TO APPROACH AN OTHER:
ETHNOHERMENEUTICS
AND THE COMPARATIVE
STUDY OF RELIGION

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Resumo: o artigo propõe uma alternativa às abordagens do fenômeno religioso marcadas tanto por uma ênfase excessiva no estudo das tradições escritas relacionadas a um determinado sistema religioso como pelo etnocentrismo, na medida em que não apresentam esforços para abandonar os ‘a priori’ derivados da própria cultura e/ou da própria religião daquele que empreende a análise. Tomando o exemplo da China e de sociedades indígenas, o autor questiona se noções ocidentais como ‘religio’ e sobrenatural são de fato capazes de dar conta de uma enorme diversidade de outros sistemas de ideias ou filosóficos.

Palavras-chave: etnohermenêutica, abordagem alternativa, noções ocidentais

The whole basis of any religion and divine worship hinges on a knowledge of the first cause, whether it be the true cause or some false or imaginary one, from which men believe that they originated and on which they depend for their preservation, and it also hinges on an understanding of the final state that awaits them after this life. For that reason, I decided to begin this treatise about the knowledge and belief, on which these Indians based their opinions, of these two things by putting down in this chapter the views that had concerned the origins of man, and in the following one what they thought about life after death (COBO, 1990, p. 11).
With some modernization of wording, this statement would fit comfortably in a number of world religions textbooks, but it is found in a manuscript completed in 1653. Father Bernabe Cobo began his study of Incan religion in Peru with explicit a priori premises about the nature of religion and religious understanding. Consequently, he found his Inca informants bewildered: “On this point [first cause] they are very confused because they do not distinguish the creation of the world from its restoration after the flood has passed” (COBO, 1990, p. 11).

Forcing Western notions of time, among other fundamental understandings, on cultures with alternative conceptions, has often grossly distorted our understanding of other cultures. In the case of Native American traditions, of which Father Cobo was examining one facet, the focus with regard to beginnings tends not to be on the creation of humans per se or the beginning of time, but on migration and emergence myths; that is, how specific people came to be where they are. Also fundamental are clan origin myths. Creation stories, or more commonly, recreation stories following a vast flood, tend to be of secondary concern. This Incan recreation myth appears similar to those of the Algonquian speaking peoples of the Great Lakes and Atlantic coastal regions, with which I am more familiar. Some of these traditions such as the Lenape (Delaware), added a paraphrase of Genesis, in accordance with Euroamerican expectations, to awkwardly precede their culture-hero myth cycle, which includes a post-flood recreation myth (PAPER, 1983). The Incan myth confused Father Cobo, a confusion he blamed on the culture he was studying.

Contemporaneous studies of Chinese religion fell into the same fallacy. The lack of creation myths led to the assumption that these myths had been lost, either deliberately or inadvertently. Yet the earliest Chinese texts do include ritual odes describing the mythic foundations of ruling clans. Perhaps a less Eurocentric interpretation is not that the early texts are flawed due to the loss of the most important myths but that the most important myths are there, and Western scholars were blind to their significance.

Slightly earlier than Father Cobo’s time, Father Mateo Ricci misinterpreted the Chinese concept of the sanjiao (Three Doctrines) as Three Sects, leading to the modern Western academic dogma of three Chinese religions. When Chinese scholars disagreed with him, Ricci declared them wrong:
The most common opinion today among those who believe themselves to be the most wise is to say that these three sects are one and the same thing and can be observed at once. By this they deceive themselves and others too.... (FONTANI RICCIANI apud GERNET, 1985, p. 64).

If scholars study aspects of another culture and find the learned of the subject culture confused or mistaken about their own culture, it is not unreasonable to suggest that there is a problem, a problem that may well lie with the foreign observer rather than the native. In both the above cited cases, the observer was examining religion, a Western term which had no exact equivalent in the studied cultures. Being a Western term, religion is defined by Western cultural criteria, criteria assumed to be universal, as perusal of any standard dictionary will indicate. The Eurocentric assumptions regarding religion can be enumerated, and I have done so in previous essays, both in general (PAPER, 1991; 1993b; 1996) and specifically with regard to the above examples (PAPER, 1983; 1987; 1993a; 1994; 1995a). I have no intention of boring the reader with repetition. I but wish to point to the problem and to indicate that proceeding from a priori assumptions regarding the nature of religion is not only normative, it is rooted in the earliest conscious study of other religions.

METHOD AND MOTIVATION IN THE COMPARISON OF RELIGIONS

The comparison of religions tends to proceed in two different directions. One is the comparison of ideas found in religions, usually as recorded in literary texts. These ideas may include not only concepts of cosmology, cosmogony, ontology, etc., but also concepts of proper ritual patterns, behavior and so forth. With regard to the former set of topics, the usual subject of study is not how people actually understand these topics but what is formally stated about them. With regard to the latter set, the focus of study tends not to be the rituals themselves but writings about how these behavior patterns should ideally proceed or how they should be understood, i.e., prescriptive rather than descriptive texts.

The second direction for the comparison of religions is to study these same subjects from the standpoint of how people and cultures perceive them...
and actually act with regard to them. Such studies may also incorporate literary texts for historical depth and as a secondary source of information. It is towards the second direction that this essay is addressed.

In comparing religions, the motivating factor, that is, the final goal of the undertaking, is of primary importance. This goal determines the nature of the scholarly enterprise. In this regard, we again find two differing directions within the comparative religion enterprise. In one, the major motivating factor is to discover an ultimate truth or reality. The subject studied may be people or culture, but the purpose is to learn through the comparative endeavor the actual reality to which the culture is responding or interacting. The real goal of this enterprise is to learn about the truth of the universe itself. Hence, the purpose of the study is theological; it is to learn about god, deities, truth, or whatever term is most meaningful in this regard to the one carrying on the study. While Fathers Cobo and Ricci lived at a time when theology was not separated from religious studies, today even those who have been struggling to separate religious studies from theology often understand religion from a theological premise. This motivating factor may be found not only among those who disavowed the social science approaches, such as Mircea Eliade, but even among those who pioneered the use of social science methods in the history of religions.

For example, Hultkrantz (1985, p. 87-8), who in his own work initiated the merging of ethnology and comparative religion and is the scholar who has most profoundly influenced my own comparative methodologies, specifically states, “...I propose a view of religion as an entity sui generis, and postulate religious institutions as a cognition of another dimension of existence”. According to Hultkrantz, the study of religion through ethnology is not ultimately to understand people and culture; the final aim of comparative religion is to discover this other dimension. This is a theological goal, theological in the broader sense \textit{vis a vis} religious studies as separate from the theological enterprise. Even those who have been at the forefront of the struggle to separate religious studies from theology often understand religion from a subliminal theological premise. Wiebe (1983), for example, assumes a transcendental character to be the definitive characteristic of religion, as do a number of religionists.

The alternative to a theological basis for history of religions is to understand the discipline to be a comparative enterprise directed towards an
increased understanding of people and culture; the objective in this mode is to better understand humankind. This approach posits no reality beyond the subject matter. It may indeed be the case that the majority of religious understandings focus on another dimension or have a transcendental focus, but this must be determined through research. Should it be the case that this was so, the subject still remains the cultural understanding of this reality, not reality in and of itself.

Because of its history of maintaining ethnocentric a priori premises, religious studies is one of the most problematic of the social sciences. As a humanistic discipline, religious studies does not evidence these problems to the same degree. Being text oriented, humanistic religious studies is only relevant to literate cultures with so-called sacred texts; in other words, it is an extension of biblical studies. But as a social science, religious studies must take as its subject matter all societies, non-literate or literate, and, in the case of the latter, whether or not having texts definable as “sacred” from a Western perspective.

Of the social sciences, absurd as it may seem, imagine political science, rather than assuming that all cultures have some form of social control and identifying its subject by function, sought its subject by form, limiting it to monarchies, even absolute monarchies. Imagine economics, rather than taking as its subject production, exchange and consumption, limited its field of purview to cultures with a formal currency, or even cultures with currency that contained an image of a monarch on its coins and bills. Yet the limitation of subjects to cultures with notions of the supernatural or assuming the existence of such notions prior to research, particularly the notion of a supreme being in accord with Western concepts, illustrates the problem with history of religions.

The social science closest to religious studies in this regard is psychology. For many decades, psychologists assumed that the Western mind, or more precisely, conceptions of mind, were universal. This presumption virtually determined that the more distant the culture from Western norms, the more sick its typical member. The psychological study of non-Western cultures became a study of pathology (as it has been in the main for Western culture as well). Only with the development of an ethnopsychiatry that sought to understand the other culture’s understanding of a healthy personality or mental illness (JILEK, 1974) did psychology begin to come to terms with cultural differences in relative rather than absolute terms.
So too philosophy, from which psychology sprung, failed in comparative analysis because it limited its questions to those important to Western cultures; for example, how does one deal with Truth in a culture that has no term for it? Only the relatively recent development of an ethnosophiology related to ethnomelinguistics (POMEDLI, 1991) allows a relatively culture-free comparison with non-Western, let alone non-literate cultures.

The major impediment to studying the religions of other cultures is ethnocentrism, a normal human condition, in that humans are enculturated beings. Hence, Eurocentrism has frequently skewed the understanding of non-Western religious traditions, often by emphasizing fictitious or inconsequential features of the studied culture, as well as by rigid definitions, including sex/gender expectations. Awareness of these problems with regard to cross-cultural inquiry has become prevalent in literary studies and has long been of concern in ethnology, but it is only recently reaching religious studies, although a small number of scholars have been raising these issues for a number of years. This may be due to religious studies, different from other modes of intellectual inquiry, being uniquely a Western construct.

TERMINOLOGY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The comparing of religions has been further handicapped by the very word religion itself. Religion, of course, is a term particular to European languages and only approximate equivalents for the term have been created for other languages in the last century or so. These approximations tend to be emically understood not as pertaining to indigenous phenomena, but to Western or other foreign phenomenon, particularly Christianity.

For example, in China, the term zongjiao, religion, borrowed from the Japanese at the turn of the century (itself taken from an obscure Chinese Buddhist text), is applied to foreign or foreign influenced religious institutions but is not applied to the vast majority of religious behavior and understanding to be found in China, entirely indigenous and integral with the culture itself. Popular Chinese religion per se, following Christian missionary influence, is labelled in China mixin, superstition, with a similar pejorative understanding as the term has in the West. The average Chinese when asked about Chinese religion will often
state that the Chinese do not have one. With extremely few exceptions, neither scholars nor other people in China consider the word religion, its Chinese substitute, or the Chinese word for superstition as applying to the ubiquitous formal sacrificial meals offered before an altar to ancestral spirits who are understood to have power over the fortunes of a family.

To cite another example, many Native Americans, at least in Canada and the United States, tend to insist that their cultures do not have religions, using instead the English word, “spirituality” (there is no equivalent for either term in the relevant Native languages). For half a millennium, Christian missionaries have told these peoples that they do not have any religion. It is hardly surprising that Native peoples accordingly tend to equate religion exclusively with Christianity and its negative impact on their cultures. Religion is often considered a defamatory term, and traditionalists may be insulted if the term is applied to their culture.

Concerning Native American religions, comparative religionists were so habituated to focusing on religious texts that they avoided non-literate traditions. It is but a few decades ago that some comparative religionists began to specialize in the study of Native American religions. In doing so, there has been a persistent, albeit unconscious, attempt to fit Native American phenomena into the Christian understanding of religion. Aside from the early presumption of a single male high god in cultures that are egalitarian from both socio-economic and gender concerns, there has also been debate concerning the application of the term supernatural. Those spirits which are an integral aspect of the natural world, that is, the mundane, ordinary world of daily life, are ipso facto supernatural to some Western scholars, because that is how deities are understood in the West. As well, the concept of superhuman has been conflated with that of supernatural, although there are many natural phenomena that are superior to humans in a number of different regards; for example, is a thunderstorm supernatural?

Not only is the applicability of the concept of religion to other cultures from both emic and etic viewpoints questionable, but there is no agreed upon understanding of the term “religion” itself. The most common definitions focus on some aspect of ideology, reflecting the ultimate importance of faith in Christianity. However, in non-Western cultures, the equivalent question of asking a person’s religion, and
more particularly, what a person “believes,” may be to ask what rituals a person performs, as in parts of Indonesia, or to whom or what sacrifice is offered, other than the ancestral spirits, as in China.

To ameliorate this difficulty, some scholars avoid the use of the word religion and focus on rituals. While this approach elicits and analyzes most forms of religious behavior, the only observable, hence, nominally objective aspect of religion, the approach does not take in the totality of religious experience nor can it analyze religious understanding. Mythic studies are similarly limited, albeit in the opposite direction.

INTENTIONALITY AND THE PROBLEM OF EXTERNAL CRITERIA

When Christians fought a battle with Muslims during one of the Crusades over a city both deem holy, that is considered a religious activity, part of a religious war. But when Americans, for the most part Christians, fought Iraqis, predominantly Muslim, over oil in Kuwait, was that a religious activity, part of a religious war? The Iraqis claimed to be fighting for the regaining of a part of their homeland, for patriotism, and the Americans claimed to be fighting for democracy (whose was far from clear). And just what was the purpose of the more recent American conquest of Baghdad? From formal theological criteria, these were not religious wars. Nevertheless, the actions of the soldiers in both examples are the same, albeit the weapons were different, and their motivations seem to have been similar.

When Iroquoian speaking people tortured to death and subsequently ate captured Jesuit missionaries in the mid-17th century, for the Jesuits it was clearly understood (we have their descriptions) as martyrdom and it is still so recognized by the Church. For the Native Americans, the action, both torture and cannibalism, was integral with their notion of onheki (soul as life force – POMEDLI, 1991). The Jesuit martyrdom and endurance of pain signified superior bravery, a principal Iroquoian value, and eating their hearts and drinking their blood transferred this quality to themselves. In every aspect but one, the Iroquoian actions meet Christian notions of religiosity. For the Native action was not related to a specific deity, although soul, whether human or other-than-human, in many respects functioned as deity as understood in Western cultures. Hence, from theological criteria, the Iroquoian
action was not religious, but the Jesuit response was, regardless of the fact that the respective intentions of both the Native Americans and Jesuits were comparable.

To complicate the situation, the Jesuits were killed during the (Iroquoian language family speaking) Five Nations territorial expansion brought on by the fur trade, resulting from contact with European cultures. The Five Nations destroyed the (Iroquoian speaking) Wyandot (Hurons), among whom the Jesuits missionized (and weakened with smallpox and other European diseases), who traded and were allied with the French, while the Five Nations (later Six Nations) traded first with the Dutch and then allied themselves to the British. This conflict was a small element in the larger war between the French and British for imperial sovereignty in North America that continued for nearly another two centuries. Is imperialistic colonization and expansion a religious criteria? There are those that have presented lucid arguments that it is in American Christian culture (DRINNON, 1980).

Many more specific comparisons between Western and non-Western cultures illustrating the difficulties engendered in religious studies by applying monocultural criteria could be provided. Only when we shift from inflexible cultural criteria to examining the intention and meaning of particular activities within each compared culture can we achieve valid comparisons.

ETHNOHERMENEUTICS

An alternate approach to this conundrum of the meaning of religion may be to examine what it is that scholars are seeking to do in studying the religion of other cultures. In this exercise, we must exclude those attempts to find an equivalent of Christianity in other cultures, studies more indicative of the cultural background of the scholar than of the subject culture.

Usually, religion is assumed to concern the expression of that which is central to both a cultural and an individual understanding of life itself, including the notions of cosmos, time, continuity, disruption, identity, reality, transformation, etc., and particularly all those activities which pertain to it; that is, those behaviors which create and connote significance and meaning among those who take part. Since individual understanding and behavior, as well as social behavior, derives
from culture, the study of culture necessarily takes precedence. In other words, in interpreting religion in other cultures as well as our own, we are seeking to clarify that which is most significant, which engenders meaning to other cultures and the individuals within it. There is a well known definition of religion which focuses on those phenomena described above, that of Geertz (1966). This definition, however, has been widely criticized for identifying religion too closely with culture and not focusing on what is central to Christian understanding, due to its theological orientation, that is, the supernatural. Hence, it may be useful, at least for the present, to consider a more descriptive term for the enterprise being carried out by many historians of religion or comparative religionists. While the traditional text-based history of religions emphasized philology, a social science oriented history of religions must focus on people and the product of their common interaction, culture; i.e., ethnos. Although every aspect of culture may be germane to our studies, as historians of religions, our central concern, *vis a vis* culture, is that which is central to establishing it, motivating it and continuing it. We seek to interpret, from a comparative standpoint, what a culture considers most significant, most meaningful. In other words, we are engaged in a hermeneutical enterprise; we seek to understand both the meaning of and within specific cultures and culture in general. One solution to the relevant problems enumerated in previous studies is a set of methodologies under the new rubric of ethnohermeneutics. This is but one of the many modes of ethnosciences that began arising in the second half of the 20th century (examples of which were given above). The concept and term was first promoted by Armin Geertz; it is one that I have developed in conjunction with him from a somewhat different methodological perspective, although our premises and goals are the same. Ethnohermeneutics, by avoiding *a priori* categories and seeking to determine that which is centrally meaningful to those of the studied culture rather than the culture of the researcher, provides a variety of means for countering the normal human ethnocentric tendency. Ethnohermeneutics subsumes methods to interpret that which is significant to specific cultures and to culture in and of itself. Ethnohermeneutics is not the study of the meaning of life or of a superordinary reality; rather, it is the study of how cultures understand their lives and the world around them and the expression of this
understanding in terms that communicate to other cultures. To carry out such a study we cannot begin with *a priori* assumptions, for to do so would inhibit our perception of the subject culture’s understanding.

Using the term ethnohermeneutics to denominate our disciplinary approach will have varying advantages, depending on the particular circumstances. For one, it will avoid the political and sectarian expectations of the word religion. For example, as mentioned above, in China, the government, and, accordingly, academic studies, distinguishes between religion and superstition. The former receives government approval; the latter, disapproval. Until very recently, indigenous religion has not been an acceptable subject for academic studies in China, unless the focus is on non-Han (non-ethnically Chinese) cultures within China. Even now, indigenous religion is primarily studied as folklore rather than religion.

On the other hand, in Taiwan, until quite recently, it was extremely difficult to have academic studies of religion *per se*, because both Buddhist and Taoist institutions insisted on controlling the field. Since the term religion has only been applied to such institutions, it is understandable that sectarian interests took precedence in the term’s use. For this reason, no public, that is non-church (Buddhist or Christian) supported, university had a department of religious studies until but a few years ago.

In both China and Taiwan, the predominant and normative aspects of Chinese religion are considered folk traditions, not religion. This is comparable to the attitude of European scholarship, which also considers the extant religious remnants of pre-Christian Europe to be folk traditions, not religion. But in the case of China and Taiwan, it is an alien, a Christian, model based on a Western term, religion, that is the determining factor. Ethnohermeneutics would bypass the use of value-laden terminology, frequently based on foreign concepts, yet include in its purview all aspects covered by the term religion in all cultures and sub-cultures.

Among traditionalist Native Americans, as well as Native Australians, etc., as discussed above, the word religion immediately conjures up the image of Christian missionaries, missionaries supported by the guns of colonizing foreigners and fomenting political policies of cultural genocide. Those involved in religion and religious studies, whether
scholars or not, tend to be identified as the enemy, and this, given the past until recently, was a reasonable assumption. The term ethnohermeneutics, in describing a set of scholarly methodologies, would not automatically be identified with the imperialistic past, and, in many cases, present.

Ethnohermeneutics would ameliorate many of the problems associated with other methods linked to religious studies. For example, religionists have difficulty in studying oral traditions because of a long held assumption that religious texts are fixed. This is a dubious approach in and of itself: What contemporary Christian reads the Gospels with a second century Hellenistic understanding? When applied to oral texts, even those written at a later time after their creation, such as the Vedas, methods developed in response to studying the Bible often create misleading interpretations. In the main, the study of non-literate traditions has been considered more appropriate to anthropology than religious studies.

Furthermore, in North America, until approximately a quarter century ago, Christian theological training was a prerequisite to the study of history of religions or comparative religion. It was extremely difficult for students who were not committed Christians to study non-Western religions, unless approached primarily through other disciplines, such as anthropology or language and literature. Although this is no longer the case at most universities, advanced degrees in the study of non-Western religions still often require more study of Christian doctrines and sacred texts than of the traditions on which the research will be carried out. Ethnohermeneutics, as well the term itself, does not carry with it the assumption that a Christian theological education is the most important background for comparative religious studies. (Although the term hermeneutics is currently used as an approach in biblical studies, the word itself need not connote Christian studies.) This is not to suggest that a basic understanding of Western traditions would not be essential for Western scholars who wished to engage in any aspect of comparative culture; rather, it is the relative importance of a background in Christianity and expected, if not required, personal commitment that is being questioned.

Ethnohermeneutics, as proposed, would not be the equivalent of the anthropology of religion, cultural anthropology, sociology of religion, or psychology of religion. Ethnohermeneutics would not involve
examining those cultural phenomena usually categorized under the rubric of religion as one of many aspects of culture or society, but would focus on those particular phenomena, as well as others, as they inform us of what is central or of primary significance to any given culture. Similarly, ethnohermeneutics would not equally study the entirety of a culture, but emphasize those aspects which inform us of meaning and which allow for an interpretation and comparison of cultures in this regard. Finally, ethnohermeneutics would not examine the understanding and ecstatic behavior of the individual aside from culture, nor assume there is a general, universal human culture, as do, for example, psychoanalytic interpretations. Rather the individual would be understood as both a result of and potentially influential upon culture.

Ethnohermeneutics may avoid the pitfalls of traditional social science and humanistic approaches to the study of religion. Most of the various social science disciplines, in wishing to be scientific, distinguish between objective and subjective understanding. It is assumed that there is an objective reality to which all cultures and individuals respond. Such an assumption ignores the possibility that reality itself is a cultural construct. From this perspective, the presumption of an objective reality is but giving precedence to the scholar’s subjective reality over the studied culture’s reality. Comparison is rendered questionable if cultural realities are not accorded equal status. Furthermore, such assumptions reflect outdated physical sciences. They ignore the established understanding in theoretical physics that reality is not a constant, that reality itself is influenced by the observer.

A similar disposition to negate valid comparison can be found in humanistic studies of religion. Here, there is also a tendency to distinguish between objective and subjective reality with regard to deities. Western scholars tend to treat the deities of other cultures as cultural constructs while, usually unconsciously, accepting the Western monotheistic deity as a reality or a norm. This predilection reflects the theological emphasis until relatively recently often found in the training of comparative religionists.

Ethnohermeneutics, in treating significance and meaning within culture rather than outside culture, would circumvent these ethnocentric pitfalls, to which all humans, as cultural beings, are prone. Notions of reality
would be studied as manifestations of culture as would the understanding of spirits, deities, etc. Ethnohermeneutists would have to be conscious of their own cultural backgrounds as their understanding impinges on the understanding of other cultures and consider their own understanding as but one of many cultural understandings. In other words, all realities would be treated as equally real and all deities as equally valid. This is not a novel approach; it is common among those who are involved in participant-observation, with the stress on the first part of the binomial expression. If one is able to adopt the reality of the subject culture, however partial initial attempts may be, then one can meaningfully participate in religious rituals.

Although increasing specialization is the norm, an understanding of significance in culture, society and the individual requires awareness of the progress being made in a variety of scholarly disciplines. Ethnohermeneutics would develop as a particular set of methodologies, borrowing approaches where appropriate, but having a coherence of its own, one closely linked to the various studies of religion, without the usual Eurocentric expectations of the concept of religion itself. For example, in studying American culture, there would be no need to designate the central motivating phenomena as a civil or quasi religion, because it did not meet a narrow definition of normative religion based on a specific theological understanding. Rather we would be able to compare Americanism to, say, Chinese religion without apology or disciplinary self-flagellation. In summary, a new sub-discipline of ethnohermeneutics within religious studies could assist in freeing history of religions or comparative religion from its Eurocentric straightjacket.

LEARNING AN OTHER RELIGION

Proceeding without *a priori* assumptions is a most difficult task, for while we must begin from somewhere, we must constantly be conscious of how our own culture has programmed us with values and notions of reality. The enterprise of studying another culture’s religion can be elucidated with the analogy of learning another language.

To learn a second language, we must start from our own or first language. Educators have found that those who have not become proficient in a first language have problems in learning a second language.
Nevertheless, we must avoid allowing our first language to improperly influence the learning of the new language. Distance between languages (the amount that can be carried over from the first language to the second) effects the learning process. Obviously, an Italian speaker can transfer far more of her or his first language in learning Spanish rather than Arabic. Carrying over too much causes errors that have been noted by linguists, either overgeneralization or interlanguage interference.

In cultures with writing systems, a fourth element may be added to differences in phonology, syntax and semantics. Western scholars have long argued over the degree of difference between the logographic Chinese writing system as compared to alphabetic systems, often finding minimal difference and concluding that Chinese theories of language are wrong. East Asian scholars tended towards a different viewpoint; Nakamura (1964) argued that differences in writing systems led to different modes of thinking and reasoning. More recently, Hansen has updated the discussion, arguing that, among other differences, differing writing systems utilize different parts of the brain. He concludes that traditional semantic theory is wrong, that literally “Thinking about things Chinese can help us to realize that the ‘mundane truths’ of Western common sense are wrong” (NAKAMURA, 1993, p. 397). And, as is being argued here, common assumptions about Chinese religion, simply put, are also wrong.

Those who have learned several languages, especially from different language families, find the process increasingly easier and more efficient. At times people learn a language from a second or third language, rather than their first. To bring us back to our topic, a similar process can be effective in studying religions without a priori assumptions so that comparison can take place.

ETHNOHERMENEUTICAL METHODOLOGIES

Of the various potential approaches to ethnohermeneutics, one emphasizes a culture speaking for itself:

... if we are not to be appeased by literary fantasy or liberal objectivity, and yet truly desire to understand a people in an arena where the printed word is made to represent human experience, then there is
only one way to go. We must let the people tell their own story, in their own language (GEERTZ; LOMATUWAY’MA, 1987, p. 4).

In *Children of Cottonwood…*, Geertz and Lomatuway’ma (1987) present both in Hopi and in a reordered English translation recorded Hopi narratives on a particular ritual. The translation is elucidated through extensive annotation. Between Hopi text, interpreted by a Hopi linguist, and commentary, based on years of fieldwork, by a Western historian of religion, one finds the most complete introduction to Hopi religion yet available.

A corollary approach is for a knowledgeable member of the studied culture, fluent in both the language and thinking of the studied culture and the studying culture, to create a text specifically for the purpose of communicating a hermeneutical understanding. An example of this would be a short text, capturing the oral mode but initially written, created by an Anishnabe healer, Kenn Pitawanakwat (PITAWANAKWAT; PAPER, 1996).

A different approach is that of participant-observation. If one is able to adopt the reality of the subject culture, however partial initial attempts may be, then one can meaningfully participate in religious rituals. Subsequently, a holistic participation in rituals leads to the (imperfect) internalization of a culture’s hermeneutics. The analyst then interprets a personal understanding, tested by comparing this understanding with those of the subject culture.

In the early 1930’s, Underhill (1979), a mature student studying anthropology under Ruth Benedict and Franz Boas, did field work among the Papago. Bringing the values of Western culture with her, she at first felt left out when she found that the sexes worked and relaxed separately and that women did not overtly take part in public ceremonies. She raised her concern among the Papago women and received an unexpected response: The women were smiling as I have smiled at pestering children. I tried to defend my position:

‘I can see that you don’t want to go on the men’s hunting expeditions, but why could you not take part in ceremonies?’
They laughed. ‘Oh, ceremonies are something the men made up, you know. They have the dreams, they make up the stories, then they perform the ceremony’
'But don’t you dream?'
No, it seemed the women did not dream very much; and finally I got the explanation: ‘You see, we have power. Men have to dream to get power from the spirits and they think of everything they can...hoping the spirits will notice them and give them some power. But we have power.” When I looked a little surprised, the answer was: ‘Children. Can any warrior make a child....’
‘Warriors do take a little part in starting the children’.
They sniffed. ‘A very small part....Don’t you see that without us, there would be no men? Why should we envy men? We made the men (UNDERHILL, 1979, p. 91-2).

Underhill came to realize that she could learn at least as much from women as men, and that they had their own cultural understanding. Dropping Western concepts, she listened to the Papago women, to their conceptions. In her study (originally published in 1936), she not only gave us the most perceptive interpretation of Papago religion to date, but the most insightful presentation of female aspects of religion in Native American cultures for the next half century.

Underhill’s slim work remains a persuasive example of the advantage of voiding one’s preconceptions in learning about another culture, learning that can only take place via direct cultural experience. She also demonstrates a minimal mode in the varying types of participation-observation that scholars have utilized in striving to understand a culture other than their own.

In the early 20th century, those who attempted, with varying degrees of success, a full integration with non-Western cultures were dismissed as having gone native. Assuming Western cultures were ipso facto superior, based on an evolutionary understanding of religion and culture, to adopt the mind-set and practices of a non-Western culture, particularly non-oral traditions, was to label oneself as inferior. Western scholars of the time believed that those of other cultures could not understand their own traditions as well as Westerners. For example, only in the last few years has there been a positive reevaluation of the contribution of Frank Cushing, who went native, in our understanding of Zuni religion.

Saso (1978), who became an initiated Daoist priest (and was adopted into a hereditary priestly lineage, a necessary precondition), wrote a book
on Daoist history and rituals that was criticized because it was written, deliberately, from the perspective of a particular lineage. What was being criticized was actually its strength. In China, Daoist rituals are not understood from a universal perspective but from the orientation of the school in which one was initiated. These orientations are based on esoteric oral traditions and secret written commentaries on the exoteric texts, texts that were not intended to be understood without such commentaries. Saso, in a scholarly format, described Daoism as it is lived not as it was theoretically understood outside of China.

Saso, a scholar of religion, illustrates a mode of participation-observation that stresses participation. A more common mode is to partially participate in the rituals and ideology of the subject culture. For example, Sharon (1978) became an assistant to a Peruvian curandero and assisted in healings but did not himself become a curandero. Stoller (1989) apprenticed to a Niger sorcerer but did not continue this participation outside of Africa. Brown (1991), an anthropologist of religion, found herself becoming a participant over time while observing a female Vodou priest, Alourdes, eventually being initiated. Her description of this process is the clearest articulation to date of an intermediary mode of participation-observation, of its advantages and dangers to the scholarly enterprise:

*The Vodou Alourdes practices is intimate and intense, and I soon found that I could not claim a place in her Vodou family and remain a detached observer...in 1981 I went through the rituals of initiation. No Haitian...has ever asked me if I ‘believe’ in Vodou or if I have set aside the religious commitments and understandings that come from my childhood and culture...The choice of relinquishing my worldview or adopting another in its entirety has therefore never been an issue. Nevertheless, I soon realized that my personal involvement in Vodou represented both gains and risks in relation to my work. The potential gains were in depth of understanding. One of the major risks involved losing the important distinction between Vodou interacting with the life of a Haitian and Vodou interacting with my own very different blend of experience, memory, dream, and fantasy. My experiences with Vodou both are and are not like those of Haitians. The stories I tell about these experiences have authority only in the territory...*
between cultures. I have attempted to stay clear on this point and even to use these stories quite self-consciously as bridges for my readers, most of whom will be more like me than Alourdes (BROWN, 1991, p. 9-13).

Where on the spectrum of participation-observation one’s work will fall depends on many factors, including opportunity, personal proclivity to religious experiences, the attitude of the studied culture to outsider’s participation, the length of time available, etc. In all cases, however, students of religion must be prepared to set aside their own cultural backgrounds to be open to the other culture and the voices of those within. The key is an unlimited empathy to other cultures and a willingness to bring one’s new understand back to one’s own culture, to be an ethnohermeneutist.

Both Armin Geertz and I have more recently described ethnohermeneutical methodologies in introductions to major studies. Geertz summarizes his approach in his monumental study of Hopi prophecy in particular and the nature of prophecy in general (GEERTZ, 1994), and I have delineated my approach in attempting to ascertain the hermeneutics of femaleness in the religions of a variety of cultures (PAPER, 1997).

CONCLUDING COMMENT

What the ethnographer studies is how people create meaning or significance in their lives, how they interpret objects and events. An ethnographic study such as *Mama Lola* is thus an exercise in bridge building. It is an interpretation within one web-spinning tradition (in this case, my own) of the interpretations of people who allow a largely different aesthetic in their spinning (in this case Haitians).

A corollary of this position is that the people who are being studied should be allowed to speak for themselves whenever possible, for they are the only true experts on themselves (BROWN, 1991).

Being a student of religion rather than an anthropologist, I cannot reflect on the applicability of these statements to ethnology, but I can to comparative religious studies. What she has so succinctly stated is precisely what I mean by ethnohermeneutics. Any further comment would be superfluous.
Nota

1 For details see Paper (1995b).

References


Abstract: *the article proposes an alternative to the approaches of the religious phenomenon enhanced by an excessive emphasis on the study of written traditions related to a determined religious system, as well as by the ethnocentrism, at the pace that no efforts are made in the sense of abandoning the priorities derived from own culture and/or the very religion of the analysis performer. As the example of China and native societies, the author questions himself whether western notions about religion and the supernatural are in fact capable assuming an enormous diversity of other ideas and philosophical systems.*

Key words: *Ethnohermeneutic, alternative approach, diversity*

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