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Guest Editor: Cosimo Zene

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THE CHALLENGE OF CRITICAL DIALOGUE AND THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS

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Abstract

The correlation between dialogue and religion, both as conceptual apparatuses and as current practices, has had a long history. The purpose of this essay is to isolate one such instance – the “critical dialogue” taking place amongst scholars of religions – which involves also the dialogue scholars establish with their field of study and/or a given religious tradition. Following a brief clarification of terminology used, I will proceed to discuss concrete examples of critical dialogue within the Study of Religions and how this might be enhanced. Finally, I will draw some partial conclusions which might pave the way for this critical dialogue to improve and continue.

I

Clarifying Terminology: Religion/s, the Study of Religions, Theories of Religion/s

There are various ways in which the word “dialogue” can be associated with the word “religion/s.” A) The very first and most obvious instance is interfaith or interreligious dialogue taking place between two or more religious traditions. Usually, this dialogue is characterised by the willingness and “goodwill” of the participants, but it also involves a measure of apologetics and rhetoric, given that those involved support or defend a given “theological” position.¹ B) There is also the dialogue which takes place amongst scholars mainly concerned with theoretical approaches of the study of religion/s. Although this may well be restricted to academics, it is strongly related to the following third type of dialogue, C) which is established by scholars of religion/s with their field of study at large, with different religious traditions, with their adherents and/or with religious phenomena in general. D) The fourth and final instance of dialogue occurs within a given tradition itself. Here emphasis is on the defence and preservation of orthodoxy against heterodox or even heretical movements or those who threaten accepted canonical principles and/or scriptures.²

In this essay, I concentrate mainly on the second type of dialogue, i.e. on the analysis of dialogue as an “internal affair” which occurs amongst scholars of religion/s, and, to some extent, with C) – their subsequent dialogue within their “field of study.” Given that these scholars are not interested in defending truth claims of a tradition, nor supporting a given theological stance, I shall label this as “critical dialogue,” so as to

¹ It is often even the case that the Study of Religions is called into the forum to provide a particular appreciation of this type of interreligious dialogue: see, Michael, Pye, “How May the Academic Study of Religions Assist the Dialogue of Religions?,” *Japanese Religions* (2007): 32.1 and 2, 89–109; Leonard, Swidler, and Paul, Mojzes, *The Study of Religion in an Age of Global Dialogue* (2000) Philadelphia: Temple University Press; Scott Daniel, Dunbar, “The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Academic Study of Religion,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35.3 (1998), 455–470; Carmen Castilla Vázquez, ed. *El diálogo interreligioso. Iniciativas para la gestión de la diversidad religiosa* (Granada: Editorial COMARES, 2011).

² This is, of course, an oversimplified list, but it gives an idea of the wider applicability of “dialogue” to religion/s in general and to the study of religion/s in particular.

differentiate it from the first and fourth types outlined above, but also to qualify it as an investigative, critical process.

While acknowledging that religion has become a highly contested category, particularly among scholars of religion/s, one cannot avoid appreciating the great interest this category generates in terms of discussions, publications and the presence of active departments entirely dedicated to its study in many universities. Despite the recurrent announcement of the “death of religion” – perhaps as part of a more general crisis affecting the humanities – the study of religion/s still attracts a great number of scholars in a variety of disciplines even beyond the humanities and the social sciences. This interest should, on the one hand, alert scholars of religion/s that they are not the sole “guardians of religion/s” and, on the other, that they should perhaps better clarify their role as scholars of religion/s – in terms of theoretical reflection and methodological standing – both to themselves and to the rest of the academic community.

If “religion” has lost – or perhaps never had – analytical valency, why do scholars of religion/s persist in using it? One might here borrow from Levinas apropos philosophical language: we cannot avoid using the Greek language when philosophising. However, we must also “un-say the said” of Greek language in order not to remain trapped by one single, monological philosophy. The vast majority of scholars of religion/s have devoted much effort to “unsaying religion,” and the task remains ongoing.³ Even the quotation marks around the term “religion” have lost their meaning in the process and scholars prefer to drop marks “so as not to bog down the narrative,” although the contention remains “that “religion” and “religious” are fairly useless analytical categories. But, unfortunately and conventionally, use them we must”.⁴ My own choice of wording “religion/s,” combining the singular with the plural, is a move towards de-provincialising a supposedly universal (western?) category in favour of a multiplicity of different epistemologies interpreting the category and against a possible “ideological monotheism,” which is closely reflected in the use of the term in the singular form.⁵

³ Roover, J. de, “Incurably Religious? *Consensus Gentium* and the Cultural Universality of Religion,” *Numen* (forthcoming).

⁴ Aaron W. Hughes, “Science Envy in Theories of Religion,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22 (2010): 294.

⁵ As Engler and Stausberg maintain: “We refer to the study of ‘religion/s’ in part to recognise that departments and programs around the world vary in their choice to use the

In order to clarify this further, we can draw a pertinent parallel between the study of “mysticism” and that of “religion/s.” While studying early modern spiritual writings, Michel de Certeau came to realise that *la mystique* (mystic “science”) is characterised by “absence”:

The historian of the mystics, summoned, as they are, to *say the other*, repeats their experience in studying it: an exercise of absence defines at once the operation through which he produces his text and that which constructed theirs ... He seeks one who has vanished, who in turn sought one who had vanished and so on.⁶

Scholars of religion/s find themselves in this very “mystifying” dilemma: to study something which is contained in that word – religion – but which is at the same time disseminated in multiple sites (myths, writings, rites, laws, music, arts, material artefacts, the human body, places, animals, etc.) and which can be reconstructed only by searching for “traces” of what is absent. In the process, a different meaning, coming from the interpretation of scholars, is found, so that the gap between the initial traces and the current meaning seems often to be incommensurable.⁷

I maintain that some of the problems surrounding the category of religion/s originate precisely from the ambiguities present within the academic study of religion/s itself, if we consider, for instance, that many scholars still refer to the “*discipline* of religious studies” as their recognised place of academic abode. In my view, the Study of Religion/s is not a “discipline” – not at least in the stricter sense of this term – but can be better qualified as a field of studies, simply because all attempts to reduce it to one single discipline have failed, and because historically a

singular or the plural. More fundamentally, the idiosyncratic use of the backlash is meant to index a series of theoretical and meta-theoretical questions regarding the referents and framing of ‘religion’ and ‘religions’” (Steven, Engler and Michael, Stausberg, “Introductory essay. Crisis and creativity: opportunities and threats in the global study of religion/s”, *Religion*, 41.2 (2011, 127–43), 127.

⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, vol. 1: *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 11.

⁷ When explaining to students the idea of “absence and difference” in Certeau’s understanding of mysticism, I make a comparison between his experience of writing about mystics and their own experience as students of religions: the possibility that in two or three hundred years time, some scholar might write about a group of young men and women who decided to dedicate a number of years to study religions, at a time (2012–13) when the general economic crises should have provoked them to seek other profitable avenues, and when even the financial advisors of their institution declared their “sector” to be in “permanent decline.”

variety of disciplines – and increasingly more so – have produced remarkable scholarship on religion/s.⁸ Thus, the eagerness to appropriate religion/s under the aegis of one single, specific discipline – religious studies – should be abandoned for the more sensible choice – study of religions, but also study in religions – which would accommodate both the secular-scientific approach to studying religions and the endorsement of an interdisciplinary, or perhaps even trans-disciplinary, methodology to accomplish this task. I will return later to qualify better the relevance of the interdisciplinary task.

The label “religious studies” lacks a certain clarity,⁹ given that, in most cases, it is intended to imply a humanistic and secular approach. In other words, there is – or should be – nothing “religious” about the study of religions. The ambiguity persists especially in those cases where “religious studies” are associated with departments of theology/divinity and often serve the purpose of providing a veneer of “multiculturalism,” or multi-faith environment in an otherwise mostly monological concern. This concern keeps alive within the field the ongoing “insider-outsider” debate,¹⁰ simply because theologians feel the need to justify their “intrusion” into the study of religions, often imposing the parameters and limitations of this one discipline onto the whole field of studies. On the other hand, many scholars who adhere to the label of “religious studies” – often imposed on them by institutional affiliation – to describe their task, are still eager to clarify differences and to defend academic autonomy.

The debate between theology and “religious studies”¹¹ – and the effort of the latter to acquire academic independence from the former – has had a

⁸ See Engler and Stausberg, “Introductory essay. Crisis and creativity” (2011): 131–4.

⁹ I am aware that it would be unrealistic to insist on adopting an alternative terminology to “religious studies,” since this fails to describe satisfactorily the task carried out by many scholars of religions. Moreover, it is equally misleading to amalgamate, even at official level, all scholars of religions under the one single label/sector of “Theology and Religious Studies,” as is the case, mostly, in the Anglo-American academia.

¹⁰ See, Jeppe S. Jensen, “Revisiting the Insider-Outsider Debate: Dismantling a Pseudo-problem in the Study of Religion,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23 (2011): 29–47.

¹¹ See, for instance: “Theology and/or Religious Studies? A Response from Graduate Students,” a survey carried out among students of Theology and Religious Studies at Oxford, Edinburgh, Leeds and Liverpool Hope:

<http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/PrsDiscourseArticles/19> (accessed 1 August 2012). For an early assessment of the situation at the end of 20th century in USA, see, R. L. Hart, “Religious and Theological Studies in American Higher Education: A Pilot Study,”

long and troubled history.¹² To re-examine it might thus seem to revert to an old dispute and fail to recognise that the study of religion/s has indeed attained freedom and maturity. However, so as to make my position clearer, I would maintain that, even when we invoke a post-theological or a-theological perspective, both religious studies and/or the study of religion/s, as an enterprise conducted predominantly in western academia and largely by western scholars, might still be subject to “intellectual” dependence on a powerful theological logos, one which yet might direct our thinking, unless we acknowledge this “condition” and offer a viable alternative. On the one hand, theology – and to be more specific, Judeo-Christian theology, for the western intellectual milieu – has for centuries informed most of our scholarship in as many spheres of academic life, including those “disciplines” which have strenuously opposed theological reasoning. The solution is not thus to combat or ignore theology, but to recognise it as part of our “cultural baggage,” as one discipline among others which deals with religion/s. In short, it would be more profitable for the study of religions to acknowledge theology and to establish a critical dialogue with it.¹³ The alternative to this would be that theology, even in its postmodern version, will always try to make a return and to control the study of religion/s.¹⁴

Journal of the American Academy of Religion 59.4 (1991): 715–827; Darlene Bird and Simon G. Smith, eds. *Theology and Religious Studies in Higher Education: Global Perspectives* (London: Continuum, 2009).

¹² See, for example: Ann Taves, “Negotiating the Boundaries in Theological and Religious Studies,” GTU’s Opening Convocation, 2005:

<http://www.religion.ucsb.edu/Faculty/taves/GTU-FinalLecture.pdf> (accessed 15 July 2012); Maya Warrior and Simon Oliver, eds., *Theology and Religious Studies: An Exploration of Disciplinary Boundaries* (London: T&T Clark, 2008).

¹³ As Mark Taylor remarks: “Insofar as religious studies defines itself as essentially antitheological, theology continues to set the terms for debate ... For those with eyes to see, theology casts a long – perhaps inescapable – shadow” (Mark Taylor, “Introduction”, in Mark Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 13).

¹⁴ According to Gavin Hyman, while “religious studies” is rooted in modernity, Radical Theology, favoured by the “fluidity” of postmodernity, would renovate also “religious studies.” I doubt, however, that this is the kind of “renovation” scholars in the study of religions are looking for. Gavin Hyman, “The Study of Religion and the Return of Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72.1 (2004): 195-219.

II

From Interdisciplinary Dialogue to “Critical Dialogue”

It has become almost commonplace to recognise that the most appropriate methodological approach to the study of religion/s needs to be multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary or even transdisciplinary. The following statement summarises its rationale:

In the absence of any foundational method or comprehensive explanatory theory, no single approach to religion is adequate. In order to appreciate the richness and complexity of religious life, it is necessary to deploy a variety of interpretive strategies. As the partiality of every particular perspective is exposed, a multidisciplinary approach to the study of religion becomes unavoidable.¹⁵

The problem still persists, however, as to how to apply a suitable interdisciplinary methodology to the study of religions, as well as to other fields of academic research. Apparently, after much over-specialisation running on sub-sub-disciplinary lines, there is now a return to an interdisciplinary approach as a viable consideration for researchers, as confirmed by the statement made in the *Unit of Assessment and Recruitment of Expert Panels* of the forthcoming “Research Exercise Framework” (REF) 2014 in UK.¹⁶ This is indeed a welcome move by the REF experts, but if it was necessary to provide a note so as to encourage the submission of interdisciplinary research with the assurance that this would be fairly assessed, it means that some doubts remain within the research community regarding the advisability of interdisciplinary research. Even in the study of religions the tendency seems to be one of caution in order to avoid the risk of venturing into the “quicksand” of interdisciplinarity, as Stroumsa warns:

¹⁵ Taylor, “Introduction,” 13.

¹⁶ “We aim to encourage the submission of interdisciplinary research and ensure it is assessed fairly by people with appropriate expertise. The broader sub-panels and main panels will help enable this, and we aim to include specific interdisciplinary expertise on sub-panels. Cross-panel membership will be encouraged in cases where there are strong connections across panels, and cross-referral mechanisms will also allow material submitted to a UOA [Unit of Assessment] to be assessed by members on a different panel.”

http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/pub/unitsofassessmentandrecruitmentofexpertpanels/01_10.pdf

In our generation, historians of religions have increasingly become historians of, at most, one religion. Gone are the days of encompassing theories and of daring comparative studies. The more one invokes interdisciplinary studies, the less one seems to practice that dangerous sport. Safe scholarship, with clear defined boundaries, not to be trespassed, and with no threats of unexpected results, has become the name of the game. But the new, or newly perceived immediate challenges, compel us to renounce this epistemological timidity.¹⁷

Perhaps this is the result of uncertainty in establishing what “interdisciplinarity” means and how it should be advantageously applied to our specific case. The solution, from my point of view, would be to make interdisciplinarity solid and efficient. However, this process involves some risk-taking given that, once disciplines are called to cooperate with each other they necessarily lose distinctive qualities of power and authority in favour of a prominence given to the subject-matter – the “problems and issues,” as we shall see later on – under discussion. When applying an interdisciplinary approach, we have to accept that individual disciplines must necessarily change and lose some of their original “purity,” acquiring instead a certain “hybridity.”¹⁸

Disciplinarity is motivated to maximise the power and control a discipline can exercise over a given subject-matter, so as to produce effective results according to the logic of the hard-sciences, aiming to manufacture a “saleable” product in line with market laws. However, an alternative attempt at interdisciplinarity – which I see closer to the needs of our field of study – as a counterpart to utilitarian criteria within the social sciences and modern thought, is offered by the work of Marcel Mauss. While seeking to recover the meaning of “the gift” as a “total social fact,” Mauss privileged the concept of “*l’homme total*” (the total human being): “whether we study special facts or general facts, it is always the complete human being we are primarily dealing with.”¹⁹ In carrying out his “experiment” on the gift, Mauss was responding to the need to “take his own sociological heritage and reorient it, to weave new relationships

¹⁷ Guy G. Stroumsa, “Preface,” in *New Science. The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Harvard University Press, 2010), vii–viii.

¹⁸ Stroumsa, further specifying the statement above, maintains that: “We must urgently find new tools to understand religion if only to confront its current threats to our societies. A way to developing such new tools, I argue, can be found in the long-forgotten beginnings of the discipline.” *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Marcel Mauss, *Sociology and Psychology: Essays* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, [1924] 1979), 27.

between sociology, biology, psychology, history, linguistics, and psychoanalysis and to open up anthropology in this new space."²⁰ It is this real "passion for totality," resisting disciplinary boundaries, combined with this appreciation of "the gift" which could offer a different perspective of a meaningful interdisciplinary practice.

This pursuit of the 'total' resulted from Mauss's dissatisfaction with the traditional intra- and interdisciplinary divisions which partitioned reality in an artificial way. He believed that the most significant and most interesting problems in the human and social sciences were to be found on the frontiers of scientific disciplines: therefore the 'total' should contribute to the *erosion of disciplinary boundaries*.²¹

One positive effect of this "erosion" is that disciplines are necessarily invited to establish a profitable dialogue among themselves, in order to make research possible, thus also favouring the inauguration of a "critical dialogue." Indeed, the complexity of inter and trans-disciplinary theoretical research is itself already a dialogue in progress.²²

For dialogue to become "critical" – i.e. significant, probing and operative – we must first of all dispel the character of general bonhomie and ineffectiveness the word "dialogue" itself has acquired in many sectors (political, managerial, economic etc.). Philosophical and intellectual debates have not remained immune to this fascination in which dialogue, at times, has become almost impossible.²³ There is, however, a more incisive side to dialogue when the true meaning of dialogue is put into practice and the *dia-logos* is taken to its extreme consequences, with the *logos* being "pulled apart," stretched from many sides (*dia-*) in the process of merging it again, not as an individual or group possession, but as a common effort

²⁰ Bruno Karsenti, "The Maussian Shift: A Second Foundation for Sociology in France," in Wendy James and N. J. Allen Eds. *Marcel Mauss. A Centenary Tribute* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998), 73.

²¹ Alexander Gofman, "A Vague but Suggestive Concept: the 'Total Social Fact'," in Wendy James and N. J. Allen Eds. *Marcel Mauss. A Centenary Tribute* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998), 65 (emphasis added).

²² Julie T. Klein, "Interdisciplinarity and complexity: An evolving relationship," *E:CO*, Special Double Issue, 6. 1–2, (2004): 2–10; Julie T. Klein, *Mapping Interdisciplinary Studies* (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 1999).

²³ See, Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard Palmer, eds. *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989); Swartz C. and P. Cillier, "Dialogue Disrupted: Derrida, Gadamer and the Ethics of Discussion," *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 22.1 (2003): 1–18.

to make dialogue possible.²⁴ Success, however, is not easily achieved, given the fragility of this “contended” logos. Early Christian theologians shrewdly appropriated the Logos as the pinnacle of human thought and applied it to the Second Person of the Trinity (see *Prologue* to St. John’s Gospel), but even this highest Logos shows signs of complexity and vulnerability when it enters into *dia-logos* with humanity. On the other hand, dialogue, especially in its “critical” perspective, seems to achieve results in disturbing the *status quo*, if some of its proponents had to endure hindrance and at times even death.²⁵

For a more sustained practice in the study of religions, a brief, working definition of “critical dialogue” could prove useful: I see this type of dialogue as a sustained, ongoing effort to rethink our theoretical and methodological categories when analysing religion in general but also when engaging with the study of a variety of religious traditions and philosophies. This practice, rather than being an individual pursuit must, by necessity, become a shared interest for a community of scholars dedicated to the study of religions. Moreover, the engagement with those traditions, though remaining critical, becomes a commitment and an intellectual/scholarly exchange with those traditions, without fear of losing academic credibility when “contaminating” our “scientific purity” with these “realities,” intended as “practices.” In other words, our effort to “learn about” is also intent on “learning from” religious traditions, and to then return to our initial theoretical positions and to revise these accordingly.

²⁴ See, Edda Weigand, E. *Dialogue: The Mixed Game* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins, 2010).

²⁵ Other notable examples that come to mind, besides the well-known case of Socrates, are Fray Luis de Leon (1527–91) and Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). Fray Luis, professor of Biblical Studies and Moral Philosophy at the University of Salamanca, in 1572 was accused and imprisoned by the Inquisition, to be released four years later without charges. According to tradition, he started his first university lecture after returning from imprisonment with the words “As we were saying yesterday ...” (*Dicebamus hesternae die*). A clear sign that the power of authority is not always capable of silencing the power of dialogue, as also in the case of Gramsci, whose captivity in Italian Fascist prisons did not prevent him from exercising critical thinking and producing a powerful political philosophy. A more recent instance of “silenced dialogue” is Marc H. Ellis’ case, Director of the Center for Jewish Studies at Baylor University. Ellis is under internal investigation for his solidarity with Palestinians.

There are many instances of “critical dialogue” which have animated the study of religions during the last few decades.²⁶ One such example is the volume *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, edited by Mark Taylor. Gustavo Benavides, in that volume, defines “Modernity” as “an act of self-reflection,”²⁷ concluding that: “To the extent that this is the case, each of these critical terms in religious studies, beginning with “religion” itself, appears as modern, as problematic, as requiring an exercise in self-reflection whose result may be the recognition that the realities they are believed to delimit could be otherwise or not at all.”²⁸ Mark Taylor himself in his Introduction discusses the “growing significance of religious belief and practice,” the problematic nature of “religion” and the terminology that surrounds it, the dissimilarity of intents between “Theology and Religious Studies,” the existential relevance for multidisciplinary and multicultural approaches for the latter and the scholars’ interplay between modern and postmodern theoretical positions. He then highlights the urgency of a return to self-reflexivity and self-consciousness to be associated with the notion of “criticism” in the study of religions. Thus, critical reflection “articulates an incomplete web of open and flexible terms.”²⁹ These, in addition to constituting “an enabling network of constraints”, provide also “a map for exploring the territory of religion,” so as “to promote a dialogue between religious studies and important work going on in other areas of the arts, humanities, and social sciences.”³⁰ As we shall see, the critical

²⁶ Among these, I would like to mention: Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz and Randi R. Warne eds. *New Approaches to the Study of Religion. Vol. 1. Regional, Critical and Historical Approaches* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co., 2004); Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz and Randi R. Warne, eds., *New Approaches to the Study of Religion. Vol.2. Textual, Comparative, Sociological, and Cognitive Approaches* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co, 2004); John R. Hinnells, ed., *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005); Robert A. Segal, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011); Robert Orsi, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). An alternative or parallel way to the sole writing about religion, while promoting critical dialogue, is the creation of networks of scholars in which critical dialogue can flourish. One such group is the “Critical Religion Association” at the University of Sterling (<http://criticalreligion.org/>), under the leadership of Tim Fitzgerald.

²⁷ Gustavo Benavides, “Modernity,” in Mark Taylor, *Critical Terms*, (1998), 201.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Taylor, “Introduction,” 1998, 17.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

dialogue is now spreading to other areas and disciplines beyond those usually associated with the study of religions.

III

Critical Dialogue and the Study of Religions

For the purpose of this present reflection, I propose to consider an outstanding example of “critical dialogue” in the study of religions and to reflect on the contents of two recent, interrelated publications: *Contemporary Theories of Religion. A Critical Companion*, edited by M. Stausberg,³¹ and the special issue of the journal *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22, 2010, with Stausberg as guest editor.³² My scope here is not to provide a review of these two publications, but to highlight some relevant arguments which outline a clear path for critical dialogue among scholars of religions, and which offer indications for a future course of action. The continuity between the two publications is guaranteed by their sharing not only Stausberg’s editorship, but also the majority of their contributing scholars.

It would appear obvious that the preoccupation with “Theories of Religion” is central in equal measure for Stausberg and the contributors in both volumes. Stausberg’s earlier statement that “Rather than being a closed chapter in the past history of the field, theorising about religion is and hopefully will remain an ongoing preoccupation,”³³ is developed even further, but starting with a problematic issue: why do scholars of religion/s avoid theories of religion? Prior to offering an answer, Stausberg reminds us of the background which justifies the “reluctance to theory” since “the field carries with itself an ambivalent legacy of avoiding and importing theories,”³⁴ going back to the origins of the “discipline” and still persisting in the present.³⁵ The first reason for this “reluctance,” apart from “a typical

³¹ Michael Stausberg, ed., *Contemporary Theories of Religions. A Critical Companion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

³² Michael Stausberg, “Prospects in Theories of Religions,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22 (2010): 223–238.

³³ Michael Stausberg, “There is life in the old dog yet. An introduction to contemporary theories of religion,” *Contemporary Theories of Religions*, 9.

³⁴ Stausberg, “Prospects in Theories of Religions,” 224.

³⁵ Quoting the well-known textbook by Daniel Pals, *Eight Theories of Religions* (2006), Stausberg remarks that: “With the exception of Mircea Eliade, none of the eight

causality dilemma" – "theory is not emphasised in religious studies programmes" – is that theory is not "regarded as a common and promising entry port to an academic career, except for positions in the philosophy of religion ..."³⁶ Other reasons are associated with the controversy surrounding the very term "religion" but also the "project of theory," both looked at with much suspicion from a postmodern perspective. Moreover, "scholars working with empirical methods often struggle to come to terms with the complexity of the phenomena."³⁷ This complexity is further accentuated by the "embedded character of religion" in society, culture, economy, politics, the law, etc. and the impossibility for individual scholars to master a variety of research methods which would allow the applicability of an effective interdisciplinary perspective.

This, nevertheless, does not seem to have deterred Stausberg and contributors from attempting a serious engagement with theoretical reflection. The complexity of the phenomena, combined with the intricacy of an almost impossible interdisciplinary task, would be sufficient to paralyse any such initiative and to simply defer to postmodern and poststructuralist epistemologies and ontologies, thus preserving a lamentable status quo. However, the willingness of these authors "to contribute to an ongoing dialogue" becomes an inspiration to others in the field of the study of religions to accept this invitation to engage in critical dialogue. Indeed, as Stausberg advocates, when commenting on Lawson and McCauley,³⁸ "... Chomsky's generative linguistic theory, can be said to have opened the door to the sort of *trans-disciplinary conversation* that the present volume aims to provoke."³⁹ Stausberg is not reluctant to defend these provocative conversations across disciplines in the name of serious scholarship, stating that he undertakes the task "... in a spirit (call it "modernist" if you will) that valorises theory, critique, and discussion as means of doing science."⁴⁰ Moreover:

theoreticians of religion included ... was trained in or worked in a religious studies department." Ibid., 224.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking religion: connecting cognition and culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

³⁹ Stausberg, "There is life in the old dog yet", 11.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 14.

Theorising is here understood as a means not of achieving closure but an act of reopening the issues. Even if the study of religion(s) is not a major producer of theory of religion, where there are academic theories of religion out there, it is our professional duty to discuss them.⁴¹

In this perspective, even the anti-theory stance of postmodernity – which is “theoretically interesting” – is recovered by asking those questions within modernity still begging for an answer by scholars of religions eager to guarantee intellectual honesty. Following this “spirit,” contributing scholars to *Contemporary Theories of Religion* – mainly from the study of religions backgrounds – have provided “a stock-taking of the contemporary theoretical landscape in the form of a presentation and a discussion of seventeen theories, where ... the voices of the commentators necessarily receded somewhat into the background.”⁴²

One particular issue raised by Stausberg caught my attention: the fact that the great majority of the seventeen theories discussed in the volume “take more top-down points of departure, in that they start from the puzzle that is religion in general.”⁴³ This indicates that “religion,” in addition to being an unanswered preoccupation of modernity, is essentially a western one and, as such, is at times unable to welcome the theoretical challenges coming from other traditions and diverse epistemologies. In other words, while it is perfectly legitimate that western scholars – taken here as the totality of theorists and their commentators in the volume – are concerned with solving this “western puzzle,” they should be attentive to the need to integrate into their theorising the conceptualisations happening in those affluent traditions we call “religions.” This operation would not only prevent a dangerous, always-present theoretical ethnocentrism, but would acknowledge the propensity of these traditions to themselves produce meaningful theories which have the ability to intervene and broaden the critical dialogue about “religion/s” even further.⁴⁴ Thus, if my initial, necessarily western theory of religion/s is open to the critical dialogue coming from other (“religious”) traditions – those very traditions which are

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Stausberg, “Prospects in Theories of Religions,” 225.

⁴³ Stausberg, “There is life in the old dog yet,” 11.

⁴⁴ An early attempt of this type of dialogue was the publication of *Indian Religions*, edited by R. Burghart and A. Cantlie (1985). The publication itself was the result of extensive collaboration and exchange among contributors. During the 1980s A. Piatigorky, an Indologist, and A. Cantlie, a social anthropologist, jointly taught a successful course on “Phenomenology of Religion” at SOAS. See also Sherma and Sharma, eds., 2008.

studied and researched upon in departments of the study of religions – needs to be revisited and possibly tested according to new “foreign” findings. This dialogical process, as much as it is unsettling and disconcerting, can also be enormously enriching and, in the end, much more rewarding. I will return to this below.

In the special issue of *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 2010, 22, the same group of authors, taking a more active role, “seek to continue and advance the debate by highlighting what they regard as crucial issues for theories of religion.”⁴⁵ The majority of contributors, in an effort to respond to the challenge presented by the complexity of the phenomenon of religion, offer a variety of theoretical approaches which range from semantic philosophy “based on a holistic view of linguistic understanding” (Engler and Gardiner),⁴⁶ to cognitive theories (Benson Saler) and philosophy of science (Sandra Mitchell) as a possible strategy to counteract “reductionism.” Other relevant issues discussed by contributors to the special issue include evolutionary models, including social evolution, applied to theories of religion; scientific and naturalistic models; theories of adaptation and functionalism and the production of religious configurations. A “biocultural theory of religion” (Geertz) is advocated so as to provide an expansion of limited views of cognitive sciences, by integrating four levels of reality: the neurobiological, the cognitive-psychological, the sociological and the semantic-semiotic. This theoretical approach is close to “normative cognition” (Jensen), where cognition is seen as conditioned by socio-cultural norms.⁴⁷ Although Stausberg sees an almost unbridgeable gap between cognitivists and discourse theorists, given that “[T]he two camps at present seem divided by epistemological and methodological abysms which prevent meaningful exchange,” he still maintains that “from a purely theoretical point of view, both concepts should be able to cross-fertilise since both are ultimately dependent upon each other.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Stausberg, “Prospects in Theories of Religions,” 225.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Stausberg rightly points out the collaborative aspect of these authors’ contribution, between a scholar of religion (Engler) and a philosopher (Gardiner).

⁴⁷ For both Geertz and Jensen, a strong interdisciplinary approach becomes indispensable in order to make their theoretical endeavour sustainable: “In devising the bio-cultural model, Jensen draws on a body of literature from developmental, evolutionary, cultural and moral psychology, cognitive science, philosophy, social anthropology and religious studies.” Stausberg, “Prospects in Theories of Religions,” 229.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 230.

Whilst all the contributions to this collection are valuable, I particularly want to attend to Aaron Hughes' article "*Science Envy in Theories of Religion*," because I feel that, methodologically, we must first address the unanswered questions regarding religion raised by modernity whilst sharing Hughes' emphasis on religion as socio-cultural formation and carrier of "social markers of identity formation," where a religious identity perceived as natural is in fact a "cultural invention." Hughes warns us against the a-historical and "context-less pronouncements" of some scientific "theories" of religion. Since religion "is appealed to in the construction, formation, and subsequent invocation of diverse and unstable identities," it follows that a definition of religion, in the singular, becomes untenable, just as the definition of a religious tradition singularly taken, e.g. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism etc. is also unsound.

Hughes' main purpose is to critique cognitivist and neuropsychological approaches to religion, and by way of doing so he proposes a return to philosophical phenomenology, as opposed to the "phenomenology of religion" as advocated by Mircea Eliade and, more successfully (still "caught in the implications of an amorphous sacred"), by Ninian Smart: "One of the unfortunate repercussions of the "phenomenology of religion" is that it has largely curtailed philosophical phenomenological analysis in religious studies."⁴⁹ To solve this impasse, Hughes proposes revisiting Husserl's idea ("*Philosophy as a Rigorous Science*")⁵⁰ that "we must return to the matters in question, as they are themselves ... looking at objects of analysis by examining how we, in our many ways of being, actually "constitute" such objects."⁵¹ To better achieve this, Hughes proposes a reflection on the hermeneutical and phenomenological ontology of Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* ("as opposed to the later Heidegger"):

... for Heidegger, phenomenology must return ... to that which we claim to have knowledge of and about, thereby engaging in the constant interpretation of phenomena in addition to the very act of interpretation itself. Phenomenology of the Heideggerian bent must undergo continual interpretation as we further revise and elaborate upon the contextual structure in which phenomena display themselves.⁵²

⁴⁹ Hughes, "Science Envy in Theories of Religion," 299.

⁵⁰ Edmund Husserl, "Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft," *Logos* 1. Tübingen. (1910-11): 289-341.

⁵¹ Hughes, "Science Envy in Theories of Religion," 297.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 298.

Hughes equally underlines as an essential part of this process the “structures of temporality,” the “very thrownness of human existence” and the paramount importance of language, given that “the ontological categories associated with Being become encased in and inseparable from the texture of larger social, cultural and political contexts.”⁵³ Not only am I in agreement with Hughes’ recovery of Husserlian and Heideggerian philosophical phenomenology – since I found myself retrieving this very path when proposing theoretical reflections of religion to students – but I believe that from the point of view of a western scholar of religions, hermeneutical phenomenology, among other philosophical traditions, is the one which most readily welcomes an open, critical dialogue with other world philosophies and epistemologies.⁵⁴ Moreover, in my opinion, the later Heidegger can also provide some useful reflections along this line.

In 1964, at UNESCO in Paris, Heidegger delivered the lecture “*The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking*,” which summarises thirty-five years of rethinking *Being and Time* so as “to subject the point of departure of the question in *Being and Time* to an immanent criticism” and to emphasize “to what extent the *critical* question of what the matter of thinking is, necessarily and continually belongs to thinking.”⁵⁵ One main preoccupation of Heidegger, here, is to demonstrate that “the end of philosophy,” its dissolution and completion, coincides with the “scientific discovery of the individual areas of beings.” This process, which started in the age of Greek philosophy (“the development of science within the field which philosophy opened up”), has now been accelerated by the separation of sciences from philosophy and their establishment of independence: “It suffices to refer to the independence of psychology, sociology, anthropology as cultural anthropology, to the role of logics as logistics and semantics.”⁵⁶ In a way, the beginning of modernity, which marked another crucial moment of independence – of philosophy from theology – is still in progress. Heidegger sees the science of cybernetics – corresponding to “the determination of man as acting social being” – as the new guiding principle

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ I am appealing here to the strong emphasis in the hermeneutical and phenomenological tradition on self-reflexivity and openness to alterity, particularly in the works of Gadamer, Ricoeur, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas.

⁵⁵ Martin Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” in Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972), 55.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 57.

for all other sciences. Although Heidegger accepts this state of affairs as "the legitimate completion of philosophy," he is adamant that these sciences "can deny their origin from philosophy, but never dispense with it," given that "the sciences still speak about the Being of beings in the unavoidable supposition of their regional categories."⁵⁷ At this point, Heidegger provides a summary and a statement which could be interpreted either as appropriation, or as implying also an "accusation," given his hidden feelings towards a lamentable course of events: "The end of philosophy means: the beginning of world civilisation based upon Western European thinking."⁵⁸ It remains to be demonstrated if Western European thinking – presumably entrusted to the care of philosophy – has failed in its mission to accomplish the task, or, if it can now spring out of the ashes of a "dead philosophy." From the rest of Heidegger's conversation transpires at least the fearful question of whether "philosophy has not been up to the matter of thinking and has thus become a history of mere decline." Presumably, in Heidegger's eyes, this decline is represented by the "technological-scientific-industrial character" which defines "world [western?] civilisation."⁵⁹

When proposing a way forward so as to accomplish the task of thinking, Heidegger, appeals to Husserl, and particularly to the latter's *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science* and re-proposes the call "to the things themselves." Finding support in Plato [*to pragma auto*], Descartes [*ego cogito*] and Hegel, it is nevertheless on Husserl that Heidegger relies, given the former's concern to oppose the claim of naturalistic psychology "to be the genuine scientific method of investigating consciousness," while blocking access to the phenomenon of intentional consciousness.⁶⁰ His call "to the thing itself," opposing also historicism, is further explained by Husserl, with a sentence in italics, quoted entirely by Heidegger: "*The stimulus for investigation must start not with philosophies, but with issues and problems.*"⁶¹ In other words, Heidegger learns from Husserl that the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 60.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 62.

⁶¹ Husserl, "Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft," 340. A more recent formulation of this idea was articulated by Karl Popper, thus: "We are not students of some subject matter, but students of problems. And problems may cut right across the borders of any subject matter or discipline." Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 88.

recovery of the task of thinking starts not with the preoccupation to restore the lost supremacy of philosophy, but by “suspending” philosophy in order to return “to the thing itself,” the issues and the problems:

In its negative and also in its positive sense, the call “to the thing itself” determines the securing and development of method. It also determines the procedure of philosophy by means of which the matter itself can be demonstrated as a datum. For Husserl, ‘the principle of all principles’ is first of all not a principle of content, but a principle of method.⁶²

The insistence on “method” becomes relevant here, firstly because sciences assert supremacy on grounds of their powerful method and, secondly, because the method, being directed to the matter of philosophy, “does not just belong to the matter as the key belongs to the lock. Rather, it belongs to the matter because it is the matter itself.”⁶³

Upholding the principle of “Intuition” through which transcendental subjectivity is reached, Heidegger’s own intuition is “to go beyond the mere discussion of the call and ask what remains unthought in the call “to the thing itself.” His pursuit brings him to propose a reflection on the idea of “openness” as “opening” and “clearing” – bringing language to shed light on the discussion: French *clairière* and German *Waldung* (foresting) and *Feldung* (fielding), so as to reach “free openness” of a primal phenomenon. Hence he retranslates one of Goethe’s *Maximen und Reflexionen* (1833) – “look for nothing behind phenomena: they themselves are what is to be learned” – into “The phenomenon itself, in the present case the opening, set us the task of learning from it, that is, of letting it say something to us.”⁶⁴ Matthew Day, in his article “How to Keep It Real,” offers a good example of this, by applying Bruno Latour’s findings in the field of science studies to propose a shift from the endless arguments around the category “religion” to “a scholarly agenda whereby attention would be paid to the labor required to make the gods and spirits real actors in a collective.”⁶⁵

I will return below to this highly relevant point. Here, I wish to conclude the reflection on Heidegger’s “recovery” of Husserl’s phenomenology and

⁶² Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” 63.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁶⁵ Matthew Day, “How to Keep it Real,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22 (2010, 272–282): 272.

its possible applicability to a critical dialogue in the study of religions. When clarifying the opening of the phenomenon as presence, Heidegger returns to a neglected term which appeared at the beginning of philosophy – *Aletheia* as unconcealment – only to then be abandoned for more “productive” terms. By refusing to translate *Aletheia* as “truth” – i.e., “the certainty of the knowledge of Being,” as *adequatio* and *certitudo* – Heidegger puts in question the idea of *ratio* as applied to technological scientific rationalisation which is preoccupied with insisting on “what is demonstrable,” rather than with “the task of thinking.” Hence: “We all still need an education in thinking, and before that first a knowledge of what being educated and uneducated in thinking means.”⁶⁶ In his concluding remarks to his lecture “The End of Philosophy,” Heidegger returns to a theme he had already discussed previously in the lecture “Time and Being,” delivered at the University of Freiburg on January 1962: “...Where does the opening come from and how is it given? What speaks in the ‘It gives’ [*Es gibt*]?”⁶⁷ Thinking “the destiny that gives Being as a gift” opens up yet another chapter⁶⁸ – closer to Mauss’ own experiment of the gift – which was set to become a major theme in philosophy, theology and other fields of the humanities.⁶⁹

In this posthumous dialogue between Heidegger and Husserl, it is surprising that while the former recovers some critical moments of the latter’s initial writings on transcendental phenomenology, Heidegger fails to make reference to Husserl’s *The Crisis of European Sciences and*

⁶⁶ Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” 72.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁶⁸ Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, 10.

⁶⁹ A considerable number of publications are dedicated to the development of this topic expanding from philosophical phenomenology to theology, in particular: Alan Shrift, *The Logic of the Gift: Towards an Ethic of Generosity*. New York: Routledge, 1997. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Robyn Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001); Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey Kosky (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); Calvin O. Schrag, *God as Otherwise than Being. Towards a Semantics of the Gift* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2002); Susy Zanardo, *Il Legame del Dono* (Milano: Vita & Pensiero, 2007). Personally, I am interested in establishing a possible interdisciplinary connection between Marcel Mauss’s *Essai sur le don* (1923–4) and Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* (1927), both written during the interwar period and reflecting the search for a viable solution to the crisis of European thought and social life.

*Transcendental Phenomenology*⁷⁰ – written a decade prior to Heidegger’s “Letter on ‘Humanism’” – given the relevance Heidegger himself assigns to the European crisis.⁷¹ Perhaps, while acknowledging his debt to Husserl, Heidegger was not yet ready to question his own personal involvement in the politics that favoured that scientific, moral, intellectual and existential crisis. This not only warns us of the limits of any dialogue, but exposes also the role of “intentionality” behind dialogue. It may be the task of critical dialogue to recover both the meaning of “the task of thinking ‘religion’” from the perspective of philosophical phenomenology, and to learn from it that “thinking religion,” as much as philosophy, remains entangled with human social history and everyday life and experience.

Returning to the original question on the validity of “critical dialogue” as part of the ongoing reflection raised by scholars of religions, our theoretical endeavours can in fact be rendered as “The end of religion and the task of thinking (on religions).” We might even venture to say that the crisis described by Husserl and Heidegger still lingers and affects our task as scholars committed to one particular field of studies within the humanities. It was, in fact, a scholar of religions, Richard Gombrich, who, over ten years ago, alerted his colleagues to the lamentable situation in British universities.⁷² The renewed commitment of many scholars in this field reassures me that the responsibility to fulfil a “professional duty” as hoped for by Stausberg, is no exception. Effectively, a critical dialogue is already in operation in many different ways and employing a variety of strategies, including internet discussion groups. The publication of this special issue on “Dialogue and Religion” is another small example carried

⁷⁰ Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, Walter Biemel, ed., Husserliana VI (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1954); partially translated by David Carr as *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

⁷¹See, Dermot Moran, *Husserl’s Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology. An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁷² Richard F. Gombrich, “British Higher Education Policy in the last Twenty Years: The Murder of a Profession,” Lecture delivered on 7 January 2000 in Tokyo at the Graduate Institute of Policy Studies (GRIPS), <http://www.atm.damtp.cam.ac.uk/mcintyre/papers/LHCE/uk-higher-education.html> [accessed on 7/10/2012]. See also: Matthew Day, “The Educator Must Be Educated: The Study of Religion at the End of the Humanities,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22 (2010): 1–8.

out jointly by colleagues belonging to one department of the study of religions.

As scholars of religions we may take on board Jonathan Z. Smith's affirmation that "there is no data for religion" as such,⁷³ but we cannot negate the great amount of data – in fact, the corpus, as a body of literature – produced by scholars of religions during the last one hundred and fifty years. It is upon the evidence of this "data" that "the task of thinking on religions" has itself become a social fact, a phenomenon, as Durkheim would define it. It is also upon this data that a critical dialogue, as part of the task of "rethinking religions at the end of religion," becomes possible and even desirable. As scholars of religions, we might also be tempted to readdress the old, primordial definition of "*religio*" as "binding," supposedly, the humans to the gods. Adopting a more secularised approach, we could risk an alternative and more mundane interpretation of the "binding together" that has been occurring under the label "religion" – in terms of myths, rituals, writings, performances, laws, leaders and agents etc. – thus making religion a collective noun for the grouping of a certain type of human activity or a given observable phenomena, but still social facts. It might help to know that the Latin-Italian word for book-binding, or rebinding "*rilegare*," is still close to the same Latin root for *religio*. In a subsequent move of this "binding together," at the time of "European expansion," other close expressions of human activity were classified under the same label of what was known – and even accepted – as religion. Although we would now agree that "world religions" are yet another "western invention" and a result of European modernity and colonialism,⁷⁴ it remains our task to rethink "world religions" not from the perspective of a universalising European mind, but by extending the critical dialogue so as to include these religions and their scholars.⁷⁵

⁷³ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), xi.

⁷⁴ Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, Or, How European Universalism was preserved in the language of Pluralism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

⁷⁵ José Ignacio Cabezón, "The Discipline and Its Other: The Dialectic of Alterity in the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74.1 (2006): 21–38.

IV

Some Partial Conclusions

When invoking critical dialogue as part of a concerted effort and a possible way forward for the study of religions, it becomes virtually impossible to come to any sort of closure since religion/s, presenting itself as "absent," does indeed resist any essentialist definition.⁷⁶ We think, nevertheless, that rather than representing an insurmountable impasse, the study of religions, its past history and present vitality, offers a privileged ground to scholars to recover "the task of thinking" within this field of human activity, by learning from the "phenomenon," the field itself, which is not dominated by one single set of rules (discipline), but which reveals a great variety of interconnected venues and interests. Following the lead of sciences, and envious of their strength, the study of religions remained trapped within a "monotheistic ideology" and a monological ethnocentricity which prevents a vision of the field at large. Thus, the acquired consciousness of "the end of religion" gives as a result the real service of the study of religions towards "the task of re-thinking religion," which means to rediscover its elemental vocation in favour of "openness towards" the phenomenon itself which "set us the task of learning from it, that is, of letting it say something to us."⁷⁷ The "end of religion" might already imply the end of religion in the singular and an openness towards a variety of traditions, bringing with them a multiplicity of philosophies and a diversity of epistemologies, hence allowing a difference in the "task of thinking." I see this as a significant contribution of the study of religions to (de)provincialise western philosophy, while recognising the beginning of this process already present in that philosophy, but which could die there if not cultivated. If Husserlian "investigation" invites us to set aside the preoccupation to "save philosophy" – and hence for us to save religion – in favour of concentrating on "issues and problems," and if Heideggerian "opening" translates the latter into "learning and listening to," then our task as scholars of religions, in line with *Sein* that becomes *Mit-Sein* (Being with), our "thinking religion" develops into "rethinking religions with," as long as *Mit-Sein* is not restricted and circumscribed by pre-set boundaries.

⁷⁶ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 29.

⁷⁷ Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," 66.

Moreover, if the Heideggerian hypothesis of “Being given as a gift” – and the logic of the gift offered by Mauss – are made relevant to our task, our thinking will move away from self-preservation to the fragile openness of *aletheia*, not as “truth” but more as a “disclosure” to the intellectual honesty of reasoning. This constitutes the favourable background in which critical dialogue takes place, not as a permanent solution to all problems faced by the study of religions, but as an ongoing process characterised by the finitude of the human condition – as seen in the Husserl-Heidegger dialogue – the instability of our languages and the vulnerability of our mental productions and memories and, as much as a gift, it will always remain a human gift, even when the gods are called into play.

Following Matthew Day’s invitation “to keep it real,” I would like to conclude with one example of practical engagement for critical dialogue, taken from Sardinia – an area close to me but distant in time – involving religious phenomena and their interpretation as part of human experience and social-cultural history. The Sardinian example – regarding “primitive religion” – opens with a widespread ritual all over the Mediterranean area and beyond (Mesopotamia), known as dream incubation (*enkoïmesis*), a practice geared towards achieving divination and/or curative results, as in the case of the Apollonian religion in Greece associated with Asclepian medicine and performed in Dream Temples (*Asclepieiai*).

The Sardinian variety of incubation was, most probably, firstly practised within or around hypogean tombs, excavated in the rock, called “*Domus de Janas*” (houses of fairies or witches).⁷⁸ These necropoli, dating back to the Chalcolitic-Bronze Age (3400–2700), can be found all over the island. During the successive period (Nuragic Period: c.1900–800 BCE), dream incubation seems to have intensified, and was practised around the *nuraghe* (megalithic conic buildings) and especially in the proximity of the *Tombe dei Giganti* (literally “giants’ tombs”),⁷⁹ communal burial grounds for a group or a tribe. Pettazzoni,⁸⁰ following Aristotle and his commentators,

⁷⁸ Having lost the original meaning, these burial sites came to be called in local folklore “House of the fairies or witches,” either benign spirits or malevolent ones. An alternative interpretation could also be “*Domus de ajanas*” or House of the Virgins (*ajana* = unmarried), thus providing the plausible hypothesis of these being the priestesses in charge of the dream incubation ritual.

⁷⁹ The name “Tombs of Giants” is justified by the large size of these burial monuments which served as tombs for entire families and tribes.

⁸⁰ Raffaele Pettazzoni, *La religione primitiva in Sardegna* (Piacenza: La Società Editrice Pontremolese, 1912) 4–13.

maintains that prehistoric Sardinians, sleeping for five consecutive days at the tombs of their ancestors so as to be cured from nightmares and traumatic mental illnesses, were not simply recounting a myth about their “heroes,” but were also practising a ritual which considered the dead heroes as dormant in an “eternal sleep.” Comparing Sardinian myths, practices and archaeological findings (cult of the dead and of water, buildings and bronze statuettes) with other cultures, particularly Mediterranean and African, Pettazzoni reaches the conclusion that all the heroes and gods of Sardinian prehistory merged into the figure of the *Sardus Pater* “the great national god of the islanders,” following an inscription found on a Roman coin.⁸¹ Saggiaro,⁸² who accredits Pettazzoni’s book on *Primitive Religion in Sardinia* as the founding text of the History of Religions in Italy, is nevertheless very critical of the mythical foundations of *Sardus Pater*: “The coin has indeed a Sardinian “content,” but it is a *Roman* coin and must be interpreted according to both sets of meaning in conjunction, and obviously searching for iconographic documents from archaeology.”⁸³ Prior to Pettazzoni, the Jesuit Antonio Bresciani wrote two volumes comparing the Sardinian life and customs with the “oldest oriental peoples.”⁸⁴ Bresciani’s comparison, referring mainly to the Bible and Homer, resulted in a mythologising process, thus de-historicising Sardinia, placing the island in an indefinite time, so as to serve the purpose of justifying a fabled but biblical past. A similar operation was accomplished by Cicero who, many years earlier (54 BCE), defending Marcus Emilius Scaurus – a criminal noble Roman – ridiculed a group of 120 Sardinians who went to Rome to testify against Scaurus. The “aristocratic dignity” of the latter was unsuspected when compared to those witnesses “dressed in animal skins” (*pelliti testes*) who resided “in a space suspended out of time,” at the margins of history.⁸⁵

Pettazzoni’s insistence on the *Sardus Pater* – driving early mythology into monotheism – seems even more out of place if we take into account the letter written by Pope Gregory the Great (594 CE) against the people of central Sardinia (*Barbaricini*) who “live like foolish animals, ignore the

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁸² Alessandro Saggiaro, *Sardinia – Ichnoussa, Questioni di metodo per una storia religiosa della Sardegna* (Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 2003).

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁸⁴ Antonio Bresciani, *Dei costumi dell’isola di Sardegna comparati cogli antichissimi popoli orientali*, Vol I–II (Napoli: Civiltà Cattolica, 1850).

⁸⁵ Saggiaro, *Sardinia*, 69.

true God, and worship wood and stones ...”⁸⁶ Aside from a comparative effort dictated by the “discipline” of the History (and phenomenology) of Religions, Pettazzoni was also motivated by the comparisons he often drew between the pre-historical cult of the ancestors and (his) contemporary observations of Sardinian life. It seems virtually impossible to establish any feasible continuity between early dream incubation, as a result of the cult of the dead, and early twentieth century popular Christianity in Sardinia, even when there is some evidence of pre-Christian traditions being carried on.⁸⁷ Dream incubation seems to have maintained its fascination and appeal in contemporary society but the former religious aspects have been replaced by, among others, clinical psychology, behavioural medicine and creative performance industries. Meanwhile, present-day youth in Sardinia are failing to find a viable solution and a “curative” response to their current nightmares caused by unemployment, which has risen amongst them to over 30%.⁸⁸

In the above elementary sketch starting with “primitive religion” in Sardinia and the phenomenon of dream incubation, it is not difficult to grasp how religion remains caught in a variety of experiences and is disseminated through multiple geographical and historical sites. The scholar himself remains entangled within this web of meanings, while trying to provide a deeper “scientific” interpretation in order to explain distant practices, in an attempt to gain knowledge for the present. The language used to convey this scholarship becomes itself a testimony of the effort to find traces of an “absent” reality into which we project our dream of understanding other distant dreams by revisiting empty tombs. Even their names are almost untranslatable and we must make use of metaphors and metonyms to grasp a sense of old but recurring words, such as life and death. The task of critical dialogue could be to indicate a possible path to committed scholarship which will refuse to place back in mythology real human beings, while remaining at the same time fully aware of the

⁸⁶ Gregorio Magno, *Epist. IV, 23*.

⁸⁷ For instance, the presence of women as mourners at funerals (*attitadoras*); the role of a special woman in the community who would practice “merciful killing” or euthanasia (*s'accabbadora*), so as to spare a dying person from prolonged suffering at the time of death; the habit of the faithful to sleep in churches, prohibited by Sardinian Synods (e.g., Synod of Torres, 1625); the presence of small houses (*muristenes, cumbessias*) in proximity of rural churches to allow the faithful to spend the night there.

⁸⁸ See Alfredo Franchini, “Disoccupazione giovanile, triste record della Sardegna,” *La Nuova Sardegna*, 29 Feb. 2012, 32.

impossibility of controlling an evanescent subject matter. I have chosen the following quote to exemplify not only the ephemeral task of the scholar of religions and the “oddness” of the study of religions, but also the marginality of the scholar himself – Michel de Certeau in this specific case – all the while upholding the possibility of critical dialogue:

Out of the endless and overwhelming flux, we conjure epiphanies as if by miracle. We make meanings. But the condition for doing so is an experience of ends. For meaning is the consequence of a limit; meaning is an effect of margins. The border where we materialize such meaning is what makes meanings possible. We perceive and conceive and construct and learn on this frontier. The margin or frontier or border is where something is divided from something else. That something can be anything, but the margin makes it what it is. On the border, through division, its definition and its relation to what differs from it become conceivable. Heraclitean projections of ceaseless change then metamorphose into a topology and begin to frame a temporality. In this sense, continuities are meaningless. Out of the flux, it is difference that crystallizes signification. This paradigm has a fundamental seduction for the historical and interpretive sensibility. In contemporary understanding, it is only through the marking of a difference – through the projection of a border – that the notions of history and interpretation make sense. This power of the liminary thus resituates the margin as cardinal. We navigate our meanings across these borders. They always materialize from elsewhere.⁸⁹

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⁸⁹ Richard Terdiman, “The Marginality of Michel de Certeau,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 100. 2 (2001, 399–421): 399–400.

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