

BELIEF UNBRACKETED

**A Case for the Religion Scholar to Reveal More of Where He or She Is Coming From
by Stephen Prothero
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I am crazy for people who are crazy for God: people nearly as inscrutable to me as divinity, who leave wives and children to become forest-dwelling monks in Thailand, who wander naked across the belly of India in search of self-realization, who speak in tongues and take up serpents in Appalachia because the Bible says they can.

Over my living-room mantel stand a chorus of carved snake-handlers, each holding a serpent aloft, each entrusting his life to God and to us a testimony. On my bookshelves stand a number of books on snake-handling. The best is Dennis Covington's *Salvation on Sand Mountain* (1995), which describes the author's spiritual sojourn in southern Appalachia, including his dramatic decision to take up serpents himself. Briskly paced and elegantly written, this memoir raises all sorts of intriguing questions about religion and violence, faith and fanaticism. It ends, however, on a sour note.

After two years as "Brother Dennis," Covington picks a fight about women speaking in church—a fight he knows he is going to lose—and stomps out the door. Such endings are axiomatic in the "in-and-out" spiritual memoir, and I was disappointed that Covington fell into the cliché. Still, I forgave him the ungraceful exit, because the rest of the book is such a graceful introduction to the slings and arrows of hardcore faith (and because I knew he needed to get back home).

Harvard Divinity School Professor Robert Orsi is not so forgiving. In a provocative essay called "Snakes Alive: Resituating the Moral in the Study of Religion," he praises Covington for providing "a good model for engaged, interpersonal, participatory religious study," then chastises him for getting above his raisin' at the end. According to Orsi, Covington commits at the conclusion of his quest the unpardonable sin of "otherizing": of defining himself over against his subjects and then judging them to be morally inferior to himself.¹

What Covington should have done, Orsi argues, is linger in the no-man's-land between going native and going home, forever flirting not only with his subjects but also with his own identity. He should have practiced the "erotics of Religious Studies" by suspending ad infinitum his judgments, endlessly playing his own religious world against the worlds of his subjects, and otherwise refusing closure. "Religious studies is not a moralizing discipline," Orsi concludes. "It exists in the suspension of the ethical."²

Orsi is a brilliant theorist of religion and perhaps more than any of us (certainly more than I) he is alive to the ambiguities and complexities of religious experience, its everyday shame and violence. Still, he is saying little new here. For more than a century, scholars of religion have been distinguishing themselves from theologians by attempting to bracket questions of truth, morality, and causality—all in the name of better understanding religious phenomena. More than any other idea, Edmund Husserl's notion of bracketing, or epoch \bar{e} (from the Greek for "holding back"), has defined Religious Studies as a discipline. What do folks like me do? We enter empathetically into the worlds of religious people in an attempt to understand the believers who

inhabit them. We set aside questions of cause and effect, good and bad. We check our worldviews at the door. Or, as Orsi puts it, we "enter into the otherness of religious practices in search of an understanding of their human ground."³

My latest book, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*, is an attempt to do just that—in this case to understand the myriad images of Jesus that have inspired Americans from Thomas Jefferson to Jerry Falwell. Though, as the subtitle intimates, one burden of the book is to explain how Americans transformed their Jesus from an abstract theological sign into a concrete person and finally into a celebrity, on the whole it is an attempt at what the Dutch religionist Gerardus van der Leeuw called *Verstehen*, or empathetic understanding.

As my book has been read, reviewed, and debated, however, I have come to believe that the endless bracketing that I have always taken as my charge is viable only as long as our work exists in the splendid isolation of the Ivory Tower. In the rough and tumble of the real world, it is not possible, and likely not desirable.

In a review of *American Jesus* published in *The New York Times Book Review*, Michael Massing, apparently taking as a personal challenge my refusal to plump for any particular Jesus, went on a quest for "Prothero's own Jesus" and found him in the person of Jefferson's rationalist sage. In the daily *Times*, R. Scott Appleby described me as a partisan of the "religion bad, spirituality good" school. Both claims concern my personal religious beliefs—a subject the book dutifully avoids—and are plainly false. As I wrote in a letter to the *Times*, I personally find Jefferson's Jesus laughably ahistorical. And while as a historian I see the partisans of disorganized religion as key players in America's spiritual marketplace, I nonetheless consider the disdain of so many Baby Boomers for religious institutions as ungenerous at best. (Where, after all, do yoga and meditation come from? Why such disdain for the dead?)⁴

Perhaps more effectively than prying reviewers, inquiring readers draw us out, too, demanding that we serve up our expertise with a bit of judgment. Over the last few months, I have participated in dozens of media interviews about my book. Virtually every interviewer has eventually gotten around to matters of judgment. Which Jesus is your favorite? Is the proliferation of Jesuses a good or a bad thing? What would Jesus say about Buddhist and Hindu appropriations of his image? Is Jesus the Christ? Of course, some of these questions can be deflected, and I tried that for a while. But interviewers quickly grow tired of the cat-and-mouse game that is Religious Studies, and eventually so did I.

To my horror (and delight), I am now on the record against Jefferson's vision of Jesus as an enlightened sage and for representations of Jesus as a Black Moses. I have told interviewers that I am a Christian (albeit a confused one), that Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* is 99 and 44/100ths made up, that Hindu conceptions of Jesus as an avatar are deliciously bold, and that Jesus would not drive a car (unless he lived in Los Angeles).

In other words, I have come to see the "erotics of Religious Studies" as a tease. What is the danger of divulging to our readers what we really think (however confused or provisional)? Does criticizing our subjects really do them grave harm? Are Religious Studies scholars really so powerful? Our readers so impressionable? Our subjects so weak?

In all this hand-wringing about bracketing beliefs and suspending the ethical, I find more than a trace of condescension toward readers and subjects alike. In *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, a preacher named Punkin Brown bears the brunt of Covington's ire. In "Snakes Alive," Orsi rushes with bodhisattva resolve to Brown's rescue, and to the aid of Covington's readers (who presumably have been horribly betrayed by the author's moral provocation). I do not know for sure, but I rather doubt that Punkin Brown was undone by the feminist rantings of a scribbling outlander, or that the book's readers are powerless to resist Covington's theologizing.

When I was in college, a group of students gathered regularly a bit after midnight and argued, often for hours, about politics, economics, and religion. It was an eclectic crew. We had Marxists, liberals, conservatives, an atheist, a Jew, a born-again Christian, and a conservative and a liberal Catholic. We went at one another, no holds barred, consigning our friends to heaven and hell, calling Christianity (Marxism as well) an opiate of the masses, and otherwise making all manner of outrageous judgments about the world and ourselves. As far as I know, none of us was hurt by any of the provocation. And I learned more about myself (and real friendship) in those sessions than I did in all my college courses combined.

At points in "Snakes Alive," Orsi seems to describe Religious Studies as an enterprise of just this sort of provocation: You venture into the dangerous border zone "between one's own moral universe and the moral world of the other" and come out a changed person. But when the contest is engaged and push comes to shove, Orsi becomes gun-shy. For him, Covington's principled assertion of women's rights "amounts to a refusal to engage his real subject." I could not disagree more. To tiptoe around the tough issues is to turn away. To tackle them head-on is true engagement.

One of my college friends, David L. Chappell (the village atheist in our early morning debates), is now a history professor at the University of Arkansas. His most recent book, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (2004), is a masterly study of the powerful role religion played in the civil rights movement.⁵ It is also a timely rebuke to the timidity of Religious Studies, and of my own reticence to move beyond bracketing to moral inquiry. In it, Chappell proceeds with all the subtlety of a battering ram (or a prophet), blasting black nationalist interpreters of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as anti-intellectuals, sneering at the hokum of the philosophical/theological school of Personalism, and castigating King and other civil rights saints for their intellectual inconsistencies.

While reading this book, I kept flashing back to a very different volume: *Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (1988) by David Chidester, a professor at the University of Cape Town. I had been at college only a few weeks when Jim Jones and more than 900 of his followers perished in a mass suicide/murder in Guyana in November 1978. Night after night, I was riveted to the radio, taking in Jones's haunting sermons. In retrospect, these broadcasts may have been the catalyst that diverted me from astrophysics (my major at the time) to American religious history. I wanted to know why Jonestown happened. I wanted explanations.

A classic example of Orsi's "erotic methodology," *Salvation and Suicide* dances around these concerns with a smile and a swagger, making it not only one of the most brilliant books in the field but also one of the most perverse. Chidester proudly refuses "causal explanations," offering instead a "religiohistorical interpretation" that seeks to understand empathetically what turned Jonestown into a "meaningful human enterprise." After invoking his method of "temporarily" suspending value judgments, he writes, "I stress the word temporarily here because after the strategy of epoch \bar{e} has been exercised, and the phenomenon we are exploring has appeared in as much clarity as we can bring to it, we can always go on (or back) to making moral judgments." Yet he never goes on, or back. True to his training (and my own), he refuses to moralize, except about the meaningfulness of Jonestown for its participants.⁶ This is what Religious Studies is all about. And if Orsi is right that excessive moralizing is the discipline's ever-present danger, then we should have more of it. Still, I can't help thinking that our problem is not a surfeit of judgment but a dearth—that the danger is not silencing our Punkin Browns but silencing ourselves. Revolutions never seem to be able to stop at drawing blood; inevitably they end up flaying corpses. And here Orsi seems to be doing battle not so much with his colleagues today as with ghosts of religionists past.

Since Jonestown, religion has shown its dark side repeatedly—with Heaven's Gate, at Waco, and on 9/11. In each case, we Religious Studies scholars have been largely irrelevant to the public debates. True, we drew out the parallels between the Heaven's Gate website and medieval Daoist immortality texts. But we could not explain what produced the worst mass suicide on American soil. No surprise, then, that radio and television producers turned instead to self-styled "cult experts" to explain what happened when Heaven's Gate swung shut. And to experts on the Middle East rather than Islamicists when it came to parsing Islam as "a religion of peace."

Here's a thought: Perhaps it is time to stop "otherizing" ourselves. In homage to Husserl, Orsi, Chidester, and all the ghosts of Religious Studies past, let us continue to suspend the ethical and understand with empathy. Let us delight in difference and tear down the barriers between ourselves and our subjects. But then also tear down this barrier: the barrier against our own judgments. If we really want to resuscitate religion as a moral enterprise, make bracketing a temporary strategy rather than an eternal imperative. Before you leave southern Appalachia, tell Punkin Brown what you think of him. He can take it (or leave it). So can our readers. Maybe Religious Studies (and I) can too.

Notes

1 Robert Orsi, "Snakes Alive: Resituating the Moral in the Study of Religion," in Elizabeth A. Castelli and Rosamond C. Rodman, *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 99, 112. My thanks to Julie Byrne of Texas Christian University for drawing this essay to my attention.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 117, 115.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 106.

4 Michael Massing, "America's Favorite Philosopher," *The New York Times Book Review* (December 28, 2003), p. 7; R. Scott Appleby, "When They Say Jesus, Which Jesus Do They Mean?" *The New York Times* (January 8, 2004), p. E9; Stephen Prothero, letter to the editor, *The New York Times* (January 18, 2004).

5 David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

6 Orsi, "Snakes Alive," p. 115; David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. xv, xii, 46, xiv.

Stephen Prothero is chairman of Boston University's Department of Religion and the author, most recently, of *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

OUR RESPONSES TO 'BELIEF UNBRACKETED' BY:

Robert A. Orsi

David Chidester

Pamela E. Klassen

R. Marie Griffith

A 'BIT OF JUDGEMENT'

by Robert A. Orsi

If only Stephen Prothero had told us exactly how "excessive moralizing"—his phrase for what he wants to see more of in the study of religion—would better equip scholars of religion to do the work we do. That it does is at least implied in his polemic. Some scholars of religion, Prothero writes (he is talking here and throughout about me in particular, which is why I am sitting here on this lovely spring day writing this rather than frolicking along the river with my dog, Thomas), "have been distinguishing themselves from theologians by attempting to bracket questions of truth, morality, and causality—all in the name of better understanding religious phenomena." He has "grown tired of this," however, and so, presumably also in the name of "better understanding religious phenomena"—for what else is our deepest responsibility as scholars than this, why else would we even take up this question—he insists instead that we "serve up our expertise with a bit of judgment."

Prothero makes this summons as a battle cry, leaving troubling and substantive issues unattended. He says, for example, that "inquiring readers" demand this "bit of judgment": but if this is what readers want (although I think that readers of religious scholarship want many things, including to be challenged and provoked by worlds unfamiliar to them), what does this say about the political and moral, even epistemological, grounds on which religious scholarship is done? How do our readers' putative desire for "a bit of judgment" implicitly or explicitly shape our inquiries, and for better or worse? How do we best respond to this desire? What are our responsibilities to our many different kinds of readers? How do our multiple responsibilities as religious scholars—to the people we work among, to our different audiences, to our students and colleagues, and to ourselves—exist in (possibly productive and revealing, possibly debilitating) tension? Or do they? Polemics are exciting, but the stakes here are high, and I wish Prothero had paid more attention to such issues as he went about his work of excoriation.

So what is this "bit of judgment"? To the "hand-wringing," "flirting," and "teas[ing]" "timidity" of "bodhisattva"-theorists of religion (Prothero's gendered language is striking) who practice the bracket, Prothero proposes as one counter-example a friend of his who, "with all the subtlety of a battering ram" (you get the point) in a book on the Civil Rights movement, proceeds by "blasting" Martin Luther King's black nationalist interpreters in his book, "sneering at the hokum of the philosophical/theological school of Personalism," and "castigating" King and others for "their intellectual inconsistencies." Another counter-example to the hand-wringers offered by Prothero is Prothero himself: "to my horror (and delight)," he writes, he is "now on record" as being "against" Jefferson's Jesus and "for" images of Jesus as a Black Moses, on record that Hindu conceptions of Jesus as avatar are "deliciously bold," and on record that Jesus would not drive a car.

Sneering, battering, castigating, blasting: this must be what Prothero imagines as "the rough and tumble of the real world" as opposed to "the splendid isolation of the Ivory Tower." But in fact Prothero and his friend (in Prothero's "Die Hard 2" version of him) are "for" and "against" the sorts of uncontroversial things that good-hearted people in Prothero's world tend to be "for" and "against." Does anyone want to weigh in for Jim Crow laws? For SUVs? So here we are again: religious studies as the practice and authorization of predictable judgments, issued in this case in gendered language—a new criterion for job searches: are you a "battering ram" or a "tease"—which is to say in language that borrows the cultural authority of normative sexual difference to sanction itself.

By "here we are again" I mean to say that Prothero has sketched out a vision of the future of religious studies that is in fact its past: his is a once-and-future understanding of the discipline. "Past" here may be too optimistic, though. Prothero and I differ in our views of the history of religious studies: where he sees a past dominated by moral bracketing I see a discipline that has embedded and masked its normativities in its very practices of critical knowing, creating theoretical nomenclatures that pathologized or marginalized the religious experiences (in the American context) of African Americans and women, of Catholics and Pentecostals (among many others). The critical apparatuses of the field have long been (and to some extent remain) deeply anti-Catholic, identifying characteristic Roman Catholic religious bodily idioms as lesser forms of religious practice on an unexamined but widely authorized hierarchy of religious forms (which continues to exist in culturally obtuse "stage theories" of faith that locate Protestant modernity at the pinnacle of religious development and situate Catholics, Mormons, Pentecostals, Orthodox Jews, and others in a supposedly less mature middle "stage").

Religious studies has been very much the theoretical enforcer of a normative and unchallenged liberal Protestant and Western religious modernity; to put this less theoretically, the academic study of religion (again I am talking here about the United States, although these comments apply elsewhere in the modern West) has long reinforced and given "scientific" sanction to common social prejudices. To cite one particularly egregious example: "scholarly" treatments of African American religion as "emotional" and "irrational" (an example of "a little bit of judgment") in the early twentieth century were implicated in the defense of lynching and in the refusal of Northern Christians to protest the horror. The job of critical self-reflection and historical awareness incumbent on all scholars of religion is precisely to uncover the ways that their particular areas of inquiry (the study of Hinduism or ritual or whatever) have been caught

up in the political history of the Western study of religion in order to begin the work of freeing themselves from it.

Predictable judgments occlude their implication in power, but this becomes clearer if we think about what a "little bit of judgment" looks like in relation to religious practices that subvert normative modernity or that are simply uncomfortable to the good hearted. It's one thing to come out boldly "for" ecological responsibility. What about "for" speaking in tongues and creating a religious environment in which one's children are expected to speak in tongues as a sign of their religious status? But apart from the boldness and deliciousness of judgment, how exactly does a scholar's being "for" or "against" the practices, say, of rural Pentecostals help us understand the nature of relationships in this world, the press of authority, the meanings of gender and class, the experience of kinship? Wouldn't battering, sneering, and castigating keep us from approaching ways of loving and being that are unfamiliar to us, ways of being and loving which we cannot imagine ourselves being and loving?

Prothero deflects issues of power. Pentecostal snake handlers, he says, do not need me to rescue them, noting "I rather doubt that Punkin Brown [the snake handling preacher who is the object of writer Denis Covington's critical fury and ultimate dismissal in *Salvation on Sand Mountain*] was undone by the feminist rantings of a scribbling outlander." Prothero's ad hominem aside here masks a real discrepancy of power: the "scribbling outlander" was a New York Times reporter, no less. Do we not need to be aware of the difference between his access to public attention, to cultural authority, to voice in this unequal society, as compared to Punkin Brown's, and of the implications of this discrepancy? Prothero appears to be calling us to a new naïveté.

And in any case Punkin Brown was in fact deeply hurt by the harsh and arrogant representation of him in the book—his health was affected, his relationships damaged, his good name brought into contempt by a "scribbling outlander" whose work was featured in the major media of the country. (For a much better account of snake handlers' lives and religious understandings than Covington's, I recommend Fred Brown and Jeanne McDonald's *The Serpent Handlers: Three Families and Their Faith*, which also gives an account of Punkin Brown's reactions to Covington. Brown and McDonald write, "Covington also repeated some unsubstantiated gossip about Punkin in his book that strained Punkin's marriage and blemished his reputation in the serpent-handling churches" [page 28]. The authors claim with Punkin Brown that the New York Times reporter did not carefully enough double-check his smears against the preacher, but presumably this was unnecessary given the more morally serious work he was doing of castigating, blasting, battering, and sneering.)

Splendidly isolated Ivory Tower? Pace Prothero, but our work, which always takes place on particular social and historical grounds (which we had best be aware of), has serious moral implications and consequences, well beyond "a little bit of judgment."

I have never said that scholars of religion should endorse every religious idiom they approach, but I have argued that we need to learn precisely how to pay disciplined attention to the very practices that disturb or repel us, and that we need to do so in a way that holds our own worlds in suspension. To suspend is not "to check our worldviews at the door," as Prothero restates my argument. To suspend means to develop a disciplined attitude of attentiveness to the other, but

this never means the denial of self: I have always argued that research is a relationship between people (to borrow Sartre's phrase), whether in the archives or in the field, and this means that both parties are present to each other. To be a scholar means to be aware of the languages (including the theoretical), and the values, the needs, and the fears, that we bring to such encounters (again in the archives or in the fields), to be as critically aware of ourselves as we are of the other.

Our moral lives are completely implicated in our research, from the imagining of our projects to the conclusions we reach and including how we conduct and represent our research; to know this, to reflect on this, to understand ourselves in this deep way in relation to others we are trying to get to know—this is how I understand the ethical challenge of religious studies, a completely different, indeed antithetical, matter than "a little bit of judgment" or "excessive moralizing."

To stand in an attitude of open, disciplined, and engaged attentiveness to an other means to put one's own world in dialogue; to be open is to be vulnerable—to be vulnerable to the disorientation of seriously meeting a different reality, the challenge of being with people who love differently than oneself, whose family lives are not familiar, who inhabit their bodies differently, who have had to contend with political realities perhaps unknown to many of us. This is not an argument for ignoring issues of power and structure; nor am I saying that to be open demands conversion to the ways of the other. It does mean seeing one's own world from the place of the other, to be able to imagine different ways of living and to try to understand them in their own terms; and it means—whether a scholar works as a historian or an anthropologist—that one's own world is likely not going to look the same, to be able to claim the same taken-for-granted authority, to hold the same givenness, as it did before one set out into the archive or field. Prothero's "little bit of judgment" is a safeguard precisely against this existential challenge: that little bit of judgment is just enough to protect scholar and reader both. Now Thomas and I can go to the river.

Works Referenced: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Vintage Books, 1968; Brown and McDonald, *The Serpent Handlers*, Winston-Salem, North Carolina: John F. Blair, 2000.

MORALIZING NOISE

by David Chidester

Stephen Prothero says that he got into the study of religion, abandoning astrophysics, because he wanted an explanation for everything that happened in and around Jonestown, but that my book, *Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (1988; revised edition 2003) "dances around these concerns with a smile and a swagger, making it not only one of the most brilliant books in the field but also one of the most perverse." By odd coincidence, or perfect timing, I learned about Stephen Prothero's displeasure with me just as I was sending off proofs for another book that he might find to be equally, or perhaps more, "perverse" than the book I wrote 20 years ago about Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown.

This new book, *Authentic Fakes: Religion in American Popular Culture* (University of California Press, forthcoming 2005), must also be regarded as a perversion. After all, I tried to get it published under the title *Holy Shit*, a "perverse" title, as anyone can see, but I was diverted by reluctant publishers and in the process I was arguably perverted myself to conform to the demands of the market. So, we find ourselves in the midst of perversions upon multiple perversions. I plead guilty. I am implicated.

Still, I notice that in this new book, long before I was aware that Stephen Prothero thought I was "perverse," I have stubbornly persisted in my "perverse" refusal to moralize. I am also struck by my stubborn persistence, over 20 years, in trying to see what that story I worked out in my "perverse" book about Jonestown might say about America.

Here is what I say: Religion is a generic term for ways of being a human person in a human place. I define religion as discourses and practices that negotiate what it is to be a human person in relation to the superhuman, but also in relation to whatever might be treated as subhuman. Since being a person also requires being in a place, religion entails discourses and practices for creating sacred space, as a zone of inclusion, but also as a boundary for excluding others. Accordingly, religion, in my definition, is the activity of being human in relation to superhuman transcendence and sacred inclusion, which inevitably involves dehumanization and exclusion. Religion, therefore, contains an inherent ambiguity.

Although I have no intention of moralizing, religion does raise the moral problem of doing harm. As a humanizing, inclusive activity, religion protects people from harm. As a force of dehumanization and exclusion, religion does harm. Moralizing, while it might do no harm, also does no one any good. I will not moralize.

Instead, I will use the term "religion" as a point of entry into the meaning, power, and values at work in the production and consumption of authentic fakes in American popular culture.

Now, I agree, this profile of my project will not be congenial to public media outlets. But my project also does not conform to Stephen Prothero's request that we state our opinions.

A long time ago, I learned—maybe from Plato, maybe from my teachers in the academic study of religion—that "opinion" is the lowest form of knowledge. For Plato, if I recall correctly, "opinion" was a way of knowing that was only just barely above the swirling, buzzing chaos of sensory perception that did not even count as knowledge. Opinion did not come close to the knowledge that might be gained by rational reflection, insight, or inspiration.

Still, we must remember, against Plato's politics, that "opinion" is a democratic impulse. Everyone has one. Every man, woman, and child has one. Let's hear them. Let's hear all our opinions. Let's hear Stephen Prothero's opinions. I am happy to hear his opinions. But here are two problems:

First, Stephen Prothero's stated opinions—against a Deist Jesus, for a Black Moses—are transmitted through electronic media for the purposes of media markets that are beyond his control. In these media, there is power, obviously, but there is also a severely limiting network of

constraints on what gets through the filters of communication. In my experience, almost nothing gets through, except such a simple "for" or "against." Certainly, Prothero can say what he thinks. But does he think that what he says in these media should set the standards for academic theory, discourse, and practice in the study of religion?

Second, if we made such "moralizing" an integral part of our work in the study of religion, we would risk reducing our academic enterprise to the either/or propositions favored by the electronic media. We would become an academic discipline subservient to a supposedly democratic but actually chaotic and diffused "common sense" about religion in which everyone, already, knows the difference between their religion and other religions, "true" religion and "false" religion, "authentic" religion and "fake" religion. If we followed Stephen Prothero's advice, we would just add the opinions of Stephen Prothero, and other media-reinforced experts, to this incoherent mix of opinions about religion.

In conclusion, Stephen Prothero is one of our best and most brilliant historians of religion in North America. His great work in the study of religion, rather than his opinions, forms the basis of my assessment. Still, with respect, we might disagree.

He points to my methodological restraint, which I am happy to hear, in his reading, carries "a smile and a swagger," but he acknowledges that I tried to understand empathetically a "meaningful human enterprise" that had been consistently dehumanized in the media.

In trying to understand, but also paying due deference to my teachers in the academic study of religion, I invoked the phenomenological epoch \bar{e} . I believe I introduced a new term into this mix, which was ignored by my teachers and everyone else, as far as I know, until Prothero called attention to it, by saying that the "bracketing" should be temporary. In other words, as a matter of method, the suspension of personal bias, prejudice, or investment in religion that might allow for our entry into different ways of understanding religion could never be a way of life. No one can actually live in epoch \bar{e} . So, as Prothero reminds me, I said: "I stress the word temporarily here because after the strategy of epoch \bar{e} has been exercised, and the phenomenon we are exploring has appeared in as much clarity as we can bring to it, we can always go on (or back) to making moral judgments."

"Yet he never goes on, or back," Prothero complains, "he refuses to moralize." Yes, I still refuse to moralize, since it doesn't do anybody any good, because moralizing is just opinion. Moralizing is the easiest and most transparent form of self-interested, self-indulgent posturing. However seductive it might be to have your opinions broadcast in the media, your voice becomes only noise, a noise that is only slightly and almost imperceptively amplified by occasional and fleeting media attention. Still, it is just noise.

In the end, moralizing has no moral force. The academic study of religion, however, in its integrity, can be a moral enterprise. How? By theoretically disciplined and methodologically self-conscious teaching and learning about religion, religions, and religious diversity.

DEADLY EROS

by Pamela E. Klassen

Stephen Prothero delivers a compelling call to forgo fence-sitting and admit our judgments as scholars of religion. With his convincing prose, at once familiar and footnoted, Prothero invites his fellow scholars to join him in a renewed, public version of his idealistic debates in the college pub, where everyone could state his or her views, argue vociferously, and still go home as friends. He challenges Robert Orsi's advocacy of remaining in moral ambiguity by keeping one's views close to the chest—what Orsi called the "erotics of religious studies"—as a "tease," arguing that refusing to pass judgment is neither satisfying to one's reader, nor respectful of the agency of one's subject. Hovering in a state of perpetual epoch \bar{e} may be a natural state for the ambiguity-laden religious studies scholar, but it does little to get one's message out in a media-saturated world, according to Prothero.

Responding in the spirit of the amicable pub debate, but without the luxury of time and conversation, let me start by saying that at first I cautiously agreed with Prothero, especially in terms of his frustration with what feels like academic dithering when trying to convey carefully one's research to media and popular audiences. Then I read Robert Orsi's recent article in *Religious Studies News*, and the differences between Prothero and Orsi became clearer, and my agreement even more cautious. Unlike Prothero, whose call for scholarly openness was forged in his recent media encounters as the author of a book that analyzes (and exemplifies) the current Jesus trend, Orsi refuses to talk to the media altogether. With insight into the ways that Western "knowingness" and political "submission" work together to make some of the most important questions about religion unaskable and unanswerable in the confines of corporate media, Orsi offers an important challenge to the assumption of the benefits of media interaction for scholars. His challenge led me to realize that in a popular and university culture in which celebrity is so intensely valued, the erotics of religious studies must be understood at another level than that of the scholar and his or her "subject."

The erotic field widens once scholars themselves appear on television, on radio, and in print explaining religion to the public and their peers, while being watched and clipped by university public relations departments eager to have their institution's name attached to a desirable expert. As public figures (of varying degrees), scholars work within an "information economy" that creates desire for certain kinds of subjects and that desires the cachet of scholars from certain academic institutions more than others. Whether or not we pass judgment on our research subjects in our public speaking, we need to critically engage with the process of our own commodification in a media intense culture crowded with unexamined desires.

Perhaps because of the taint of commodification, the line between the respected voice and the overexposed pundit is a fine one, especially in the eyes of one's scholarly peers. It's a line that Orsi avoids altogether by his media boycott (except when he gets his own byline in the hopefully corporate-agenda-free RSN), and it's a line that remains invisible in Prothero's account, since he assumes that talking to the media is valuable. In fact, media exposure is Prothero's predominant example as an arena in which religious studies can become both relevant and a "moral enterprise." Given the primacy of media in creating desire in our culture, however, what are the

pitfalls of mixing it with the metaphor of the "erotics of religious studies" when trying to advance a strategy for "resuscitat[ing] religion [or religious studies?] as a moral enterprise"?

Prothero's and Orsi's shared language of an erotics of religious studies intimates that we transgress the lines of public and private selves in our work—toying with the frisson of the research subject as metaphorical lover, the academic expert as religious devotée. Framing as erotic our necessarily constant negotiation of what is public and private in the course of our work, however, demands an accounting of the ways gender, race, and exoticizing facilitate, constrain, or confound this frame. Especially in a culture in which media of all kinds—internet, newspaper, magazines, television, even radio—are increasingly normalizing the sexualization of just about everything, scholars need to be conscious of the rhetorical uses to which they put the erotic. The barrage of sexualized images on billboards, magazine covers, and internet pop-ups is a depressing byproduct of so-called "postfeminism." Newspaper front pages have displayed how the American military and government, using judgment-laden scholarship on "Arab culture," has explicitly combined religion, sexual degradation, and torture (while some took pictures) in its religiously informed war. The erotics of religious studies, if that's what we labor under, needs to understand not only that religion can be deadly, but also that eros, or something that passes for it, can be too.

Sorting out the significance of self-disclosure for religious studies demands acute self-consciousness about the responsibilities and limitations of our roles as commentators on the world, past or present. While Prothero may be right that most subjects can take it (or leave it) if we tell them what we think of them, Orsi is also probably right that telling the media what we really think about our subjects demands awareness of the consequences of being a sound bite for corporate media. Framing all of this thinking in the language of erotics may well be illuminating, whether referring to the college pub or the ethnographic field, but it can also obscure the ways that some scholars who disclose are given more legitimacy than others, and some subjects are more sought after (by both scholars and the media) than others. Self-disclosure demands self-criticism if eros is not to pass either into a narcissism of moral arrogance or a servitude to an insatiable media culture.

MAINTAINING EMPATHY

by R. Marie Griffith

Stephen Prothero urges religion scholars to "stop 'otherizing' ourselves" and to "divulge to our readers what we really think (however confused or provisional)." This is a worthy and eminently reasonable proposal as far as it goes. Ethnographers have been saying something to that effect for some years, as have feminists and other foes of purported objectivity. Odes to self-reflexive candor are ubiquitous, and no principled interpreter would dare confuse her views with those of her subjects. Most religion scholars I know, moreover, seem plenty adept at expressing opinions in print. So what's the problem? According to Prothero, our modes of engagement are too restrained.

Prothero argues that the typical posture in our field—exemplified by David Chidester and above all Robert Orsi—shies away from frank confrontation with religious "others" whose views we might find objectionable. Our niceness is enervating. We "enter empathetically into the worlds of

religious people in an attempt to understand the believers who inhabit them." We "tiptoe around the tough issues" rather than "tackle them head-on." We bracket ourselves in "splendid isolation," dancing around in an erotic haze of ethical suspension rather than meeting religion's challenges in the "rough and tumble of the real world." We do not measure up to the bravery of Prothero's preferred scholarly ideal, the historian David Chappell, who constructs a "timely rebuke to the timidity of Religious Studies" by "blasting," "sneering at," and "castigating" his analytic subjects for their inconsistencies and failures. Such heroic prose distinctly evokes the muscular Christianity about which Prothero has eloquently written in *American Jesus*. Recall the advertising mogul Bruce Barton, who in 1925 wrote that Jesus was not a "sissified . . . physical weakling" but rather someone whose "muscles were so strong that when He drove the money changers out, nobody dared oppose Him!" Indulge the errant? Pamper the pantywaist? No sir.

Now Steve is my friend, and I know him to be generous, decent, and perspicacious. Despite his gendered baiting of Orsi (whom he calls "gun-shy" in facing religion "when the contest is engaged and push comes to shove"), I rather doubt his critique turns on so crude a villain as the emasculation of religious studies. Nonetheless, I reject his claim that the well-developed, highly nuanced stance of critical empathy that varied religion scholars have sustained in recent years has left us wide-eyed and weak-kneed in the face of contemporary crises such as tragedies spawned by authoritarian spiritual leaders or religio-ethnic warfare. To relinquish or even play down empathy—the painstaking attempt to comprehend the experiences and passions of diverse others, eventuating in one's own moral transformation—is ultimately to accede to the shoot-from-the-hip, you're-with-us-or-against-us cowboy mentality embodied in today's neo-fundamentalist political climate. Prothero justly thrashes "prying reviewers" of *American Jesus* for their careless misconstruals of his own beliefs, but in the aftermath he seemingly plays into the desire of media interviewers and deadline-pressed journalists for snappy, provocative sound bites about, say, why Jesus would not drive a car unless he lived in Los Angeles. That's a very clever line. It's debatable, though, whether such repartee constitutes the robust response to current exigencies that Prothero intends to inspire in his fellow scholars.

Prothero's rebuke of discursive practices aimed at mutual understanding puts one strangely in mind of Christian "new traditionalists" such as Stanley Hauerwas who disavow the messy work of participating in democratic forms of questioning and deliberation outside the church. (I cannot overstress what a departure this is from Prothero's scholarly work to this point.) It is not simply that he here seems purposely to misrepresent his scholarly targets in a way reminiscent of Hauerwas's famous caricatures of his liberal democratic foes. More marked, in light of his minimization of efforts toward empathic understanding, is Prothero's conflation of self-disclosure with moral and intellectual clarity. Unbracketing our beliefs and worldviews for the academic or journalistic record, he suggests, will lead us finally to venture conclusive judgments about the hardest questions raised by religious groups and events such as Jonestown, Heaven's Gate, Waco, and 9/11. If religion scholars do not step up as authorities on such subjects, Prothero warns, a less scrupulous class of self-styled experts surely will.

True enough. But airing a pithy opinion on the topic du jour—The terrorists did not represent true Islam! Those American Christian prison guards in Iraq were hypocrites!—is not the same as contributing thoughtful insights to public knowledge, and a scholar must draw careful distinctions here. If she has not sought meaningful comprehension of the intricate circumstances

and complex actors generating the latest religious event, then she must admit lack of expertise, however impatiently she is pressed—by journalists, students, or colleagues—for simple, quotable estimations. Chronically spouting forth convictions is a recipe not for sustaining reasoned exchange but for dodging it and perhaps mystifying matters still further. It would have been interesting, in this light, for Prothero's commentary to have included Jeffrey Stout's latest book, *Democracy and Tradition*, which builds a meticulous case for the ethical role of religious discourse in participatory democracy.

Coming clean regularly about our own standpoints as scholars of religion is essential. I concur with Prothero on this point and in fact cannot think of any colleague who would dissent in principle from it, however often we may fail in practice. But I refuse to shrink empathy's effects down to ceremonious pretension or fainthearted moral paralysis. Empathy remains vital not so that we may pay "homage to Husserl, Orsi, Chidester, and all the ghosts of Religious Studies past," as Prothero coolly settles it toward the end of his essay. It abides because, rightly practiced, empathy is a strategy of concentrated encounter that leads to intelligibility and mutual recognition. It purges fuzzy thinking rather than rousing confusion or bland accord. It neither fosters solipsism nor impels conversion to the perspective of another; rather, empathy comprises a form of listening that enables a person more precisely to articulate his own differentiated stance. Without it, the religion scholar is just one more blustery talking head.