

Field report.

Lately we have found ourselves in an “age of anxiety.” Economic, social and political pressures have led many people to search for an identity in religion, but in polyethnic and multireligious Russia strengthening religious and ethnic identities have produced tensions. Without scholars who can provide insight and advise governmental and non-governmental agencies and help mediate possible conflicts, that is, without specialists in intercultural communication, the repetition of mistakes we’ve seen in Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq, or, on local level, Kondapoga is inevitable. Those of us teaching Religious Studies must explore new opportunities and methods for educating such specialists, particularly in light of major changes the field has seen in the last few decades.

Since the early 1980s, Clifford Geertz’s influential definition of religion as symbolic system has been criticized and revised, if not rejected. In 1983 Talal Asad published his “Anthropological concepts of religion: reflections on Geertz” where he argued that the very concept “religion”, used as a means of research, was culturally determined and locally (‘Europeanly’ and ‘Christianly’) biased, and that the study of religion ought to shift its focus from universal definitions to “actual workings that motivate people’s actions”. Drawing on Ann Swidler’s reformulation of culture as symbolic toolkit and repertoire, rather than symbolic system, i.e. a consistent totality, Asad suggests refocusing on authorizing practices rather than on depicting a ‘religious system’ that ostensibly exists independently of practices, either as text or as structural something “being out there”. In his search for a ‘new paradigm’ applicable to ‘New Age’ Religions in 1994, R. Stephen Warner further developed this approach, emphasizing previously neglected aspects of religion: social mobilization rather than ‘plausibility structures’ (the concept from Peter L. Berger’s sociology of knowledge), emerging religious groupings rather than the decline of old religious institutions (according to secularism thesis), historical study of group solidarities and their diachronic persistence rather than pure synchronic

functionalism, and, finally, the situation of 'religious market' rather than ascribed religious identities.

In 2001 Robert Orsi professed the famous Husserlian motto "back to the things" and declared that Religious Studies must turn to radical empiricism. The study of 'new' religions that are "always religion-in-action, religion-in-relationship" demands new epistemological premises, which were readily available from phenomenology and the sociology of knowledge, for example, the concept of intersubjectivity. But R. Orsi also questioned the very foundation of Religious Studies. If religious behavior is considered in terms of intersubjectivity, then obviously scholarly behavior must be understood in the same terms, i.e. as intersubjective. The 'enmeshedness' of any study in its cultural locality undermines objectivity. In 2003 Peter L. Berger suggested that nowadays scholars must proceed from a theory of pluralism rather than from a traditional, comparative 'Religious Studies' approach, because different modernities produced different secularisms, and then different desecularizations. The volume "*Everyday Religion*", edited by Nancy T. Ammerman, and prefaced by Peter L. Berger, published in 2007, tries to implement this new orientation in Religious Studies: "Our observations suggest that religion is bigger than the theological ideas and religious institutions about which typical surveys have inquired...these articles demonstrate the enormous gains to be made by giving attention to individual life stories, observations of groups in action, and analysis of societies at crisis moments and otherwise listening for the social patterns that emerge in everyday life".¹

In fact, the methodological turn to so-called 'lived religion' (*religion vécue*) reflects changes in religious practices themselves, which have been variously characterized as 'patchwork religion' (R. Wuthnow), or *'bricolage'* (after C. Levi-Strauss, but used for religion by E. Pace), or 'vicarious religion' (G. Davie). These changes were best captured by R. Bellah in *Habits of the Heart*, which describes a woman named Sheila Larson who claimed that she had her own personal religion, which she called *'Sheilaism'*. Trends toward voluntarism and

¹ "*Everyday Religion*", p. 6.

consumerism in religion required new methods of study, which were supplied by anthropology (in depth interview, long term observation, and participant observation) despite the methodological identity crisis anthropology is undergoing. To better understand the current reevaluation within anthropology, I suggest looking at a brilliant discussion in “*A Passage to Anthropology*” by Kirsten Hastrup, published in 1995. According to Hastrup, ethnography gives us a truly *radical empiricism*: “Anthropology, indeed, may be seen as an empirical philosophy...Over the past decades, the traditional positivist view of hard ethnographic data has been irreversibly replaced by a vision of reality as in some way created through the encounter between the ethnographer and the people under study. In turn, these people have changed status from informants, speaking cultural truths, to participants in a dialogue initiated by the ethnographer”.² This new radically empirical realism is impossible without *reflexivity*, scholars must be aware that “reflexive anthropology places itself between the poles of correspondence theory and constitutive theory, which were both seen as inadequate...The fieldworker’s experience of different worlds leads her to question the foundations of her own. This questioning is part of her search for general understanding of how ‘worlds’ are premised and produced, and how their inhabitants reach agreement about social action and moral value” (“*A Passage to Anthropology*”, 50).

Thus, current anthropological research is a creation of particular shared space as much as understanding of particular ‘cultural locality’, it produces an ‘overlapping consensus’ between researcher and the subject of research; this is indeed intercultural communication in process. But given this great social function of anthropology, is this communicational, reflexive anthropology still a science? Is there any place for *objectivity* in shared ‘cultural localities’? Hastrup suggests that “the fact that there is no uniform objective reality does not mean that there are no objective realities”.³ Instead, the objective reality of a studied cultural locality is manifest when a researcher himself becomes an object of ascriptions in the local frame of reference; by this

² “*A Passage to Anthropology*”, p. 48.

³ “*A Passage to Anthropology*”, p.50.

reciprocal ‘classification’ the shared frame of reference is created. Is this created shared frame of reference objective? Hastrup argues: “the shared reality of social experience is transformed from largely implicit local knowledge to an explicit external understanding which subsumes and transforms local knowledge”.⁴

In a lucid and brief summary, Hastrup writes “anthropological knowledge starts in the sharing of social experience and in the documentation of another definitional reality. But it does not end there. The world has to be explained in words; this always involves an element of reduction. It also implies a certain degree of distortion, because reality is lived, not talked or written. While experience cannot be spelled out, anthropological knowledge must be communicated through writing; “the text, unlike discourse, can travel” (C. Geertz). Theories are sentences – ensnaring silences as well as words. Rephrasing the anthropological endeavor as one of stating the hypothetical helps us realize that there is absolutely no need to dismiss scholarship. Quite the contrary, by formulating new hypotheses about the nature of social life and human understanding, anthropology contributes to the creating of new historical possibilities in a spirit of solidarity”.⁵

It is in this spirit that I plan to explore religion and philosophy in my course, by focusing on how they are lived in individual lives, how they are actually practiced, rationally thought about and morally justified as particular ways of life.⁶ These theoretical and methodological elaborations in the scholarship must now be ‘converted’ into teaching. In the classroom we also create shared space, therefore, the position of a teacher cannot be that of indoctrinator, rather, the teacher should provoke student thought and develop students’ critical faculties. Indoctrination requires only good memory and enough time to memorize “doctrines and opinions of famous philosophers.” I hope instead to pose intellectually challenging questions, both in class and in assigned readings, that will require students to develop their thinking skills and learn to reason

⁴ “*A Passage to Anthropology*”, p. 56.

⁵ “*A Passage to Anthropology*”, p. 59-60.

⁶ I put religion and philosophy together in the way that Pierre Hadot considered them related in his “*Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*” (2002).

and argue critically. This approach also allows for students to contribute to the course, to the issues discussed; they can bring in new perspectives or information that the teacher may not have considered. In this view, the classroom becomes a place of equal and mutually advantageous engagement. In practice, this means that rather than covering as many theories and approaches as possible, the teacher selects the topics and texts that may ‘thematize’ and ‘problematize’ students’ ontological assumptions. It gives a teacher freedom to be tendentious in his choice, and at the same time confers on him or her great responsibility, but I believe that the opportunity for theoretical engagement with the students is worth it.

‘Patchwork’ may be a fitting description not only of contemporary religion, but also of recent scholarship in the humanities. In methodology, positivistic specialization resulted in compartmentalization of knowledge and lack of mutual understanding among the disciplines and even branches of a discipline. Yet trendy “interdisciplinarity” has sometimes led only to inconsistent and doubtful findings. It may be best to proceed by carefully selecting and justifying a particular methodology for each individual research project. In language, a positivistic universalistic language of description has been pitted against postmodernist rhetorical criticism, which dismisses any factuality from discourse. In any case, it is clear now that scholarly idiom matters, because how one says or writes powerfully determines what is articulated: the researcher has to be a ‘language-conscious polyglot’. In epistemology, assumptions, perspective and focus of interest are also woven from both localized and globalized strands (not just multiple modernities, already mentioned, but multiple contexts in general), while *problematique* comprises both parochial and universal dimensions (local problems and interests are thematized and presented as universal, and *vice versa*). In this respect, it seems that in the maze of diverse factualities and interpretations, the role of individual teacher and his responsibility grow hardly bearable. His skills and ways of teaching have to be accordingly diversified and elaborated, and he himself must be a specialist in intercultural communication, serving as an example to his students.

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