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Ethnohermeneutics in a Postmodern World

During the last three decades a growing amount of literature has accumulated that, to quote from the title of a recent collection of essays, can aptly be summed up with the words: *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989).[1] This literature addresses Western literature and science and definitively rejects much of that literature and its stereotypes. It shows how power is at the center of Western literature, and it therefore addresses issues of hegemony, language, place and displacement, racism and sexism, and it attempts to address a common post-colonial theory. This critical literature, sometimes extreme but usually insightful, coincided with the postmodern crisis in ethnography and other cultural sciences that have also assimilated literary theory.

Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin show in the above-mentioned book that post-colonial literary criticism appears to be taking two major paths at the moment:

> On the one hand, via the reading of specific post-colonial texts and the effects of their production in and on specific social and historical contexts, and on the other, via the "revisioning" of received tropes and modes such as allegory, irony, and metaphor and the rereading of "canonical" texts in the light of post-colonial discursive practices (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989: 194).

They emphasize that post-colonial art, philosophy, and literature are no mere continuations or simple adaptations of European models but products of "profound interaction and appropriation" involving a "radical dismantling of the European codes and a post-colonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European

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[1] This title is a take-off on a quote from Salman Rushdie: "...the Empire writes back to the Centre...." The first half of this paper consists of the conclusion to my essay "Can We Move Beyond Primitivism? On Recovering the Indigenes of Indigenous Religions in the Academic Study of Religion" which is slated to appear in Jacob Olupona, ed., *Beyond "Primitivism": Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*. In this paper I have developed the ethnohermeneutic approach somewhat more.

discourses". But even though the demand by post-colonial writers and thinkers for a new or recovered "pre-colonial reality" is comprehensible, it is none the less completely unachievable. As they wrote: "It is not possible to return to or to rediscover an absolute pre-colonial cultural purity, nor is it possible to create national or regional formations entirely independent of their historical implication in the European colonial enterprise."[2] One might add as well that it is impossible for Europeans to return to their colonial cultural hegemony (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989: 195–196).[3]

One of the failings of humanism is that it has been the handmaiden of primitivism. I think that the two should be clearly separated if humanistic science is to contribute anything of value to the academy. The humanistic study of religion does not need primitivism even though the Enlightenment itself was formulated in terms of primitivism. As Carl L. Becker noted, Enlightenment philosophers were not interested in how society came to be, rather they were concerned with identifying the universal, natural man, the man who "did not exist in the world of time and place, but in the conceptual world, and who could therefore only be found by abstracting from all men in all times and all places those qualities which all men shared" (Becker 1964: 97–99; quoted in Hughes and Allen 1988: 207). Aside from the predominantly male terminology, I suggest that this is essentially what cultural sciences are all about, and it is therefore crucial for us to find ways to avoid the excesses of primitivism in our search for the universally human.

I have tried to formulate a number of theoretical and methodological approaches that might be useful to such a project. The key to these approaches is taking our dialogue partners seriously on an equal basis as mutually fallible human beings. My first approach involves what could be called an iconoclastic pedagogics which takes its point of departure in the stereotypes received from literature, movies, etc. and systematically deconstructs them ("the deconstruction of the Exotic") in our publications and teaching. Since we are dealing with very powerful social and psychological mechanisms, it is essential that this approach be followed up by a "reconstruction of the Exotic". This second stage of the process focuses on issues relevant to indigenous peoples as well as to the West, but only on the basis of accurate ethnography, authentic familiarization with the

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[2] See the excellent reader *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (Williams and Chrisman 1994).

[3] See Anthony Giddens insightful analysis of modernity in Giddens 1990: 63–78.

worldviews and scriptures of the world's religions, and no-nonsense knowledge about how believers actually behave.[4]

My second approach attempts to deal directly with the issues of postmodern criticism in an effort to reconstruct a basis for scholarly consensus in a pluralistic arena. I have drawn on two similar but separate attempts.[5] The first is being promoted by feminist anthropologist Annemiek Richters who defends the kind of postmodernism that conjures up a *new, radicalized* Enlightenment (Richters 1991).[6] The point is "where does justice reside now that meta-narratives about progress, civilization, humanism and rationality have lost credence?" (Richters 1991, 131). I agree with her and suggest that solidarity and ethics *require* us to maintain these meta-narratives, at least in an improved version, while keeping "openness to difference and otherness". This point of view was strongly criticized during the conference on primitivism in Davis, California in 1996. It was claimed that since the Enlightenment gave philosophical credence to European war crimes, there was no sense in upholding it. And, indeed, many Enlightenment thinkers were racists and worse (see Eze 1997). The argument was also put forward in Davis that one cannot isolate the "good" values of the Enlightenment without bringing in the "bad" ones. But I disagree. If this argument held true, than what reasons could there possibly be for preserving the "good" values of indigenous cultures when many indigenous cultures have also been guilty of imperialism, racism, and genocide? Certainly their philosophies were also used to support the ideologies of war criminals. But this does not mean that their philosophies are without value. As Terry Eagleton noted, what is good about postmodernism is that it has helped "reviled and humiliated groups" to "recover something of their history and self-hood":

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[4] This program was promoted in a debate I participated in with American religious studies colleagues on the theme "As the Other Sees Us. A Conversation on the Postmodern Study of Religion" in Geertz 1994a and Geertz 1994b.

[5] Both of these approaches are addressed in a paper I gave at the 1995 conference of the German Association for the History of Religions on "Vergleichen und Verstehen in der Religionswissenschaft" (Comparison and Understanding in the Study of Religion) in Bonn. See Geertz 1997.

[6] As she wrote: "What they [women] should do, however, is to search for a kind of postmodernism that does not foster the pathos of the *end* of Enlightenment, but conjures up a *new, radicalized* Enlightenment" (Richters 1991: 127).

This, as I've argued, is the trend's most precious achievement; and one cannot realistically expect that those involved in a painful struggle for recognition will be much enthused right now by transfigured notions of universality, especially when these ideas spring from groups which have traditionally been their enemies.... There is indeed a bad kind of universalism; but there is a bad kind of particularism too. If Enlightenment universalism is exclusivist in practice, ethnic particularism can be exclusivist in both practice and theory. Little is to be gained by simply substituting the one for the other, though there is perhaps little to be gained either by arguing the point now (Eagleton 1996: 121).

Eagleton has also argued that much of postmodernism has sprung from or taken root in the United States and reflects "that country's most intractable political problems":

It is then perhaps a little ethnocentric of this anti-ethnocentrism, though hardly a gesture unknown to that nation, to project its own political backyard onto the world at large.... If postmodernism is a form of culturalism, it is because among other reasons it refuses to recognize that what different ethnic groups have in common socially and economically is finally more important than their cultural differences. More important for what? For the purposes of their political emancipation.... It is because of its commitment to minorities that postmodernism questions the notion of a general humanity; but it is difficult to see how some such appeal would not be necessary for defending minorities against racist assault (Eagleton 1996: 122–123).

For the record I must emphatically state that being critical of postcolonial and postmodern discourse is not an expression of capitulating to the right nor of supporting chauvinism, colonialism, racism, authoritarianism, or instrumentalism. I am, on the contrary, very much a part of postmodern discourse, but I wish to maintain a critical rationality—however problematic that might be—rather than displays of flamboyant subjectivity, self-serving ethnicity or cryptoreligiosity. Following social activist Murray Bookchin, I agree that "until the current antihumanistic tendencies are subjected to serious criticism, we cannot even begin to address the more tangible problems of our time that antihumanism obscures and distorts" (Bookchin 1995: 33).[7]

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[7] Jonathan Z. Smith has expressed similar sympathies: "We cannot judge another culture by reference to ourselves [but] we may judge (both another and ourselves), if our criteria are universal "rules of reason." The anthro-

The Dutch anthropologist Annemiek Richters has similarly argued
along these lines:

> Those who deploy postmodernism to try to extend the project of
> Enlightenment and to overcome Enlightenment's one-sidedness,
> endeavouring to confront a wide range of contemporary prob-
> lems, point out the necessity of a paradigm shift in contemporary
> philosophy culminating in an epistemology and a politics which
> acknowledge a dearth of meta-narratives and foundational
> guarantees but which none the less persist in formulating mini-
> mal criteria for legitimating discursive and political practices:
> criteria which are not exclusively practice immanent, but in part
> meta-practical. What we indeed require are guidelines for the
> normative conditions needed to support power-free discourses
> and to identify pseudo-cognition, pseudo-consensus and symbolic
> violence (Richters 1991: 133).

Those acquainted with contemporary philosophy will recognize, no
doubt, that Jürgen Habermas is what she has in mind. Despite
criticism from feminists of Habermas' theories (cf. Fraser 1985),
Richters is convinced that his "communicative ethics or communi-
cative rationality" will help renew the emancipation of meta-
narrative in a "de-transcendentalized way" (Richters 1991: 133; see
Benhabib 1985; Fraser 1985; Fraser 1986; Felski 1989).
    This idea has also been proposed by the second scholar I have
drawn on, namely, philosopher Albrecht Wellmer. Wellmer is of the
opinion that the concepts of reason and of the autonomous subject
have been illicitly drawn into the turbulence of the postmodern cri-
tique of "logocentrism" for different motives and on the basis of di-
vergent insights (Wellmer 1985: 346). Wellmer insists that the three
forms of the critique of reason and the subject should be kept sepa-
rate: 1) the psychological critique of the subject; 2) the philosophical,
psychological and sociological critique of instrumental or "identity-
logical" reason and its subject; and 3) the language philosophical
critique of "self-transparent reason and its meaning constituting
subject" (Wellmer 1985: 346). Wellmer rejects the simplistic image of
modernism that postmodernists have and wishes to reappropriate
and transcend the democratic universalism of the Enlightenment

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pology of the last century, the study of religions in the academy, has con-
tributed to making more difficult a naive, ethnocentric formulation of the
"rules of reason," but this does not require that such "rules" be denied, or
suggest that we should slacken in our attempts to formulate them" (Smith
1982: 105). See his recent article "Nothing Human is Alien to Me" (1996).

and the Marxian problematic of pluralistic reason. Wellmer thus proposes his challenge:

> Against the democratic universalism of bourgeois society we must object today that democracy remains unreal as long as it does not penetrate the pores of social life; against Marx and anarchism we must object that this cannot mean a state of general immediacy and harmony; against rationalism in general we must object that *neither* ultimate legitimations *nor* ultimate solutions are to be expected. But this does not mean that we dismiss *either* democratic universalism and its autonomous subject *or* the Marxian project of an autonomous society *or* reason. It means rather that we must think the moral-political universalism of the Enlightenment, the ideas of individual and collective self-determination, reason and history in a new fashion (Wellmer 1985: 360).

Postmodernism has also been criticized by post-colonial writers. Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin wrote in their collection *Past the Last Post* (1991) that postmodernism and post-structuralism operate as a Euro-American western hegemony clinging to its position of global centrality (Adam and Tiffin 1991: viii).

My third approach to finding a way out of our dilemma is to promote what I call ethnohermeneutics.[8] It is somewhat similar to dialogical anthropology in the sense formulated by anthropologists Gilles Bibeau and Ellen E. Corin whereby reliable anthropological interpretation must involve "native indigenous exegesis, dialogical ethnography, co-belonging and optimal distance" (Bibeau and Corin 1995: 6). Versions of this approach sometimes seem to be hampered by curious clichés such as the attempt to remove the so-called "omniscient third-person discourse of a solitary male" (Mannheim and Tedlock 1995: 20), or by handy, but superficial, techniques such as Dennis Tedlock's transformation of solitary male discourse to an imagined dialogue (Tedlock 1995).

Edward Sampson's comments in this respect are relevant here:

> Dialogism is simultaneously both correct and incorrect. It is correct in leading us away from a merely self-celebratory stance and permitting us to see just how intimately intertwined self

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[8] I have formulated some of my ideas in the following articles: Geertz 1990a; Geertz 1990b; Geertz 1994a; Geertz 1994b; Geertz 1997; Geertz s.a. Furthermore, demonstrations of the method can be found in Geertz and Lomatuway'ma 1987; Geertz 1992; Geertz 1994c. I am currently working on a publication that will map out ethnohermeneutics in more detail.

and other are. Dialogism is incorrect, however, in assuming that self and other are always equal contributors to the co-constructive process. Some have more power to set the terms of co-construction than others. The history of human relationships can be seen as a playing out of this differential (Sampson 1993: 143).

The power plays he is referring to are also those of well-meaning postmodern anthropologists, for instance, who engage in monologues that are actually dialogues (Sampson 1993: 152 ff.).[9]

Another critic trying to deal with the problems of primitivism is Marjorie Perloff who argued in her article "Tolerance and Taboo: Modernist Primitivisms and Postmodernist Pieties," that we must somehow avoid the essentialization of the West that a critique of primitivism brings with it. As she wrote:

> Ironically, then, we are now witnessing an increasing body of scholarship on oppressed groups that, in its zeal to track down the oppressors, reinscribes the very oppression and subordination it seeks to descry. Furthermore, such would-be oppositional discourse curiously reverts to the very binary model that poststructuralist critics have assiduously claimed to be undermining (Perloff 1995: 340).

Perloff demonstrates the problem in her critical analysis of Marianna Torgovnick's book *Gone Primitive* (1990) and Cary Nelson's book *Repression and Recovery* (1989). What seems to be political analysis of canonical works is more often than not simply the passing of moral judgment on them with concomitant absolutist notions of good and evil:

> Torgovnick's root assumption is that a good writer (or ethnographer) is equivalent to a good person, and, concomitantly, that a "good" book is one that is a repository of the "right" cultural values. But, as John Guillory has recently argued, we must beware of equating "the values expressed in a work with the value *of* the work," of assuming that a given work is simply the "container of such and such values." (Perloff 1995: 352; Guillory 1993: 30–33).

Others, such as Terry Eagleton have criticized postmodernism for its collective amnesia and its failure to address more important issues (Eagleton 1996).

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[9] Sampson draws inspiration on this point from Fabian 1985 and Bourdieu 1977.

Ethnohermeneutics tries to widen the circle a bit by drawing its inspiration from the textual sciences and the ethnosciences. Ethnomethodology, which began in 1954 with the work of Harold Garfinkel and others, "studies the technical details of how participants in social settings use common sense to manage their membership, biographies, language, and knowledge in order to accomplish naturally organized ordinary activities", as the movement historian Pierce J. Flynn defined it (Flynn 1991: 1). Ethnomethodologists understand their movement as a "radically reflexive form of sociological inquiry", and the distinctive features of ethnomethodology are:

1) Indexical expressions: "Indexical expressions essentially are communicative products that depend on unstated assumptions and shared knowledge for the mutual achievement of sense. Examples are special vocabularies, referential statements, and actions that index a prior socially recognized understanding, like a handshake or a wink."

2) Reflexivity: "Reflexivity refers to the dynamic self-organizational tendency of social interaction to provide for its own constitution through practices of accountability and scenic display."

3) Membership: "Ethnomethodology places fundamental interest in what a member of a social scene or group has to know and do in order to accomplish recognized membership, performative competence, and identity. Membership stands as the key to the understanding of the other ethnomethodological features."

4) Accountability: "Accountability refers to members' practices of perceiving, describing, and justifying their actions to each other in the local collectivity."

5) Local practices and social order: "Local practices are the embodiment of membership and assemble all that is social. Ethnomethodology is the study of people's local practices and methods by which social rationality, knowledge, order, structures, and objects are artfully achieved."

6) Situatedness: "Situatedness refers to the radically contextual nature of human-sense-making activities. Ethnomethodological studies of social settings seek to discover how structural features are embedded in practical action and common-sense situations of choice."

7) The unique adequacy of methods and becoming the phenomenon: These are "methodological devices designed to orient the researcher to the fullest investigation possible of members' ordering procedures 'from within' social settings. Unique adequacy of methods refers to the condition that the highest validity is a re-

sult of the ethnomethodologists' own achieved competence in the membership domain studied."

8) Scenic display: "Scenic display refers to members' performative mastery of a social scene's local practices, implicit rules and knowledge, and accountability. Scenic display is the embodied totality of artful membership...." (all quotes from Flynn 1991: 27–30).[10]

What I am trying to envision in relation to the ethnosciences is a combination of anthropological, historical, and linguistic methods that pay close attention to theories and models proposed by indigenous thinkers. I would like to move beyond the primarily sociological interests of ethnomethodology and expand the term ethnohermeneutics to mean the bringing together of the hermeneutical horizons of the student of religion and the indigenous interpreter. The idea of this kind of interaction draws inspiration from anthropologist Anne Salmond who in a paper on cross-cultural conceptions of knowledge promoted an alternative approach to the empiricist criterion of knowledge by proposing that language is "an instrument for the negotiation of meaning, and that contexts of utterance and pre-existing knowledge are important both in saying, and in interpreting anything that is said." As she wrote:

> This is an interpretive account of meaning, which applies as much to scientific language as it does to everyday talk; and it has the effect of directing our attention as anthropologists to our own interpretive activities as well as to those of others, and to the complex interactions between our interpretations, theirs and 'the real world' (Salmond 1982: 65).

The end product of these complex interactions, I suggest, will be greater than the two.[11]

When I presented this approach at the above-mentioned Davis conference on primitivism, it was rejected as being too ethnocentric. But this reaction might have been the result of a misunderstanding. When I speak of "indigenous interpreters" and "indigenous students of [or belonging to] that religion", I am not referring to indigenous scholars. I am referring to the reflections and/or unreflected premises of believers, of the cultural bearers, of the indigenous elders and thinkers, and so on. I had not thought it necessary to stipulate that

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[10] These eight features have been conceptualized in a paper by Mehan, Jules-Rosette and Mehan 1984.

[11] This draws inspiration from the hermeneutical philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. See Gadamer 1972.

indigenous scholars are in the same position in relation to their areas of study as Western scholars are, since many of them share more or less willingly in the paradigm of Western cultural science. Many function at any rate in Western universities.

The methods used to elicit the ethnohermeneutic perspective are not new. They include fieldwork, comparison, the sifting of evidence and texts, and so on using the principles of validity, warrant, and proof. It is *by its very nature* an expression of the principles of religious criticism, relativism, and skeptical rationality—all of which are elements of the agnostic platform that Orientalist critics wish to avoid (El-Affendi 1991). But with the combined efforts of the multitude of voices and perspectives engaged in a common, self-critical scientific endeavor, I believe that the whole product will become "the third perspective".

One of the major problems facing indigenous scholars is that they are often caught between being marginalized in relation to traditional social institutions and forms of knowledge on the one hand and to Western social institutions and forms of knowledge on the other. This situation is, in my opinion, well-suited for pursuing the ethnohermeneutic platform, since they are in effect simultaneously contingent as well as transcendent to the relative boundaries of both cultures. But very few do so because there is much deconstructive work to be done in relation to the Western bias in the cultural sciences.

Conclusion

When I first promoted the term ethnohermeneutics in 1985 at the IAHR congress in Sydney, I was trying to formulate the combination of methods necessary to the study of indigenous oral traditions in the framework of the history of religions. At the time, the hallmark methods of our field were historical, philological and comparative with a strong emphasis on texts in exotic languages and little or no interest in the social, psychological or philosophical aspects of religion and its study. Ethnohermeneutics was an appeal to be more methodologically plural in the history of religions—a consequence of this appeal is that I prefer to call the latter by the broader term "the study of religion" or *Religionswissenschaft* which is equivalent to the Danish *religionsvidenskab*. I have tried to promote this idea at various IAHR conferences and in various publications as well as partaking in formulating the Warsaw statement of 1989 which at-

tempts to redefine the history of religions in relation to the social sciences.

My second reason for taking up the term ethnohermeneutics was my dissatisfaction with the amateurish and condescending attitude towards indigenous cultures and religions widespread in many human and social sciences. Some of the greatest philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, historians, and cultural scientists are either ignorant of world history or adamantly ethnocentric.[12] Ethnohermeneutics is an appeal to professionalism in dealing with these cultures, especially in requiring the basics of the study of any other religion, namely, historical insight, linguistic knowledge and—wherever applicable—fieldwork.

My third reason for the use of the term has developed since 1985 in response to the epistemological and ethical problems that have plagued the human and social sciences. During the past 30 years, many scholars have tried to correct these weaknesses, but many have become victims of the power struggles of postcolonialism and postmodernism. Without falling victim to what Thomas J. Csordas and Janis H. Jenkins have termed "two equally virulent strains of intellectual flu that have infected academe in recent years" namely "scienceitis" ("a disorder of irrational fear that science is necessarily an instrument of oppression") and "pomophobia" ("a disorder of irrational fear that postmodern theory will necessarily render knowledge impossible") (Csordas and Jenkins 1997: 2). Our field, its methods, its theories and its central terms are developing and changing in response to contemporary challenges, but I suggest that we strive for balance and reasonability.

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[12] Jürgen Habermas, for instance, who is an otherwise brilliant critic of social oppression in any guise, none the less reads into contemporary Western reflection the end result of a development out of traditional, "archaic", "mythical", and "closed" societies (read: "primitive") see Habermas 1987: 72–113. This is unfortunate since much of his thought on communicative action can serve to help cultural science out of its present *cul-de-sac*. See the challenges raised in Taylor 1994 edited by Amy Gutmann containing papers by Habermas and other leading social theorists.

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