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Source: *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 2006, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2006), pp. 392-423

Published by: Brill

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23551830>

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BRUCE LINCOLN'S "THESES ON METHOD": ANTITHESES

TIM FITZGERALD

1. *Introduction*

It is 10 years since the well-known scholar of Religion Bruce Lincoln nailed his theses to the door of the church, the church in this case being this journal ("Theses on Method" in *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* vol. 8 (1996): 225-27).¹ Bruce Lincoln is an important writer in Religious Studies, a prominent and fruitfully vocal member of the Divinity School at Chicago, where he is Caroline E. Haskell Professor of the History of Religions.

On his website at the University of Chicago he says about himself: "Bruce Lincoln emphasizes critical approaches to the study of religion. He is particularly interested in issues of discourse, practice, power, conflict, and the construction of social borders."

This language exemplifies Lincoln's facility to create an appearance of critical discourse analysis. I say appearance because the substance of his writing goes in the other direction. The anti-theses I present here claim that, while he appears to be engaged in a critical analysis, his work is actually re-embedding an uncritical and essentialized discourse on both religion and the secular. In this sense his writing performs important ideological work in reconfirming a network of categorical assumptions around which the world can remain polarized, while generating the appearance of a man hard at work deconstructing myths. In this article, I will justify this conclusion about at least some of Lincoln's work, mainly in the form of a point by point rebuttal of his

¹ I am grateful to Professor Lincoln for confirming by email that he still stands by these theses. I am also grateful to Greg Alles for carefully reading this article one stage back and making me more sensitive to the possible context of intellectual struggles within the Chicago Divinity School. However, as a reader of the "theses on method" and as someone not privy to these internal struggles, I have only been able to take the theses at face value, albeit in conjunction with some of his Professor Lincoln's other writings.

Theses. I will initially look at some other publications such as *Discourse and the Construction of Society* (1989) and *Holy Terrors* (2003).

Let me place Lincoln's *Thesis 9* at the beginning, because it is a methodological principle which I would be grateful if the reader would bear in mind, and to apply equally to *my own* questioning of Lincoln's scholarly discourse:

Thesis 9. Critical inquiry need assume neither cynicism nor dissimulation to justify probing beneath the surface, and ought probe scholarly discourse and practice as much as any other.

Antithesis: These antitheses are given in that same spirit, neither cynicism nor dissimulation, respect but something short of deference.

Observation on some of Lincoln's other publications

In my view, within the discourses on religion, for an approach to be genuinely critical, this has to mean that we take a critical approach to the very idea of "religion," the category itself, and its actual usages. This in turn requires a critical approach to those categories that are explicitly or implicitly imagined as distinct from religion, such as society, politics, economics and the secular. This may be a problem for Lincoln. Let me immediately illustrate his language of "religion" in a book which is widely, and rightly, admired, *Discourse and the Construction of Society* (1989). It is fitting to start here because the very title seems to announce, like his webpage, a critically aware writer who is deconstructing our taken-for-granted assumptions, our largely unquestioned categories such as "society" and "religion," and who is attempting to locate and contextualize meanings by focusing on discourses and the power matrices in which they operate.

Nevertheless, even here there is ambiguity, for he might mean that he is interested in the "Construction of Society" in the more literal sense, as though such a thing in general could exist, rather than the construction of "Society" as a problematic category, a word which for centuries in the English language had an entirely a different and un-reified usage (Bossy, 1982, 1985: 170-171). We certainly need a critical analysis of the construction of "Society," but this is what Lincoln gives us:

As has been long recognized, any society, even the smallest, is a complex amalgam of multiple subunits—clans, lineages, socioeconomic classes, political factions, age groups, genders, and so on that are only imperfectly

bonded together to form the total social unit. Such integration, which is necessary for the smooth and harmonious functioning of society, is regularly sought and accomplished through numerous overlapping systems and mechanisms—among them law, pedagogy, etiquette, aesthetics, and ideology, particularly religious ideology. It is, in fact, the particular competence of religion for achieving broad social integration that led Durkheim to consecrate his masterwork, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, to the study of religion, and the Durkheimian tradition—which has been so influential in sociological, anthropological, and historical scholarship—has enriched our understanding of the means whereby religion powerfully promotes social cohesion and sentiments of common belonging (1989: 89).

It is clearly true that Durkheim was concerned with “religion”—after all, who could deny the very title?² But Durkheim was arguably after something more interesting, that is to say classification systems and *representations*, and the language of “religious” representations was a misfortune that runs like a theoretical rift through his book. However, my main reason for quoting at length is to show how “religion” gets reified here, as a distinct system having some problematic relation to “society” as a whole; at one point as a special kind of ideology (“ideology, particularly religious ideology”) which implies other “non-religious” ideologies; at another point where he talks about “the special competence of religion for achieving broad social integration,” which is virtually a personification of religion, talking about religion as though it is an agent that “achieves”; and again “religion promotes social cohesion.”

Holy Terrors (2003) is a little ambiguous about the status of our English language categories, especially in its fourth through sixth chapters. In a fast moving, wide ranging discussion, Lincoln distributes any number of ideologies and movements in every continent at all periods of history into pre-arranged categories with the dexterity of a card ace, expertly shuffling the pack and dealing. This has the effect of embedding English language categories as though they are static and eternal verities, as I shall go on to show in more detail.

In some passages, he makes potentially critical observations about the limitations of “religion” as a key category, for example in an extended footnote where he discusses the difficulty of distinguishing between religions and so-called secular ideologies such as Marxism, Freudianism, nationalism and anarchism (2003: 129, ft. 10).

² I note in passing Lincoln’s use of the verb “to consecrate” here. He may have intended irony; but one cannot help noticing that his own (perfectly correct) usage illustrates that ordinary usage subverts the essentialist distinction between secular and religious meaning which he upholds. See his thesis 5, “Reverence is a religious, not a scholarly virtue . . .”

In these chapters in *Holy Terrors*, Lincoln contextualises the idea of "religion" historically, and in the process seems to deconstruct it, or at least to be in a position where it would make sense for him to do so. Lincoln is concerned with the relation between the category "religion" and the hegemonic aspects of capitalism and colonialism in these chapters, and he has many valid and interesting things to say about the colonial context.³ In some places he discusses the difficulty of distinguishing between "secular" and "religious" ideologies in potentially interesting ways (such as 129, footnote 10, a point I return to below).

However, his treatment on the whole essentializes and universalises English language categories as though they are eternal truths fixed in the nature of things. His potentially useful distinction between "Maximalist" and "Minimalist" models of culture (2003: 59), like the distinction between religion and the secular that it implies, tends towards a static and essentialist model of alternating phenomena, like an eternal duo fox-trotting together through the whole of human history. It is assumed, without critically reflective comment, to represent *generic* religion, and his model building is designed to throw a very wide net, in my view indiscriminately wide, and gather up a whole range of different movements, ideologies and practices within one "religion" basket which are themselves all distinguished from *secular* ideologies and practices. Historically speaking: Who invented these two big arbitrary baskets?

As I mentioned before, Lincoln seems to hover on a genuinely critical insight. Nevertheless, the appearance is more than the substance. For example, in an extended footnote he says:

To my mind, one of the most difficult of all questions is assessing the extent to which "secular" ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—Marxism, anarchism, psycho-analysis, and the like—are significantly different from religious ideologies, and to what extent the undeniable differences between these two modes of ideology are more superficial than substantive. What can be observed is that until relatively recently in human history, all ideologies were explicitly religious. Within the last two centuries, however, such developments as the emergence of the modern nation-state, mass communications, and industrial production have created situations in which ostensibly nonreligious ideologies have come into being and flourish alongside of religious ideologies. One must note, however, that these new ideologies still possess powerful mythic, ritual, and soteriological

³ There are indeed a number of discussions which overlap to some extent with points I have made in my own book *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000). But the convergences turn out to be temporary and accidental, and our different concepts of critical analysis take us in different directions.

dimensions, whatever their position towards “religion” per se. At the very least, we may thus be justified in calling them “para-religious.” (129, footnote 10.)

It is useful to take note of the actual usages in Lincoln’s paragraph here. Small signs can be significant, if that isn’t a tautology. What is “religion per se?” Why does he put the first “secular” and the final “religion” in inverted commas, as though to sensitively separate them and indicate them as problems, when he is using these terms uncritically as fundamental and universal organizing categories throughout his book? If these “secular” ideologies are so similar in so many important ways to “religions,” then what are the “undeniable differences” between them that he asserts in passing? How far does the term “para-religious” differ from the widely used terms quasi-religious, pseudo-religious, religious-like phenomena; and what analytical weight does Lincoln want to attribute?⁴ He says that “until relatively recently in human history, all ideologies were explicitly religious.” How does he know that? This is not a hypothesis based on observations, but promulgation, a proclamation! How were they explicated as “religious,” in for example, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, different African languages or even in English? For even in English until quite recently nobody would have described Christianity as a “religious ideology.” It is a striking example of the way in which modern English terminology, one is tempted to say triumphalist English terminology, is simply proclaimed as having universal validity.

Most importantly, if the secular ideologies that he mentions are similar to religions, then: what about the ideology of liberal capitalism? For it finances our scholarly productions and makes ideologically hegemonic the belief in scholarly objectivity. Are our own values, practices and procedures quasi-religious, like Marxism or psycho-analysis?

⁴ Lincoln uses the term “quasi-religious” to characterise nationalism, viz. “the nation can acquire a quasi-religious aura of its own, becoming the moral, spiritual, and ritual community that calls forth the highest devotion of its members, imbuing their lives with meaning and purpose.” (63) On the other hand, he uses the term “the religious nation” (65) mainly in distinction to the “secular state,” though there may also be an implicit distinction with the minimalist secular nation in which religion has been rolled back and relatively marginalized. At any rate, whereas nations can be the objects of religious devotion, the religious nation is one of those that has a different religion from nationalism, quite possibly a religion that would categorise worship of the nation as irreligious? I have discussed these tortuous attempts to preserve the validity of ideologically-loaded categories as though they are neutral analytical ones in *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000).

What we have here, I contend, is a wobble in which here Lincoln has half-heartedly left the normal safe cover of unquestioned assumptions about the validity of our categories that are regnant largely unchallenged throughout his work, has flirted played in a footnote with the dangerous idea that a whole range of ideologies which are usually categorized as secular themselves look suspiciously like what in other contexts we prefer to call religions, and has retreated back to the magisterial position of commander of the field by re-shuffling the pack a little and dealing them briskly into a pseudo-category, "para-religious." Unfortunately, this leaves the problem unsolved.

In my view, if he had taken those observations to their logical conclusion, he would have rendered the distinction between the religious and the secular useless from any presumed point of view of objective analysis or description, and usefully clarified it as a rhetorical and ideological distinction serving particular power interests. Such an insight would have required him to ask questions about his own power position in his assignment of vast swathes of human practices into their proper places. Sometimes he does seem to be saying something like this, especially in the context of his discussion of European and American colonialism (82). I therefore initially took his apparently critical stance as a critical one. But this is actually misleading, for Lincoln does not allow these observations to distract him from his more fundamental intention to construct generic religion and its distinction from the secular as sound descriptive categories for objective model-building of all societies at all times (see his models: 66-72). He does not seem interested in the idea that without reified "religion," his own myth of scholarly rationality (of the essential difference between doing history and being religious)—his own intension of bringing us objective Enlightenment through the building of increasingly elaborate and comprehensive models⁵—would be impossible.

That Lincoln's intention is more in the direction of essentializing and naturalizing the religion-secular dichotomy can be seen from something he says near the beginning of the book, where he indicates that he is still searching for "the nature of religion," as though religion has a nature, as when he says in its preface: "This book represents my attempt to think through the nature of religion, to identify its core components

⁵ He has four elaborate models on 66, 69, 70 and 72 which are designed to incorporate as many "religious phenomena" as possible in a comprehensive, universalizing scheme.

(discourse, practice, community, institution), and to specify its historically changing relation to other aspects of culture (particularly the ethical, aesthetic, and political) (2003: ix)."

Why should we assume that religion has a nature distinct from the aesthetic, the ethical or the political? Do all these categories refer to things with natures? If discourse, practice, community and institution are what constitute the core components of the nature of religion (its essence), how does religion differ from secular history, or from secular politics, or from secular anything you like? Do they not all have discourse, practice, community and institution? We come back to this point, because Lincoln claims quite explicitly in his "Theses on Method" (1996: 225-227) to be able to specify the essential difference, but it is an illusion generated by the mystifying effects of his own brand of transcendentalism. My point is that he is not doing anything essentially non-religious himself. We only think he is because, well, because we keep telling ourselves that there is this essential difference between what western⁶ scholars do and what "the religious" (such as vicars, brahmins and imams) do.

2. "*Theses on Method*"

Lincoln assumes that the secular standpoint from which he and I both view the world is essentially different from a "religious" perspective. Yet the "Theses on Method", both the substance and the style of delivery, seem rather to demonstrate the opposite, which is that the secular is itself an ideological perspective, different from other perspectives in some significant respects, but not essentially different from some great class of "religious" perspectives over which Lincoln seem to think he has a superior and more rational viewpoint.

By publishing his views in the form of theses, nailed up, as it were, in a public forum and reproduced in other public sites⁷ Lincoln has tacitly invited someone to produce some antitheses, and this is a convenient way to explore the way his ideological discourse gets naturalized in the

⁶ By "western" I here refer to any scholar of whatever origin who is thinking, writing and representing the world in European, and particularly English language, categories.

⁷ I saw them first on Russ McCutcheon's website at the Department of Religious Studies, University of Alabama, where they had been placed for pedagogic purposes.

very formulation of his methodology. My replies are usually longer than his theses, and in some respects I admire his brevity, which I cannot match. Lincoln has, with considerable courage, set up a challenge and I have risen to it; or perhaps I have fallen into a trap. We will see. Though I profoundly disagree with what I think he is saying, I respect him for saying it, and for making himself a target, which is the sign of a generous spirit, infinitely preferable to hiding our meanings in obfuscation, or not being prepared to consider the problematic issues with our practice at all. This to me is the essence (if I can use that term without too much irony, given what follows) of democratic debate, that one sets up a thesis and invites others to knock it down. It is easier to knock down than to put together. Hopefully, a synthesis might then become visible. If my antitheses are at all valid—and it is for others to decide—Lincoln deserves the greater credit for providing a forum for debate in the first place.

I said that I respect the succinctness and brevity of his theses. However, there is also a danger to being too brief. Complex ideas need explaining clearly, and some of his theses, which at first reading seem meaningful if difficult, turn out to be more difficult than meaningful. In fact, they are cryptic and have much of the stamp of what are frequently categorized as *religious* utterances, a mixture of prophetic pronouncement and koan-like evasion of clear meaning. I may have misrepresented Lincoln's intended meanings as a result. If so, then I am sorry, and he will have the chance to set the record straight.

Thesis 1. The conjunction "of" that joins the two nouns in the disciplinary ethnonym "History of Religions" is not neutral filler. Rather, it announces a proprietary claim and a relation of encompassment: History is the method and Religion the object of study.

Antithesis: First we should be clear about the kind of speech act that this is. This annunciation and "proprietary claim" of "encompassment," to use Lincoln's own self-revelatory words, is not itself an example of historical method. In the absence of any further discussion of what kind of history "History of Religions" might be, and what historically contextualized nuance the grand abstraction "Religion" might possess, then we find ourselves in the realm of rhetoric. Whatever else history or the study of history might be, it is concerned less with abstract pronouncements of transcendental principles, and more with evidence and contextualized inquiry, of the kind which he has so well executed for

myth (1999).⁸ Yes, there are principles that can be articulated of a general sort; yet the problem with all of Lincoln's theses is that they claim to annunciate general principles without ever giving historiographical context to the claims embedded in them.⁹ In that sense they are a walking contradiction. In his blanket and un-nuanced distinction between two different kinds of discourses, his "Theses on Method," with unintended irony, belong more in the Religion basket than the secular historiographical one.

Thesis 1 is an ideologically motivated claim about what Lincoln believes ought to be the case. It is not a statement of neutral fact. It is not itself a proposition claiming factuality, or an observation claiming objectivity. Rather it is a rhetorical pronouncement that reflects a power relationship of the kind "I have decided." Neither History nor Religion are anything except what people say they are. Usually it is power that controls meanings, as Lincoln himself states in his *Thesis 8*. Yet the implication of this rhetorical pronouncement and the ones that follow is that "History" or its methods ought to be imagined as standing in the real world, which historians such as Lincoln neutrally and painstakingly observe. "Religion" is the "object" observed, and about which the secular scholar will make his authoritative pronouncements. The practice of History is rational, located in the real world and is thus in a position to study the transcendental imaginings of Religion. While Religion may claim the superior ground, historical method *is* the superior ground. History discovers objective truths. Religion dreams what it merely believes to be the truth.

There are many things that need unpacking in his terse claim, and the reader will expect the unpacking to follow thesis by thesis. The most important things to unpack are the key terms themselves, "history," meaning a method for gaining knowledge which is characterized by empirical rationality, and "religion," which is an object for the historian to study. We will see in the following theses that Lincoln does specify what he means by Religion, but at a level of abstraction, vagueness and non-specificity that is thoroughly unhistorical. This is one of the loose threads that unravels the entire text.

⁸ Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

⁹ This relates also to Greg Alles's point about the possible conflict of intellectual interests internal to the Divinity School at Chicago. If one was able to re-integrate the theses into their historical power context, their trajectory might become clearer.

In *Thesis I* Lincoln claims that Religion is an object: "Religion the object of study." Yet in the same thesis he also refers to Religions as multiple, as in "History of Religions." Is Religion one object of study, or are they multiple objects of study? This is a crucial question, for Lincoln claims to be interested in the one or the other as a thing (a type of discourse but still "the object of study") located in the empirical world. The problem is that "religion," or "religions," are themselves English language categories which are not intuitively embedded in the natural order of things but are ideological constructs. These constructs do not have essential meanings, even when they claim to; they are contingent and contestable categories which reflect a history of actual power relations. In other words there are multiple historical discourses on Religion and religions and until we know what Lincoln has in mind then his theses transcend any empirical verification. This is a strange position for someone extolling the primacy of historical method.

In *Holy Terrors*, as we saw, Lincoln at times questions his own essentialization of religion and its distinction from "secular" ideologies such as Marxism, anarchism, Freudianism and nationalism. What he had to say there about the principles of the French Revolution seems especially significant, because many of the principles upon which our secular societies are based, and by which they are legitimized, were most clearly articulated by the French Revolutionaries, and before them the English and the American. The chief actors to these revolutions, "saw such doctrines as the rights of man, popular sovereignty, and the social contract as no less sacred—in fact, much more so—than the divine right of kings," and he goes on to quote Christopher Dawson that the revolutionaries in France "dreamt of a spiritual republic based on moral foundations" (Quoted in Lincoln, 2003: 87). One might equally say the same things about the English and American revolutionaries too.¹⁰

This is interesting and important, but it doesn't help us to understand what is and what is not religious in Lincoln's thinking, for our own secular societies are supposedly based on these sacred principles.

¹⁰ The idea of "civil religion," as developed by Bellah (1970: 168-189), for example, could be read as recognition of this point. Bellah has to argue for the legitimacy of interpreting the stories of the founding of the colonies, the escape from persecution, the Revolution, as the myths of the civil religion; the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as "religious" documents or scriptures; Washington as "the divinely appointed Moses" (1970: 176). However, in Bellah's writing it sometimes isn't clear if the idea of "religion" as in "civil religion" is an analytical category by which to pursue an inquiry, or the object of enquiry itself. What he in effect does is to extend the sphere of "religion" into "the secular," to

After all, if we reflect on his distinction between cultures in which religion is maximal, and those in which it is minimal, it is in the latter that secular (in the sense of non-religious) principles are central. Yet these turn out to be themselves religious, or, in his escape clause, “para-religious.” What we seem to have then is a dominant set of ideological principles, the religious secular, which oppose and marginalize the previous set, the religious religious.

Thesis 2. The relation between the two nouns is also tense, as becomes clear if one takes the trouble to specify their meaning. Religion, I submit, is that discourse whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal. History, in the sharpest possible contrast, is that discourse which speaks of things temporal and terrestrial in a human and fallible voice, while staking its claim to authority on rigorous critical practice.

Antithesis: This essentialization of both Religion and non-religious Historical Discourse, which he here claims are in “sharpest possible contrast” to each other, transcends the very historiographical method that I had thought Lincoln wished to extol. It merely restates an ideological position that is already hegemonic in western societies, but which is also counter-intuitive, as I will show. It claims that, though we historians may be fallible, at least we have critical practice. But where is the human fallibility that would come from historically contextualizing these meanings? There is no historically nuanced critique of the categories religion and history here, or their discourses. They are uncritically built into Lincoln’s theses by proclamation, not by critical argument. Putting aside for a moment the humility implied by “I submit,” we have the proclamation: “Religion . . . is that discourse whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent.” This is a God-like generalization that transcends historical inquiry. Religion in itself is nothing. It is a highly contested construct and requires contextualized, historical unpacking. “History, in the sharpest possible contrast, is that discourse which speaks of things temporal and terrestrial.” This is not a critical

the extent that it becomes difficult to know what stands outside religion. The more that is included in religion, then the less is included in non-religion or the secular, in which case the distinction becomes increasingly uninformative, irrelevant, and contradictory. Why not then adopt an idea of Encompassing Religion, in which Religion means Christian Truth, and there is no discrete separated domain called “the secular” in the sense of non-religious? This immediately forces on us the contradictory paradigms both derived from our Christian history and both present in our discourses, the idea of privatized religions being predominant.

practice; it is a statement, or a pair of statements, of the kind "Unicorns have one horn" and "Bligs have three tongues."

His characterization of religion as a transcendental discourse is itself transcendental to the point of disappearance from view. The same can be said for his characterization of history as a discourse. It is an unintended irony that his claims about the nature of historical discourse should themselves be so a-historical. In his theses he has plucked abstractions out of the air, such as "contingent" and "eternal," and distributed them into two baskets with not the slightest attention to historical usage. We think we know what "eternal" means until we think about it a bit more, and then we realize that it means "non-temporal." Then when we think about what we mean by "temporal," we realize that it means "not eternal." To give these metaphysical abstractions any real content, we have to look to see how people have used them historically. When Lincoln does that, as in *Holy Terrors*, we find that the foundation principles of our modern secular societies have been sanctified by violent revolution and sacrifice. In that sense theology is a more exact science than Lincoln's. This point comes back with renewed force in the next thesis.

Thesis 3. History of religions is thus a discourse that resists and reverses the orientation of that discourse with which it concerns itself. To practice history of religions in a fashion consistent with the discipline's claim of title is to insist on discussing the temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human, and material dimensions of those discourses, practices, and institutions that characteristically represent themselves as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, and divine.

Antithesis: All the loose terms with which he claims to differentiate between religion and the secular are contestable, and have been contested in historically available documents. What actually do the words "temporal," "eternal," "transcendent," "human," "spiritual," "material" and "divine" mean when they are grandly distributed out of any historical context? Are their meanings intuitively certain? Are they universals or local English language constructs? Lincoln is here merely recycling a series of empty dichotomies that displace each other in an endless deferral of meaning: the temporal as against the eternal; the human as against the spiritual and the divine; the situated as against the transcendent, and so on. What is most notable about these terms is their vagueness, their ambiguity, or their polyvalence. They do not give us any clear semantic content, but merely define each other by what the other is not. How does the temporal differ from the eternal? What is "matter" and how does it differ from "spirit"? How does the human differ from

the divine? Can the divine also be human, and if not then why not? What is human, and what would be inhuman or nonhuman? Is the divine different from the spiritual, or the same? Who, and by what authority, is to decide these issues? Putting aside the problems of translating these terms into Urdu, Chinese, Arabic or Russian, or any of the National or official languages of the Republic of Mali: French, Bamanankan, Bomu, Ticyaxo Bozo, Toro So Dogon, Maasina Fulfulde, Hasanya Arabic, Mamara Senoufo, Kita Maninkakan, Soninke, Koyraboro Senni Songhay, Syenara Senoufo, Tamasheq, Xaasongaxango, the meanings of these terms in English alone are far from clear. I am not convinced that we have two sharply contrasted discourses here. What we have are abstractions floating above the real world of actual usage in historically documented discourses. We should then ask, what is the ideological purpose behind this binary metaphysical discourse of Lincoln's theses?

Thesis 4. The same destabilizing and irreverent questions one might ask of any speech act ought be posed of religious discourse. The first of these is "Who speaks here?" i.e., what person, group, or institution is responsible for a text, whatever it's putative or apparent author. Beyond that, "To what audience? In what immediate and broader context? Through what system of mediations? With what interests?" And further, "Of what would the speaker(s) persuade the audience? What are the consequences if this project of persuasion should happen to succeed? Who wins what, and how much? Who, conversely, loses?"

Antithesis: Let me repeat the first part of the crucial question that Lincoln is urging us to ask here: "Who speaks here?" i.e., what person, group, or institution is responsible for a text, *whatever it's putative or apparent author*" [My italics]. There is a sound methodological point here, which is that people, especially powerful people, do not just speak for themselves; they represent interests, often of powerful institutions, even though they are not always or even normally conscious of it. Let us then take Lincoln's advice and ask these same destabilizing and irreverent questions of Lincoln himself. What answers will he give? We know that Lincoln speaks as a member of the Divinity School at Chicago whose webpage statement of *History and Mission* gives us some good indications of its ideological leanings. Of course it does not follow from this that any scholar, let alone one as brilliant and committed as Lincoln, agrees with the dominant representations of his School. We are all making compromises the whole time because we all have to survive. Even if Lincoln would not like his own conscious intentions to be confused

with the ideological background of the School he represents,¹¹ he can hardly object given his own methodological instructions about the correct way to approach a text, viz. "*whatever its putative or apparent author*". The first President of the university, William Rainey Harper, was a member of the Baptist clergy. He believed, says the Mission statement of the School,

that a great research university ought to have as one central occupation the scholarly study of religion, to prepare scholars for careers in teaching and research, and ministers for service to the church. These commitments led him to bring the Morgan Park Seminary of the Baptist Theological Union to Hyde Park, making the Divinity School the first professional school at the University of Chicago.

We can see then that the school which gives Lincoln an authoritative platform and access to one of the largest publishers in the world, plus a leading role in an important journal called *History of Religions*, was founded in part to prepare ministers for service to the church. There is no clear sense here that historical scholarship and faith commitment need to be kept separate. "The School has served for decades as the largest single institutional educator of faculty members for theological seminaries, departments of theology, and programs in religious studies across the spectrum of educational institutions that comprise American higher education."

Lincoln's Divinity School then has a mission to disseminate certain practices and understandings into the education system, as well as the church pulpits. We know, of course, that there are many distinguished scholars with different specialties at the school, and that "Cross-disciplinary work . . . is strongly encouraged"; but this does not help us to understand what is meant by "the scholarly study of religion," though we can get an idea by the predominance of instruction in World Religions alongside the central Christian Theological and Mission concerns. However, it is not an uncommon realization that "the study of religions," and indeed the concept of "religion" itself, is fundamentally a

¹¹ I am not privy to the inner debates within the Divinity School, and it may well be that Lincoln contests various positions and policies about which I am unaware. I myself am caught up in contradiction by the fact that I work in a department of religious studies which to some extent deploys similar phenomenological rhetoric. But my point follows from his thesis and is itself a methodological one, viz. that the rhetoric of the Divinity School has an ideological relationship to his own secularist rhetoric. They make each other possible. There is an alternative to Lincoln's dogmatic and essentialist secularism, viz that we consciously critique and historicize our own standing.

Christian based or Christian derived category and operation: “. . . the School is privileged to number among its alumni a long and distinguished list of ministers, and continues this tradition today through a Master of Divinity (M.Div.) curriculum that prepares ministers for a life of service to the public church.”

Apart from this (for Lincoln) embarrassing disregard for the distinction he claimed to announce in his earlier thesis, the school that provides Lincoln with a powerful and prestigious pulpit from which to issue his proclamations on method promotes, the website goes on to say, “systematic research and inquiry into the manifold dimensions of religion.” This is the language of comparative religion, and it seems to construct an object every bit as mystical as the Real Presence. Is it one or many? We know from the listings on the web page that there are lots of different “religions” being taught at Chicago. But “the manifold dimensions of religion” suggests that it is all One. Is this the one in the many, and the many in the one? How should we read this piece of metaphysics?

Nowhere are these issues discussed or even mentioned in Lincoln’s “Theses on Method.” It may be that the Divinity School webpage somewhere or at some time contains or contained a critical genealogy of the category “religion”;¹² but the impression I received from the visit was that “religion” is floated as an eternal feature of the natural human world. “It” is embedded in human nature and human society. It is this myth of “religion” that is uncritically multiplied in thousands of text books disseminated throughout the education system, and Lincoln’s own School is one of the major disseminators of this mysterious object which has dimensions and, no doubt, manifestations. That religion has “manifold dimensions” suggests the idea of a mystical entity which can be approached from different directions. It embeds the idea of a reified we-know-not-what into the Divinity School Mission Statement almost before one can be conscious enough to challenge it. It suggests an essence which appears under different guises, a substance with different accidents, or a concealed supernatural reality with different cultural manifestations. It is understandable that a School of Divinity might want to propagate and missionize a myth. Given his promulgation of the theses on method, how is it that this object of study is uncritically

¹² Greg Alles has pointed out to me that Martin Riesebrodt’s article on the category of religion that appears in the Kippenberg Festschrift was originally posted on the Divinity School website.

taken for granted by Lincoln himself? Why has he failed to notice his own institutional context? Why is he not engaged in its critique?

In the *Overview of Curriculum* section of the Divinity School's webpage the enquirer is assured that students will study "religion in all times and places approached from multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives." Underlying the School's mission, then, is a concept of religion as a multi-dimensional reality that manifests in all societies at all historical and presumably pre-historical times. The school that gives Lincoln his prestigious status as a representative of the study of religion has as its central mission the propagation of this uncritical and highly ideological construct of ubiquitous "religion" or "religions." Lincoln may intend to be its critic, but my contention is that he inadvertently normalizes the reified world religions paradigm by essentializing the religion-secular distinction.

Lincoln asks about the authors of texts "To what audience? In what immediate and broader context? Through what system of mediations? With what interests?" The Divinity School's stated mission, which is the propagation and dissemination of this idea, is apparently highly successful. Look how it finds its way into school text books! Here is one audience for mystification, the children and their teachers! One popular text that is widely disseminated in American schools is by Hopfke and Woodward, *Religions of the World* (9th Ed. 2004). With no hint of irony the authors list their organizing categories as Basic Religions, Neanderthal Religion, Cro-Magnon Religion, Neolithic Religion, Native American Religions, African Religions, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Baha'i. Here the manifestations of religion are ubiquitous in time and space, as though embedded as a "type" of human practice and institution in the natural order. There is a total lack of historical consciousness here. There is no analysis of the historical genesis and contextualized meanings of the central category. It is assumed, an object of faith. I am not accusing Lincoln personally of authorizing these text books and the mythic constructions that they promote under the guise of secular objectivity. He may well abhor these reifications. Yet it is highly ambiguous, for they are not inconsistent with the essentialized dichotomy which he is promoting between secular history and its object of "encompassment," religion or religions, which Lincoln appears to believe have existed at all times and in all places. Nor do I assume (and I repeat myself here) that Lincoln necessarily and explicitly approves of the contentious world religions model

that his faculty seem to legitimate on its webpage. Yet my analysis of his writings suggests an uncomfortably close correspondence. My point follows Lincoln's methodological point: that one needs to look behind the single voice to the institutional context. There is a relationship between the production of these ubiquitous objects and Lincoln's dogmatic secularism of which he seems to be unaware.

Lincoln asks "What are the consequences if this project of persuasion should happen to succeed?" One consequence is that the distinction between the secular practice of the History of Religion which, according to Lincoln, is defined by its concern with the contingent and the situated, and which Lincoln claims has an encompassing relation to the myths of religions which are its objects of study, itself turns out to be a myth. The Divinity School for which Lincoln is a representative has as its mission the construction and propagation of a myth itself! A myth about a timeless entity that manifests in all times and in all places, like an incarnating god!

The broader audience beyond the missionizing of the education sector, apart from the church congregations who no doubt are being asked to meditate on, and perhaps even mediate, Christian-Muslim relations, presumably includes the media and the politicians. There is no space here to analyze the arguably disastrous effects on human communications that this Christian derived myth of ubiquitous religion has had and is having. Nevertheless, if we look at the way Lincoln himself constructs this myth in these theses, we can hazard some guesses.

Lincoln pushes on relentlessly with further questions. "What are the consequences if this project of persuasion should happen to succeed? Who wins what, and how much? Who, conversely, loses?" These are indeed leading questions. Perhaps one would need to look at the history of colonialism for at least part of the context for the development of this dangerous essentialization of mythical religions. Lincoln has some useful things to say about Colonialism and the ideological function of missions in *Holy Terrors* (2003: 82) Even so, colonialism is nowhere mentioned (as far as I can see) by his School Mission statement. I am not suggesting that Lincoln himself consciously approves of Christian missions of any kind, and he may well have hostility to them. My point follows his *thesis 4*. One cannot understand the full import of what someone is saying until you can place it in a wider power and institutional context. There are unintended consequences to what people proclaim. I am arguing that there is a significant connection between the construction of religions and Lincoln's proclamation that the secular is essentially different. What I suggest a critical thinker like Lincoln

should be doing (and I do not mean to sound arrogantly patronizing in suggesting it) amongst the many questions that are raised by the propagation of the myth of religion, is to take another. In an act of self-critique, and a recognition of his own considerable prestige and rhetorical power. Lincoln might have applied the implications of this thesis to his own (perhaps reluctant position as a public legitimator of institutional interests. He might, for instance, have taken a closer look at the colonial activities of Baptist, Methodist and similar missionaries since the early days right up to the present, in their systematic attempts to take a particular form of Christianity to colonized indigenous peoples around the world. He might ask "what interests were being served there?"

The answer is no doubt a complex one. Many missionaries were highly ethical and compassionate people who wanted to bring to people that they imagined to be deprived something of their own spiritual and material advantages. Some were explicitly anti-colonialist. One is not looking for a simplistic sense in which missionaries spoke with one voice in unison with each other, and with the multiple interests that were being played out in complex colonial situations. One view is that the dissenting sects, one of which has clearly had an important role to play in founding the Divinity School which is Lincoln's institutional location, wanted not only to save the souls of heathens lost in superstition but to *civilize* the natives. They also often wanted to abolish slavery and replace it with wage labor, for example in Jamaica where they ran into trouble with the slave owners and the expatriate Anglican establishment.¹³ Another example is provided by David Livingstone, who if not precisely a Baptist could not have been far from it. Isaac Schapera, in his introduction to Livingstone's *African Journals 1853-1856*, explained Livingstone's rapturous reception back in Imperial Britain primarily by his geographical discoveries, which showed that Africa "was not a useless desert but a land of incalculable commercial possibilities" (Schapera, 1963: pxii).¹⁴ The legitimation of "secular" rationality could be the interest that is being served by the uncritical promotion

¹³ See Mary Turner, "The Colonial State, Religion and the Control of Labour in Jamaica," in (eds.) H. B. Hansen & Michael Twaddle, *Christian Missionaries and the State in the Third World*, Oxford: James Curry, Athens, US: Ohio University Press, 2002: 17-29.

¹⁴ I do not mean to imply that Lincoln himself would want any of these things. But the methodological principle that he is making suggests—and I agree I believe correctly—that what we say makes things happen that go beyond our conscious intentions.

of the myth of “religions.” It is at least worth discussing in a critical approach to the history of “religion.”

Thesis 5. Reverence is a religious, and not a scholarly virtue. When good manners and good conscience cannot be reconciled, the demands of the latter ought to prevail.

Antithesis: Here is a writer who knows what the religious virtues, as opposed to the non-religious virtues, the scholarly ones, are. Is this not another arbitrary technique for embedding an essentialisation of the differences between the scholarly secular academy and the religious? This thesis makes another a-historical and decontextualized pronouncement, and is not itself an example of the virtues of historiography. It represents an arbitrary technique for legislating meaning, and thereby embedding an essentialization of the differences between secular and religious discourse. It is, in short, an act of power. Just as, in ordinary English, one strives *religiously* for clarity in an article, drafting and redrafting, attending *conscientiously* to footnotes and bibliographical data;¹⁵ so doesn't one also feel *reverence* for a senior scholar one deeply admires, or show reverence for widely held principles of academic conduct? We can surely express a feeling of reverence even for a beautiful book. The wise elderly sometimes engender reverence in sensitive children. Environmental activists exhibit a reverence for the environment, as in the concept of Gaia. There is indeed a whole webpage *devoted* to usages of the term which include reverence for life, reverence for the intellect, and reverence for the rules of society. Here is one from George Eliot: “No soul is desolate as long as there is a human being for whom it can feel trust and reverence.”¹⁶

Lincoln's thesis on reverence is an example of arbitrary control on meanings being imposed from a position of power to satisfy the perceived

¹⁵ Consider the complex requirements of different formatting conventions demanded by different publishing houses and academic journals, and the attempts to bring all possible permutations of referencing and formatting under consistent rules of procedure: does anyone really believe that the painstaking attention to minutiae to which the author of scholarly articles must submit himself or herself in complying with this discipline, often taking many hours of dedicated concentration, can be explained in terms of instrumental rationality alone? I would suggest that a closer model would be a liturgical textbook on what we usually refer to as ritual procedure to which we apply ourselves *religiously*, without irony.

¹⁶ George Eliot (1819-1880) (In “Webster's Electronic Quotebase,” ed. Keith Mohler, 1994.) [[http://humanityquest.com/topic/Quotations/index.asp?theme1=reverence.](http://humanityquest.com/topic/Quotations/index.asp?theme1=reverence)]

interests of the speaker. Or, if not the perceived interests of the speaker, then the unperceived interests of the institutions that provide Lincoln with his authoritative platform?¹⁷ This lack of critical self-reflexivity would be embarrassing, because on his own website at the University of Chicago, he says he "is particularly interested in issues of discourse, practice, power, conflict, and the construction of social borders." And yet here in his "Theses on Method" he appears to be uncritically proclaiming the very borders that are at issue. After all, is he not defending (as well as proclaiming) the sacrosanct values and practices of the non-religious? Is this not a confession of faith? Lincoln also suggests the idea that *conscience* over-rides *good manners*. I do not know Lincoln's own personal background and do not wish to mistakenly attribute him with any particular direct cultural influence. But if we look at this in terms of diffuse cultural influence at least, or more specifically the kind of influence that seems to permeate so much of the Divinity School's official rhetoric, it does sound like the Protestant inward Religion of the Heart pitted against the mere externals of ritual propriety.

It is after all revealing that secular scholarship should be characterized by what many would associate with a religious ideal, conscience as against mere good manners. It can be argued, then, that these procedures of scholarly debate, where we submit Ph.D. theses for examination, and manuscripts for publication; deferentially refer to some people as Professor, while others are mere instructors; proclaim Theses in public places; wear hierarchically graded ceremonial vestments at elaborate rituals of graduation; attend conferences and listen to interminable papers with the appropriate postures and demeanors of solemnity, and pursue truth as a matter of conscience, are our *religio*. And haven't our own ritual procedures been sacralized through centuries of usage, becoming a kind of orthodoxy derived from what was once considered dangerous subversion by those who since the Renaissance have challenged the hegemony of the papal hierarchy? I suggest that these ritual procedures, both inner and outer, if there is such a thing as the inner as against the outer, have now become part of the orthodoxy of academic praxis, all but invisible to the uncritical eye (see his *Thesis 10* on the transparency of one's own ideological presuppositions). That they are orthodox does not necessarily debase them, especially at a time when

¹⁷ It might reinforce the belief that, say, an urban developer might entertain, that *reverence for the environment* is a 'religious', 'mystical', or otherwise romantic sentiment that has nothing essentially to do with the secular pragmatics of rational business decisions.

Truth seems under threat from politicians. Who else can guard Truth from politicians but the secular academy? But what is Truth if it is not sacred?

Now in many ways I share Lincoln's *religio*: how could I not, since I, like him, am confessing it by entering the debate and following its practices, and like him I must be careful, as much about the manner in which I say it, as what I actually say. The problem is that what is being humbly submitted . . . "Religion, I submit, is that discourse whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent . . ." . . . albeit nailed in the form of a proclamation in publicly accessible places, is itself part of the construction and re-construction of modern ideology. It is an object invented so that we can imagine another mythical domain, the natural, non-religious rationality of the humanistic empirical sciences, along with secular politics and economics.

Thesis 6. Many who would not think of insulating their own or their parents' religion against critical inquiry still afford such protection to other people's faiths, via a stance of cultural relativism. One can appreciate their good intentions, while recognizing a certain displaced defensiveness, as well as the guilty conscience of western imperialism.

Antithesis: Here we have the introduction into the discussion of the term "culture" as in "cultural relativism." Culture also comes up again in *Thesis 7* and *Thesis 8*. The intended meaning of this thesis is unclear. We saw in the discussion of *Holy Terrors* that he has a number of models of cultures with a kind of static repositioning of elements in different combinations. What does he mean by cultural relativism? The problem that Lincoln may be attempting to adjudicate on here is the way that cultural relativism can be used to resist any kind of outside criticism. People torture other people to death and claim that it is a divinely sanctioned punishment which is beyond outside criticism; or refuse to buy another peoples' beef because they say their different racial constitution makes it bad for their digestion; or argue that the mass slaughter of millions of animals is justified by market forces; and any number of arbitrary evasions of what Lincoln would see as questions of justice. Does this have anything especially to do with "religious," as against "secular," thought processes? It may turn out that dividing the world into these two great baskets is part of the problem.

I shall take him to mean—and given the brevity of his statement it is only a guess—that irrational beliefs and practices, or irrational religious beliefs and practices, are sometimes defended by otherwise rational

people, by claiming that there are no absolute standards of rationality, and that what appears irrational to an outsider is not irrational when understood within the total system of representations of which they form a part. Such people can take a rational, sceptical, secular view of their own religious practice, but because they feel guilty they tend to over-compensate and take a protective, less rational, relativistic view of the practices of others. Who are the "many" in Lincoln's mind? They are people "who would not think of insulating their own or their parents' religion against critical inquiry" but who would "afford such protection to other people's faiths." I assume—and I hope I am not misinterpreting his meaning—that he has in mind those who share with him a belief that the discourse on history, or more generally secular (e.g. non-religious) rationality, provides the universal standard for arriving at truth. Such people are fully capable of rationality and would assume, as Lincoln does, that historical method and its principles are not themselves culturally relative. I believe the people he has in mind then are members of secular cultures in which people have a private right to practice religion, as against other people, that is members of other cultures that are not secular and which are therefore not fully rational. The implication is that they are also westerners, because of the reference to "the guilty conscience of western imperialism." The implication seems to be (and I admit that this is partly conjecture about his intended meaning) that normal rational people (secular Americans and Europeans, especially those in the academy who might be reading this?) are prepared to subject their own religious beliefs to the penetrating gaze of rational historical discourse and its methods, but, perhaps as a result of a guilty conscience resulting from the past imperialism of their own western cultures, are willing to apply less rational standards in order to protect the less than rational beliefs and practices of non-western or non-secular cultures. Thus, whereas the methods of historical study provide universal criteria of rational belief and practice, non-secular or religious cultures do not.

Assuming for argument's sake that I have unpacked a reasonable interpretation of Lincoln's meaning from this cryptic statement, there are so many contentious issues in it that it would require a book or several to do them justice. *Thesis 6* begs as many questions as it answers. I would say that this thesis as it stands is hardly intelligible as a serious academic proposition about methodology in whichever field Lincoln is addressing.

One implication of this thesis seems to be that Lincoln's own principles of critical inquiry are not culturally relative. It is interesting how

the lack of historical contextualization in these theses tends to insulate Lincoln's faith in the rationality of his own methodology from critical inquiry, wrapping key terms such as Religion, history and even culture in immutability and putting them beyond analysis.

The idea of critical inquiry sounds reasonable and gentle, especially when one is on the inquiring end of things. Being inquired into by powerful agencies can be frightening and can put one on the defensive. This is especially true when the terms and methods of inquiry are all framed by the inquirers. When the inquirers are members of an alien culture, speaking an alien language, and claiming some kind of jurisdiction over one's own community, as the Americans and the British apparently do in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and the Middle East, then one's sense of defensiveness might be expected to grow hard and protective. Imagine British civil servants, confirmed in their belief in their own scientific rationality, but accompanied by guns just to be on the safe side, measuring the skulls of your kith and kin to put them in their place in the evolutionary scheme of things, to subordinate them to the higher knowledge. Without knowing it, you have been measured up, photographed, classified, and your sacred objects placed on display like trophies in the Museum of Ethnology for the higher education of the superior white races. This was all done in the name of science, but of course we can see now, in retrospect, that it was done in the name of imperial power.

Intellectually Lincoln knows all of this, and of course he is as much against colonial violence as I am. But he cannot see that his own religion has camouflaged its relation to the colonial power through manufacturing a *sui generis* myth of objectivity. Imperial science, in the form for example of anthropology or the science of religions, arguably also created essentialized cultures in much the same way that it created essentialized religions, and these are being ritually recycled by his own School. No wonder people feel defensive and often wish to insulate their way of life against critical inquiry. Having one's history constructed and interpreted for one by scholars in western universities who are convinced that their own principles and methods are superior, and not themselves culturally relative might, if one ever discovered what they were doing to your identity, be rather shocking and alienating.

Thesis 7. Beyond the question of motives and intentions, cultural relativism is predicated on the dubious—not to say, fetishistic—construction of “cultures” as if they were stable and discrete groups of people defined by the stable and discrete values,

symbols, and practices they share. Insofar as this model stresses the continuity and integration of timeless groups, whose internal tensions and conflicts, turbulence and incoherence, permeability and malleability are largely erased, it risks becoming a religious and not a historic narrative: the story of a transcendent ideal threatened by debasing forces of change.

Antithesis: Lincoln is correct, but again he does not notice that embedded in this thesis is the same fetishistic essentialization of the distinction between a religious and a historic narrative. These theses seem designed to clothe History in a sacred aura. It is not clear what kind of proclamations Lincoln thinks these theses are, for they sound more like oracular pronouncements, and they are not typical examples of historical method. It is difficult to see how this thesis is itself a non-religious speech act. Lincoln might anyhow discuss the ideological functions of History, and especially History of Religion, in the legitimation of the sacred secular, including the construction of time in a capitalist society. Does History of Religion have no function in maintaining the sacred canopy of liberal capitalism, or of naturalizing its principles and assumptions so that they appear as in the eternal and natural order of things?

Thesis 8. Those who sustain this idealized image of culture do so, inter alia, by mistaking the dominant fraction (sex, age group, class, and/or caste) of a given group for the group or "culture" itself. At the same time, they mistake the ideological positions favored and propagated by the dominant fraction for those of the group as a whole (e.g. when texts authored by Brahmins define "Hinduism," or when the statements of male elders constitute "Nuer religion"). Scholarly misrecognitions of this sort replicate the misrecognitions and misrepresentations of those the scholars privilege as their informants.

Antithesis: The problem with all these proclamations is that they are antithetical to the contextualizing practices of historiography. One can turn it around: those who sustain an idealized image of Religion or religions do so by mistaking the ideological positions favored and propagated by the dominant fraction (white middle class salaried male elders, missionaries from Christian cultures, privileged Professors in prestigious western universities) for universal realities rooted in the nature of things.

Lincoln's view is that the major problem is the essentialization of cultures, and he makes an important and valid methodological point about reliance on particular sources of information which, for example,

many women anthropologists have argued with considerable effectiveness.¹⁸ However, there is an additional and parallel problem, the very idea of “Nuer religion.” His concern, if I understand him rightly, is that we might be misinformed about “Nuer religion” because anthropologists and their arm chair imitators have favored certain privileged groups within Nuer society as sources of information. But I don’t see how “Nuer religion” could have been created in the first place by indigenous male elders, who presumably did not speak English and had no idea what the English word “religion” meant, until the anthropologist, a member of the ruling colonial power, tried to translate what *he* thought it meant into a language of entirely different provenance. “Nuer religion” was constituted by the anthropologist albeit with the unwitting help of male elders. So alongside Lincoln’s valid point about the essentialization of culture, an additional crucial question is what it means to talk about “Nuer religion” in the first place. In the absence of any sensible discussion of the range of different, historically-nuanced meanings that the English word can have, then the very idea of Nuer religion seems presumptuous. Lincoln does not even specify how he would differentiate between Religion and Culture here. The reader is supposed to intuit his meanings.

The Nuer may well have been blessed with *freedom from* “religion” until the anthropologist came along and suggested that they must have it. As the historian John Bossy said, if I may paraphrase from memory, to attribute to the people who we study the thing when they did not have the word is an invitation to mis-description (Bossy, 1982).¹⁹ He was talking about concepts like “religion” and “society” in early modern England, but one can see that the same methodological principle applies equally as strongly across cultures and languages.

Lincoln’s example of the representation of Hinduism similarly misses the point about religion. Again, for him the methodologically crucial issue is who acts as informant about the religion Hinduism, and it is indeed a valid issue. This begs more questions than it answers. The “World Religion” Hinduism was not created only by texts authored by

¹⁸ Carol MacCormack & Marilyn Strathern (eds.), *Nature, Culture and Gender*, CUP, 1980; Pat Caplan (ed.) *The cultural construction of sexuality*, Routledge, 1987; Henrietta Moore, *Feminism and Anthropology*, (polity, 1988); Shirley Ardener, (ed.) *Defining Females: the nature of women in society*, Berg 1993; Fiona Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion*, Blackwell, 2000.

¹⁹ John Bossy, “Some elementary forms of Durkheim,” *Past and Present*, 1982, No. 95.

Brahmins, but by white male Christian missionaries, white male East India Company employees, and white male scholars of other powerful western agencies such as the military and the civil service, albeit with the assistance of co-opted indigenous pundits. The authority over the translation, editing and interpretation of the texts to some degree shifted to the white pundits in European universities, some of whom, like Max Mueller at Oxford, never even visited India. Some others of the white males were probably tax collectors, religiously gathering revenues for the company and the Crown; and many of them were conscientiously developing ever more complex classification systems for the greater control of the imperial power. The inventors of "World Religions" were arguably the members of various Divinity Schools in wealthy western universities and other agencies who have constructed them as essentialized objects of study, and who have frequently attributed the authority of their position, not to colonial power, but to their superior intellectual vantage point, the "relation of encompassment" that Lincoln announced in his first Thesis, grounded in natural reason and a higher level of evolutionary rationality.

Gandhi, who is widely and rightly feted by western liberals as a hero of the nationalist liberation and the chief as an important spokesman for the Indian Nation, and who talked a great deal about religion in English, might have found it difficult to endorse the essential ideological distinction between secularism and religion which Lincoln apparently seeks to reconfirm. It was Gandhi who wrote in defense of the divine social order of *chaturvarnya* (Gandhi, 1936, "A Vindication of Caste"). If he meant anything by religion (and he probably meant a number of different things) then one of his dominating tropes was the encompassment of all institutions by Brahman priests. This would suggest that the campaign of civil disobedience was neither "religious" nor "secular," but something more interesting that subverts both categories and reveals them as inadequate western concepts. Gandhi's great critic, the untouchable leader Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who was mainly responsible for producing the Republican Constitution of modern India, wrote that the democratic principles of the French Revolution, *viz.* equality, liberty and fraternity, are sacred—what he called "the Religion of Principles", in distinction from the Brahmins' "Religion of Rules" (Ambedkar, 1936; "Annihilation of Caste"). It is by no means clear how these two quite different representatives of vast numbers of Indian people, one group the non-Brahmin high castes, the other the untouchables, would endorse the way Lincoln has proclaimed the essential distinction between religion and the secular.²⁰ It might turn out to

depend on the rhetorical context, for they too had their power struggles. The point I am making here is that much of *Thesis 8* which is concerned with the mistaken idealization of “culture” can be turned back onto Lincoln’s own idealization of the distinction between “religion” and “secular” scholarship.

Thesis 9. (See above.)

Thesis 10. Understanding the system of ideology that operates in one’s own society is made difficult by two factors: (i) one’s consciousness is itself a product of that system, and (ii) the system’s very success renders its operations invisible, since one is so consistently immersed in and bombarded by its products that one comes to mistake them (and the apparatus through which they are produced and disseminated) for nothing other than “nature.”

Antitheses. This is well phrased, and it expresses perfectly the problem with his surprising failure to see that the position which he holds and advocates is as much an ideology as any other. Once his essentializations are displayed like the emperor with no clothes on, the claimed distinction between religion and secular discourses looks embarrassingly thin²¹ with which we are all faced in developing a position of self-reflexivity. My response is therefore a comment rather than an antithesis *per se*. The system of ideology that underpins American capitalism has historically required an ideological separation of secular politics from privatized religion, and Religion scholars are so consistently immersed in its basic assumptions that we have, largely without realizing it, been assiduous in rendering this ideological position as natural reason, as the ground of encompassment, and thus immune from critical attention.

Thesis 11. The ideological products and operations of other societies afford invaluable opportunities to the would-be student of ideology. Being initially unfamiliar, they do not need to be denaturalized before they can be examined. Rather, they invite and reward critical study, yielding lessons one can put to good use at home.

²⁰ Ambedkar did endorse it, and one of his three or four different concepts of “religion” corresponds to the privatized religion of secular societies. But he did not think that the distinction between secular and religious discourse is simply there in the nature of things. He advocated it through struggle as an ideological and constitutional goal.

²¹ Thanks to one of the anonymous readers, who pointed out that my response here is not a genuine antithesis but a comment.

Antitheses: How do we know which of our English-language representations of “the ideological products and operations of other societies” are not functions of our own mythology? This problem of hermeneutics is a serious methodological issue, and it seems strange that Lincoln thinks he can formulate a methodological principle without examining more carefully the ideological rigging inherent in the imposition of categories. Lincoln is (I imagine) a well traveled and cultured scholar, and a much better linguist than I am. I lived for many years in a non-western society and struggled with the language, and it left me—to say the least—with a sense of humility in the face of the enormous problems of translating from one system of categories and their dominant discourses to another. The main result of that experience has been to problematize for me many of our basic ways of thinking about the world in the English language, not least the one that Lincoln takes uncritically for granted throughout these theses. He is surely right if he is saying (as I think he is) that we can sometimes get a glimpse of ourselves as others might see us through their language and their stance, as “other”—for we Euro-American academics are very much “the other” for billions. Let us as far as possible then look at our own institutions and practices in the same spirit in which we look at those of others. I suggest that we can then notice that our own position of claimed objectivity and “secularity” is itself a practice, an ideological discourse, an assumption of superiority, through which we claim to order the world, that as university professors and secular scholars of reified religions and cultures we largely project onto the rest of the world our own imagined, thinly disguised self-representations, so beloved of and consecrated by the English language media—Mullahs, Brahmins, readers of chicken entrails, strutting demagogues, ritual specialists, seers, solitary practitioners of meditation, prophets, chant leaders, chiefs, advisors to the chief, preachers, diviners, and theologians. What are the Arts and Humanities, if not our Dream Time?

Thesis 12. Although critical inquiry has become commonplace in other disciplines, it still offends many students of religion, who denounce it as “reductionism.” This charge is meant to silence critique. The failure to treat religion “as religion”—that is, the refusal to ratify its claim of transcendent nature and sacrosanct status—may be regarded as heresy and sacrilege by those who construct themselves as religious, but it is the starting point for those who construct themselves as historians.

Antithesis: This is a confused proclamation. The problem of reductionism is an artificial generalization that arises in the first place from the essen-

tializing construction of “religion” and “the secular” as distinct areas of discourse. The so-called problem of reductionism itself needs to be reduced from its metaphysical pretensions of the kind “is it right or wrong to reduce religious discourse to secular discourse?” to a number of specific, and specified, problems of explanation. There is a curious inversion here. Lincoln sides with those who wish to critique “religion” and who refuse thereby “to ratify its claim of transcendent nature and sacrosanct status.” But who decides that this is what religion “claims”? Who decides that “it” makes a claim? Lincoln is *a priori* embedding in his own rhetoric the problematic that he wants to critique. He has caught himself in a circle. Lincoln himself has set up “religion” as that discourse “whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent” (*Thesis 2*). It seems then that Lincoln is first defining religious discourse as essentially different from secular discourse, the one being mythical and the other historical, the one being about the transcendent and the other being rooted in the temporal and the contingent and therefore in natural reason, the one being grandiose in its world building, the other being humble and hard working in its frail but gutsy struggle for empirical truths, and then claiming the right to reduce the one to the other against the wishes of “those who construct themselves as religious.” But who is constructing who as “religious”? These very theses are themselves constructions of, or attempts to construct, “religion” and “the secular” as monolithic discourses with essentially different characteristics. And the so-called problem of reductionism only arises because of the prior commitment to such essentializations! There is a sublime circularity in this proclamation of essences and simultaneous denial of them!

Lincoln’s construction of generic “religions” constitute a vast family of what virtually anybody who has access to a publisher or a pulpit may choose to refer to as “a religion,” and to include any number of discourses, ranging from ancestor worship, state emperor cults, the deification of Genghis Khan in contemporary Mongolia, “witchcraft,” “sorcery,” tea ceremony, civil religion, fortune-telling, the Confucian civil service, the principles of the French revolution, football, Victorian séances with or without ectoplasm, the raising and lowering of the national flag, the launching of a ship with a bottle of champagne, Aroma Therapy, or Monty Python’s Flying Circus. We would need to know what is being reduced to what in such cases; but lofty generalizations about the problem of reductionism disguise such specific attempts to say what we mean in a fog of generalizations. Arguably this is the function of ideology, to render its own operations invisible.

The entanglement that Lincoln is generating for himself and his already confused readers gets even more difficult to unpick when we consider the most typical examples of reductionism, which usually involve the "reduction" of a Christian or monotheistic concept of God to a Marxist, Freudian or generally humanistic explanatory system. The problem arises acutely here because the whole issue is narrowed down to a) a concept of Religion characterized by a culturally and historically specific theological construct which excludes a whole range of other ideologies which have been described as religions in text books disseminated throughout the educational system, and b) systems of explanation such as Humanism, Marxism and Freudianism which he himself has argued with some cogency might themselves be described as "religions." What, after all, shall these systems of explanation themselves be reduced to?

Thesis 13. When one permits those whom one studies to define the terms in which they will be understood, suspends one's interest in the temporal and contingent, or fails to distinguish between "truths", "truth-claims", and "regimes of truth", one has ceased to function as historian or scholar. In that moment, a variety of roles are available: some perfectly respectable (amanuensis, collector, friend and advocate), and some less appealing (cheerleader, voyeur, retailer of import goods). None, however, should be confused with scholarship.

Antithesis: Let me repeat some of this thesis, so that the full force of what Lincoln could be interpreted as saying makes itself felt: "When one permits those whom one studies to define the terms in which they will be understood . . . one has ceased to function as historian or scholar." What price scholarship? This could have a much worse spin placed on it than what I believe Lincoln would ever intend. Misrepresentation is a dangerous thing, and I do not want to misrepresent him any more than I believe he would want to misrepresent those whom he studies. What I want to say is not what I want to believe he truly intended to mean, only what it seems like he might have meant. He seems to suggest that, if I am a true scholar, then I have the right define the terms in which I will represent him. In this situation, if I misrepresent him, then he can publicly challenge and correct my misrepresentation. However, not everyone is in such an equal situation. Not everyone reads English, and not everyone reads the kinds of publications in which they might be represented or misrepresented. How can Iraqi people resist being defined in the terms that suit the Washington Post, the White House, the Pentagon or influential scholars? I have no doubt

that Lincoln is a kind and generous human being who would never knowingly hurt anyone, and the best part of his book, *Holy Terrors*, is motivated by a thoroughly laudable desire to short-circuit the fanatical rhetoric on all sides. But there are unintended consequences to consider.

Let me put it like this. The use of “permits” here seems authoritarian. It may be the authoritarianism of a man of clear principle. My sense is that Lincoln is a man of sincere humanity, as well as brilliant intellect. Nevertheless, it could be interpreted as a deeply embedded colonialist paternalism masquerading as Euro-American Enlightenment. One thinks of the way Protestant English writers represented the “truth” about the Catholic Irish. Or about any number of colonized peoples who were (mis)-represented by Christian missionaries and “scientific” scholars who insisted that these other people should be represented in the terms of the dominant metropolis, whether it was Christians talking about heathens and savages, or evolutionary theorists talking about pre-logical primitives or contemporary western leaders talking about “failed states.” Arm chair theorists are infamous for representing people in their privileged taxonomic terms while relying on data collected by others and translated from languages that they themselves did not know. Bruce Lincoln is not a missionary, or so he claims, but a historian of religion. Does that make such a difference to those whose identity is being defined and represented on their behalf? Are there not dangerous precedents in this way of thinking?

He seems to be saying: “I have the right to study you” and “to make you the object of my analytical scheme”; but “you have no right to interfere with the way I represent you.” The implication of this would be: “You will be understood in my terms, because I am a secular scholar!”

If, for example—and this is an imaginary example, I am not saying that Lincoln would actually say this, but it is conceivable from the terms of this thesis, and might follow the gist of a newspaper editorial, or a local lynch mob—if I say that you are a Mullah and that Mullahs are or ought to be “religious,” and since I have also defined religious thinking as essentially different from secular political thinking, then it seems to follow from *Thesis 13* that if you act in a way which I define as “political” then you are not a genuine Mullah, you are using religion for political ends. You are therefore a charlatan, a “politician” pretending to be a “religious” leader! And I will make sure that my knowledge about your real identity, defined according to my criteria and terminology, will be disseminated in English language books, jour-

nal articles and newspaper editorials, regardless of your Arabic or Urdu or Persian protestations! I operate from the ground of natural reason because I am a secular enlightened type, in touch with reality, able to represent the true order of things; I know the difference between the religious and the non-religious; and you are "religious" and shall submit to my system of categorization whether you object to it or not! My first duty is to secular science and to objective historiography, and I therefore cannot allow you to define the terms in which you will be understood. Mullahs are religious and therefore, *qua* Mullahs, can only claim "to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal." Mullahs should therefore stay out of politics which ought to have nothing to do with religion.

Lincoln will retort that this is not what he meant at all, that this is a gross misrepresentation. And I will be happy to apologize, relieved to be wrong. But his thesis as it stands could be misunderstood, and perhaps needs some clarification. For this kind of journalistic misrepresentation is common and such discourses derive a sense of authority or legitimacy from influential academics. And these theses are too close to rhetorical or even oracular pronouncements to give liberal scholarship a good name.

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