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Arnold - Diversity in the History of Religions - JCRT 2.2

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I want to begin my reflections on diversity with a true story. A few weeks ago I was shoveling out my driveway when a young African American man approached me. I instantly recognized him as an evangelist coming to save me. He first handed me a pamphlet with an idyllic picture drawn of a beautiful Paradisiacal landscape and everyone in the picture was smiling and having a wonderful and wholesome time. There are what looks to be an Asian mother and daughter petting a bear near a berry bush; a Latino family petting an African lion; an African or African American man and woman, as well as a white boy carrying food. This is all set in an idyllic landscape with farmlands and mountains in the background. And, of course it is a splendid fall day. Everyone is smiling.

3. I have seen pictures like this one and they give me a strange feeling of uneasiness simply because, in my experience people should stay away from bears and African lions and people who are deliriously happy for no apparent reason make me nervous. But what really made me mad was the title of the painting, "Life in a Peaceful NEW WORLD." The image that the young man gave me I will label a fantasy of multiculturalism. It is a very polite, cleaned-up fiction which we in the History of Religions might have jokingly referred to as the "take a Buddhist to lunch" notion of religious plurality. The reason it made me mad was that it was an image in which diversity of all sorts is stripped out of life.
4. The young man asked me if I thought that the world in the painting was possible. Inside I was fervently hoping that it was not possible, but instead I said that I thought it had already been a reality previous to America being labeled "New World." I wanted to throw him off by indicating that language of the New World was the problem rather than a solution.
5. He then asked if I believed in God. I said, yes of course, because I had no tangible knowledge of my creating myself and I believed in what I could see. I think he was unaccustomed to the pairing of a belief in God AND a belief in the material world. Then he asked if I believed that the Bible was the inspired word of God. I said yes, but added that I also thought he was an inspired work of God. At this point he opened his Bible.
6. Now wait a minute, I protested, before you start telling me what God says in that book you first have to explain to me how a text generated in the Ancient Near East, in a language other than the one in which you are reading has anything to do with you and me. Also, you have to demonstrate to me how this book, which has been used to justify the enslavement of your ancestors and the genocide of countless millions of Native Americans, as well as other people around the world, is now a solution to all those violations against humanity. How can your Bible be both?
7. I continued to say that he ought to check out other inspired words of God, the Quran and the Talmud, for example. He then looked at me with a tear in his eye, which I think was due to the cold, and asked if I sincerely believed in all those things. I said of course, because I was not an idiot. Then he said that if I believed all of that, then he couldn't talk to me. I said fine, but I hadn't started the conversation but instead had been minding my own business shoveling my driveway.

8. I wanted to begin with this story, not just as an example of the utility of the academic study of religion in getting rid of Jehovah's Witnesses from your front yard, but to indicate a problematic regarding diversity. From my perspective, which is currently a minority view, the discipline of the History of Religions has always been involved with promoting an understanding of diversity of religious perspectives; but it does so through processes of self-consciousness and self-transformation. Or, put differently, in the simple task of describing Other traditions in such a way that they are comprehensible and also have something to say about religious dimensions of human existence, one necessarily has to put at risk one's own understandings and orientations. That is to say that the Other, whichever traditions the Historian of Religions chooses (to use J.Z. Smith's formulation) will always defy being overdetermined by the scholars language. Or, to put it in Syracusan language the question of "What is religion?" (or, the cipher of religion) is implied in the Historian of Religion's work.
9. But, as I have said, mine is a minority opinion these days. At the start of every major symposium on comparative religion, or in the introduction of every big book having to do with religion lately there is an obligatory chastising of Mircea Eliade. He is labeled as a romantic, an essentialist, a crypto-theologian, a Nazi, a monarchist, etc., etc., etc. His work is seen by most in my discipline as an impediment to the enhancement of comparative method. My sense is that what drives comparativists nuts about Eliade is his appeal to something he called "the sacred." There is, therefore, something at stake.
10. My first meeting with Eliade was in 1983 in Boulder, Colorado, when I was working as a research assistant in David Carrasco's Mesoamerican Archive and Research Project. I was an undergraduate at the time and was just beginning my long fascination with Aztec traditions. Eliade was invited by Carrasco to view the photographs of the newly excavated Templo Mayor, the principal temple of the Aztec, which is located in the center of Mexico City. By this time Eliade was a feeble person, a breath of wind. As he sat looking at the slides of the excavated offering boxes he vigorously exclaimed that they were a "sacred language that contained in them the Aztec understanding of religion." Now, you have to understand that these are offering boxes that lay at the base of the temple which were crammed full of all kinds of ceremonial objects. I think he was looking at the most infamous one, offering #42, at the lowest level of which ocean shells were laid-out in an east-west direction. Above that were an assortment of animals of both land and sea, which were probably sacrificed during the ceremony. Above these were the skeletons of 47 children. Then finally, at the top, were about the same number of small figures of Tlaloc, the Mesoamerican god of rain and fertility. In other words, for a young, liberal minded undergraduate student this offering box was a horror! In spite of my visceral reaction to the Aztec, I thought that Eliade was probably right; those offering boxes were in fact a sacred language—one I didn't like. As I thought about it, the stratigraphies marked out by the archaeologists were also a cosmography. But I also knew that this language of the Aztec had no speakers. They had been silenced in various ways—the most pronounced of which was their conquest by the Spanish in 1521. So how was I to learn a language of a dead people, who were not my dead, but nonetheless significant dead people? Was I only to appeal to my own imagination or could I appeal to something tangible, something I could see, something obvious, in order to bring this language into appearance? Finally, why should I care about this language? Why would it speak to me, someone reared so far from the Aztec world?
11. These are urgent questions, or questions that are asked before, during and after one's research. The History of Religions gave me a method for doing this work and that method had to do

largely with the cipher of religion, or “the sacred.” It culminated in my book *Eating Landscape*. The cipher of religion was the one thing that Eliade insisted on throughout his life. After his major works like *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, *The Sacred and the Profane*, and *Myth of the Eternal Return*, he seems to have been moving away from the sacred as a firm reality and toward an understanding of the sacred as a necessary cipher. In his 1961 article “A New Humanism,” which was the first article of the first issue of *History of Religions* (the founding editors of this journal were Eliade, Joseph Kitagawa and Charles H. Long), he says, “[I]t is not enough to grasp the meaning of a religious phenomenon in a certain culture and, consequently, to decipher its ‘message’ (for every religious phenomenon constitutes a ‘cipher’); it is also necessary to study and understand its ‘history,’ that is, to unravel its changes and modifications and, ultimately, to elucidate its contribution to the entire culture. Thus, the historian of religions is in a position to grasp the permanence of what has been called man’s specific existential situation of ‘being in the world,’ for the experience of the sacred is its correlate. In fact, man’s becoming aware of his own mode of being and assuming his presence in the world together constitute a ‘religious’ experience” (*The Quest*, 8-9).

12. Paradoxically it is the cipher of “religion” as an experience of being in the world, or as Long would put it, as an orientation to what is real in an ultimate sense, which allowed me to simultaneously imagine the Aztec language as real. Real in the sense that it could reveal something about their world as well as pressure things in mine. If we refuse to acknowledge religion as a cipher then there would be no restraint, no epoché, and the languages of the Others, like Aztec, would be already determined and therefore of no consequence.
13. It is the issue of the relationship of the cipher of “religion” as a methodological tool and the language of reality, or materiality with which I want to conclude. As I told the young Jehovah’s Witness I believe in what I can see. But that in no way implies that I know about what I see. In contrast, many in my discipline seem to know about what they see. For many comparativists, religion is wholly definable. Ironically, both the Jehovah’s Witness and scholars who understand religion to be reducible to some social scientific reality, rely on firm and fixed languages of understanding. My impression, however, is that the Aztec, and Native American Religious traditions in general, do not. For example, I could be (and probably will be) shoveling my driveway from now until I die but I would be very surprised if someone came along from Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Longhouse tradition to convert me to their religion. I doubt I could even take them to lunch. If we were to reverse the context of the meeting and I were to go to the Onondaga Nation (as anthropologists do every season) and ask them to share with me what they believed, or asked them to tell me about their religion, I would probably be told politely that they did not know what I was talking about (i.e., that they do not have a religion). I suspect they would not talk to me, not simply because they would not understand my questions, but because I would be correctly identified as a colonist; I would reveal myself as less interested in finding an answer to an urgent question of mine, and more interested in controlling them. For many people, their sense of religiousness is not simply an ideological appendage, but is involved with how they are in the world. On the other hand, I would be and have been quite comfortable talking on and on with the Haudenosaunee about the meaning of obvious things in the world like food, medicines, the human body, men and women, trees, water, shells, etc., etc. In spite of all the confidence many comparativists place in the languages of the social sciences as the means for explaining religion, I still think that Eliade was right both in emphasizing the sacred and in locating that cipher in seemingly obvious material phenomena, because this approach works in both descriptive and contact

settings. It marks a respectful distance between the self and the other, which people, both living and dead, deserve. In my case, because I have developed these strange fascinations with and commitments to the horrors of the Aztecs, it more authentically represents the human dimensions of my work.

14. I have another example. I wrote on behalf of the Onondaga who are trying to stop gravel mining at Tully, which is a sacred site for them for a variety of reasons. To initiate my task I was invited to a meeting in which elders talked about their relationship to Onondaga Creek, which runs from Tully to Onondaga Lakes. They are afraid that the creek will become even more polluted due to the mining runoff from the gravel pits. Anyway, it was startling to me how profound the meanings of the creek were. As they talked, it became clear that the creek was the site of their identity, a site of ritual events, food, etc. Talking about the meaning of the creek, therefore, was much more profound than a conversation about "religion."
15. Many know me to be a fan of Kurt Elling. He was a colleague of mine at the University of Chicago, until he dropped out of graduate school (he was in religion and literature) to become a jazz vocalist. It was a good career move. His first three albums were nominated for Grammy Awards. Now he is a different kind of colleague. I would like you to listen to the song, "Esperanto," which Kurt sings so beautifully on his fourth album, *Live from Chicago*. (I have included, below, the lyrics, so far as I could understand them.)

"Esperanto," by Vince Mendoza and Kurt Elling, lyrics inspired by the poems of Pablo Neruda. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist. From the album *Live in Chicago*, '2000 Blue Note / Capitol Records. More information about Kurt Elling may be found at <http://www.kurtelling.com/>.

There's a secret that never dies,
 like a dance of hidden meanings that we never apprehend.
 There are questions just as old as time,
 and the answers that come never quite make amends.
 Even so when you look at time you can get a subtle feeling of the way it oughta be.
 Take a good look at your own real life,
 and you will see if you want what you've gotten to be.
 Its a hope, a sign, a measure of quiet rapture,
 of love and what might come after.
 Its letting go and letting no answer be an answer.

How did smoke learn how to fly?
 Where do birds go off to die?
 Why does coal sleep in darkness?
 Do dreams live in apartness?
 Is a number forever?
 Where's the soul of the water?
 How old is "Old November"?
 No one here can remember.
 If I die where does time go?
 Do the bees feel vertigo?
 To get love is there potion?
 Or is love only motion?

Holy lift, holy reading; holy gift, holy needing.
Holy sound, holy winding; holy spark animating.
Holy food, holy breathing; holy light interweaving.
Holy night, holy handwrite; holy flight, holy insight.
Holy sun, holy brother; holy moon, holy mother.
Holy dream, holy vision; holy scheme, holy mission.
Holding one to another; holy me, holy other.
Holy lives, holy pending; holy start, holy ending.

16. Kurt plays off the notion that there is a universal language, but that language can only indicate meanings with regard to the cipher of the human condition. Also, it is the nature of the cipher that generates creativity, imaginative recreations of reality. It is that play with our material condition, or with the other, which keeps me going. Unlike other programs of religion I think Syracuse welcomes that creativity out of diversity because it insists on the cipher of religion. Thanks.

Philip P. Arnold (Ph.D., University of Chicago, 1992) is Associate Professor of American Religions at Syracuse University and specializes in Native American traditions of the Americas with special emphasis on contact between Europeans and pre-Columbian Mesoamerican civilizations and Iroquois traditions. His work in Nahuatl texts and archaeological materials from central Mexico has focused on connections between indigenous rituals and their material world. His articles have included topics on the ritual symbolism of food, cultural contact in the development of religion in the Americas, and 'book culture' in Native communities. His current work highlights the local history and religious landscape of the Erie Canal and of New York State, utilizing the issues and insights of Haudenosaunee (i.e., Longhouse, or Traditional Iroquois). His books include *Eating Landscape: Aztec and European Occupation of Tlalocan* (University of Colorado Press, 1999) and *Sacred Landscapes and Cultural Politics: Planting a Tree* (Ashgate, 2001), which he co-edited with Ann Grodzins Gold.

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