by history—for example, those inconvenient historical gaps that go by the names of chance, accident, forgetfulness and ambiguity. Consider a 2004 conference that I attended on to ‘Conflicts at the Border of Religions and the Secular,’<sup>16</sup> at which I drew attention to the manner in which writers—despite acknowledging that the term ‘religion’ has a specific yet sadly vague etymology—nonetheless assert that all human beings are religious.<sup>17</sup> This is none other than an instance of having one’s cake and eating it too, for the influence of history is acknowledged amidst holding onto a transcendent element that successfully rides the unpredictable waves of historical happenstance. Although the names change, Led Zeppelin was right: the song remains the same (see McCutcheon, 2005a). In the animated conversation that followed, a scholar asserted that the Arabic term *dīn* ‘means religion’—not just today, not just for contemporary, trans-national Arabic-language users thoroughly acquainted with the Euro-North American semantic world of ‘religion,’ but everywhere and always. Despite the fact that even for ancient Romans *religio* did not mean ‘religion’ as we have come to use it today, this scholar linked the term to its supposed subject much the same as the traditional essence/manifestation distinction was once wielded by phenomenologists, relying on the connector ‘means’ (as in ‘*dīn* means religion’) to be doing some pretty heavy metaphysical lifting.<sup>18</sup>

Despite this asserted correspondence between word and whomever, a rather different story is told by more historically nuanced studies such as Dubuisson’s, suggesting that what is at stake in this debate are, as in Valla’s day, different philosophies of history and thus systems of authority.<sup>19</sup> Case in point, consider the *Encyclopedia of Islam*’s persuasive case for understanding *dīn* to have developed from the notion of a debt that must be settled on a specific date, which in turn leads to such successive usages as: the idea of properly following an established custom of settling debts; the act of guiding one in a prescribed direction; the act of judging whether such a prescription has in fact been followed; and visiting retribution upon whomever has failed to follow the required path (see Lewis et al., 1965, pp. 293–6). As such, *yawm al-dīn*, or what we might translate as ‘Day of Judgment’, therefore comes to signify the day when Allah gives direction to all human beings. Much as with the relation between the geographic and prescriptive senses of such English words as ‘direction’ and ‘directive’, we see here a gradual mingling of social exchange with geographic movement and, eventually, with rules of propriety. Accordingly, *dīn* eventually moves from the more narrow sense of a debt to be discharged to a term that stands in for ‘the body of obligatory prescriptions to which one must submit’ (Lewis et al., 1965, p. 293).

Therefore it is rather misleading to suggest, as does one reference which agrees with the colleague cited, that *dīn* is ‘employed to mean a religion together with its practices in general’ (Glassé,

<sup>16</sup> The one-day conference, held on 23 April 2004, was sponsored by the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict, Arizona State University. My thanks to Linell Cady for the kind invitation to speak and to Carolyn Forbes for making the arrangements.

<sup>17</sup> For a recent example of this, see the textbook by Esposito et al., 2002, p. 50. The text appears unchanged in the 2006 edition. For a critique, see McCutcheon, 2005, pp. 40–1.

<sup>18</sup> Anyone who studied literature in high school, and who has since come to see the study of meaning and intentionality as a rather thorny problem, is more than familiar with the ahistorical work being done by this kind of meaning-talk, as in the proverbial question: ‘What did Shakespeare mean by...?’

<sup>19</sup> The following analysis of *dīn* derives from McCutcheon, 2005b, ch. 3.

1989, p. 99). Although italicising this intimation of intentionality may put too fine an edge on the issue, *dīn* is not ‘employed to mean a religion’ or even some sense of worship or religiosity—as if early Arabic writers were hunting for a local equivalent for what some of us now take to be the obviously universal concept that lurks deep within the word ‘religion’. Instead, as Dubuisson would observe, an ancient Arabic term is translated by contemporary English speakers intent on finding a universal phenomenon to confirm their particular way of organising the world.

If this etymology is persuasive, then there is much lost in the translation, for ‘the concept indicated by *dīn* does not exactly coincide with the ordinary concept of ‘religion’ precisely because of the semantic conception of the word’ (Lewis et al., 1965, p. 293). Just what is lost is significant. For instance, consider a recent translation of the Qur’an’s famous surā 5.3:

Today I have perfected your system of belief  
and bestowed My favours upon you in full,  
and have chosen submission (al-Islam) as the creed for you. (Ali, 1988, p. 98)

Or as phrased in a popular translation of the Qur’an:

The day I have perfected your religion for you and completed My favour to you. I have chosen Islam to be your faith. (Dawood, 1983, p. 387)

As Dubuisson might have predicted, both ‘system of belief’ and ‘creed’ in the first instance, and ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ in the second, are English renderings of *dīn*—translations that nicely lock the Arabic term within a discourse on inner sentiment and individual choice concerning a series of systematically related propositions—that is, a creed that expresses a deep faith with which one either does or does not agree. Nothing could be further from the complex social, transactional history of the ancient Arabic concept.

Although ‘[t]hese few remarks... perhaps oversimplify the difficulties encountered in translating the *dīn* of Kur’anic [sic] verses into Western languages’ (Lewis et al., 1965, p. 293–4), we see that a concept that once marked one’s changeable status within an historical world of differing ranks and of competing interests and entitlements has come to be sentimentalised as a matter of inner faith, belief, opinion and judgment, all of which are what we today commonly *mean* by ‘religion’. The history of *dīn* could therefore be the topic of a chapter in what we might call the modernist sentimentalisation of classical piety (for example, see Smith, 1998, p. 271). But this book can only be written by one who, along with writers such as Dubuisson, presumes that both words and concepts, both essences and manifestations, are all malleable historical products that change over time and place, in light of differing interests and preferences. This is clearly not the presumption of those historians of religion whom Dubuisson rightly, especially, in the first three chapters of his book: those who seek ‘to preserve an essential (timeless?) tie between the current, living acceptance of a word and its hypothetical first reception, raised to the status of original, founding datum’ (p. 22). For these scholars, ‘religion’, like the unsinkable Molly Brown, is a wonderfully resilient signifier that bounces back no matter what one throws at it. Yet like the wishful tale of Molly Brown taking charge of the Titanic’s famed life boat number six, ‘religion’ as we have it today may be nothing more or less than a product of the Victorian imagination.

It is just this presumption of universal signification—what Dubuisson calls the ‘learned confusion between etymological signification and essences’ (p. 22) as well as ‘the old Platonic nostalgia’ (p. 23)—that Dubuisson subjects to repeated and hard-hitting critique. Although ‘religion’ came

to prominence in modernity, during which time it came to be used to name an inner disposition rather than an outer social status, Dubuisson is particularly interested in that set of preconditions, which he traces to early Christianity, that helped to set the stage for the modern rise of ‘religion’. Using the writings of Paul as an early example, Dubuisson draws attention to the utility of ‘the circumcision of the heart’ rhetoric (Romans 2:29). This handy device helps us out with the pesky fact that the empirical thing we call the letter of the law sometimes (well, let’s be honest and just say most of the time) is incapable of matching, and therefore, furthering our context-specific, practical interests; it’s therefore pretty tempting to think up a spirit of the law (call it the law’s essence, its intention, or meaning, etc.).<sup>20</sup> This crafty piece of metaphysics nicely enables us to sidestep a basic tenet of historically based scholarship: that our rules, curiosities and tools are just that—ours; neither are we to expect them to be everyone else’s nor are we to assume that they will always be ours.

It is the mark of a certain kind of hubris when one fails to see that the utility of one’s tools—one’s conceptual categories—is linked to one’s questions and interests and not to their ability to fit reality in a seamless manner. With this hubris in mind—one that often attends our use of such signifiers as ‘religion’ and ‘human nature’—I cannot help but recall Clint Eastwood’s second ‘Dirty Harry’ film, ‘Magnum Force’ (1973), in which his corrupt superior, Lieutenant Briggs (played by Hal Holbrook), drives away from the crime scene at the film’s end, in Harry’s car, prepared to indict Harry for his own crimes. Unbeknownst to Briggs, of course, the bomb intended for Harry was still in the car and, in Eastwood’s typically detached style, Harry passively watches his Lieutenant’s car blow up as it drives away. ‘A man’s got to know his limitations’, Harry says dryly. Those who make their categories do far too much work fail to recognise the limitations of their tools.

Of course there are those like Dubuisson, who think that ‘religion’ can do no heavy lifting whatsoever and recommend that we throw it out altogether when doing anything but description. For these writers, there is likely no ‘sound principle of economy’ that, as Dubuisson suggests, ‘obliges us to use it [i.e., religion]’ (p. 102). Although the work of Tim Fitzgerald (2000, 2003a) certainly comes to mind as one of the better-known recent criticisms of ‘religion’, the work of Ronald Inden provides another example, one worth considering here because it may not be so familiar to general theorists as that of Fitzgerald.<sup>21</sup>

In an understatement worthy of Grafton, Inden, the author of the recently reissued *Imagining India* (2001), comments in a footnote to the introduction to his co-written book, *Querying the Medieval*, that the ‘various ideas of religion that scholars have used have a complicated and contested history, which we will bypass here’ (Inden, 2000, p. 22 n. 50). This bypass consists of dropping the term completely and replacing it with ‘way of life’. ‘Ritual’ goes out the door as well, being replaced by ‘life-transforming practices’. ‘Disciplinary order’ replaces such notions as ‘school’ and ‘sect’; and as for such favourites as ‘myth,’ ‘ideology’ and the much coveted ‘world

<sup>20</sup> See Arnal (in press) for a novel argument that draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s work on doxa to argue that, contrary to popular scholarly conceptions, Paul was not a critic of the Judaism of his day but was instead intent on making what Arnal terms ‘artificial Jews’—that is, in disengaging the preferential status of turn-of-the-era Jews from any biological or ethnic sense and instead redeploying this identity as an immaterial, or ‘spiritual’, identity, thereby extending this social identity, and the privileges that come with it, to a new group.

<sup>21</sup> For an example of how heated these debates can get, readers should to see Fitzgerald’s recent exchange with Ian Reader (see Fitzgerald, 2003b, 2004; Reader, 2004).



view,’ they all get replaced by such terms as ‘life-wish’, ‘royal wish’, ‘imperial wish’, ‘world wish’, ‘life-account’, ‘world account’ and ‘world vision’ (pp. 22–3)—all in an effort to indicate the often overlooked social sites and effects of these systems.

Although writers long accustomed to finding only ‘religion’ to have scholarly merit will likely see such terminological revisions to embody a ‘barbarism of remarkable infelicity’ (as Strenski [1998, p. 124] once described my own suggestion [McCutcheon, 2001, ch. 2] of redescribing ‘religion’ as ‘social formation’<sup>22</sup>), those who are suspicious of the manner in which ‘religion’ is used within social systems in which doctrine is presumed to take priority over social practice, belief over behaviour, private experience over public behaviour and authoritative tradition over the contingent present, will more than likely welcome the attempt to introduce a greater degree of theory into our technical terminology, as is evident in Dubuisson’s preferred redescription: ‘cosmographic formation’ (pp. 17, 69, 199ff.). But bringing social theory to bear on the texts, behaviours and self-reports of so-called religious people irritates quite a few of our peers—an irritation that stymies the creation of new knowledge, for the application of theories that are separate from the data inevitably leads to a systematic renaming of that which participants take for granted. As Cicero had his Epicurean philosopher, Velleius, tell his readers, ‘We are bound to employ novel terms to denote novel ideas, just as Epicurus himself employed the word *prolepsis* in a sense in which no one had ever used it before’. Accordingly, criticism of new words is simply criticism of new ideas and their new institutions by other means.

Dubuisson’s new technical term is connected to the idea that, instead of presuming ‘an objectively constant thing, a “religion”’ (as phrased by Inden [2000, p. 23]), we ought to take seriously that the study of human practices must consider the complex world of intention and structure, of agency and accident, where textual and doctrinal artifacts are tips of competitive social economies, each concocting a habitable semantic world. With this presumption in mind, Dubuisson’s work has much in common with that of Inden. Consider how Inden’s ‘disciplinary order’—much like cosmographic formation—makes eminent sense if we problematise the manner in which ‘school’ presumes a static homogeneity and uniform opinion. Instead, ‘disciplinary order’ draws attention to the many techniques that are up and running when any social world is perceived by its participants, or by scholars, as a consensual arrangement that endures over time. In the words of one of Inden’s reviewers, the things many of us call religions are therefore ‘significant competing articulations of knowledge about the world and proper action in it, with the power to fashion and order the lives of those who accept them’ (Davis, 2002, p. 1410). This definition is a useful one for Dubuisson’s notion of cosmographic formation.

The advantage of this theory-based approach, in the words of Davis once again, is that it ‘represents a significant and challenging revision’ to indigenous self-reports, in as much as it places those groups who are self-described religious elites ‘in their broader sphere of action [i.e., social world] and envision[s] them as seriously engaged in projects of constructing polities’ (Davis, 2002, p. 1410). It was just such a revision that got Valla into trouble back in fifteenth-century Italy! If we are willing to risk a little bit of trouble today, then we will see that there’s nothing particularly religious about so-called religious elites, for they, like the rest of us are working within

<sup>22</sup> For a reply to some of Strenski’s recent critiques of scholarship on ‘religion’, see McCutcheon 2004.

a competitive context and drawing on useful discursive conventions to fashion a socially habitable world that accords with their interests and expectations.

Swimming against the anti-historicist presumption that at the root of a text there lies some coherent and uniform meaning—a presumption that fueled the development of textual criticism and philosophy alike—Inden is equally suspicious of alternate approaches that emphasise context, such as class and gender, as the non-agential setting that determines what gets to count as meaningful. Instead, he attempts to steer a middle course between text and context, between agency and structure:

If we give up the notion of a universal truth grounded either in theology or scientific knowledge, if we no longer think of the state of affairs in the world as God’s plan or nature’s design, then the object of our inquiry shifts. We no longer concern ourselves with trying to know God or one of his reborn substitutes—human nature, reason, creative genius, modes of production, and the like—but turn to the causes of the human world; transitory human agents and their actions. Of special importance are the practices, persistent and consciously ordered activities, in which people engage because these, more than other activities, have to do with ordering the world and disrupting orders. (Inden, 2000, p. 4)

To those who welcome the appearance of Foucault in the department of religious studies, this all makes great sense. To those intent on doing God’s work or finding either the religion gene or the religious genius, these are dangerous words, for they throw the baby out with the bath water.

Keeping in mind Inden’s criticism of the kind of agency that haunts much work in our field, I realise that, despite my support for Dubuisson’s effort to start emptying this murky tub, I do not think that we have yet arrived at the point of putting forward a fully redescribed approach to the study of human behavior bereft of that pesky little conceptual anachronism from which this very journal gains its name and identity.<sup>23</sup> If all we are interested in is description, and descriptions of the self-reports of just those people who use a specific linguistic device to classify features of their lives, then by all means let’s keep ‘religion’. But our failure to elevate other indigenous concepts to the level of theory — people around the globe use a lot of local concepts to organise their lives, so where is the journal entitled *Mana*, *Dīn*, or *Bhakti*?<sup>24</sup> — suggests that those who are interested in doing something more than repeat self-reports that regularly distinguish religion from politics, for example, will have to go looking for other conceptual helpers to make sense of such talk. But the advantage of the helper Dubuisson offers—cosmographic formation—is not, as he argues, that it is ‘freed from all religious concern and all Western prejudice’ (p. 69). If, for the moment, I can be granted the right to talk about such an unwieldy thing

<sup>23</sup> Note that this journal’s redesigned cover, which presents a collection of what are presumably words in many languages for ‘religion’, provides surprisingly useful grist for Dubuisson’s critical mill.

<sup>24</sup> Despite the late Ninian Smart’s recommendation that we internationalise the field by using concepts such as *bhakti*, *li*, *mārga*, and *sharī’ah* in our scholarly studies (see Smart, 1994, pp. 902–3; McCutcheon, 1997, pp. 148–9), as Dubuisson notes, we would likely feel odd having other scholars arrive on our shores searching for the dharmic nature to our social institutions, informing us that, whether or not we knew it, we all had dharmic experiences. As he observes, ‘India has never been tempted or never been able to impose its concept of dharma on anthropological thought as an absolute system of reference. Nor did it ever claim that there was a universal essence of dharma present in all cultures, that every person carried within him or her a homo dharmicus’ (p. 101).

as ‘the West’, it occurs to me that the level of material affluence necessary to be able to sit back and discuss the systems that humans devise to classify and negotiate their worlds is something that only exists in certain historical periods and specific contemporary national regions. In other words, the very distinction between ‘participation in’ and ‘study of’—a distinction that forms the basis of our field—is itself evidence of a particular social world. Call it ‘the West’, if you like, but more accurately, it might be specified in terms of the economic privilege required for developing the appearance of intellectual distance and emotional detachment necessary for these scholarly pursuits.

Although I certainly prefer his theory-based term to ‘religion’, his preference for ‘cosmographic formation’ is therefore not based on the fact that it is either freed of Western prejudice or more intelligible. Instead, the term has utility for those of us working in the human sciences because its intelligibility is based on a social theory concerning the variety of ways in which people go about establishing and contesting their systems of habitability (recalling Inden as well as the work of William Paden [2000]). Although ‘religion’, along with its many uses, is certainly intelligible to vast numbers of people, it is precisely this intelligibility—the common, taken-for-grantedness of intertwined discourses (what Dubuisson likens to a hypertext [p. 32]) on invisible beings, morality, endtimes, origins, ritual specialists, textualisation, experience and the supposedly distinct nature of the institutions in which these discourses routinely circulate—that ought to occupy the attention of scholars. Just how is it that this grouping appears to so many person as intelligible? If these things, taken together, count as religion, then the problem of why it is that just these things are so commonly grouped together by certain societies, in clear distinction from other parts of their social worlds, will be answered only by a theory from outside the discourse on religion. Because religion cannot levitate itself, concepts such as cosmographic formation, relying on the muscle provided by a social theory that is interested in all instances of worldmaking activity, therefore steps in to do some of the work.

The point is that scholarly terms are not more intelligible than folk concepts. Despite my own difficulties with the rhetorics of good and evil that populate post 11 September 2001 international relations, I do not fail to recognise that these rhetorics are extremely useful for large numbers of persons who are trying to make sense of their worlds and who, in so doing, create worlds that are conducive to their interests. Instead, the advantage for scholars of using concepts such as cosmographic formation is that their tools are placed within a discourse other than the one that is under study, ensuring that the interests advanced by our work are ours and not those of the people we study.

Still, I admit to a nagging hunch that, despite replacing ‘religion’, the old philosophical idealism yet seeps back in to many of our efforts to rethink our field. For instance, *The Western Construction of Religion* is an intellectual history in which actual human beings do not appear all that often. It is a critique of ideas, of paradigms and of ‘intellectual hegemony’ (p. 94). It is not a book about economics and material interests. Examining ‘cosmographical schemas deeply buried in our ways of thinking’ (p. 94) therefore seems strangely reminiscent of the one-time emphasis on studying beliefs, ideas and doctrines, or on studying such observable things as behaviours and texts as if they were the merely outward expressions of inner sentiments, intentions or mentalities. But it is this kind of scholarship that Dubuisson criticises so well in the first half of the book. Had he prioritised the study of the structures and institutions that make ideas possible, rather than the study of ideas that animate institutions, had his critique of ‘religion’ not been premised on the historic influence of specifically

Christian thinkers,<sup>25</sup> perhaps he would have arrived at different conclusions. Instead of concluding that ‘the West’ espouse[s a] bad epistemology ... that in the last analysis simply does not work’ (pp. 94–5), he might have seen that our continued success at thinking this thing that so many of us know as ‘the West’, or the ease with which we today look back on two millennia and pick out the specifically ‘early Christian’ writers from among a host of other people in antiquity, is all evidence of the success of the institutions represented by this epistemology. If, along with Dubuisson, we say that the West created religion and that ‘the concept of religion eventually came to be the core of the Western world-view’ (p. 94), then we might have to conclude that it works extremely well, for it is only by using ‘the West’ that a book such as this can be written, so central to its thesis is a posited direct link between a turn-of-the-era Mediterranean text—the letters of Paul—and current European and North American scholarship. Therefore Dubuisson’s critique of the manner in which ‘the West continuously speaks of itself to itself, even when it speaks of others’ might, ironically, be but one more piece of evidence concerning just how well these mechanisms continue to work. To phrase it another way, it may not stem from ‘intellectual laziness’ (pp. 102, 107) or even from the inevitable inertia that attends all social existence.<sup>26</sup> Instead, it may be because these anachronisms work so well in helping a host of agents to address the inevitable gaps of historical existence, thereby furthering their various interests. Laziness may be better redescribed as an efficacious social strategy.

As well, I admit to having some ambivalence towards Dubuisson’s critique of idealist notions of subjectivity (see pp. 107–12). For despite my enthusiasm for the manner in which he argues that the increasing preoccupation of modernity with ‘the torments of the interior life’ (p. 107), as evidenced by the rise of discourses on faith and experience, can be linked to the rise and dominance of mass movements (see Perkins, 1995), I am left slightly unsatisfied with the thoroughness of this critique. Case in point: although it may seem a quibble, consider Dubuisson’s use of Saint Paul.<sup>27</sup> Concerning the Stoic ideal of a universal civilisation, we read: ‘Here one cannot but recall Saint Paul’s bold, inspired decision to turn away from the Jewish world (which he saw as too sectarian and ungrateful) evangelise the heathen, and finally, go to Rome, the heart of the pagan empire’ (p. 103). Citing Acts 13:46–49, which details the divine mandate for Paul to establish a mission to the Gentiles, Dubuisson elaborates on what he describes as ‘Saint Paul’s choice’: ‘Without doubt this decision, which inaugurated what in its further propagation would be transformed into a veritable world conquest, must be seen as one of the founding acts of the West, one of those of which we can say with certainty that it influenced the fate of humanity’ (p. 103).

<sup>25</sup> That is, there is the nagging problem of writers who throw out ‘religion’ but end up studying Christians, Muslims, Hindus, etc.—in a word, the things we already seem to know to be religions.

<sup>26</sup> As my colleague Tim Murphy once phrased it, plain old inertia might explain more than we realise. The prominence of ‘world religions’ as a concept, despite some devastating recent critiques, provides one possible example. Attending the American Academy of Religion’s 2006 Southeastern Commission on the Study of Religion’s regional meeting in Atlanta (March 10–12), it was as if no one had ever offered a critique of ‘religion’.

<sup>27</sup> As an aside, let me say that I am curious as to why Paul is always referred to by Dubuisson as ‘Saint Paul’, for to my mind the theological honorific common in French discourse places this figure within a specific setting—one that Dubuisson works to historicise throughout the book. Unless, of course, his intention is merely to refer to this figure in a descriptively accurate manner, at least as particular contemporary Christian insiders might. However, if this were the case, then would he also follow any reference to Mohammad with ‘peace be on him’?

My difficulty with this passage concerns the manner in which social change is presumed uniformly to develop from the choices of individual social actors—choices seamlessly communicated to us by means of texts that later generations of readers can employ to understand the intentions of their predecessors. This view of social change—what we once might have termed a great man view of history—seems at odds with much of Dubuisson’s own critique. In fact, a view of history more in keeping with his useful analysis of representation—one in which we presume from the outset that ‘the world is mute about itself’ (p. 127)—would find the signifier ‘Saint Paul,’ along with such things as ‘the Book of Acts’ and the ‘Pauline Epistles,’ to be discursive constructs that resulted from the social activities and collective interests of subsequent generations working with a host of raw materials from various of their many pasts. For instance, many scholars of Christian origins are rather suspicious of treating Luke/Acts as a resource for understanding the earliest Jesus movements, given both the suspiciously uniform portrait it offers of their early intentions and effects as well as the later period to which it can be dated. I use the adjectives ‘social’ and ‘collective’ to underscore that the institutions that enable artifacts from prior social worlds to be preserved, collected, archived and continually reinterpreted and applied to new and previously unforeseen situations are not in fact coterminous with the interests of any one agent; they are, instead, the non-intentional results from the commingling of large numbers of intentional actors, collaborating, disagreeing, forming and undermining coalitions and remaining silent at opportune times.<sup>28</sup>

If this view of history informed our reading of ‘the past’, then the Book of Acts does not necessarily tell us anything about an intentional agent’s choices, and the present is not the direct result of any of these choices. In addition, adopting this view of history as a continual, hindsight concoction makes it increasingly difficult to speak of ‘the West’ as a coherent historical formation, for if the world is mute about itself, then so too are those things we call civilisations, making all claims about ‘the West’ or ‘the Western mind’ (p. 128), let alone claims concerning their originary point and their lines of historical development, techniques that a specific ‘we’ in the present use to organise the unwieldy world of competing interests and sensations. Perhaps the discourse on ‘the West’ is part of our cosmographic formation! If so, then much of what Dubuisson writes of the strategic uses for ‘religion’ is equally applicable to our own work as scholars. Like the essentialists who yet cling to ‘experience’, so the individual, intentional subject we find at places in his text, seems yet to presume the existence of an ‘unchanging transcendence’ (pp. 130–1). Although his notion of transcendence is hardly the ‘benevolent divine providence intervening in the universe’ (p. 131) that we find in the work of many other scholars of religion, it nonetheless shares in a number of the assumptions that seem to drive those whom Dubuisson criticises so well. If Dubuisson is correct, if all human beings set about the work of building a comprehensive world by drawing on a similar set of techniques, then it should be no surprise to find ourselves in our own data set. Despite some authors’ best intentions, their historicisations of the category religion, along with their criticisms of the interrelated faith/institution, apolitical/political and private/public classifications, risk reproducing the very conditions they thought they were criticising. Grafton phrases it, ‘When any discipline takes a new shape, antitraditionalist rhetoric becomes the standard mode of framing

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<sup>28</sup> This view of archiving the past is influenced by Trouillot, 1995. My thanks to Willi Braun for bringing this book to my attention.

one's work as virtuous and innovative, and several Hindenburgs are produced for every Spirit of St Louis' (Grafton, 2001, p. 75).

If my assessment is persuasive, then we must be on the lookout for critiques of 'religion' that, knowingly or not, re-admit through the side door that which was kicked out by the front. Case in point: Jeremy Carrette and Richard King's recent *Selling Spirituality*. While both authors are known for their suspicion of what they characterise as the imperial and oppressive foundations of the imported category religion (see King, 1999), their current work nonetheless advocates for an 'engaged spirituality', lamenting the commodification of what they characterise as 'the world's religious traditions [which] provide the richest intellectual examples we have of humanity's collective effort to make sense of life, community, and ethics' (Carrette and King, 2005, p. 182). Or consider Aaron Ketchell's analysis of tourist attractions in the Ozarks region of Missouri (see Peterson and Walhof, 2001, pp. 156–75). Despite appearing in a book entitled *The Invention of Religion*—a book in which contributors seek to historicise the category religion—Ketchell's chapter seems only to criticise the manner in which such prior, internal things as 'pious impulses' and 'religious sentiments' are commonly manifested in tacky, popular culture. Or perhaps we could even cite David Chidester, whose latest collection of essays on religion and American popular culture, *Authentic Fakes* (2005), aims to recover this thing he calls 'human authenticity'. Despite being known for his earlier historical work on the colonial impact of early comparative religion in Southern Africa (see Chidester, 1996), his effort to contextualise religion nonetheless uncovers the pan-human kernel that might otherwise go unnoticed. In the opening to his new book he writes:

At work and at play, human authenticity is at stake in American religion and popular culture. Religion is the real thing but, as we already know from the world of advertising, Coca-Cola is also the real thing. Baseball, rock 'n' roll, McDonald's and Disney, Tupperware and Nike, along with all the other permutations of the popular, have artificially produced a real world. Religion, mediated through popular culture as ordinary leisure and entertainment but also as human possibility and experimentation, has appeared in the traces of transcendence, the sacred, and the ultimate in these cultural formations. (Chidester, 2005, pp. 9–10)

Apparently, there is a really real and an artificial, and the artificial is capable of mediating the real, thereby providing us with glimpses of the ultimate in the most unlikely of places, such as food storage systems. How this differs from van der Leeuw's work on manifestations of the religion or Eliade's work on hierophanies popping up in unexpected sites, I am not sure.

All of which brings to mind Grafton's description of Pope Sixtus V's (1521–1590) efforts to resurrect the relics of Egypt—architectural anachronisms in desperate need of retooling if they were to prove of use in their transplanted setting in the piazza out front of the Vatican. 'In elaborate ceremonies', writes Grafton, 'the obelisk was exorcised and rededicated to the service of the true God; a cross was set on its top, replacing the ball which had once been thought to contain the ashes of Caesar Augustus' (Grafton, 2001, p. 59). With Sixtus V's exorcisms in mind, we find an important lesson that can be applied to our efforts to exorcise the imperialism of 'religion'. By means of our scholarly ceremonials, we sometimes replace a ball said to contain one hero's ashes—studies intent on divining the deeply held religious experience—with a cross thought to have carried another's corpse—studies that, instead, work to uncover the enduring human spirit or the deep ideas that drive history. As the saying goes, the more things change ...

Despite not yet being the retooled field's equivalent to the Spirit of St Louis that touched down at La Bourget Field, just outside Paris, in 1927, unlike many other critiques of 'religion' Dubuisson's newly translated book is certainly no Hindenburg either. I therefore fear that some of my criticisms may be mistaken by the hasty reader for something other than disagreements between colleagues with shared interests. For those willing to take seriously that human behaviour, and its scholarship, are all historical products of a happenstance world of competing agents, *The Western Construction of Religion* points them in the right direction by helping to lay to rest some nagging assumptions and troublesome categories. Its shortcomings simply make all the more evident the importance of its thesis concerning the tenacious hold that these ideas have had on our minds, not to mention the grip these institutions have had on our bodies.

## Response

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My primary concern is that we remove our metaphysical presuppositions from the history of religions, which should be an exclusively historical and anthropological discipline. Accepting references to any kind of transcendent principle would call into question the place of the discipline among the human and social sciences. Those who wish to salvage the notion of 'religion' at any price do so not for scientific reasons but with the hope of surreptitiously reintroducing 'metaphysical' considerations borrowed generally from Christian 'religions' themselves. 'Religions' are the 'objects' that we must analyse, not the 'tools' that we must use to understand this human phenomenon.

No concept that is so determined by its exclusively Christian and Western history can act as a universal paradigm in the study of humanity. Yet the concept of 'religion' is so intimately linked to 'our' history and culture that it cannot be redefined in any fundamentally different sense. 'The Western religious world'—this expression seems to me preferable to the word 'religion' alone—has had a single history and polemical structure. Moreover, the adversaries provoked by religion—that is to say, by the complex schema associated with the term 'religion' (p. 127)—always define themselves in relation to it. In this sense, Western atheism is a creation peculiar to our culture.

My primary focus is the history of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century History of Religions and the schemata that it established. The field borrowed most of its categories and favourite topics from the Christian cultural tradition, reflecting the tremendous success of 'Christian culture' in the West and therefore of the word 'religion'. But of course we must not forget that for centuries the West imposed (often by force!) its models and categories on societies and cultures that it first subjugated and then 'occupied' (see King, 1999; Fitzgerald, 2000). I have simply questioned the idea that humanity is 'naturally' religious, the way phenomenologists and Catholic theologians assert. This idea of an innate religious vocation in humanity was borrowed at first from the Christian theology of the Fathers, and it appears in the work of such thinkers as Calvin,

Schleiermacher, Kant, Lafiteau, Renan, Jung and Durkheim. Eliade then made it the fundamental principle of his vision of humanity. But this notion is an ethnocentric fantasy. The new anthropology that we try to define must build on other foundations than those that have served our indigenous, that is to say Christian, anthropology. Our intellectual vocabulary and our ‘way of thinking’ had been also preceded by centuries of Christian culture! It is therefore difficult to escape these influences.

That is why I propose the heuristic concept of ‘cosmographic formations’ to represent all the constructions—‘religious’, ‘symbolic’, ‘cultural’, ‘cosmological’—with which humans construct their worlds, that is to say the worlds as corresponding to human aspirations and requirements. These worlds are presented to us only in the light of our condition as human beings. They are real creations and not abstract mental representations. As humans, we really do construct our own worlds. But we can only discover the meaning of these worlds through the texts—political, juridical, ideological, philosophical, ‘religious’, literary, mythical—that represent and justify them.

### Response to Steven Engler

Engler’s paraphrase of my argument is as faithful as it is excellent. But his critique misreads me at several points:

I write of the human sciences, especially the History of Religions, not of chemistry or nuclear physics. The human sciences, as soon as they move beyond erudite monographs, draw on the biases or presuppositions of the cultures under study. That is, insofar as they speak in general about ‘humanity’, ‘history’, ‘cultures’, or ‘religions’, they act like philosophical systems. At this level it is not always easy to differentiate between science and philosophy, as I try to show in the case of Lévi-Strauss (see [Dubuisson, 2006](#)). The ‘human sciences’ have no raw data. They are interested primarily in the symbolic, cultural and linguistic productions that aim at transforming ‘raw data’ into cosmographic facts.

The foundational theories of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Lévi-Strauss, Weber and Freud are constructed on *a priori* philosophical or metaphysical bases that form a consistent *Weltanschauung* but that introduce no strictly scientific criteria. Their presuppositions are indemonstrable! It is for this reason that I state that ‘people do not live the THE world, ... since each human group lives only in *its* world’ (p. 204). Here I refer to cosmographic formations, and I mean simply that George W. Bush, for instance, does not see a world the characteristics of which would be the same for all people; rather ‘his’ world is shaped by firm beliefs, creeds, prejudices and ideas that form a ‘particular world’. Clearly, and despite any appearances to the contrary, George W. Bush and Michael Moore do not live in the same world!

In my view there are no ‘raw materials’ for the history of religions, for all relevant ‘objects’ have been subjected to a long cultural elaboration. The expression ‘raw materials’ appeals to an epistemology dominated by naïve positivism. Yet I am not a ‘relativist’ like Boas and Geertz. I believe that there are anthropological universals—for example, ‘symbolic function’—but I do not believe that these universals are of a ‘religious’ nature. It is the monumental mistake of many historians of religion to posit ‘religious’ universals. From an anthropological point of view the claim has little significance. It stems from a prejudice invented by the Church Fathers



(see, for instance, Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, II.6.11<sup>29</sup>) and taken up by Christian tradition.

I am well aware that it is impossible to step outside of language, a paradox that I have examined in detail, drawing on Wittgenstein and others (see Dubuisson, 1996). But this paradox should not lead us to throw the baby out with the bath water that is to posit an absolute relativism that would paralyse science and its critical capabilities, which are so necessary today. We must proceed by comparison, working with the largest and most complexly structured groups as is possible. In this manner we can in part escape the limits imposed by our submersion within a particular language.

For example, it is entirely possible to ‘translate the body’. We do so by comparing the cultural processes—education, discipline, initiation—through which bodies, at first biologically identical, are transformed into ‘Christian’, ‘Taoist’, ‘communist’ or ‘gnostic’ bodies. In other words, biological bodies conform to cultural models represented in texts that describe different cosmographic formations. Any Christian body remains real even if it has been shaped by Christian education.

That is why I disagree with Engler’s claim that in my view ‘the only agency is that of discursive construction’. I wrote: ‘Each cosmographic formation (re)creates the world and thereby transfigures it’ (p. 204). And this world is real even if only our texts, our discursive creations, are capable of providing it with an origin, a meaning, a destiny or a unity. Action, reality and language are absolutely complementary, as is the case with rituals. I insist, it is true, on ‘discursive construction’ because discourse has the final say in determining the meaning of the ‘practical work of religion’. Without tales, without myths, without treaties, without commentaries (learned or traditional), we would be altogether unable to determine the value of rituals and institutions. (It is also true that Malinowski’s functionalism is hardly popular in France). Words always have the last word! That is why I grant them such importance. Besides, all cultures that we study—generally thanks to their texts—are very, very talkative. Moreover, we are unable to generate serious hypotheses concerning mute cultures of prehistory.

I end with a question, one that I would also pose to Robert Segal: what definition, however heuristic, of ‘religion’ would Engler himself put forward? It is all too easy to suggest that this notion is necessary or irreplaceable when one does not specify what it is. In the spirit of Hans Penner, one might say, ‘a science of religion based upon a mystery remains a mysterious science’.

## Response to Aaron Hughes

In response to comments by Engler and Hughes regarding the ‘French’ nature of my book, it is true that my book was initially intended for a French audience. As a result, it was not oriented to debates that have been taking place for some years in the United States. It goes without saying that I would add today an additional chapter dedicated to these current questions. It is also true that the History of Religions in France and in the U.S. too often ignore each other and do not deal with precisely the same subjects. It is therefore difficult to address oneself at the same time to both publics. This intriguing difference deserves to be studied closely.

<sup>29</sup> ‘There is a something noble and salutary that indicates the name and being of God: for all men had taken this for granted in their common reasonings, since the Creator of all things had implanted this conviction by innate ideas in every rational and intelligent soul’. ([http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eusebius\\_pe\\_02\\_book2.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eusebius_pe_02_book2.htm)).

Responding directly to Hughes, I must point out that the important works by Lincoln, McCutcheon, Segal and Wasserstrom ‘on the same topic’ were published after or at the same time as, not before, the French version of my book (*L’Occident et la Religion*, 1998). Furthermore, my first analyses of the work of Eliade (*Mythologies du XXe siècle*, 1993) were published in an epoch when majority of the American specialists, with the notable exceptions of John Saliba and Ivan Strenski, ignored the extent to which this work drew on gnostic, esoteric (Guénon, Evola, Coomaraswamy), pagan and anti-Semitic themes, these last borrowed by the Romanian Fascism of the Thirties.

In this context it is wholly unacceptable to put Heidegger, Dumézil and Eliade in the same Fascist ‘bag’. Dumézil was excluded from teaching by the Fascist regime of Vichy because he had been a Freemason! By contrast, Eliade’s support of the Romanian Fascist movement from 1933 till 1945 was immensely fuller than was Heidegger’s support of the Nazi movement. It suffices to read A. Laignel-Lavastine (2002) to gauge the extent of Eliade’s participation and hate: ‘Better a German protectorate than a Romania invaded yet again by Yids’ (M. Sebastian, *Journal*, 20 September 1939).

The influence of Lucretius on my formation was deeper and more decisive than that of Heidegger, whom, I have yet to read without irritation. In effect, contemporary French thought has been literally polluted by his heavy and indigestible German metaphysics.

In sum, I argue consistently against the concept ‘religion’, which is ridden with biases and pre-suppositions. Some, like Hughes, do not wish to change this reassuring intellectual skyline that so perfectly corresponds to our intellectual habits and incorrigible prejudices. The role of science is not to ‘comfort’ us or to maintain our phantasms. Rather, science must remain ‘critical’, in the noblest sense of the term, aiming to show us things ‘as they are’, not ‘as we think they are’ or ‘as we would like them to be’.

### **Response to Robert Segal**

Generally speaking, Segal simplifies my ideas, giving them a narrow and rigid interpretation. In particular, Segal does not mention my notions of ‘general topics’, ‘exemplary propositions’ and ‘major paradigm’ that are fundamental to my argument (see pp. 116–44). We must begin by discussing these essential notions!

I noted, in particular, that ‘The ancient, rich, structured topics associated with the term ‘religion,’ defines, or rather underpins, a huge corpus of knowledge, which in turn permits the investigation of every domain to which we attach (at times with considerable trouble and uncertainty) the label ‘religious’ (p. 127). It goes without saying that, within this category, ‘exemplary propositions’ are developed that one finds in no other culture (see p. 140). I specified further that ‘When we attempt to draw up an inventory of the topics around which the field of the history of religions has been organized (within the broader context of Western intellectual history), it soon becomes evident that this catalog ought to be headed by a certain number of exemplary or paradigmatic oppositions’ (for example, theists/atheists; Providentialists/antiprovidentialists) (p. 129). These exemplary, centuries-old oppositions form in turn a ‘major paradigm’ within the intellectual history of the West. Recall that, in French, a ‘dominant’ or even ‘hegemonic’ point of view is not necessarily the unique or sole point of view. In addition, the presence of a ‘model’ does not imply an implacable and rigid pressure on phenomena. Finally, I noted repeatedly in my book that the Western idea of religion has taken shape through countless controversies and conflicts.

Re Segal's point 1): In reality, the differences among rival conceptions are less significant than their fundamental agreement that humanity is 'religious' by nature and hence that religions are everywhere! This is so true that nineteenth-century scholars in particular, never thought of calling into question this obvious prejudice.

Re Segal's point 2): The History of religions has not 'secularised' or 'desacralised' all of its conceptual instruments. And if so-called 'religious' concepts and phenomena are objects to be studied, they cannot be at the same time instruments serving to orient these studies. They cannot be both hammer and nail!

Re Segal's point 4): The theme of difference has unquestionably been important. Yet many have tried to overcome this difference to find some 'first principle' underlying all religions. And this first principle was often imagined as a manifestation of transcendence. After all, how does Segal explain the colossal success of Eliade's work in the United States and around the world when it is no more than a tissue of fabrications? More to the point, the 'scientific' categories intended to represent and comprehend so-called 'religious' phenomena generally drew inspiration from those predominant in the Christian West. I wholly agree with Segal's comments on William Robertson Smith. But Smith, as Segal well knows, was a brilliant exception: it was certainly not his perspective that dominated the nineteenth-century history of religions. Not to mention that he himself met some few problems during the course of his career.

Re Segal's point 8): This critical interplay of 'similarity' and 'difference' is both on and off track. It has been clear since Sextus Empiricus that such sophisms are incontestable when framed in this sort of paradoxical and abstract form. Only specific cases would allow us to distinguish 'misleading likenesses' from 'significant differences'. After all, different things can perform equivalent functions, and similar things can perform distinct ones.

Re Segal's point 12): I agree in principle with the reductionist project, but it remains too rooted in religion as *explanandum*. 'Phenomenologists' and theologians will argue that the kind of 'functionalist' view that Segal points to does not give an account of the irreducible peculiarity of religious facts and experience. That is why it seems preferable to say that 'non-religious' explanations are based in facts that are also 'non-religious'. In this way 'religion' becomes a superfluous category.

### Response to Ann Taves

The things that Westerners call 'religions' fill an architectonic function, as do all other cosmographic formations. We can easily imagine materialist, atheist or agnostic 'cosmographic formations'—for example, Taoism, ancient Buddhism, Epicureanism and twentieth-century Russian communism. The concept of cosmographic formations subsumes that of 'religion'. It is more global, more fundamental and more universal. It is also obvious that 'Christian religion' filled this cosmographic function in Western culture for many centuries.

However, the concept of cosmographic formations has a purely heuristic value: 'it shows not how some object is constituted, but how, in its light, we must investigate the nature and relations of the objects of experience in general' (Kant, 1971, p. 468). Ultimately, this concept could be replaced by some other, because it is not at all concerned with substituting a new cosmology for those under examination. Its ultimate ambition is—and is only—a methodological one; and it reveals its own 'system' progressively, implied by the rules followed in the comparative analysis of other systems. It is a method—indifferent to metaphysics, yet concerned with clarifying any

metaphysical phenomena, complex or fragmented, that it may encounter in the course of its study. (Dubuisson, 2006, Introduction)

It goes without saying, of course, that a purely heuristic concept need not be hypostasised in the form of timeless essence (*eidos*). In this sense the notions of ‘religion’ and ‘cosmographic formation’ occupy distinct epistemological levels. The one claims a metaphysical value, where the other aims only to help us to think a little better!

Under these precise epistemological conditions, we can grant the concept of cosmographic formations an anthropological role, since we find its expressions in all cultures. But it is not a reflection of our ‘imperialist’ ambitions or ethnocentric fantasies. On the contrary, I doubt that any indigenous Western category—for example, ‘religion’—could play the same role. In effect, if a notion is historically determined by peculiar events and unpredictable accidents, it cannot serve as a universal and timeless category. It is defined by its own history and has no existence apart from the contingencies that gave rise to it. Moreover, how can an ancient theological concept carry out a scientific function today? Does astrophysics use the principles of medieval astrology? Similarly, would we Westerners accept the idea that ‘dharma’ or ‘Tao’ could serve as an anthropological structure defining us intrinsically and fundamentally? Yet we make bold with our idea of ‘religion’, persuaded that our indigenous anthropology is the ideal model of any anthropology. Could there be anything more conceited and blindly self important?

To those who, like Taves, wish to preserve the idea of religion, persuaded that it can serve as a scientific instrument, I take the liberty of asking: Where are the borders of religion? By what principles are these borders defined? What lies beyond—mythology, wizardry, astrology? What elements—creed, activities, institutions, objects—are indispensable to any ‘religion’? Is a ‘religion’ a system, a structure, a collection, an assemblage or a composition? Has it one immutable core or several? What is it, or what are they? What decisive authority—sociological, psychological, political or metaphysical—is empowered to explain ‘religious’ phenomena? Should the study of ‘religious’ phenomena be analytical, structural, functional or hermeneutic?

Taves’ proposal that ‘a stipulated focus on occasions when people address themselves to imaginary beings would allow us to focus on processes of category formation (of religion, magic, divination, etc.) that are typically suppressed when we begin with a definition of religion’ does not seem to me wholly decisive, because the semio-linguistic mechanisms discovered in these processes would identify no specifically ‘religious’ character (see Dubuisson, 1994). Besides, categories such as ‘sorcery’ and ‘religion’—and the opposition under which they are subsumed—are typically Christian categories, invented by the Church Fathers in their polemics with the pagans. They haven’t the slightest scientific value.

### Response to Wilhelm Dupré

Wilhelm Dupré’s summary of my work is one of the most perceptive and faithful that I have had opportunity to read. Responding to some of his objections will allow me to clarify certain aspects of my thought and method.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Regarding foreign gods, I simply wished to signal that, for many, the existence of their gods did not necessarily mean the non-existence of others! In other words, the opposition between ‘the’ true religion of the one true God and ‘wrong’ religions is a typically Christian, and formidably orthodox, idea.

I am, like Dupré, perfectly aware of the need to differentiate scientific nomenclature from ordinary language. Scientific language has analytic and critical capacities that ordinary language will never have. ‘Notions and ideas with which people live’ are dedicated to justifying, conceptualising and preserving their world. Hence their main function is at a cosmographic level. For example, where Christian ideas on religion aim to construct Christians and a Christian world, scientific ideas regarding the Christian religion, or religion in general, have no such need. On the contrary, scientific ideas can conceptualise the origin of others in the light of historical, philological and anthropological knowledge.

This is why it seems to me aberrant to attempt, as some do, ‘to think religion(s) with the words invented by religion’ (p. 102). Rather, we must transform what has wrongly become an ‘instrument of knowledge’ into merely an ‘object of knowledge’. The word ‘religion’ is an indigenous cultural fact to be studied as such, not a tool for the analysis of cultural facts, *a fortiori* those of other cultures.

Nor do I believe that ‘the meaning of religion as a cultural reality... has nevertheless a life of its own’, however this ‘life of its own’ is conceived. The word ‘religion’ and all that it denotes is not grounded on an immutable essence, on some timeless category, or on any other kind of autonomous facts independent of any historical determination. The ‘transcendental illusion’ (Kant) consists here in allocating to the notion of religion those qualities that invoke religious myths as their preferred object. This notion depends on a series of peculiar historical situations, themselves determined by a web of equally particular reasons and conditions. We do not hesitate to proclaim our indigenous notions as universally valid. Yet we would no doubt be loath to accept Chinese or Inca notions as defining the core of humanity, that is, of ourselves!

This is why I reject the possibility of altering or improving the definition of word ‘religion’ to make it more appropriate for proper anthropological study. This notion is so profoundly anchored in our culture that we will never be able to use it with a fundamentally different or novel conception, not to mention the fact that many would oppose this possibility as sacrilege. It seems preferable in every respect to work with new tools, ones less weighed down and clogged up by a long ideological history. To this end I have offered the more neutral concept of ‘cosmographic formation’.

The ideas of ‘God’ and ‘Being’ have long been inherent in our European intellectual culture, and religion and metaphysics often find common cause on these grounds. Nevertheless, I do not believe that ‘the light of Being’ can shed any light on ‘the concept of religion and the idea of studying other traditions’. First, the notion of ‘Being’ is too closely linked to our specific philosophical history to have any transhistorical value. Once again, the mere fact that one of our cultural creations happens to claim universal and timeless status does not make it so. Second, it strikes me as injudicious to lump together an idiosyncrasy of philosophical and pagan origins with one of Christian origins. Two errors are generally twice as bad and do not necessarily cancel each other out. Finally, and most especially, invoking some form of transcendence in order to explain facts that reveal no more than immanent history and anthropology just creates confusion and the potential for regression to pre-scientific forms of thought.

Allow me to more precisely differentiate ‘culture’, ‘religion’ and ‘cosmographic formation’. Clearly, Christianity was for centuries the predominant cosmographic formation in the West. Yet we can conceive of others that would be in no way ‘religious’. Confucianism, communism, Stoicism and in my opinion the wisdom of Buddha are not ‘religions’ in the Western sense of the word. They are cosmographic formations (see Dubuisson, 2004). These formations share something more

universal and essential than that which word ‘religion’ more narrowly evokes. I am tempted to insist that all cultures are cosmographic formations, but only on condition that they are seen as more than a simple juxtaposition of knowledge, beliefs, uses, norms and values (in the manner of E.B. Tylor). Cultures are a collective and dynamic process that result in the building of the consistent and sensible world and the definition of a specifically situated way of life. The ‘human condition’, such as it is, is the essential component of cosmographic formations.

Dropping the word ‘religion’ is not equivalent to parricide or sacrilege. Conducting research using more appropriate anthropological concepts would result in considerable heuristic gains. And it would incidentally unmask ‘religionists’ who, working under the flag of History of Religions, act as shameless apologists for some sort of ecumenism.

### **Response to Forrest L. Vance**

I would like to take advantage of Forrest Vance’s remarkable text in order to examine, from a ‘psychological angle’, the close relation that I postulate between ‘culture’ and ‘cosmographic formation’. These concepts address a double problem: on the one hand the lasting construction of the ‘self’, of the personality; on the other hand the life that each self confronts. However, the resolution of this double problem is no way ‘religious’. It reaches its end by other means.<sup>31</sup>

Misfortune, death, the meaning of life, the fragility of the self, incurable pain, evils, disasters and many other equally objective facts raise key questions, and cultures answer these in terms that transcend speculation and naïve consolation. Cultures seek first to shape and educate us and to prepare us to confront these tests. Here they reveal in these moments their truest vocation.

Cultures answer to other necessities and ends than those that psychology and sociology typically address. These disciplines have never yet managed to explain existence, as though cultures lie outside their various determinisms—from Marx to Bourdieu, from Freud to the biological psychologies. A similar conclusion emerges from the study of literary inventions, artistic creations, symbolic networks, audacious philosophical speculations, recipes for wisdom and countless forms of ritualisation. Their importance in the life of each person, their universality and their obstinate and continuous reemergence, grant them a central place in any anthropological inquiry.

Cultures participate actively in the constitution of individual consciousnesses, of the personalities that confront the world and life. Individuals owe much to their strict ‘moral’ education, including self-awareness, serenity, courage in the face of danger, resistance to suffering, mastery of emotions, moral rectitude and force of character. These architectonic traits define and organise our personal ‘character’ and ethos.

To succeed in this promethean task, this great discipline, this long ‘moral’ education of humanity, every culture must make a ‘world’ of itself, in order to exclude contingency and chaos. Though ever novel and incomplete, each culture is by itself and for itself the best, if not the only, possible world. It is in this sense that all cultures culminate in the embedding of a cosmographic formation. It is only by virtue of this embedding that, for instance, ideas of boundaries, customs and norms make sense and come to be accepted as necessary. Of course, norms have value not only for the

<sup>31</sup> The following paragraphs draw on Dubuisson, 2004.

group. The internal dispositions that invoke respect are inculcated through training and through the consolidation of each individual personality.

This subtle alchemy produces an ensemble that constitutes the best part of each individual. The self owes much to the task of education. Human beings are not born with particular predispositions—for example, for asceticism, self-control, courage or a sense of honour. The synthesis that results from training is not a simple mechanical process. It develops on the basis of tractable and fragile psychical elements, which are exposed to many dangers. Not is it easy to achieve, since it presumes a constant series of volitional efforts during a long course of confrontations with life's contingencies.

A reflective and controlled conduct of life manifests itself in firmness of character in the face of adversity and misfortune. Given these same challenges, certain forms of depression, addiction, suicide and wallowing in the anesthesia of conformity represent surrender and demoralisation. We must remember that cultures, as cosmographic formations, are always incomplete, constantly threatened by the violence of human passions. They rest, when all is said and done, on the moral and intellectual adherence of their members. We must do them the justice of recognising their ongoing accomplishments, yet without falling into naïve idealism. For the principles they defend are relative: they acquire significance only within the very same world that they undergird; they appear absurd, extreme or unfair when looked upon from the walls of another world.

It remains for us to produce a balanced model of such a being, the mind, feelings, bodily *hexis*, imagination, memory, beliefs, wishes, etc, that make a Buddhist bhikshu, a brahmin, a Jansenist, a liberal Lutheran, a militant communist, a Confucian sage, a Roman citizen, or a Stoic philosopher. This task is a prodigious transformation that draws into play the corresponding cultures and cosmographic formations. Could one imagine a grander or higher anthropological ambition?

### Response to Russell T. McCutcheon

I agree entirely with the main arguments that Russell McCutcheon sets out in the first part of his brilliant exposition. I appreciate, and know well, the double paradox that he underlines, in which the concept of religion—though a mere historical creation like all human creations—purports to designate something timeless and ahistorical, while, moreover, its very vagueness furthers this ambition. There is something here that merits serious contemplation and that recalls a well-known lesson: despite, or because of, its vagueness, the poetic text always says much more, and often much better, than any scientific text. This 'much more' contains all humanity's wishes and dreams, all its worries and fears. The struggle is unequal! Criteria of rationality doubtless have little to do with the forces that lead to belonging and individual conviction ...

As for the almost emotional attachment to the term, religion, a lingering allegiance that hinders our detaching from it, I add this supplementary explanation. It seems obvious that the Christian notion of religion, with its *ad hoc* assembly of practices and beliefs, has been ubiquitous in our education, in our scholastic and intellectual training and in our 'organic' membership in a certain culture. As a result, this notion played a fundamental role in shaping our personal formation and our individual development. It became a polymorphous element (cognitive, ideological, psychological and emotional) of our personality and our ways of living.

To repeat, the concept of 'cosmographic formation' has no more than heuristic value. Any appeal to it is tentative, valid only 'to some extent', 'as far as possible' or 'by analogy' (all these

expressions are borrowed from Kant): ‘In that way, the idea is properly an heuristic not an ostensive concept. It shows not how an object is constituted, but how, under its direction, we must *seek out* the nature and continuity of the objects of experience in general’ (Kant, 1971, p. 468).

It is not surprising that the expression ‘cosmographic formation’ evokes our indigenous concept of religion. Quite simply, we must reverse the order of explanation, recalling that the Christian notion of religion functioned as the predominant cosmographic formation in the West for many centuries. In this light, ‘religion’ must be considered alongside other phenomena that are comparable in functional, not metaphysical, terms. What counts is not resemblance of metaphysical ideas but homology of anthropological functions.

There are, however, two points at which I diverge from McCutcheon, or rather from the destructive epistemology developed in the second part of his exposition. It is comparatively easy to imagine today a critical perspective linking Foucault’s historicism, radical materialism, Buddhist critiques of ontological propositions, Boas’ cultural relativism, and the subversive verve of the ancient Sophists and skeptics. This cocktail would pack quite a punch, leaving those who indulge in it somewhat tipsy from imbibing the product of twenty-five centuries’ fermentation of the seeds of idealism and essentialism.

However, it is important to resist the temptation of this drunkenness. I fear that this radical deconstruction leads to the dissolution of ‘humanity’ and of any possibility of its study. Certainly it is worth considering the proposal that all human creations are, to evoke Buddhism, ephemeral, composite, relative, anonymous, conditioned, denuded of any pure nature, etc. But it seems untenable to conclude with certainty that these creations are in no way comparable. In my view, the prolegomena to any future anthropology rests precisely on such comparisons, evoking now Kant.

I do not believe that ‘individual agents’ are mere images of the collective representations of their time. (Foucault, at least, did not think so of himself!) To hold this view would be to deny individuals *qua* agents any influence on history. I would say rather that certain personalities for example, Paul, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Jean de la Croix, Schleiermacher knew better, than others how to make original syntheses of the ideas of their time and how to transcend these ideas, sensing certain future evolutions. At any rate precisely this—something not impersonal—occasionally arises from simple ways of expressing diffuse and collective feelings. It’s called talent ... or genius!

## Conclusion

In sum, my heuristic notion of ‘cosmographical formation’ has a fourfold goal:

1. To ground our anthropological studies of symbolism and human cultures in something other than Christian anthropological categories. Humanity is not naturally or congenitally ‘religious’ as theologians and phenomenologists assert.
2. To represent the many constructions (for example, ‘religious’, ‘symbolic’, ‘political’, ‘cultural’, ‘cosmological’) by means of which humans construct their own worlds, that is, the worlds that correspond to human aspirations and needs. These worlds are presented to us only in the light of our condition *qua* human beings. They are real creations and not



abstract mental representations. As humans, we really do construct our own worlds; that is our primary characteristic.

3. To eliminate insoluble metaphysical questions from our scientific debates.
4. To provoke a healthy epistemological inversion: our indigenous and ‘religious’ categories must be considered as ‘objects of study’, not as tools of knowledge.

Finally, greater breadth of applicability is a key value of the notion of ‘cosmographic formation’. It includes what we in the West call ‘religions’. But since it is not based on the same principles, this notion can also apply to the cosmographies of atheists, agnostics and materialists. In the light of this approach, distinctions such as religious/non-religious become negligible: the world according to Epicurus, according to Confucius, according to Buddha, according to Luther and according to Marx are all examples of ‘cosmographic formations’. They are worth studying under this label and according to this perspective. This kind of approach will teach us much more about humanity than perpetual reassessments by theologians and phenomenologists of our ‘religious nature’.

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