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Response to Paul J. Griffiths

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RESPONSES  
AND REJOINDERS

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## Response to Paul J. Griffiths

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I APPRECIATE THE CARE and clarity with which Paul J. Griffiths lays out an intellectual grid through which to view contemporary dilemmas concerning the future of the academic study of religion. Griffiths' grid shows that these dilemmas are of a piece with larger epistemic issues of our day: the status of claims to truth, the difficulty of wrestling with difference. Focal to Griffiths' essay is the difference between theological and nontheological approaches to religion (a term inevitably defined variably in different registers, Griffiths rightly notes). He advocates for the theological over the nontheological, finding the latter guilty of a kind of false consciousness. Theologians are commendably open about their normative claims; practitioners of nontheological methods (Griffiths cites J. Z. Smith and Bruce Lincoln as examples) are blind to their own need for (and unacknowledged tendency to make) normative claims—a lacuna born of a misguided desire to assert their independence from theology. Griffiths predicts a bleak future for the so-called “scientific” study of religion unless it returns to “the warm embrace of Christian theology, where it properly belongs.”

I am not persuaded that the future for the scientific study of religion is “bleak” apart from theology's embrace, no matter how warm (some might say suffocatingly so) it might be. This dire prediction does not seem to follow necessarily from Griffiths' critique of the field, no matter how apt *it* might be. Let us grant, for the sake of argument that the study of religion is plagued by an unacknowledged need for normativity and

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would benefit from bringing that need into the light of day. Griffiths seems to suspect that such normativity would show itself to be theological or, at least, in need of the theological. Why would that be the case? And even if Griffiths proved correct, the cure (*pharmakon*) that Griffiths offers religious studies seems to be, to play off the double meaning in the Greek, more poison than remedy. If theology is by definition beholden to particular religious traditions, such an asymmetrical demand for accord between the two fields would effectively bring the scientific study of religion—understood as either an artifactual or natural entity, to use Griffiths’ grid—to an end. And, ironically (or not?), its end would lie in its beginning: Griffiths seeks to incorporate religious studies not into “the theological” in general (problematic enough) but into *Christian* theology. And a particular Christian theology, at that; one which understands religion as Griffiths does: as “human action” born of the “natural desire” for union with “the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus” and whose turn to the study of religions found just that “natural desire” disseminated incipiently, at least, throughout religion’s diverse forms. What justifies the privilege Griffiths claims for *Christian* theology (much less this specific version of it) over and above all others? Perhaps, supercessionism is not what Griffiths intends, but it is at least a risk run by the position he articulates. How might this risk be avoided should religious studies take Griffiths’ “cure?” What concrete gains in the understanding of religion as a(n irreducibly?) diverse phenomenon—the putative aim of religious studies—would offset the risk run? Furthermore, what does a Christian theology not interested in repeating its supercessionist past stand to gain by taking in its prodigal son?

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## Reply to Armour

MY THANKS TO PROFESSOR ARMOUR for her gracious reading of my essay and for the interesting questions she raises about it.

Armour asks first why I think that the normative understandings implicit in the work of practitioners of the study of religion like Lincoln and Smith would, if unveiled, be nakedly theological. But I do not think (and did not write) that they would be; I think (and wrote) that they would include axiomatic assumptions about human beings, human intellectual work, and so on. They would therefore be like explicitly theological understandings in including such axiomatic assumptions but not necessarily like them in themselves being explicitly theological. What I need for my argument is not that self-confessedly scientific studies of religion rest upon explicitly theological axioms; only that the axioms they inevitably do rest upon are of the same order of abstraction and disputability as those assumed by (for instance) Catholic systematians. And I remain convinced that this is so.

Armour further says that I would like to end the scientific study of religion by incorporating it into Christian theology. That is not quite right. What I would like is to end pretense and confusion by encouraging public acknowledgment of the claims made in the preceding paragraph, and so to contribute to the goal (realizable only eschatologically) of getting those who do not yet see it to confess that they are theologians manqué. If Armour will allow this correction, her question about what justifies the privilege I claim for Christian theology remains. The answer to it is that Christianity's truth justifies it. I do not, of course, expect that to be a satisfying answer: I wrote in my essay that it is typical for the unveiling of axiomatic norms not to convince all comers of the truth of what stands forth. Were Armour to unveil hers (she shares the coyness of Lincoln and Smith in not doing so, a coyness whose presence, coupled with apparent blindness to its presence, I argued is endemic to and perhaps definitional of those who attempt to separate the scientific study of religion from theology), they probably would not seem true to me, either. This fact should lead to humility about the likelihood of agreement on questions that matter and to shame at our fallen condition that makes such agreement so unlikely. In 1839, John Henry Newman wrote "When men understand what each other mean, they see, for the most part, that

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controversy is either superfluous or hopeless.” He was quite right.

Armour also asks how I can avoid being a supersessionist but does not explain what she means by this. The ordinary technical use of this term in Christian theology is as a label for a particular view of the relations between the new and the old covenants. I disavow supersessionism so understood, though I have no space to explain just what the view is and why it is mistaken. It is probably not, in any case, what Armour is accusing me of, but because I cannot easily tell what she is accusing me of (perhaps of thinking that Christianity’s central claims are true and, therefore, that claims contradicting those are, to the extent that they contradict, false?), I do not know how further to respond.

And lastly, Armour asks whether what I argue for would produce “concrete gains in the understanding of religion . . . ” This question misconstrues the whole point of my essay (my fault, not Armour’s, I am sure), which was to argue that the intellectual program to which her question belongs would, if it became appropriately self-aware, perforce cease; and that there are signs that this is already happening. I suspect that she disagrees with at least the first part of this claim, but I can find no hint in her remarks as to why.

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