I would like to thank those who have invited me to formulate a response to Professor Tomoko Masuzawa’s paper on theory and method in the study of religions. During the last few years I have been systematising a methodology for the study of indigenous religions in Mesoamerica. Therefore, I can only welcome the opportunity to outline some comments based on her presentation.

I am with Professor Masuzawa when she says: ‘I am not a specialist in general theories of religion’ but, unlike her, I am willing to use the term ‘methodology’ for my humble proposal, that is decidedly pedestrian, but also terrestrially empirical. I also agree with her that with today’s non-poststructuralist frame of mind prevalent, theoretical deliberations will always and immediately be answerable to the question of method; that is, the work of theory is held responsible for the maintenance of a healthy stockpile of good tools and functional instruments for empirical research and analysis.

I would like to draw the attention to an interesting intersection between Professor Masuzawa’s investigation and my own area of study. While she explores the historical terrain traversed by the European discourse on religion, I would like to make a reference here to Jonathan Smith’s review of the terms ‘religion’, ‘religions’, and ‘religious’. Smith examines how these terms have been changing, stretching their meanings across time. He points out that ‘…this technical vocabulary…gets first extended to non-Christian examples’…in the description of the complex civilisation of Mesoamerica. He specially refers to Hernán Cortez, the conqueror of Mexico, and his letters to the King of Spain, as well

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1 Sylvia Marcos, Taken from the Lips: Gender and Eros in Mesoamerican Religions, Leiden: Brill, 2006.
as to the learned Jesuit Joseph de Acosta who in 1590 compiled an encyclopedic work entitled *The Natural and Moral History of the Indies*.3

Quoting Derrida’s deconstructive, or deconstituting critique, Professor Masuzawa asks what, then, could be a way out of the fix, so that the work of analysis—that is, any empirical study of the variety of religions in human society—may continue? What choices do we have when the foundational concepts or schematic apparatuses of a discipline are called to account, ‘…momentarily—if not indefinitely—disabling the interpretive work, as the whole operation seems to be besieged by doubt, suspicion, and umbrage?’ Turning her gaze to Lévi-Strauss, she affirms Derrida’s observation that, ‘This is how the language of the social sciences criticizes itself. Lévi-Strauss will always remain faithful to a double intention: to preserve as an instrument something whose truth value he criticizes’. ‘So much of the grievance against “mere theory” or “mere critique”, she continues, ‘has to do with the complaint that this constructive or restorative moment is insufficiently attended to or altogether lacking’. Thus she summarises the bases of post-modern deconstruction. This path of double intention of destroy-and-preserve is indeed frequently assumed to be the only path of critique.

The binarism of the nature/culture divide has been fundamental as an analytic strategy, not only to structural anthropology but in general to other social sciences. As Professor Masuzawa recalls, a memorable moment in the birth of post-structuralism, amounting to a beginning of what has since come to be garnered, cultivated, variegated, and multiplied under the term ‘theory’, occurred in October 1966, at the Johns Hopkins Conference ‘The Languages of Criticisms and the Sciences of Man’. However, this ‘new beginning’ of theory has also been developed much further, beyond the critique of binarisms such as the nature/culture divide.

I would then pose the question: Is there another way of structuring a rigorous and systematic analysis that goes beyond critiquing and nevertheless recuperating the analytic armature of binary categories? Is there a more constructive or restorative moment?

I have no ready-made answers, but *preguntando caminamos: se hace camino al andar*. We find our path by walking on it, as an ancestral Mayan Tzeltal saying goes. May I suggest that another path could be feasible? Turning an ethnographic gaze to the concrete practices of locally bound religious specialists, could one not locate diverse forms

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3 Ibid., pp. 269–70.