

When studying religion, one attempts to describe the mystical, contemplate that which is revered, and explain things that believers take to be unexplainable. This aspect of the study of religion creates a tension between theists and scholars not found in other areas of study and is best described when Bruce Lincoln states, “although critical inquiry has become commonplace in other disciplines, it still offends many students of religion who denounce it as ‘reductionism’” (Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). Therefore, one may stipulate the importance of a clear methodology when approaching this topic which for many is sacred to minimize conflict and maximize productive discourse. The methodological points in their approach to the study of religion within *Theses on Method* by Bruce Lincoln, and *Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation* by Melford Spiro share an emphasis on both cultural nuance and preventing bias from entering one’s work. Individually, Spiro emphasizes defining religion empirically, and Lincoln provides the good-faith scholar a set of guidelines they ought to follow when studying religion.

Spiro starts his work by demonstrating a need for a scrupulous definition of religion. Any practical conversation on a topic cannot get off the ground unless the constituent parties agree what one means by key terms. Spiro makes the case that the definition for religion—unlike, for example, bread—is uniquely polarizing (Spiro, 2013, p. 87). To answer why, it is useful to understand what a definition *can* be; he establishes two types: nominal and real (Spiro, 2013, p. 85). In short, nominal definitions define abstract concepts (‘an integral is the area under the curve’), and real definitions, as the name implies, define real things (‘an apple is a red fruit from a tree’). Nominal definitions are not without their problems, but, because they do not describe real things, they can be easily standardized (a mathematics authority can publish a fixed definition of an integral) (Spiro, 2013, p. 85-86). Real definitions, Spiro argues, are much more problematic because they “are conceived to be true statements about entities or things” and they

(sometimes dubiously) assert what is the “essential nature of some entity” (Spiro, 2013, p. 86). For instance, say a dictionary author writes that apples are “a bright red fruit found on a tree.” The day a green apple is found, what happens? Are these considered a new fruit? Plainly, real definitions are vulnerable to exclusion—what set of attributes makes something, something? This exclusionary nature of real definitions is precisely the reason why dispute around the definition of religion persists; Spiro (2013) argues debate around religion’s definition are “disputes over the phenomenon or range of phenomena which are considered to constitute legitimately the empirical referent of the term” (p. 87).

Attempting to walk the tightrope that is defining religion, Spiro dedicates pages of prose to convincing the reader that a definition which includes superhuman beings is requisite. Spiro (2013) defines religion as “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings” (p. 96). Unpacking the definition, the repetition of the adverb “culturally,” distinguishes religion as something that can only exist within the context of a greater culture. This is further supported when Spiro (2013) spends page ninety comparing religion to other sociocultural phenomena like Communism and Catholicism, and when he insists “religion is an attribute of social groups, comprising a component part of their cultural heritage” (p. 97). The use of the word institution within the definition is intentional, too. Like a government enforcing law, religion *prescribes*—rather than merely *describes*—actions, beliefs, and ritual in which one ought to partake (Spiro, 2013, p. 97). It is clear Spiro believes a religion must have a ‘governing body’ of sorts; drawing on Émile Durkheim, he notes “there can be no religion without a church” (Durkheim, 1954, p. 44, as cited in Spiro, 2013, p. 97). Finally, Spiro (2013) contends that a religion needs to have superhuman entities within its canon (p. 96). It is trivial to see why this may be controversial at first glance; a counter example is ostensibly easy

to create: Buddhism and Confucianism are two belief systems most would consider a religion that do not traditionally have Gods. Notice, however, that Spiro uses the term *superhuman* rather than God. It is the opinion of the author that Spiro used ‘superhuman’ rather than ‘God’ *strategically*, as the word ‘God’ is quite loaded. The word ‘God’ carries with it the attributes of the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic God; that is, an entity who has omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence. To this end, Spiro goes with ‘superhuman.’ On Buddhism, Spiro argues that the Buddha is a superhuman as “unlike ordinary humans, [the Buddha] acquired the power to attain Enlightenment” (Spiro, 2013, p. 92). Spiro further claims that a definition of religion need not be universal to all things we colloquially consider religion, and that one should “face, rather than shrink from this consequence” (Spiro, 2013, p. 88).

Lincoln’s work advises the would-be scholar of religion to understand the context of the works they read, reduce the effects of bias in both your work and the works you read, and avoid broad categories and classes. Even when one tries their hardest to remain completely neutral, it is inevitable that some predisposition, opinion, or judgement slips through in their work. How does the reader deal with this situation in which they are placed? Lincoln advises the scholar to ask themselves certain questions while reading a work: “who speaks here,” “to what audience [is the author writing],” “what [are the author’s motivations],” “what are the consequences if this project of persuasion should happen to succeed” (Lincoln, 2005, p. 8)? By asking these questions, you become, at the very least, aware of the biases that the author may have carried while they were writing, allowing you to critically evaluate their attempts at persuasion. In the same vein, Lincoln spends time offering advice around preventing bias in one’s own work. Lincoln put it eloquently, “reverence is a religious, not a scholarly virtue” (Lincoln, 2005, p. 9). A more inconspicuous form of bias may be towards the religion onto which one was born; it may be easy to be harsher

towards your own religion (or the religion of your parents, as Lincoln puts it) for the simple fact that critiques against others can be viewed as insults, and scholars—like most humans—err on the side of being polite (Lincoln, 2005, p. 9). However, Lincoln (2005) insists that we must engage in the same amount of debate towards other religions as we do our own (p. 9). With regards to bias, Lincoln's final piece of advice pertains one's own society (Lincoln, 2005, p. 9). Lincoln (2005) makes the case that because "one's consciousness is itself a product of [their society]" (p. 9) and "the system's very success renders its operations invisible, since one is so consistently immersed in and bombarded by its products" (p. 9), they are unable to properly judge it (p. 9).

With regards to understanding cultural nuances, both Spiro and Lincoln speak to a common fallacy many anthropologists commit when studying a group (Spiro, 2013, p. 93; Lincoln, 2005, p. 9). Specifically, when an anthropologist takes the culture of some large subset to be interchangeable for the beliefs, customs, and traditions of the whole. Spiro writes, "it is certainly a strange spectacle when anthropologists, of all people, confuse the teachings of a philosophical school with the beliefs of a religious community" (Spiro, 2013, p. 93). Similarly, when speaking on the woes of cultural relativism, Lincoln (2005) writes, "those who sustain this idealized image of culture do so, *inter alia*, by mistaking the dominant fraction... for the group or 'culture' itself" (p. 9). Both Lincoln and Spiro are trying to communicate the same idea in these respective moments: *quantizing* a culture removes too much information. In quantum mechanics, the idea of quantizing a charge is changing a continuous value (a value with infinite precision) into a discrete one (a value with finite precision). We quantize things in everyday life; for example, if someone were to be asked their height, they would not respond 1.92384812938... (and so on) meters; instead, they would respond 1.92 meters. In this moment, a continuous value

(your height) has been turned into a discrete one for the sake of brevity. Lincoln speaks to the fantasized version of cultures many have, one in which a perfect line can be drawn between them—discrete cultures (Lincoln, 2005, p. 9). Cultures, however, are continuous variables as there is the potential to be infinitely precise with our analysis. Therefore, any sort of quantization will remove some information, just like when rounding one's height. When one analyzes culture, any generalizations must be done carefully. When this is done wrong—when the dominate is mistaken for the whole, as Spiro (2013, p. 93) writes—the would-be anthropologist does not do justice to the 'culture' they attempt to study.

Notwithstanding, Lincoln would perhaps disagree with Spiro's comparison between a doctrine-ideal type of the Buddha and Judaeo-Christian-Islamic (JCI) God. While trying to make the case that the Buddha should be considered a superhuman being to fit his definition of religion, Spiro writes "the soteriological attributes of the Buddha are, to be sure, different from those of the JCI God" (Spiro, 2013, p. 92). Even though Lincoln would likely concede that the contrast may be broadly true, it risks reifying two ideal-types, which is what Lincoln warns of when he writes of cultural relativism flattening nuance (Lincoln, 2005, p. 9). One could surely imagine Buddhist figures functioning soteriologically like a saviour and vice versa.

When attempting to describe the mystical, contemplate that which is revered, and explain things that believers take to be unexplainable, extreme care must be taken. For many, few things are as personal than religion, so prescribing attributes to and studying it can feel minimizing, clinical, and dismissive. Lincoln and Spiro's methodological approaches to the study of religion center on sympathy and understanding for the subject—making sure their subjective points of view are understood, rather than waving them away as nothing more than superstition—something every academic subject should strive for.

References

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