Innovation in the study of religion and religions
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Let me begin with two legends from ancient Greece. When the Greek mathematician Archimedes was taking a bath, he suddenly realized that he could calculate the volume of his body. Subtracting the volume of the water without him in the bath from the volume of the water with him in the bath would equal the volume of his body. Excited by the discovery, it is said, he jumped out of the bath, and ran naked through the streets, shouting *heureka*, 'I have found (it)!'.

Second story: When the Greek hero of technology, Daedalus, invented wings of wax for his son Icarus, Greek myth tells us, Icarus flew too close to the sun, his wings of wax melted, and he fell to his death.

If the first story captures the 'wow' feeling of the scientific innovator, the second warns of the ambiguity of technological inventions.

Taking 'innovation' as the theme of my lecture, we may wonder about its meaning and how to bring it about. It is a term that seems to be everywhere, but one that is often not given content and reflection. A quick search for recent literature on the term indicates a focus on technological inventions that can be patented to make money.

Tonight I would, however, like to turn to human beings. The question before us is this: How may we produce new knowledge about human beings in the Human and Social Sciences? More specifically, how may we at a university produce new knowledge about what we name 'religion' and 'religions'?

Without denying the importance of money to create the space for academics to conduct innovative research on human beings and having been given this opportunity for almost thirty years, I will use this occasion to reflect on and share with you what I have learned on this theme and question.

My intellectual journey started at the University of Pretoria, where I came to focus on ancient Greek linguistics. The refrain from Prof Jannie Louw was that we were not going to study language the old way, but were going to do it in a new way. If the old way analysed the history of words, the new one examined language as it appears to us at a given moment. It is like a chess game. The old approach would try to understand the game by tracing its history, the new one focuses on the relationships between the pieces as they stand at a given moment on the chessboard.

What this meant in practice was that we spent most of our time, applying this innovative insight to Greek texts by drawing intricate lines to make explicit the relationships between words, sentences and bigger units. But there was more to this new approach of 'discourse analysis', which had to do with the analysis of concepts. If according to the old theory the meaning of a word could be derived from its original meaning, the new approach to semantics revealed the folly of etymological arguments. Indeed, how valid is it to claim that the word 'nice' derives from the Latin *nescio* ('I don't know')? Would that indicate that a nice person is actually an ignorant one?

Instead, the new approach argued that concepts use words. If word A has three possible meanings, and word B has two possible meanings, and the first meaning of word A overlaps with the second meaning of word B, we may group these overlapping meanings together in the same semantic domain, while defining the special or diagnostic elements of each term within the domain.

If this discovery sounds a bit Archimedian or technical to you, let me illustrate with an example from Afrikaans rather than Greek. The word 'stoel' may refer to an object on which a person can sit. It may also carry the meaning of 'getting fat' (as in 'hy of sy het gestoel') plus a few others that you may wish to add. The word 'bank' in Afrikaans may refer to a financial institution, or an object on which one or more people can sit, or colloquially to students staying away from a class (as in 'sy of hy het die klas gebank'). Now the first meaning of 'stoel' and the second meaning of 'bank' here overlap so that they may be classified under the semantic domain of 'objects for the purpose of sitting', and the distinguishing or diagnostic component between them being that a 'stoel' is for one person to sit on, while a 'bank' is meant for one or more people to sit on.

And so, on the basis of this theory, applied to the Greek New Testament, a semantic domain dictionary was completed. The overarching categories that were used to classify the semantic domains were in themselves innovative. Instead of using the conventional categories of noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition etc, new categories were introduced. The semantic domains were categorized under objects, events and abstracts, which had huge implications for translation.

Particularly instructive was the insight that nouns expressing events may be transformed into kernel sentences. 'God's love', for example, may be made explicit as 'God loves X', where X would be filled in on the basis of the context. The usefulness of this approach is evident in texts where nouns expressing events or actions are staggered - a characteristic of Paul's writings, which makes a literal translation hardly understandable in many modern languages. The application of this theory and method – an attempt to translate the *meaning* of the source text by finding 'dynamic equivalents' in the receiving text - resulted in the production of several new Bible translations, among them the *Good News / Today's English Version*, *Die gute Nachricht* and the 1983 Afrikaanse Bybelvertaling. It is on the basis of this theory that the events in 'the baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins' (a literal translation of Mark 1:4) were transformed into four kernel sentences and the relationship between them made explicit to result in 'Turn away from your sins and be baptized, … and God will forgive your sins' (in *Today's English Version*).

The first lesson that I learned from this study was that innovation depends on concepts and theories that are applied to case studies, in my case ancient Greek. I later, however, also learned that what was new would come to pass, as newer concepts and theories would pose new challenges. In the past ten years I have thus collaborated on a new Afrikaans Bible translation that aims to recover metaphors and stylistic emphases that were lost in the 1983 translation.

But let me not dwell on this further to get to the second phase in my intellectual journey. Having arrived in Theology, I came to focus on the critical study of the New Testament. After a thorough introduction to modern historical analyses of these first century texts, I was told that we were going to read the gospels in a new way. We would read the gospels and episodes in them as stories, by using concepts from theories about narratives: Jesus as hero, the disciples as helpers and the Pharisees as opponents act as characters in narrative plots of time and place to convey a message unique to each gospel. With Jesus as carrier of the ideology to be followed, we discovered Jesus as suffering Messiah in Mark, as second Moses bringing a new law in the sermon on the mount in Matthew, and as model that reaches out to the socially outcast in Luke. But, I must add, it was Prof Andries van Aarde who persistently emphasized that we should not discard historical-critical studies of these texts. It remained imperative to detect the unique fingerprints of each gospel writer on the basis of comparison

and to relate their messages to their respective historical contexts.

A profound reorientation in my thinking took place, when Andries introduced me to the work of the Irish-American scholar, John Dominic Crossan – considered by many to be the most innovative late twentieth century scholar on the historical Jesus. Crossan's early work focused on the language of Jesus, on his parables and aphorisms (short pithy sayings). What was new in Crossan's approach was the discovery of a paradoxical structure in the historical Jesus' parables, which he reconstructed based on a comparative reading of early Christian transmissions of Jesus' parables inside and outside the New Testament.

Take, for example, Jesus' comparison of God's kingdom to a meal. What, says Jesus, would the world be like, if God would rule it? It would be like a meal where the invited friends are not present, but uninvited strangers are. Expectations are radically challenged and overturned. God's rule works paradoxically, Jesus said by means of metaphor. In Matthew we see the paradox changed into an allegory: those who are at the meal, now escalated to a royal wedding banquet, stand for the congregation who accepted Jesus as Messiah, and those who were invited but are not present are the fellow Jews who rejected him. In Luke, the original paradox is turned into a moral example story for his community who were to reach out to the poor, ill and marginalised in society. At the beginning though, was the challenge of paradox.

In mapping types of story, Crossan argued that some stories serve to affirm our world, and others at the opposite extreme subvert it. To make the paradoxical structure of the latter clear, he compared Jesus' parables not only to ancient examples, but also - as a further innovative step - to those by modern writers such as Kafka and Borges who subverted conventional genres in their writings. He concluded that although we human beings live in stories like fish in the sea, we can not dwell in paradox alone. If parables disorient us by their very structure, we need to reorient ourselves in order to live and act in the world - 'orientation by disorientation', as the philosopher Paul Ricoeur maintained.

Crossan's work, since the 1990s, took a new turn, as he came to apply concepts from social anthropology to the historical Jesus within the context of first century Judaism and the early Roman empire. Foregrounding the cross-cultural concept of 'class', he now situated Jesus among illiterate peasants in rural villages in Lower Galilee and around the sea of Galilee in the late 20s and early 30s of the first century. As a non-violent programme of resistance to an empire that through client kings and with the collaboration of the religious elite politically oppressed and economically exploited peasants, Jesus empowered the latter by sharing meals in their homes and reaching out to the sick and abandoned. Crossan's focus, due to the application of new concepts, has now shifted from Jesus as mystical poet playing with paradoxes to shock our expectations, to a Jesus whose performance of an egalitarian vision and programme of distributive justice subverted the unjust religious, political and economic system of his time and introduced new communities of caring and sharing in rural villages at grassroots level.

Thinking back about the semantic domains that I had learned earlier, it became clear to me what we lose, when we do not historicize and localize the meaning of concepts. As Crossan emphasized: justice looks quite different when seen from the side of the neck of the oppressed than from the boot of an oppressing and exploitative empire.

This ethical urgency, not simply a matter of *individual* morality, but of *systemic justice* that demands of followers the sharing of resources, was according to Crossan continued by Paul in his house churches in major cities of the eastern part of the Roman empire. By using the same titles and terms that were used for the emperor as evidenced on stone, coins and texts - eg Son of God, God, Saviour, good news at the birth of the emperor – were used of Jesus by those early Christians who formed

alternative communities within the empire. Against the justice and peace that Rome claimed to have brought to the world by the sword, Paul held that small house churches of Christ followers, who shared among themselves material and spiritual resources so that each one would have enough, were already establishing justice in a non-violent way.

This ideal was unsurprisingly not always realized in Paul's house churches. By imaginatively relating, in collaboration with an archaeologist, material evidence on city layouts and homes in Paul's time to the text of 1 Cor, Crossan constructed a convincing scenario of the problem in the house churches at Corinth. These Christians included a few relatively wealthy patrons, who hosted the church meetings in their villas, and the majority of poor workers who rented from those owners shops that fronted the streets on the outside of the villas. What upset Paul was that those owners would eat the best food and drink the best wine before the poorer members arrive to commemorate Jesus as their saviour in their common meals. The poor who arrived late would only get the crumbs. Paul, outraged at this behaviour, since the common meal of Christ followers should not be like this, instead fiercely insisted that there should be a sharing of the food and the wine at these early eucharistic meals.

The third phase in my journey overlapped with the second. Having joined the Department of Classics at Unisa, I was repeatedly told to take leave of the 'devil dodging stuff', ie my interest in early Christian studies, in order to become a 'pure' classicist by focusing all my attention on the close reading of classical texts from Greco-Roman antiquity. But, in spite of the reprimands, I persevered in crossing boundaries and exploring theories. This way I encountered a group of classicists in Paris who were doing innovative and imaginative research on Greek myths.

Instead of the conventional listing of attributes of gods, goddesses and heroes, they applied anthropological categories. Not unlike the principles that I learned for a semantic domain dictionary, they would categorize overlapping functions of divinities under common social domains. If Athena was the goddess of war and wisdom as well as weaving and pottery, Hephaestus the god of metalworkers as well as the lame husband of the love goddess Aphrodite, and Daedalus the hero of technological inventions as well as architecture, it would be possible to consider them together under the social domain of crafts and technology and to define the specific function of each within this domain.

Innovative as these classicists were, they did not engage with critical theories along Marxist or feminist lines to critique the hierarchical power relations that those myths justified between rich and poor, men and women, Greek and barbarian. In their view, it sufficed to show, for example, taking death as social domain, that Greek myths praised a young *male* hero who died on the battlefield for his city or country, but consistently chose *female* figures to portray the terrifying side of death - such as Medusa with a monstrous face and snakes in her hair instilling fear of death to anyone looking at her, or the Sirens with their seductive voices luring entranced sailors to death. A critique of myths that propagate patriotism or subordinate women did not form part of their innovative analysis.

Continuing simultaneously my interest in early Christianities within their Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts, I then discovered that Burton Mack - a prominent American scholar of early Christianities - not only related his innovative analysis of early Christian myths as intellectual products of sub-cultures in Greco-Roman antiquity explicitly to the Paris school's anthropological analysis of Greek myths, but that he also developed a piercing critique of the Christian legacy.

If the German scholar Rudolf Bultmann, one of the most important 20th century historical-critical scholars of the New Testament and the staple food during my studies of the New Testament at the University of Pretoria, had tried to reinterpret early Christian myths that were created around Jesus' death and resurrection by giving them an existential meaning for Christians in his time, Mack dismissed this emphasis on individual experience as pious posturing. Instead, he offered a social-

anthropological analysis that showed how diverse, competing and often conflicting early Christian myths were constructed by early Christian groups to serve the interests of each particular group.

Mark's portrait of Christ as an apocalyptic hero, for example, served to create a binary hierarchy between his own group who would be saved and others who would be condemned in the end. The formation of the New Testament canon itself, he further maintained, was to be critiqued as a reduction of diversity when bishops of the emerging orthodox church from the second to fourth century decided to exclude texts by gnostics and others whom they labelled heretics. Identifying a binary hierarchy at the basis of the Christian myth, Mack argued that official Christendom, with quite early antecedent drives but particularly since Constantine's unification of his empire through the imposition of a singular creed, increasingly directed its aggression at Jewish opponents, eventually culminating in full-scale anti-Semitism. He further argued that the concept of a 'Christian nation' among conservative American politicians and fundamentalist preachers could be traced to this legacy - a pernicious legacy, he argued, that we do not need in our postmodern world that demands appreciation of cultural and religious diversity.

Mack and Crossan's assessment of the Christian legacy cries out for comparison. If Mack considers the Christian legacy with its logic of a binary hierarchy as irredeemable in our multicultural world, Crossan is more differentiating in his judgment of Christian traditions, always taking his construct of the historical Jesus as norm. On the one hand, Crossan does not shy away from lamenting the change that took place from Jesus' sharing an open table with marginalized people in rural villages to Constantine's celebrating a closed eucharist with guards preventing the poor from entering the palace to share in the meal with him and the bishops, or from condemning portrayals of a violent God and Christ in many parts of the Bible that might instigate violence among followers (as superbly examined in his recent *How to read the Bible and still be a Christian*). On the other hand, Crossan argues that for Christians as well as humanity, the future lies with the historical Jesus' non-violent vision and programme of distributive justice and egalitarian social relations in so far as his followers as well as people from other traditions work towards its implementation.

My final phase, the current one, surely presupposing and building on my previous experience, started when nine years ago, due to rationalization of Classics, I was redeployed to the field of Religious Studies at Unisa. Whereas my previous studies focused on the comparison of Jewish, Christian and Greco-Roman traditions in the ancient world, my new assignment expected of me to exponentially enlarge the field of study and be sensitive in thinking, writing and teaching about religious nationalism and violence, the place of women and homosexuals in religion, the ethics of indigenous religious claims and practices, and the new national policy on teaching children in public schools about the many religions of the world and in South Africa.

In addition to the Semitic / Abrahamic religious traditions (Judaism, Islam and Christianity) and Eastern religions (Hinduism and Buddhism, but also to a lesser extent Chinese religions), I had to acquire and am still acquiring knowledge about African indigenous religions, new religious movements and even popular culture that functions like conventional religions. As you can see, the field is enormous. But since the academic study of religion traditionally entails historical and comparative work, the fundamental question I have to answer has to do with cross-cultural key concepts that are to be problematized and given theoretical depth so that we may apply them analytically to case studies from religious traditions.

The obvious first term that needs clarification is 'religion' and 'religions', with 'religion' being the generic category (the genus) and 'religions' the species – just as we classify fruit as general category, and apples, pears and oranges as specific examples of the category of fruit. Having been disciplined in my previous historical studies to think about ancient Greco-Roman religions, formative Judaism and early Christianity in a humanistic way, I have accepted the challenge from scholars of religion to

try and understand religion as a *human* construct by using theories from sociology, psychology and anthropology rather than following a theological and confessional approach that claims to speak from or on behalf of divine eternity.

As working definition of religion I have started with the definition of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim: religion refers to sacred beliefs and practices, with 'sacred' meaning 'set apart' from the ordinary, that serve to unify a group. I have adapted this functionalist definition by introducing insights from critical theories that expose the conflictual potential of religion in drawing boundaries between insiders and outsiders of a group of adherents, and in validating asymmetrical power relations between rich and poor, men and women, and under colonial and imperial conditions of colonizers imposing themselves as civilizers on socalled 'primitive' peoples. But in addition to studying the potential of religion to hurt, I also on the basis of the evidence have been considering religion's potential to heal.

If 'religion' is the first concept that needed clarification, the second concept is 'comparison'. As a basic strategy in the comparative study of religion and religions, why do we compare and how may we do so in a valid way? I have taken my cue from the American scholar of religion Jonathan Z Smith, one of the most prominent theorists of the comparative study of religion since the 1970s. With a deep background in Classical, early Jewish and early Christian traditions Smith devoted his book *Drudgery divine* to this question. Structured around the comparison of words, texts and contexts, and taking the comparison of early Christianities with Greco-Roman mystery religions as case study, he argued that scholars have tended to take Christianity as norm so that their comparisons ended up as apologies for Christianity. Instead, he maintained, Mack's sociological analysis offered the most promising prospect for innovative research on early Christian myths as products of social formations.

On the basis of his proposal for a valid comparison of religions that would not be a defense of Christianity but compare religions on a fair and equal basis, I have accepted as procedure that we first need to decide on the issue or key concept that we want to compare, well aware of the history / genealogy of the chosen concept itself, and after having given it theoretical depth, apply it to at least two case studies. The way to do it, is to study each case within its specific historical and geographical context before we consider similarities and differences between them with respect to the chosen issue or key concept. The purpose of comparison done in this disciplined and systematic way, Smith has argued, is to redescribe the one case in terms of the other and so shed new light on the issue under consideration, and even to eventually redefine the concept that we started with.

The first issue that I investigated after joining Religious Studies was the notion of **'religious nationalism'**. The idea of **'nationalism'** emerged in the 19th century European movement of romanticism, which as a reaction to the European Enlightenment's ideal of rationality, focused not only on the emotions and the overwhelming forces of nature, but also on the collective spirit of a nation or Volk, each with its own language, religion and history. The formation of nation states in Europe was the concrete manifestation of the idea of nationalism. Due to colonialism this idea and its manifestation spread from Europe to the rest of the world so that nation states with territorial borders became established globally by the end of the 19th century and today constitute the basic units of international politics.

The term **'*religious* nationalism'** refers to nation states or groups within nation states that define their collective national identity by prioritizing one religion at the expense of others. Instead of starting my analysis with case studies from the familiar Christian nationalism in apartheid South Africa or the USA (already familiar to me from Mack's analysis), or forms of Islamic nationalism in nation states such as Pakistan, Indonesia or Turkey, I decided to follow the strategy of defamiliarization by starting with Buddhist nationalism in Thailand and Hindu nationalism in India that have violently suppressed Muslim and other minority religions. The purpose of this looking elsewhere has been to shed new

light on the South African context. My conclusion was that 'religious nationalism' as an exclusionary strategy of rigid boundary making has tended to cultivate intolerance and often violence.

As alternatives to address this problem I considered not only initiatives taken by religious institutions to promote interreligious dialogue, but also constitutional guarantees undertaken by the state against discrimination on the basis of religion and for the equal treatment of religions before the law, as well as policies that would guide the implementation of multireligion education in public schools. Although I find these initiatives laudable, I am also aware that they are contested on many fronts which calls for continuous innovative thinking in the field of Religious Studies.

Having become conscious of the intolerance and even violence that essentialised and exclusionary group identitifications with rigid boundaries may breed, I have argued that essentialized and exclusionary claims to Africanness and ethnic identities in post-apartheid South Africa may effect the same consequences. I did so on the basis of not only the effects that the propagation of pure Hinduness as a criterion of national belonging by the conservative BJP political party in India with its cultural and religious affiliates have had, but also by taking seriously anthropological studies of the destructive effect that post-colonial political uses of indigenous belonging have had in Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire and Botswana.

In the case of Cameroon, after independence in 1960, an emerging dictatorship under Ahmadou Ahidjo enforced national belonging by means of rigid ceremonies (collective rituals) and by strongly discouraging the cultivation of ethnic loyalties. Although this policy was initially continued by his successor Paul Biya, the latter due to international pressure from the IMF and World Bank to democratize, in the early 1990s started to instrumentalize indigenous funerary practices as a means to divide and attract voters in his favour: the village where one's ancestors were buried served as marker of one's belonging and was the place where citizens were to vote. In Côte d'Ivoire, Laurent Gbagbo similarly demanded that people had to return to their villages of origin to vote, which had disastrous consequences due to a history of urbanization and migrations. The same problem of the political essentialization of indigenous identities that create fragmentation, new hierarchies, intolerance and violence is evident from Botswana's privileging of Tswana ethnic identities in spite of its constitution, and the xenophobic outbursts in South Africa.

But to better understand the permutations of the concept of 'indigeneity' as a reference to a group or groups who claim to have been first in a specific territory before the arrival of European colonists, we need to revisit colonial and apartheid history. How can that story be told in a new way? David Chidester, who in the mid-1980s moved from the USA to South Africa to take up a position in Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town, has done so in an exemplary way. Under 19th century British colonial conditions the term 'religion', with Christianity taken as norm, was first used as an oppositional term to *deny* religion among South African indigenous people by labelling indigenous beliefs and practices as superstitions, and later after having *acknowledged* indigenous religious systems among Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho and Tswana speakers the category was used to administer and contain indigenous people. Scholars in European imperial metropoleis, on the basis of a decontextualized use of data received from colonial observers who had in their turn obtained their information mostly from indigenous converts, developed abstract theories about the evolution of religion from a socalled primitive mentality to rational Western Protestant faith and science – a process of theory formation that Chidester conceives of as a triple mediation.

Chidester's retelling of this story has, however, been even more innovative. In line with, and as a pioneer in the recent turn in Religious Studies to study not only the history of beliefs as the Protestant founders of Religious Studies and their followers have tended to do, but to focus specifically on material aspects of religion such as objects, the senses and ritual practices, Chidester has taken among other things an anchor on the Xhosa-speaking east coast of South Africa and Zulu dreaming as interior

senses as case studies for analysis. I give you a brief indication of his analysis of the anchor, and hope that it will inspire you to read on your own his analysis of Zulu dreaming (from angry ancestors appearing in dreams to descendants who due to dislocation from land and dispossession of cattle under colonialism could not honour them with the expected sacrifices, to Credo Mutwa whose visions took him from being a supporter of apartheid's indigenous villages to encounters with extraterrestrials, the education of white sangomas and eventually the appropriation of electronic technology in cyberspace).

The cover of *Savage systems* (1996), in which Chidester demonstrates that 'comparison' from a South African perspective was not an innocent academic exercise in the 19th century, shows the drawing from a 19th century British writer of an indigenous person bowing in front of an anchor. The reference is to the anchor of a shipwreck that was discovered by Xhosa speakers at the end of the 18th century and towards which they developed a ritual behaviour. Chidester argues, on the basis of 19th century Xhosa and Zulu speakers' reinterpretations of their creation myths (according to which they were born from the land and belonged here, whereas whites came from the sea and should have stayed there), that their ritual behaviour towards the anchor probably expressed their opposition to colonial invasion. European observers at the beginning of the 19th century, however, interpreted the ritual behaviour as a respectful saluting of the anchor by those Xhosa speakers, indicating a superstituous belief that the anchor was an animated object having the magical power to kill them. In the second half of the 19th century scholars of religion abstracted the data in these reports further from its colonial context to develop their evolutionary theories of a primitive mentality. This theory of the inferiority of indigenous religion and thinking had, again, a huge influence on Werner Eiselen, the anthropologist from Stellenbosch who was instrumental in the development of apartheid policies on education.

But in addition to tracing this trajectory from the perspective of Europeans who devised and imposed an oppressive and exploitative system, Chidester also crucially attends in his new version of the story to the creative agency of indigenous people. Not only did he show how indigenous people in South Africa reinterpreted their creation myths under 19th century colonial conditions, but also ways in which black intellectuals at the beginning of the 20th century started to reverse the production of knowledge about African indigenous religion - writers such as John Dube (Zulu novelist and founder of what was to become the ANC), Thomas Mofolo (Sotho novelist who dealt with Shaka and Zulu religious traditions), SM Molema (Tswana historian) and HIE Dhlomo (theorist of Zulu ritual and drama) who critically engaged with European theories of religion.

As a crucial further step, Chidester interrupts the conventional discussion of theories of religion that focuses exclusively on debates among European intellectuals, by foregrounding and comparing the theories of anti-colonial thinkers such as Gandhi, Fanon and Mondlane. If Gandhi promoted on the basis of his religious persuasion non-violent resistance to empire, Fanon argued to the contrary that a violent strategy against the systemic violence of empire was necessary for the colonized to regain their humanity. Eduardo Mondlane in Mozambique held that colonialism corrupted true religion (an essentialist view that Chidester critiques), and showed how the colonized found ways to interact with colonial Christianity - either by embracing it, or by subverting it. The Makonde woodworkers, as an example of the latter strategy, represented Christ as demon, priests as wild animals, and Mary as 'raising a spear over the body of her dead son'.

The ways in which this kind of innovative analysis contribute to the revision of our curricula, particularly within the context of current demands to decolonize a Eurocentric curriculum, should be clear. But what should also be clear is that instead of discarding European theorists of religion, Chidester has in my view persuasively insisted that an examination of their nexus with colonial and post-colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid, narratives and counter-narratives remains imperative.

Let me, as I move towards the conclusion of my lecture, invite you to think with me about the key concept of 'sacred space' - one of the categories that has in the recent material turn in the study of religion received renewed attention. As you leave this building, you will see our case studies: two monuments on the opposite hills. Instead of looking for sacred space in the church, temple, synagogue or mosque, as we conventionally do, we turn our analytical lens to the Voortrekker Monument and Freedom Park.

The category of 'sacred space' has been theorized in two major ways. On the one hand the Dutch scholar of comparative religion, Gerardus van der Leeuw, one of the major theorists of religion in the first half of the 20th century, maintained that a place is sacred where people experienced awe at the intervention of a transcendental power. Structurally, he further held, sacred space typically holds an even more sacred space at its center, eg the ark in the temple of Jerusalem, the altar in a cathedral, the shrine at the end of a pilgrimage, the hearth as the center of a traditional Dutch home, and eventually the heart as the center of the human body. As an exponent of the phenomenological approach in the comparative study of religion, he argued that the task of the analyst should be to bracket any biases that he may have about a religious or cultural tradition, and describe with empathy what he observes and hears.

Applied to our case studies, the most sacred center of the Voortrekker Monument is the cenotaph with its motto 'Ons vir jou Suid-Afrika' on which the sun is to shine through a strategically placed opening in the roof every 16th of December at noon. The most sacred space at Freedom Park to which the pathway leads and where visitors are requested to take off their shoes is the *isivivane* area with its exclusive use of indigenous symbols. The phenomenologist's task would stop with a sympathetic appreciation of these facts - something that Van der Leeuw attempted to do in the reports that he wrote on the basis of his two visits as representative of the Dutch government to South Africa in 1947 and 1949, and the speech that he gave at the opening of the Voortrekker Monument on 16 Dec 1948.

The second theory of sacred space insists that sacredness is not given by transcendental revelation, but historically constructed and ascribed by a group of adherents to unite them and serve their particular interests. In the case of the Voortrekker Monument we can trace the diverse functions that the sacred stories told and ceremonies performed around it have served, from its opening as a symbol of Afrikaner nationalism to its current functions in post-apartheid South Africa. Similarly, the social and political functions of Freedom Park can be traced, from the initial proposals of a cosmopolitan architectural structure to reconcile South Africans divided by a traumatic past, to the option of a structure that would prioritize indigenous symbols, and the current contestations of it as a sacred space.

In so far as we may problematize and elaborate a critique of the Voortrekker Monument, we should in my view note the same for Freedom Park. Not only have critiques been expressed by conservative Afrikaners and Pentecostal Christians (many of them black), specifically objecting to taking off one's shoes as one enters *isivivane*, but also by liberals who emphasize that cultural diversity should be the state's focus in constructing heritage sites. Furthermore, if the *National Policy on Religion and Education* prescribes that no particular religion is to be privileged in public schools and if we consider Freedom Park as an extended classroom, the prioritization of indigenous symbols and the conflict of interests should be clear and demand of us critical reflection.

Having taken you through the academic disciplines that I have traversed in my academic career, I think I have by means of a selection of examples shown that our best hope to produce new knowledge about religion as a powerful force among humans, may lie in crossing disciplinary boundaries, construct and theorize with critical self-awareness cross-cultural concepts from these encounters, and apply them comparatively to case studies.

In my study of ancient Greek, I already learned the need for linguistic terms to analyze language, from where - I later learned - the anthropological distinction between etic and emic derives. When Chomsky was asked how many languages he spoke, he replied that he was not a languist, but a linguist. Similarly, Jonathan Z Smith quotes Borges' parable of the map makers to emphasize the need for concepts to analyze our data. In this parable, cartographers decided to gradually increase the map of their territory until the map eventually completely coincided with the territory, and they were left without a job. Like Smith, I am convinced that second order concepts that are precisely not exactly the same as first order terms used by insiders, create a gap between map and territory that is a condition for creative, analytical thinking in our field - lest we become parrots repeating word by word the language and terms of those whom we study.

It is my hope that in the time that remains, by experimenting with the application of theorized concepts to case studies in a comparative way, I may still have a few of those Archimedean 'wow' experiences. But I will simultaneously, mindful of Daedalus, not refrain from critical analysis of the ethical import of our intellectual innovations for the world that we live in and for our South African context in particular.

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