

# The “Problem” of Religion and the Need for an Ethical Component in Reading the Other

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**Abstract:** This essay begins by questioning why, among the various interdisciplinary studies of literature, religion and literature never became a popular topic of study in the IS. It looks at this issue from a theoretical perspective, examining the role of New Criticism and other self-contained close reading methods that followed it. It also places the lack of interest in religion and literature within the context of the rise of secularism in US society and academia. Historically, US universities have disdained religious studies as a viable subject of inquiry and have exhibited a marked anti-Catholic prejudice. One must recognize the degree to which American culture is shaped by Puritan and evangelical values making it difficult to grasp any vision that runs counter to an American (read: Protestant) sensibility that values individual revolt and damnation rather than focus (as does Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism) on moral duty and life envisioned as an obligation. This concept of theodicy is central to our understanding of how we engage the Other, the study of which currently dominates recent critical trends in identity studies, multiculturalism, post-colonialism and the academic discourse on globalization. The second half of the essay examines how the other has been historically

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configured in philosophy from the classical period through the German Romantics, existentialists and up to the present. I focus on the Other as understood in the works of Paul Ricoeur, Michel de Certeau, and Emmanuel Levinas as possible models for further ethical discussions on the Other.

**Keywords:** Religion – Literature – Philosophy – Identity – Other – Interdisciplinary studies – University

**Resumo:** Este artigo começa por se questionar porque não tem hoje muita visibilidade o cruzamento entre a Religião e a Literatura, pesem embora as várias propostas interdisciplinares que proliferam no sistema educativo. Considera esta questão sob uma perspetiva teórica, examinando o papel do New Criticism e de outras correntes críticas que se lhe seguiram. Mas também no contexto em que ela se inscreve, sob a crescente secularização da sociedade e da academia, nomeadamente nos EUA. Historicamente, as universidades norte-americanas foram menosprezando os estudos religiosos como assunto passível de investigação, posição a que não era alheio um marcado preconceito anticatólico. Parece-nos evidente o grau a que o Puritanismo e os valores ditos evangélicos foram conformando a cultura americana, nela obnubilando a presença de qualquer outra visão da sensibilidade americana (lida como protestante), e valorizando os valores individuais da revolta e da danação, não se focando (como sucede no Catolicismo, Hinduísmo, Islamismo ou Judaísmo) no dever moral e na vida como compromisso. Este conceito de teodiceia é fundamental para a forma de compreensão do Outro, tema que domina as mais recentes correntes dos estudos sobre Identidade, Multiculturalismo, Pós-colonialismo, bem como em geral o discurso académico sobre Globalização. A segunda parte deste artigo examina historicamente algumas configurações paradigmáticas do Outro, desde a filosofia clássica até ao presente, com especial relevo para o Romantismo alemão e existencialistas. Focaliza-se ainda na obra de Paul Ricoeur, Michel de Certeau e Emmanuel Lévinas, possíveis modelos alternativos nas discussões éticas sobre o Outro.

**Palavras-chave:** Religião – Literatura – Filosofia – Identidade – Outro – Estudos Interdisciplinares – Universidade

## I. The Problem of Religion

As someone who has studied theology, the history of religions and Comparative Literature and has taught these subjects, I have of late been intrigued by the continued neglect shown to the study of religion in the humanities. When I was a graduate student, interdisciplinary studies were in their infancy. Those were the days when a scholar in a Comparative Literature

department could study literature and philosophy, literature and cinema, literature and the law, or literature and music. I was interested in religion and literature, but such courses, I discovered, tended to focus on the study of myths, archetypes, or religious symbolism. At the time, I found this patternist approach strangely mechanical (in actuality, it was just French, in its focus on myth studies, i.e. the myth of X in the works of Y) (Tomiche 2016). I was disappointed by the fact that such classes usually dealt exclusively with English-language texts – lots of William Blake, C.S. Lewis and T.S. Eliot – and tended to be parochial in focus.<sup>1</sup> I did not at the time understand the role that Religious Studies played in American academe nor its institutionalization in US universities.<sup>2</sup> I did, however, notice that Religion and Literature did not flourish as a course of study to the same degree that the other interdisciplinary configurations (such as Literature and Cinema) did and I thought at the time that this lack of interest could not simply be attributed to unimaginative curricular decisions – something else must be at work.

Recently, my research has brought me back to this question of the apparently diminished interest in religion and literature, approaching it now from a theoretical and pedagogical perspective. Was there something inherent to or in literary studies that prevents religion and literature from coexisting as an interdisciplinary subject? Here I decided to examine the methodology in vogue when this interdisciplinary dyad was proposed. The then reigning theory, New Criticism, focused on close readings; it defined literary texts as discrete entities and fostered the interpretation of the text as the primary task of literary analysis. New Criticism was suited to modernist ideas of the freedom of the text from outside influences. It championed a literary text's self-contained nature, detached from history, authorial intent, and reader reaction. Given the enthusiastic adoption of New Criticism in American universities, it seemed obvious that theoretical problems would necessarily arise when dealing with authors who drew on ethics or theology as resources for literary thinking. New Criticism (and, for that matter, all the self-contained close-reading methods that followed) paralleled the rise of secular culture in and outside the university in

1 I still remember the only exam I ever refused to complete in a course entitled "Religion and Literature" at Harvard Divinity School in the late 1970's. For the final exam, the professor wrote that since hands figured prominently in the books we had read that semester, we should comment on the symbolic use of hands in these works. I believe that I started to analyze Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* and then just rebelled and walked out of the exam.

2 In many universities and colleges, religion was a faith-based discipline. In other institutions, the teaching of religion was dictated by university statutes. Notably, Ezra Cornell decreed that religion could never be taught in the university he founded. So, Cornell University has never had religion department, making it difficult to teach South Asian culture, for example.

that both tended to diminish the credibility of morality and ethics as intellectual resources (Cadegon 2013:176). Such a theoretical focus could explain why no one seemed to want to investigate the religious dimensions and connections in literature that I found so compelling and complex. But I suspected it was not the full answer. So I turned to sociology for further elucidation.

Here I read studies on the indifference and even disdain for religious issues that could be found in American academe. Scholars attributed this *méfiance* to the long establishment of liberal mainstream Protestantism in the American university setting.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in some institutions, this disdain manifests itself in the complete dismissal of religious studies as a viable subject of inquiry. For example, consider the noteworthy case of Cornell University where it is stipulated in the university's charter that religion should never be taught there. When not institutional, the neglect of the study of religion could also be disciplinary. As Wilhelm Halbfass has shown, philosophy departments routinely exclude the study of Hindu speculative thought from their curricula as too "religious."

We are simply not trained in the States to dissociate our individual beliefs (or lack thereof) from our ability to critically approach a work of art that foregrounds a religious thematic. There is not the tradition, as one finds in France with its *sciences religieuses*, where one can deal with religious phenomena within the context of the secular state. Faith (in the form of religious belief or, more often, in its distortion as ideology) always intervenes in some negative fashion. So does prejudice. Non-Protestant religions in America are routinely associated with the Other and the immigrant, an association that triggers nativism (fear of outsiders). As one sociologist of religion has noted, Americans have difficulties "exiling evaluation" (Cadegon 2013:177). We tend to see art as deeply implicated by its political contexts. By way of an example, I will choose the case of Catholicism, although I believe that arguments can be made for Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam experiencing similar forms of intolerance, since they are all religions of the Other in America.

As far back as the founding of this republic, Catholics have been historically viewed as outsiders. Historians and sociologists have widely studied the nativism directed against Catholics as a group in America.<sup>4</sup> Andrew M. Greeley, in particular, documented the role of anti-Catholic prejudice in American universities both in the intellectual nativism that suffuses scholarship and teaching and in the careers of Catholic academics in elite institutions (Greeley 1976, 1977). Decades after Greeley's statistical findings, American students even in this era of multiculturalism still exhibit a certain mistrust of texts that deal with

3 See Marsden 1977:14, 18, cited in Massa 2003:14

4 For a summary of this literature, see Massa 2003.

Catholic belief structures, as I have learned in my own teaching in predominantly Baptist and evangelical rural Georgia.<sup>5</sup> A prime example of America's reticence to deal with a Catholic worldview can be found in the reception of Flannery O'Connor, who is not read to the extent that her work perhaps warrants. She is not, for example, studied at all in Women's Literature classes. Here we have an excellent stylist with a uniquely American vision, a female writer who wrote about the South, died young, and catered to gothic sensibilities.<sup>6</sup> Yet she is not championed as a great American author nor canonized as a feminist icon and I suggest that her Catholic religious vision of the world has contributed to her marginalization. The experience of teaching her in my class on the Self is that these Southern students find her short stories far more foreign and incomprehensible than any of the Hindu religious texts I teach in the same class! Readers outside of a predominantly Catholic milieu find it difficult to read a Catholic author such as O'Connor in anything but a nativist fashion.

Let's take another, less regional example, that of Alessandro Manzoni and the reception of his masterpiece *I promessi sposi*. Manzoni's novel, while required reading for all Italian students and taught alongside *Mme. Bovary* throughout Europe, is not often read in the US. The literary critic, Larry Peer, writing from a non-Catholic perspective, has attributed this neglect of Manzoni to the fact that American literary criticism reflects Protestant (and often anti-Catholic) pastoral assumptions. Peer contends that American critics, largely influenced by this Protestant orientation, exhibit an implicit resistance to the authoritarian universality of the Catholicism expounded in an author such as Manzoni (Peer 1986:22). Among the US population, many hold to the (Protestant) religious mentality that they are directed by some inner revelation or a mysterious calling from God. This Protestant model of religion stresses a private and voluntary form of religious organization in which power and authority rise from the bottom up and decisions are voted on by all the members of a congregation. Gatherings within the church are for personal and devotional purposes.

5 Just this past semester in a Comparative Literature class on autobiography, I taught Augustine's *Confessions* and Mary McCarthy's *Memoirs of a Catholic Girlhood* in addition to the standard fare of Marcus Aurelius, Rousseau, Frederick Douglass and Vladimir Nabokov. The students in rural Georgia had significant difficulties grasping McCarthy, although she was certainly closer to them on a number of levels. Her Catholic childhood and concerns simply baffled them. I usually teach Sanskrit literature and I can assure you that these students found McCarthy's discussion of her faith as foreign to them as any Hindu text I have ever taught. They had fewer problem with Augustine because his style – that of the personal address to the deity – resembled this own Baptist training and attitude of a personal relationship with Jesus.

6 If you visit her hometown of Savannah, Georgia, as I did looking for traces of her life there, you are far more likely to trace signposts of John Berlant, the author of the bestseller *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* or the minor poet Conrad Aiken than see any evocations of their native daughter.

In contrast, Catholic ethics recognizes the rights and duties that are owed by individuals to the community. Catholics believe that this stance does not diminish the dignity of the individual. Rather it is thought that the individual achieves full dignity and moral meaning within the context of the Church itself. In other words, Catholics are hierarchical (Massa 2003:69). Protestants speak of a one-on-one relationship with God. They view the Catholic's focus on the community, the sacrament, and the hierarchy of the Church as institutional oppression (Massa 2003:147). David Tracy maintains that Protestants perceive the Catholic institutional understanding of the Holy as a potential source of overweening pride and a hegemonic structure that needs to be resisted, since it threatens the concerns and values of American democracy (Tracy 1981:410-15). Protestants vest authority in a gathered community of individual believers who democratically determine among themselves the boundaries between the sacred and the secular, the church and the world. They understand all too well that this mode of operation differs from that of the Catholic Church. But, and this is an important point, since Catholicism is not democratic, Protestants have historically viewed it as intrinsically anti-American.

Greeley also investigated how the Catholic communitarian ethic differs from Protestant individualism (Greeley 1977). He understands American culture as primarily shaped by those very Puritan and evangelical values that posit that individuals must be protected from the encroaching Catholic oppression of the community and its demands (Massa 56). It is with this Protestant parochial context that criticism in the US has traditionally approached literary studies. A Catholic (and one can extend this issue to other non-Protestant minority religions) vision of the world would be deemed foreign or "other" to those American readers who expect God to behave in literature just as they perceive Him as functioning in their own lives. They do not take kindly to books where God deviates from their accepted script. For Protestant readers, an absent or indifferent God (as one finds in Catholicism and post-Holocaust literature) does not suit their religious tastes, particularly if its vision can be seen to run counter to a certain American (read: Protestant) sensibility that values individual revolt and damnation. A Catholic (or Hindu, Muslim, or Jewish) vision focuses on moral duty and life envisioned as an obligation; it relates to the concept of theodicy. Such concerns are central to theology: How are we to reconcile divine goodness and omnipotence with the reality of the existence of evil and suffering? In secular terms, how are we to engage with the Other?

It is this last question that I seek to investigate with you today, since the issue of the Other has become paramount in universities and reflects institutional mandates for diversity, inclusiveness, and greater tolerance as they are conceptualized in recent critical trends such as identity studies, multiculturalism,

postcolonial studies, and the academic discourse on globalization. In fact, the humanities and the social sciences in general appear to have been of late suffused with discussions of Otherness. Unfortunately, these exchanges often ignore complex issues. For example, they pay scant attention to the ethical judgments that might inform our understanding of heterology (or the study of the Other). I believe we can partially attribute this lack of interest to the aforementioned *méfiance* towards religion in American academe. However, the absence of the ethical dimension here seriously compromises and undermines scholarly and institutional engagement with the Other. But, before examining in greater depth how we might recuperate sensibilities absent from the current academic discourse on alterity, I would first like to offer an historical overview of how the Other has been emplotted in philosophy and hermeneutics. In my conclusion, I will then offer a blueprint for how we might profitably conceptualize our readings of the Other, using the critical tools provided by Paul Ricoeur, Michel de Certeau, and Emmanuel Levinas.

## II. Theoretical Configurations of the Other<sup>7</sup>

Classical conceptions of the Other focus primarily on its relationship with the Self.

In the *Sophist*, Plato put the discussion regarding the Other in the mouth of the Eleatic Stranger: does the existence of the *xénos* demand the establishment of another category (*héteros génos*) beyond Being? The Stranger argues that all kinds of beings blend with each other. This mixing of the same (*autos*) with the Other (*héteron*) makes speech possible (*Soph.* 259e) and enables us to distinguish between what is true and what is false. Without such blending, the other is literally unspeakable and unrecognizable (Kearney 2003: 153).

Modern philosophy continues the pattern, set in place by Plato, of refusing to allow the Other to be truly other and not a reflection of the self. In Romantic hermeneutics, as practiced by Schleiermacher and Dilthey, the purpose of philosophical interpretation was to unite the consciousness of one subject with that of another through a process of appropriation (*Aneignung*). Schleiermacher explored the retrieval of estranged consciousness in terms of a theological re-appropriation of the original message of *kerygma* (quoted in Dilthey 1974: 117). Dilthey analyzed alterity in terms of the historical resolve to reach some kind of objective knowledge about the past (Dilthey 1976: 66–105). Hegel historicized

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the Other in literary theory, see, Figueira, *The Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Cross-Cultural Encounters with India* (London: Bloomsbury 2015), introduction.

it in terms of the master-slave dialectic (Hegel 1994). Marx addressed the question of the other in his analysis of fetishism and ideology (Marx 1990; Marx and Engels 1970). In the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl identified the Other as never absolutely alien, but as always and everywhere recognized as other than me (Husserl 1960: 112–17). In each of these formulations, the Other is viewed by analogy. This notion of the Other as alter ego was taken to an even more radical extension by existentialist philosophers such as Sartre (Sartre 1943: 413–29) and Heidegger, who described the other in the context of their theories regarding inauthentic existence and bad faith (Heidegger 1962). In all these formulations, the Other is reduced to the ego's horizon of consciousness and is, as such, always mediated. Mirroring the ego, the Other is assigned no intrinsic value beyond its role as a duplication of the same. Not surprisingly, in the wake of the Holocaust, certain thinkers, most notably Levinas, felt that a reassessment of Heidegger's thought was warranted, as was a revaluation of the transcendent subject.

In postcolonial theory, the Other continues to be seen in mediated form. Now, however, it is understood to function as a gross distortion of the Self and assumes a political significance. Narcissistic and aggressive projections onto this Other are understood as compensations for a perceived lack in the European "individual." Edward Said's *Orientalism* claimed to reveal the extent to which the Other was monolithically constructed to support imperial hegemony (Said 1978). Borrowing from structuralism, Said posited that individual action, cultural forms, and social institutions can be reduced to stable essential elements. He then was able to view East-West encounters in terms of a Foucauldian drama where a "western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over" (Said 1978: 3) other cultures enables the actual deployment of European colonialism. Grounded in a hermeneutics of suspicion visibly rooted in the works of Marx, Freud, and Gramsci, Said's critique of orientalism has informed most subsequent scholarship. It spawned postcolonial theories, influenced multicultural debates, and invigorated Asian Studies (Figueira 2008:32). As I have shown in a number of publications, it has become the master narrative of current-day cross-cultural encounters where interpretations of the non-Américo-European Other are judged as forms of subterfuge created to consolidate Américo-European power and domination (Figueira 1991, 1994). Individual theorists then added their own blend of spices to this heady brew.

This politically charged Other, largely bereft of any ethical-theological modes of being, can now appear as obsessively reiterative. We should also acknowledge here Bakhtin's critique of a hierarchical, centripetal ordering of the world where all authority is vested in a singular hegemonic ideology that



suppresses dissent. One can also enlist Frantz Fanon's perception of the subjugated as a phobic object (Fanon 1963) or Jacques Lacan's theory of the way in which individual subjects are constituted to support a postmodern theory of alterity (Lacan 1966). Henry Louis Gates would borrow from Lacan to map subject formation onto a Self-Other model (Gates 1991: 463). Homi Bhabha would then bring together Freud's concept of the fetish and Fanon's schema of the imaginary to define the colonial subject as the reformed and recognizable Other, a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite (Bhabha 1992), while Abdul Jan Mohammed would warn us against the undifferentiated Manichaeian view of the Other (Jan Mohammed 1985). Such postmodern approaches all tend to focus on psychologizing modern fantasies of alienation. Their starting point can be situated in a pathologization of the classical era as the origin of a climate culminating in nineteenth-century imperialism.

Like their classical and early modern precursors, these poststructuralist conceptions of the Other also focus on the Self. By seeking to assess the psychodynamics of appropriation, they often grapple with the impossibility of portraying the Other as anything but a translation of the European familiarity with the Self. A key difference between earlier conceptions of the Other and the poststructuralist formulations is that the latter acknowledges that the process of trying to understand involves issues of appropriation or, at least, creates conditions for colonization. The result of this operation confirms Foucault's assertion that power and knowledge are entwined and recognized as such (Foucault 1970). It is, however, in this very notion of recognition and, significantly, its relation to interpretation that hermeneutic approaches to the Other distinguish themselves from poststructuralist constructions of alterity.

As Hans-Georg Gadamer so succinctly put it in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*:

To seek one's own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the basic movement of the spirit, whose being is only a return to itself for what is other. (Gadamer 1960: 11).

As Paul Ricoeur would explain, this movement (represented by the concept of *Bildung*) provides a structure of excursion and reunion (Ricoeur 1969: 16–17). If the circular structure of hermeneutic understanding is complete, the spirit moves to the strange and unfamiliar, finds a home there, and makes it its own or recognizes what was previously perceived as alien to be its genuine home. Hermeneutic understanding, then, consists of a movement of self-estrangement in which one must learn to engage and know the Other in order to better know oneself. Selfhood is by nature dialogical and thus suffused with otherness. In fact, in a reversal peculiar to *Bildung*, the movement

of the spirit resembles a "true" homecoming, its point of departure being essentially a way-station and the initial alien-ness a mirage produced by self-alienation.

Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy—which stretched back through Heidegger to Dilthey and Schleiermacher—pursued the idea of a reconciliation between our own understanding and that of strangers in terms of a fusion of horizons (Gadamer 1960: 273–74, 337–38, 358).

What I want to stress here is how we engage with alterity. At one pole of the hermeneutical field, there is the hermeneutics of belief (hermeneutical consciousness) directed at recovering a lost message and animated by a willingness to listen. At the other pole, we find a hermeneutics of suspicion (critical consciousness) aimed at demystifying and animated by distrust and skepticism. In broad terms, these two hermeneutical positions define how we approach the Other today. And I think that what we need to understand is that most recent forms of criticism (Foucauldian, post-Foucauldian, Saidian, post-Saidian, colonial discourse analysis, postcolonialism, multiculturalism and the critique of globalization) all opted for a hermeneutics-of-suspicion approach, one that is indebted to Jürgen Habermas's view that all communication is distorted by ideology (Habermas 1980). The Foucauldian quest to unmask power structures was deemed politically righteous and thus more relevant to those individuals sitting in Ivory Towers and aching to man (at least metaphorically) some barricade somewhere. The critique of ideology was simply too attractive and too rich, overflowing with the many abuses, self-obsessions, and projections of the Amero-European sense of superiority and intellectual imperialism which scholars could claim to battle. Scholars could now allege to engage in a viable form of social action. So, scholarship dealing in any encounter with the Other or with cross-cultural encounters simply adopted, with varying degrees of sincerity and efficacy, the critical-consciousness stance even though it was often quite self-referential and self-serving. Paul Ricoeur countered this trend in his intervention in what would become known as the Gadamer-Habermas debate and in his subsequent work. Ricoeur proposed a middle path between the two hermeneutical positions by charting the ontological and ethical categories of otherness and advocating for dialogue between the Self and the Other. Ricoeur's middle path, while deemed unfashionable for the last forty years, has of late gained renewed interest, especially since his death in 2005. Two contemporary thinkers, Michel de Certeau and Emmanuel Levinas, shared Ricoeur's concern with the ethical dimensions of engagement.

The heterological procedure was interpreted by Certeau as presenting no simple opposition between Self and Other, but rather a procedure akin to a form of psychoanalysis. Of necessity, interpreters must recognize that their

representations of the Other are contaminated by their own intrusive identities. Implicit instances of social alterity precede the interpreter and their effects continue to inform the interpreter's work, inducing forms of unconscious repetition through which the past returns to haunt the present (Certeau 1986: 4). For Certeau, the Other is thus structurally re-formed as a projection or residue of a legitimate interpretive operation. It becomes a site of uncertainty upon which the dead resistance of the past inhabits and haunts the present. Difference can be seen then not as something created solely by a given power structure, but as formed by what hegemony fabricates in us in order to plaster over its former conquests (Certeau 1986: 6). In this respect, the historian or reader becomes an apologist for the present regime as well as an operator of the forgotten past. The Other can then be assimilated into the "same" by eliminating resistance through an idealization of the past. Certeau suggests that such idealizations cannot be avoided. His conceptualization of heterology, in fact, requires that we address their existence and acknowledge the ensuing ethical demands any utopian vision imposes on our encounters with the Other.

Ricoeur claimed that one of the best ways to de- alienate the Other is to recognize and treat oneself as another and the Other as (in part) another Self. Ethics also enjoins me to recognize the Other as someone capable of recognizing me in turn. The Other is thus configured as a Self capable of both recognition and esteem. For Ricoeur, the concept of narrative memory is what allows us to preserve the trace of the Other (especially the victims of history) who would, if unremembered, be lost to the injustice of non-existence. Through narrative mimesis, the Other within calls us to act on behalf of the Other without. However, in order to be faithful to this Other, one has to have a Self and, once again, it is narrative that creates a sense of identity and allows us to sustain a notion of selfhood over time. This developed sense of identity also produces the self- esteem that is indispensable to ethics and serves as a guarantee of one's fidelity to the Other.

Let me here call to mind the overriding argument I am constructing with regard to the relevance of religious studies for the humanities. At the beginning of my talk, I tried to show some of the reasons why religion and the humanities have not been fertile sites of production in the past. If, however, we set aside certain outdated and preconceived notions that hinder inquiry, religious studies and the humanities have a great potential to nourish each other. First and foremost, we can start by reintroducing into the humanities the ethical dimension that has been submerged with the rise of secularism in American culture and in the university setting. And I feel that the hermeneutics of consciousness approach can help us recuperate this ethical dimension, particularly through its formulations regarding our encounters with alterity.

According to Ricoeur, the indispensable critique of the Other is necessary in order to supplement the critique of the Self. The hermeneutics of suspicion must, therefore, operate in both directions and on both fronts simultaneously. Real relations between humans demand a double critique, with both the Self and the Other entering into a dialectic relationship of mutual responsibility. In this respect, Ricoeur's hermeneutics differs considerably from those theories of alterity based on a Foucauldian conception of power dynamics. By alerting us to the irreducible alterity of all incomers, Ricoeur challenges the vision of fluidity and hybridity informing much of recent critical formulations of alterity. His approach also stands in contrast to the radically minimized role of the Self in relation to the Other, as found in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. For Ricoeur, the stranger is relatively Other. For Levinas, it is so radically Other that I cannot even represent it to myself or enter into a relationship with it. To do so would assimilate the Other and, thereby, reduce it to the same.<sup>8</sup>

Levinas envisions a loss of selfhood and terror through immersion in the lawless chaos of what he terms *il y a* ("there is").<sup>9</sup> In *On Escape* (2003), Levinas instructs us how to evade this chaos. The source of light can only be found in something other than Being: I see another as someone I need in order to realize certain individual and personal wants. By looking at the face of the Other, I should be able to transform it into a moment of my own material or spiritual property. Instead, the appearance of the Other, in fact, breaks, pierces, and destroys the horizon of egocentric monism. The Other invades my world; its face or speech thus interrupts and disturbs the order of my ego's universe. Something present in the Other manifests itself and I am chosen to discover myself as someone who is totally responsible for this determinate Other and who must bow before the absoluteness revealed by its look or speech. In other words, the Other makes me accountable for my life. The self is thus linked *ab initio* to the Other from which it is radically separated, yet unable to escape. Levinas posits the relation of the Self and the Other as the ultimate horizon (Levinas 1969: 3/33ff).

8 It is not happenstance that both Ricoeur and Levinas offered ethical approaches to our engagement with the Other. Both were the chief proponents of phenomenology in France in the postwar period and very early on in their publishing careers, they addressed the ramifications of Edmund Husserl's philosophy.

9 Husserl's renewal of philosophy through phenomenology can be summed up by the term "intentionality." All consciousness is a *cogito* of something (*cogitatum*). The ego must be directed outside the Self. The intentional structure of consciousness can, therefore, be characterized as the interplay between subject and object. In the '30s, Heidegger transformed this vision of phenomenology by viewing consciousness as rooted in deeper levels of "being there" (*Dasein*). Heidegger conceived of Being in light of the expression *es gibt*, a formulation that Levinas would subsequently transform into his notion of *il y a*. However, Levinas understood the concept of *il y a* as radically different from Heidegger's *es gibt*.

Levinas connects the Other with an ethics of generosity: to recognize the Other is to give. Generosity to the Other is, however, a one-way movement (Levinas 1969: 349). The Other is not a member of my community, but a stranger who cannot be reduced to any role or function in my world. To do justice to Others, we must come face to face with them, become subordinated to their vocative address, and speak to them. Most importantly, however, we cannot reduce the Other to a textual element in a narrative on the Other. As an interlocutor, Levinas's Other is not an object of discourse (Levinas 1969:69). In radical opposition to Ricoeur's concept of engaging alterity through mimesis or Certeau's psychoanalytically structured procedure, Levinas's Other can neither be grasped nor objectified; it cannot be reduced to any textuality or reinscribed in narrative form. According to Levinas, the only possible response to this Other is respect, generosity, and donation – which brings me to my conclusion:

### III. How and Why Should We Read the Other?

There are several points we can take from the discussions concerning alterity outlined above. Hermeneutical consciousness seeks to engage the Other. It has been overshadowed by the critical consciousness approach that has almost exclusively informed the last forty years of scholarship. The critical consciousness approach views such encounters as acts of intellectual and cultural mastery. As a critique of ideology, it severely limits the possibility of cross-cultural understanding. Ricoeur proposed a middle path between hermeneutics and the critique of ideology. He maintained that creative discourse permits us to recognize that we are confronted both by ideological distortions and utopian ideations. The former strives to dissimulate legitimate power and the latter questions authority and seeks to replace the reigning power structure. Ricoeur, therefore, acknowledged the need for a hermeneutics of suspicion. This acknowledgment allows us to transform the absolute Other into a relative Other so that we might be able to see it as another Self. However, Ricoeur also saw, as did Certeau, that the mastery of the Self in relation to the Other is disrupted before discourse can even imagine itself in control. Following Gadamer, Ricoeur recommended an understanding of hermeneutics that posits the possibility of recovering a text's lost message while maintaining the necessary suspicions aimed at demystifying it. Underlying this understanding is the belief that our temporality and historicity make sense only when organized in narrative. Both Ricoeur and Certeau acknowledged that through narrative not only those in power but also those bereft of power exercise a political will. Levinas presented us with a radically different perspective on our ability to engage the

Other. In the first place, he speaks of the irreducibility of the Other to any text about him or her. Ricoeur and Certeau set certain limits to our engagement, but they never denied the very possibility of such an encounter. Levinas, however, claims that we cannot grasp or assimilate the Other who, in turn, breaks and destroys our spiritual horizon of egocentric monism. Whereas Ricoeur emphasizes the dynamics of reciprocity with the Other ("I need the Other and, in giving, I receive"), Levinas has us held hostage by the Other.

The important lesson taught by the fruitful complications Ricoeur, Certeau, and Levinas brought to notions of alterity – complications that expanded the abstract politicization of the Other found in the post-structuralist criticism I have outlined here today – is that the Other is not a purely political concept but rather *relational*, and that as such any serious engagement with the Other will necessarily entail an ethical dimension. This is where, I think, Religious Studies can be very useful, by bringing back into discussion the ethical component that the dominant hermeneutics of suspicion theories have tended to ignore. (And I am sorry if, to make my point, I had to spout so much theory!) I began my talk today by looking at how the role of religion within the study of the humanities has been marginalized. We saw how it was affected by institutional biases, theological preconceptions, disciplinary doxa, and pedagogical fads. We also saw how we are historically and sociologically preconditioned in American universities not to seek religious meaning outside Religious Studies departments (that is, if they are even allowed to exist on campuses in any real form). As I then tried to show with my summary of heterological criticism, the political and institutional imperative to engage with the Other has been ill-served by much of this theoretical discourse due to said discourse's inability to provide a legitimizing pace for the validity of relational experience. Finally, I examined how ethical structures of meaning make convincing claims for relevance in the works of Ricoeur, Certeau, and Levinas provide grounds for improved inquiries in the humanities.

By shifting direction from the exclusive embrace of a hermeneutics of suspicion, we open up the ethical possibilities inherent in the path of hermeneutical consciousness. Personally, in my teaching, I venture down the middle path between the hermeneutical consciousness and the hermeneutics of suspicion championed by Ricoeur. I have found that viewing encounter in terms of some fusion of horizons as well as a product of ideological discourse solidifying the imposition of power is more fruitful than our endless attempts at unmasking various forms of epistemic hegemonic violence. In any case, a renewed interest in the ethics of our engagements with the Other is sorely needed. It can serve as the lynch pin for greater understanding of the world's differing approaches to Transcendence, something I think we can all agree is necessary in these

troubled times. Moreover, I would even say that our engagement with the Other is the primary task facing us today both inside and outside the university.

Religious Studies and the humanities can and should inform each other. With its emphasis on comparison within an ethical framework, Religious Studies is perhaps the best venue for assuming the task of expanding the potential for relational meaning through the study of the Other. Ironically, the very Otherness of the study of religion itself within American academe – and our recognizing this Otherness and its history – can facilitate future responsible encounters with Otherness. The willingness and ability to dialogue across disciplines and across worldviews is pivotal to the university's mission of promoting diversity and tolerance. The multiplicities of religions in the US and the study of this multiplicity in Religious Studies (as in this very department at Riverside) open up a propitious space to explore diversity and convergences. By theorizing a truly ecumenical path for future engagement, we can thus invigorate the university's, the community's, and our own commitment to the Other.

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