

Response to Prof. Morny Joy's 'Method and Theory in Religious Studies'¹

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Let me start by saying what a pleasure it was to listen to Prof Joy's presentation. We all agree that Prof Joy addresses issues that are of vital importance for the future of Religious Studies, not only in the 'rest' of the learned world, but also in South Africa.

It is not necessary to summarize what Prof Joy said in her presentation. When I read the manuscript – and it was confirmed this morning – one gets a very clear picture of the basic drive behind her argument. And the direction she sees fit for Religious Studies to take in possible future developments.

Rather, for the purposes of a response I have decided to focus on one question only, namely the status of modernism in her presentation, and more to point, the proclaimed ambition to move beyond modernism, without, in her own words, denying 'certain components of modernity' (p. 2). Does her argument indeed take us beyond modernism? Or, and this is my suspicion, is the argument still indebted to modernism, even more so than she is perhaps willing to accept?

Of course, the reason why the ambition to move beyond modernism is so important is that the modern era (and its many disciplinary regimes, like Religious Studies), is deeply inscribed in a conservative, masculinist, colonialist, capitalist, and racist logic, and therefore 'suspect', 'of an unsavoury nature', ridden with 'false dichotomies' and 'simplistic dualisms', etc.

But what exactly is meant by modernism? If this question is not addressed more extensively, we may repeat what we are trying to transcend.

¹ This response is dated 8 August 2014.

1. Objectivity and Neutrality

Prof Joy writes, and I agree, that we need to revise ‘the mode of thinking that has been content to insist on neutrality or objectivity, when all too often – in both past and present – this has been an excuse for unacknowledged interest’.

In a certain sense this has become common knowledge, especially after the so-called language turn during the previous century. In short, the modern attempt to be objective and neutral has foundered on the rocks of our unescapably historicity, i.e. the fact that we are always already imbedded in this or that particular tradition or community of trust. Prof Joy accepts the historical nature of the human condition, contrary to the modern tendency to escape time and history.

But, and this is my question, can we – amidst the acceptance of our own historicity – do away with the idea of objectivity? And is Prof Joy’s presentation not itself indicative of this? For at least some traces can be identified in her presentation of the idea of objectivity, despite claims to the contrary.

But let me rephrase the question: what happens when our philosophies do away with the dialogue between the subjective and the objective, historicity and truth, the particular and the universal? Emphasis on only one of the binaries leads us almost of necessity to either a pure objectivism (with its denial of our historical embeddedness), and – just as important – a pure subjectivism and relativism (with its inbuilt tendency to reduce reality to nothing but a struggle for power and the instrumental promotion of our own particular interests)?

Against this background one can ask whether Prof Joy is not (in an attempt to do away with modern objectivism) committing herself to subjectivism (with the attendant reduction of everything – following Nietzsche and Foucault – to a simple power game). In other words, is postmodernism not the dark shadow of modernism? And is one’s resistance to modernism not undermined by one’s loyalty to postmodernism?

But even more, is the preference for the subjective not accompanied by a rather strange phenomenon, namely the return of the objective under the guise of its denial? She starts her presentation with the following statement: ‘If one surveys the present condition of Planet Earth, the inevitable conclusion is that it is facing a number of challenges that threaten its

continued viability as a life-enhancing environment – in climatic as well as in humanistic matters’.

What exactly is meant by this statement? One possible explanation is that the surveillance of Planet Earth rests on the age-old ambition to describe the latter from the vantage point of a certain free-floating, objective and neutral platform somehow removed from planet earth.

In this regard one can ask what is meant by the continued viability of Planet Earth as a life-enhancing environment. It is difficult to escape the impression that these concepts do function for all practical purposes as objective norms. In other words, is this a question of the objective making its scarcely visible re-appearance against the background of its denial?

2. Dualism

Since Nietzsche and his unruly squat of French supporters on the left bank of the Seine we know that modern dualism is a bad thing. It lies at the very foundation of phenomena like colonialism, racism, phallo-logo-centrism, Euro-centrism, capitalism, apartheid, etc.

Prof Joy is accepting, as normative for her own argument, the post- or even anti-dualist talk of postmodern philosophers like Foucault and Derrida. This is the reason why she often refers to the need to transcend – in her words – the ‘false dichotomies’, ‘artificial polarities’ and ‘simplistic dualisms’ of modernism.

However, a certain semantic ambiguity characterises this attempt to transcend dualism.

Firstly, it stands in marked contrast to the rhetoric used in the presentation. For the presentation is structured around a typical dualist geometry in terms of which certain phenomena are seen as negative and others as positive. E.g., phenomena like ‘conservatism’, ‘identity politics’, and ‘western values’ are seen, without qualification, in negative terms. (As if – by the way – there are no traces of conservatism or identity politics to be found in the presentation).

At the same time their opposites are embraced. Like ‘human rights’ and ‘change’. However, as is the case with the meaning of concepts like conservatism and identity politics, the meaning of ‘human rights’ and ‘change’ are also left in unclarified. And if this is indeed the case, what

exactly is the difference between one's own position on human rights and the neo-liberal embrace of human rights? Even more, what is the difference between one's own position on change and the neo-liberal emphasis on the need to reduce everything – out of concern for ever expanding markets and limitless desires – to a state of pure potentiality? What is the difference between one's own preference for change and the typical capitalist need to meld everything solid into thin air, as Marx famously said?

But this brings me to the second remark. In contrast to the above-mentioned need to transcend dualism, the presentation also implies (in its use of concepts like 'false dichotomies', 'artificial polarities' and 'simplistic dualisms') that there is such a thing as true dichotomies, natural polarities, and complex dualisms.

But on what basis can we accept dualism? Even more to the point, on what basis can we distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable dualisms?

I am not convinced that Foucault and Derrida will be able to help us to answer this rather difficult question. But, and this is certainly controversial, I am convinced that traditional Western philosophy (despite its many problems) can provide us with an answer.

How? Traditional Western ontology is based on the idea that being can be seen as an analogical event, in other words as the dynamic interplay between similarities and differences. Traditional ontology thus shows the way not only beyond dualism (i.e. the need to draw unbridgeable lines between beings), but also beyond dualism's ever present shadow, namely monism (i.e. the tendency to deny differences). However, as long as we – in a typical modernist fashion, and with appeal to progress, change and potentiality – try to do away with tradition (a typical modernist temptation also present in Prof Joy's presentation), we are left without these important ontological guidelines. And without such points of reference from the past, modern society is less capable of answering the very phenomena that Prof Joy, rightly, identifies as problematic, namely capitalism, globalization, racism, etc.

3. The Transcendent and Modernism

Prof Joy proposes that religious studies follow the example of contemporary trends in anthropology. Now, I don't have any problems with anthropology

per se (although it is an open question to what extent anthropology enables us to think from within the interplay – as suggested above – between the historical and the universal, the particular and the general, the subjective and the objective, etc.).

However that may be, what struck me is the fact that the specific nature of religion – captured by the idea that religion is all about our reference to and dependency on a transcendent being – is left in the dark. As if the transcendent has no bearing on the question about the future of religious studies.

Now, in response I would like to argue that the transcendent is not merely an extra that we can eventually do away with without changing the very nature of our discipline. On the contrary, it has an intrinsic bearing on how we understand religious studies. This argument is based on the premise that our understanding of being as such is a function of our understanding of the transcendent. In other words, the argument is based on the premise that our ontologies are deeply indebted to our theologies (and let it be added as a side-remark, all of us do depend on theology, even those in religious studies who strongly denies this).

Let me give a few examples. It has a direct bearing on the question of modernism.

Firstly, take the example of the Christian God in High Mediaeval theology. Without explaining this in any detail, it is noteworthy that the understanding of God (God as origin and endpoint of our desire) found an analogical reflexion in its participatory understanding of being, for being was in essence nothing but a 'thankful response, a liturgical reaching out and participation' in God.

Secondly, during the theological revolution of the 13th and 14th centuries (Duns Scotus and William of Ockham) we were left with a radically new understanding of God. Henceforth, God was understood not as good and reasonable (as presupposed by the participatory ontology of High Mediaeval theology), but rather as a wilful, dark and impenetrable power.

But, and this is the important point, once God was thus reconceptualised, the space was opened for the modern understanding of being in similar terms. Thomas Hobbes, and modern liberal philosophy in his slipstream, gave expression to this when he argued that 'life in the state of nature is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. Henceforth the need arose to control the wilful, dark and irrational being by means of – as it turned out –

two powerful modern instruments, namely the state (nowadays supported by the culture of human rights and the liberal left), and, on the other hand, the forces of the market (nowadays supported by the liberal right). These events – a true redefinition of the very nature of being – would not have been possible without the nominalist revolution in modern theology.

Thirdly, within traditional participatory theology the dualism between subject and object, between the particular and the universal, between the historical and the systematic, would not have been possible. It is only on the basis of modern theology – and especially due to the fact that God was in ever more radical steps seen as unknowable (in nominalism), distant (in modern deism) and eventually dead (in modern atheism) – that being itself could fragment along the lines mentioned above.

In short, I think we in religious studies will not be able to respond to modern dualism (and its ever attending accomplice, monism) without placing the transcendent at the centre of our philosophy. The possibility of this happening in religious studies is, however, almost non-existing. Why? Because – and this is extremely speculative – religious studies has structurally internalised the modern paradigm (its theological presuppositions included) to such an extent that, so it seems, it is doomed to swing like a drunkard from the left to the right leg, from the subjective to the objective, from historical research to systematic thinking, etc., without bringing them to some sort of fruitful synthesis.

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