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14

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Religion is whatever people think it is. For the scholar, religion is a moving target. It never occurs by itself but is always enmeshed in changing cultural, political, and historical contexts, which determine the stakes people have in drawing the boundaries between religion and other concepts. It is important to note that this is also true for scholars who study religion. Their investments may be different from those of lawyers, politicians, journalists, or physicists, but scholars are just as much accomplices to power and established patterns of thought as these other cultural actors are, and their theories have regularly helped stabilize societal orders of knowledge about religion. To say that religion is whatever people think it is also reveals the fact that ideas are turned into reality through societal and cultural practice. Reality, in turn, reinforces the ideas underlying it (whether those ideas were based in reality or not), making them unassailable and, even if tacitly, true for a given society. Thus, what can be described as the reification of concepts of religion is a process that informs the levels of materiality and action in the academic study of religion. While scholars of religion do not need a normative understanding of what religion "really is," they do contribute constructively to societal debates. In an ideal world, scholars reflect openly on the stakes that motivate the production of knowledge about religion—including their own biases—and serve as a critical voice in a public debate about religion and its others.

—Kocku von Stuckrad

Critical Voices, Public Debates: A Reply
to Kocku von Stuckrad

Laurie L. Patton

Kocku von Stuckrad is correct that humans have defined and redefined the idea of "religion" throughout history. He is also correct that cultural, political, and historical contexts determine the boundaries between religion and something else. Here I would add economic contexts, because while economics is not an exclusive determinant of religious life, they are very much intertwined. There is much recent discussion of the "secularization" hypothesis: the more economic growth there is in a country, the more secular it becomes. And there is also much recent discussion of the renewed idea that religious traits and characteristics influence an individual's economic behavior, which, in turn, influences the overall economy. Wherever one stands in this debate, the question of political economy remains a large part of the debate about religion, particularly as more and more people become less religious, and the "nones" (no religious affiliation) become part of the landscape for scholars of religion.

"Religion is whatever people think it is," von Stuckrad begins. "For the scholar, religion is a moving target. It never occurs by itself but is always enmeshed in changing cultural, political, and historical contexts, which determine the stakes people have in drawing the boundaries between religion and other concepts." I would want to avoid a one-way determinism of definition here. On the one hand, von Stuckrad is right to point out that contexts determine definitions of religion. We can use an Indian example to demonstrate. The cultural, historical, and political context of the exploding Indian economy in the 1990s gave rise to the resurgence of the Hindu right, its insistence on an essentialized Hindu identity, "rights" for the Hindu majority, and a critique of what it perceived as "privileges" for non-Hindu minorities. The idea of a globalized and globalizing India, assimilated to the cultural and economic ways of Europe and America, prompted the reassertion of a unique, indigenous, Hindu identity. Frequently understood as "Aryan," this identity and history grounded this new religious movement. The recent religious history of India is, then, a perfect example of what von Stuckrad means when he writes of this determinism.

However, what is defined as "religion" then becomes a force in its own right and helps to define its own contexts. The Hindu right's religious resurgence has in turn affected the politics, culture, and economy of India since the 1990s. Narendra Modi's election as India's prime minister in 2014 and 2019 was fueled in part by a Hindutva religious ideology that had become "mainstream" during the decades since the 1990s. Hindutva's effect as a cultural movement has been to rewrite the history of Hinduism in India and assert its predominance, muscularity, and masculinity. Hindutva's effect as a political movement has been to create voting blocs of previously unaligned groups, as well as to provide the ideological grounding for a centralization of power and the expulsion of perceived foreign elements. The movement's effect as an economic power has been to unite the muscular power of Hindu identity with neoliberal monetary policies; this combination gives prestige to goods manufactured in India as well as puts India on a par with other global economies.

"It is important to note that this is also true for scholars who study religion. Their investments may be different from those of lawyers, politicians, journalists, or physicists, but scholars are just as much accomplices to power and established patterns of thought as these other cultural actors are, and their theories have regularly helped stabilize societal orders of knowledge about religion." This statement is the most compelling part of von Stuckrad's assessment. Scholars are indeed frequently accomplices to power, and they can and should reflect on this more. They should do so for several reasons. First, as I have recently written (Patton 2019: 16), I would extend von Stuckrad's insight to argue that no theory of religion in the twenty-first century should exist without an accompanying theory of the university that produces such theories. How is one's university or seminary or college or nonprofit an "accomplice to power"? What other roles might one's institution play—including as a resister of established power? How does one's own institutional location either stabilize or destabilize social orders of knowledge about religion?

Second, I have also written (Patton 2019: 16) that neither should a theory of religion exist without a theory of the public spheres in which these theories are relevant and have impact. For example, scholars of religion might realize the ways in which their own theories may or may not affect legal definitions of "religion." Winnifred Sullivan's work is a good example of this. Sullivan argues that legal definitions of religion that continue to be exclusively "textual" will never give legitimacy to religious practices that are more

"folk" in origin but no less meaningful to those who practice them. Sullivan (2009, 2010) has also raised the question of the institutional representation of religion, particularly in relationship to the perceived "secular" focus of the United States, and the way religion is defined and practiced in legal contexts. She argues that the separation between the religious and the secular is increasingly less tenable descriptively. An understanding of Americans as fundamentally religious by nature is now deeply embedded in government and in our public culture. This is true not only for legal and government perspectives but also because religion and spirituality are being naturalized; the idea of "faith-based organizations" and "faith-based individuals" is increasingly the norm.

Third, and most important, as I have also recently written (Patton 2019: 253), scholars might reflect on the public spheres in which their scholarly theories do and do not have impact. We need sustained reflection about the nature of the academic community in which the individual scholar operates and its relationship to the public sphere. Such a reflection is part of what many recent writers have demanded of us in making a more ethical university. Jon Roberts and James Turner's (2000) *The Sacred and the Secular University* shows that in the latter part of the nineteenth century, religion lost its power as an organizer of knowledge in American universities and was replaced by research, professionalization, and specialization. The idea of liberal education took the place of theology as a unifier of knowledge— particularly humanities as a study of the moral essence of Western civilization in literature and art. Relatedly, Talal Asad (2011: 292) has observed that liberal universities were the birthplace of "freedom of speech" as a form of public critique, and it has since been asserted widely as an absolute value. So, too, has professional critique, according to the norms of the guild.

In each case, however, and to make von Stuckrad's point specific and push it one step farther, scholars should also be aware and conduct an inventory of their own relative power within the academy and beyond. How does tenure create a kind of privilege, which might allow public engagement or the refusal of public engagement to be perceived differently? Given that, in our own field as well as in the humanities more generally, tenured professors are increasingly in the minority, it is, I believe, a moral obligation for the tenured professoriate to support adjunct instructors in their public engagements and protect them if they have written controversial research. Indeed, by the nature of their work, adjunct professors are more likely to be more engaged in the public sphere and should be understood as great resources for others to

think through these important questions. Adjunct professors are also more vulnerable when they are part of controversies between religion departments and their publics.

"To say that religion is whatever people think it is also reveals the fact that ideas are turned into reality through societal and cultural practice. Reality, in turn, reinforces the ideas underlying it (whether those ideas were based in reality or not), making them unassailable and, even if tacitly, true for a given society. Thus, what can be described as the reification of concepts of religion is a process that informs the levels of materiality and action in the academic study of religion." Von Stuckrad is right that materiality and action are essential parts of scholarly work and are rarely acknowledged as such. Talal Asad (Asad, Brown, Butler, and Mahmood 2013: 48) puts it the following way: "While the freedom to criticize is presented at once as being a right and a duty of the modern individual, its truth-producing capacity remains subject to disciplinary criteria and its material conditions of existence (laboratories, building, research funds, publishing houses, computers, tenure . . .)." Thus, for Asad, while the secular is part of the contemporary American university, its structures are still part of a larger matrix of institutions (state, corporate, philanthropic) that can affect those conditions, and, as such, no structure is ever fully guaranteed in the way that a university's theological grounding once was understood to be. These are the various "patrons" with whom the scholar also interacts, in addition to departments and religious communities.

Expanding on von Stuckrad's view, I have made, and make here, a call to reflection (Patton 2019: 253). In this newly complex world of academies and publics, a scholar of religion, and perhaps religion departments as well, should think in an explicit way throughout their careers about what academic institutions are for. The great question for liberal learning today is: Are academic institutions primarily for the creation of knowledge? Or are they there to make the world a better place (which includes vocational training as well as social activism)? While the obvious answer to this is "both," the current arguments about liberal learning turn on which of these purposes is to take primacy and how we might characterize the goals of research, teaching, and service.

If scholars of religion are ultimately convinced that institutions of higher learning are for the creation of new knowledge, then connections to the various publics will have one particular kind of coloring. The sharing of research with the communities one studies may not be one's primary goal, and the audience may remain the academy and the academy alone. Some researchers

might even think that they should conduct normative research that might be universally applicable, but also argue that their work should be read only by their students and colleagues.

However, since now a scholar of religion's readership will likely never reside in the academy alone, such scholars should have a philosophy about how, when, and why to interact with the inevitable interlocutors from the community concerned. Indeed, some scholars may be quite eager to share research with different kinds of communities but have a clear philosophy that the normative implications of their work are not their concern. Some might remain at a distance, and even be critical of community concerns; nonetheless they need a clear method of engagement once it is asked for.

If a scholar of religion is ultimately convinced that institutions of higher learning are there to make the world a better place, then their perspective on community engagement will take on a different hue. It might well be that reaching out to the communities before, during, and after the publication of their research would be the norm for such scholars. They may invite readership from a wide variety of circles and welcome comments from community members who are not inducted into the academic guild. They may feel that they also have an obligation to translate their more obscure research into broader language—not just when the community demands it. Moreover, such scholars might also be aware of the fact that some communities may not want to engage with scholars, whether those scholar be insiders, outsiders, or in between.

"While scholars of religion do not need a normative understanding of what religion "really is," they do contribute constructively to societal debates. In an ideal world, scholars reflect openly on the stakes that motivate the production of knowledge about religion—including their own biases—and serve as a critical voice in a public debate about religion and its others." Von Stuckrad argues for scholars to engage a critical voice in public debate about religion and its others. I would press us to do more than that, and begin by acknowledging multiplicities. There is not a single kind of critical voice, nor is there a single public. There are many kinds of critiques, and many kinds of publics.

I have also argued (Patton 2019: 254–255) that, at a most general level, scholars' theories of religion should engage their theories of their publics. If, in fact, scholars understand universities as places of knowledge, with little obligation to publics at large, then they will write in one particular way. If they understand universities as being accountable to multiple readerships, then they will write about religions in another way. It is primarily a matter of

whose voices they wish to include in the larger conversation that their work introduces.

A scholar who argues that a university should manufacture knowledge for knowledge's sake may well write work that includes statements about a religious tradition that are irrelevant or even scandalous to the community. They may also include statements that the community agrees with. But any given community's disagreement or agreement is irrelevant to that scholar's larger work. A scholar who instead believes that a university should engage with its various publics may well include these same statements, but will include such statements prepared to discuss them and defend them, and most of all will not be surprised if and when communities wish to engage with their work. And there are, of course, various stages in between.

Relatedly, given the new demographics of the humanities, it should not be a foregone conclusion that a scholar's place of employment is within an academic institution. If one is with an NGO or think tank, then the commitment to research as a way of making the world a better place is more clearly front and center. At an NGO, a scholar's publics are already multiple, and the scholar would more regularly reflect on the connection between research and the mission statement of the organization. While the mission itself might be different, many of the same dynamics would apply to scholars working at a for-profit institution, such as a company or a consulting firm.

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The Accountability of Embedded Scholarship:
A Response to Laurie L. Patton

Kocku von Stuckrad

In her reply to my statement, Laurie L. Patton raises a number of highly important points that resonate constructively with my own approach to the study of religion and its place in changing societal, political, and economic environments. It is also noteworthy—and further proof of her arguments—that Patton's reply comes from someone who has served the academic community in various influential positions and who has experienced the entanglement of scholarship and public spheres, as well as the academic responsibilities that result from this entanglement, in her own scholarly biography.

Fundamental to both Patton's and my argument is the idea that universities as producers and stakeholders of knowledge are firmly rooted in societal, economic, and political systems. These systems also host and generate ideas about religion. Patton alludes to the "secularization" hypothesis, which thrives on the assumption that the secular and the religious, or the scientific-rationalist and the metaphysical-spiritual, are two domains that are basically in conflict with each other, with secularism critiquing and ultimately overcoming religious truth claims. On closer inspection, though, this simple argument does not hold true. Rather than witnessing a conflict between two distinct discourses, what we see is the "scientification of religion" (von Stuckrad 2014) in Europe and North America, which began in the nineteenth century. In this process, allegedly "secular" research has proven to be "religiously productive": while more traditional religious institutions did indeed lose support in the twentieth century (at least in Europe), a whole new field of spiritual ideas and practices—from nature-based spiritualities to quantum mysticism and metaphysical ecology—has emerged under the influence of "secular" academic theories. As I have argued recently (von Stuckrad 2019a), discourses on the soul—which are tied to discourses on nature, consciousness, science, the cosmos, art, literature, and spirituality—have played a significant role in establishing the "scientific-religious" field that is influencing large swaths of global culture and politics today.

It is not accidental that this discursive change coincided with the institutionalization and professionalization of knowledge about religion at the

end of the nineteenth century. The academic study of religion, cultural an-
thropology, sociology, Indology, psychology, theoretical physics, biology,
and many other fields were established as recognized disciplines at that time.
The scientification and institutionalization of socially accepted knowledge
are two dimensions of discourse history that intersect in many ways (reso-
nant with Patton's reference to Talal Asad). Steven Shapin (1994) points out
that the mechanisms of attributing "truth" and validity to certain opinions
shared within a community have changed significantly since the seventeenth
century. Whereas it used to be personal relationships and social values that
drove the acceptance of truth, since the nineteenth century institutions
have become the most trusted arbiters of truth in societies—the same phe-
nomenon that Niklas Luhmann ([1968] 2014) calls "systemic trust." Today
even the specialized knowledge of individuals is deemed trustworthy only
if it is communicated through institutions that host this expert's knowledge
(Shapin 1994: 412). Despite the "new demographics of the humanities" that
Patton describes, along with the changing publics of universities and other
institutions, systemic trust still seems more important for the acceptance of
knowledge than the actual quality of the individual research.

From the perspective of discourse research (which is my theoretical and
methodological background), institutions such as universities, Nobel prizes,
and professional associations are vehicles or "dispositives" that carry out,
legitimize, and stabilize orders of knowledge in a given societal setting.
Furthermore, what Kurt Danziger (1990: 182) says about the formation of
academic psychology holds true for other sciences too, including the aca-
demic study of religion:

> There is an intimate relationship between the general forms of
> presuppositions, knowledge goals, and investigative practices and their
> specific embodiment. As the community of knowledge producers grows
> it develops internal norms and values that reflect its external alliances. Its
> professional project is directed at carving out and filling a particular set of
> niches in the professional ecosystem of its society, and its internal norms
> reflect the conditions for the success of this project. These norms tend to
> govern both the production of knowledge and the production of the produ-
> cers of knowledge through appropriate training programs.

If we conceive of scholars, departments, and associations as contributors
to a larger discourse community that also includes readers, practitioners,

lawyers, politicians, journalists, artists, and arguably nonhuman actors as well (von Stuckrad 2019b), we will inevitably arrive at Patton's claim that any theory of religion (or any other topic, for that matter) needs to be linked to "an accompanying theory of the university that produces such theories," as well as to "a theory of the public spheres in which these theories are relevant and have impact."

The institutions and publishing houses that host academic work equip researchers with a power that scholars must be aware of and address in a self-critical way. I agree with Patton that such a self-reflection should be an integral part of academic work today; it should also encompass a critical awareness not only of one's own employment situation—tenured, tenure track, adjunct, or self-supporting—but also of the many unearned privileges that characterize most internationally visible research: intersections of gender, race, age, religion, and access to resources. (Many universities in economically disadvantaged countries do not have the means to provide the necessary support for work-related traveling, libraries, etc., even for their tenured staff.)

This brings us to a number of hotly debated questions: Are scholars the keepers of the Holy Grail of Truth? Is there a truth that scholars must insist on over against the invention of "facts" by politicians, journalists, and stakeholders in various public spheres? And when scholars become publicly engaged, do they lose their scientific objectivity and neutrality? These are tough questions to answer in an age of planetary crises, and they cut deep into the structures of "academia."

In "Solidarity or Objectivity," Richard Rorty (1990: 24) criticized the idea that our systems of knowledge are "true" representations of the world around us, arguing instead for a pragmatist position that abstains from a theory of truth and sees knowledge as the result of social processes: "As a partisan of solidarity, [the pragmatist's] account of the value of cooperative human inquiry has only an ethical base, not an epistemological or metaphysical one." Often, Rorty explains, this position is confused with a "relativist" one, particularly by realists who hold on to the idea that our knowledge of the world can be objective, neutral, and thus independent of the positions and perspectives of individual human beings. They find it hard to swallow the idea that the establishment of shared knowledge is based on structures of justification rather than objectivity, and that the acceptance of shared knowledge does not even require a theory of truth.

Thirty years after Rorty's essay, not much has changed when it comes to the persistent fear of relativism and the conflation of such a perspective with

a concept of "anything goes" or "one claim is as good as another"—only that today, in what is simplistically presented as the age of "fake news," the dispute is more bitter. Many academics claim that even if we can never reach the full truth, we have to stick to objectivity as the lodestar of scholarly work.

Echoing Rorty, my response to such a claim is "No." This is not only because our understanding of objectivity cannot be generalized as a universal category of science. Objectivity has a much more recent history than most people assume; dating back to the second half of the nineteenth century, "it never had, and still does not have, the epistemological field to itself" (Daston and Galison 2007: 29). More important, the claim of objectivity neglects the messy social field in which scholarship is corralled. Taking seriously the communicative structures that establish knowledge within a delineated group of people (peers, *ethnos*), Rorty therefore favored solidarity over objectivity. This resonates with Bruno Latour's actor-network theory and his observation that "[d]ay-to-day research—what he termed science in the making—appeared not so much as a stepwise progression toward rational truth as a disorderly mass of stray observations, inconclusive results and fledgling explanations" (Kofman 2018). In Rorty's words, this is more about "solidarity" (finding agreement according to the sometimes messy rules of justification within the peer group) than about "objectivity."

From a similar point of departure, but moving in a different direction, I want to argue for *accountability* as the bottom line of academic work. I understand accountability in the sense in which the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it: "an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions." For academia, this means that scholars need to openly explain why they make certain choices or come to certain conclusions. Letting go of the idea of objectivity does not mean embracing arbitrariness. Accountability takes "academia" seriously as a cultural location and a podium for open debate, an arena in which people—with clear arguments and documentation accessible to everyone—justify their claims and decisions.

But accountability includes much more than an ethics of scholarly debate. It also applies to the choices scholars make in their professional work as administrators and as communicators toward the various publics in which they are embedded. As for administration, it is important that scholars act with a clear awareness of their institutional positions of power and the precarious job situations many of their colleagues are facing today; I therefore agree with Patton that tenured scholars should use their respective positions

to act in solidarity with less privileged colleagues. As for the various publics in which scholars are embedded, the idea of a solitary researcher working in an ivory tower of knowledge is no longer tenable (if it ever was). In an age of rapid climate change, mass extinction, and global transformations on economic, social, and political levels, scholars are accountable for their engagement (or lack thereof) with the planetary repercussions of their work.

An example of such an engagement with various audiences or publics, as well as scholarly positions of power, is Greg Johnson's (2019) "experiment in public engagement," published with Counterpoint: Navigating Knowledge (a think tank and communication hub, founded by Whitney A. Bauman and myself in 2018). As a consequence of his scholarly engagement with the Mauna Kea protest movement in Hawaii, Johnson attempts to find new ways of engagement: "I am pushing to understand better how issues of consequence become visible to various publics and how scholars of religion might facilitate this process. The issue is not whether we support the movement (some of us do and will), but how we might learn from it and, perhaps, how people in the movement and publics watching it unfold might learn from us" (Johnson 2019). In my view, this is the way we should understand our work and hold ourselves accountable in the twenty-first century.

Another example of how scholars acknowledge the entanglement of academic research and societies at large is the Centre in Indigenous Knowledge Systems, hosted by the University of Kwazulu-Natal. In a programmatic way, South Africa promotes indigenous knowledge systems in higher education, which "will serve as a facilitating and enabling mechanism, for broad participation and collaboration of local communities. The educational institutions will focus their activities on developing, preserving and using the knowledge of local communities as basis for sustainable community livelihood and development."[1]

Such approaches clearly resonate with Patton's claim that we need to think about "what academic institutions are for. The great question for liberal learning today is: Are academic institutions primarily for the creation of knowledge? Or are they there to make the world a better place (which includes vocational training as well as social activism)?" I wonder if formulating these as competing options is the only way of looking at them. Making the world a better place does not need to be the main goal of academic research, and yet social activism and direct engagement with political,

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[1] See the Centre's homepage, http://aiks.ukzn.ac.za/about-dst-nrf-ciks, accessed January 9, 2020.

economic, and cultural processes are part of our professional work today. In my view, acknowledging this entanglement is a mark of good scholarship.

What is more, this embeddedness brings us into contact with ways of knowing that go beyond academic forms of knowledge. Universities are platforms for the production and accumulation of knowledge; however, this does not mean that we can confine this knowledge and separate it from the world, even if we wanted to. Any serious scholarly quest needs to actively search out and include knowledge that goes against established systems of knowing; this includes indigenous knowledge systems, nonreductionist forms of knowing in many traditions around the world, and even the knowledge that the more-than-human world embodies and provides. The academic study of religion, which arguably crystallized around the question of how humans organize their relations with the more-than-human world, should be in a good position to address these issues in the twenty-first century.

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