EN JEU: LINCOLN LOGS OR PICK-UP STICKS

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The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are “still” possible in the twenty-first century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.—adapted from Walter Benjamin’s eighth “Thesis on the Philosophy of History” (1969)

How does one teach an introduction to religious studies/history of religions/Religionswissenschaft for entering graduate students after 9/11—or before for that matter? How does one break the entering divinity and MTS and too often the MA student (with undergraduate degrees in religious studies!) from the often pious, rather Protestant privilege of interiority and the individual, of experience and Truth, of belief but not of bodies or of works? How does one teach a course on “religion” and/or “religions” when the aura of essentialism attaches to those terms—and to many of the standard categories of religious studies—as extension does to matter? When definition is at best a problem to be subjected to genealogical analysis? How does one get students to put a question mark upon “religion” or place “religion” under erasure?1

I call in the shock troops: the work of Jonathan Z. Smith (1998, 1982), Sam Gill (1994, 1998), Richard King (1999), Talal Asad (2001), and Bruce Lincoln (1996, 1999). These scholars of a certain generation (who by engaging in acts that have been taken for patricide—cf. Lincoln’s preface to Death, War, and Sacrifice (1991)—or in the case of Gill, perhaps, matricide or suicide, depending upon how one views the controversy over his Mother Earth [1987]), who by engaging in discourse and genealogical analysis of their discipline have shifted—desacralized—its focus/purport object: from certain historically specific notions about the nature of religion to analyses of the emergence and use of those notions (inside and outside the discipline) as well as to reexaminations

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of the data and of their collection (stepping aside from any metaphysical claims inside and outside the discipline).

The students are treated to a two-pronged attack, each of which could be seen, and in their appropriation by students are seen, as led by some of Bruce Lincoln’s pithiest and most in your face statements. First, his “Theses on Method” herald the sequence of Smith on “Religion, Religions, Religious,” Gill on “The Academic Study of Religion,” Asad’s rereading of Smith, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, that is, and his so-called nonessentialist definition, and King on the “Modern Myth of Hinduism.”

The second trajectory is initiated by a passage from Lincoln’s Theorizing Myth—“If myth is ideology in narrative form, then scholarship is myth with footnotes.” This marvelous apothegm is illustrated by J.Z. Smith on Jensen on the Ceramese myth of Hainuwele in “A Pearl of Great Price and a Cargo of Yams”, by Gill on J.Z. on Eliade on Spencer and Gillan on the Arrente in Storytracking. Perhaps it is the terseness or their attitude, but Lincoln’s propositions seem to have the most immediate effect. Both sets of conjoined readings come to be viewed as so many commentaries or glosses on Lincoln’s Dvarim. (Of course, I still wonder why one still has to engage in shock therapy more than 30 years after Jim Helfer (1968) glibly asked: “Strangely, but appropriately, economic historians are not more ‘economic,’ military historians more ‘militant,’ intellectual historians more ‘intellectual,’ or social historians more ‘social’; why must historians of religion persist in being more ‘religious?’”)

Lincoln’s political but not politic call for scholarly rigor and integrity, the necessity to interrogate the historic conditions and interests at play and at stake (i.e., en jeu) in the emergence of both student and stuff, continues to resonate throughout the semester. Yet, I do not view the theses as “on method.” Method, methods, methodology, I find too often to be employed as nondialectical cookie cutters with delusions of grandeur imposed upon the data (as if the data preexisted the incision). Rather, I see these readings as an attempt to inculcate an attitude, a way of being in the world of academia (but not only that world). Moreover, I employ the “Theses” as a parabolic intervention and not as an object of analysis or of “critical appraisal.”

Today I will also be deploying Lincoln’s “Theses” as a provocation—differently, as I will be treating them more as an object than as an actant (Latour 1987). I will begin by engaging in a bit of speculation on those theses. Seen in light of Lincoln’s work before and since, these propositions seem rather transitional or liminal, to point in both directions. On the one hand, religion is defined as a discourse in thesis #2: