THE SPOOKY POLITICS OF DARK TRUTHS

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Abstract:

As social theory garners cache in departments of Religious Studies, scholars find themselves unclear about how to address the notion of truth. This paper approaches truth as an opportunity to explain the role of truth-claims in erecting and razing social boundaries. It begins by reframing or "signifying on" Alan Race's typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism in order to register social formations rather than soteriological criteria. Then it reviews moments in African American cultural history in order to explain the ways people mediate identity politics though truth-claims. Readers will visit three, race-centered debates over memorials on U.S. college campuses as case studies for demonstrating this perspectival shift. In so doing, the paper presents an alternative model for the kind of analytical social commentary Religious Studies scholars may provide their publics.

Keywords: truth, race, religious studies, social theory, public intellectuals, monuments, identity, signification

As one of the younger human sciences, Religious Studies lacks the name brand recognition held by departments of Sociology, Anthropology, and History. And so far as these other disciplines also study "religion," fathoming the distinctives of Religious Studies challenges those formally in the academic discourse, let alone the uninitiated. Aaron W. Hughes remarks that even a "casual saunter" through the halls of an annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) reveals that some of us are "philologists," others of us participate in "interfaith dialogue," and what exactly canopies all of us under the "big tent" remains a matter of dispute.[1]

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[1] Aaron W. Hughes, "Introduction: Theory in a Time of Excess," in *Theory in a Time of Excess: Beyond Reflection and Explanation in Religious Studies Scholarship*, ed. Aaron W. Hughes (Sheffield: Equinox Publishers, 2017), 3.

Seeing that we cannot agree upon a commendable model for scholarship, one could try to point to a fictional exemplar of the field. Disciplinary identifications notwithstanding, fictional characters like archaeologist Indiana Jones or "symbologist" Robert Langdon are among the most popular analogs, but the sensationalism of their occultist pursuits may strike others as an unfair association. Nevertheless the characters' interest in questions of truth makes them intelligible proxies for many laborers in our field. For despite tomes of scholarship suggesting the contrary, the public face of Religious Studies—in the United States, at least— is a field of inquiry interested in correct belief.[2]

Perhaps this is a failure of the social theorist or a shortcoming of the analyst, yet one must admit that phenomenologists have impressively piqued the curiosity of those fascinated by religion. The glow of televised scholarship has haloed the works of Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth* (1988), Huston Smith's *The Wisdom of Faith* (1996), and most recently Reza Aslan's short-lived, *Believer* (2017). These heralded series explored central tenets cherished, maintained, and dramatized by religious phenomena in a Schleiermachian quest to better explain the human experience.[3]

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[2] Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe opine that within ten years of the AAR's emergence from the National Association of Biblical Instructors, "the Academy fell back into the arms of religiously oriented interests where it has largely remained to this day." It is in regard to this tension that the two founded an "alternative," "complementary" body, the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR). See "Establishing a Beachhead: NAASR Twenty Years Later (2004)," in *Theory in a Time of Excess*, ed. Aaron W. Hughes (Sheffield: Equinox Publishers, 2017) 14.

[3] Schleiermacher's dual interest in rational thought and the experience of contemplation come to mind.

> The contemplation of the pious is the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all things, in and through the Infinite, and of all temporal things in and through the Eternal. Religion is to seek this and find it in al that lives and moves, in all growth and change, in all doing and suffering." ("Second Speech: The Nature of

This kind of "religious" scholarship finds public relevance in a world they interpret as stretched between the presumed poles of violent fundamentalism and amoral secularism. These assumptions further have particular purchase for practical intellectuals who offer sophisticated salves to global issues. In 2008, the popular British historian of religion Karen Armstrong received a $100,000 TED Prize with which she drafted a global "Charter for Compassion." The ambitious, four paragraph document calls for signees to return to the essence of "all religious, ethical, and spiritual traditions … and to honour the inviolable sanctity of the human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect."[4] Similarly, Donna Hicks, a conflict resolution specialist with mediation experience in geopolitical hot zones, has advanced a similar categorical imperative called the "Declaration of Dignity."[5] In it she outlines ten essential elements to address conflict, the first of which is "acceptance of … the ways in which race, religion, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, and disability may be at the core of other people's identities." The architects of both statements seem to presume an underlying or originary truth—that were we to recognize the inherent worth of "the other," then humans would be well on their way to peace.

It is a powerful sentiment, to be sure, tempting the student to redress the academic exercise into something more civil. Yet its uncritical adoption may lull the scholarly mandate of

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Religion," in *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman. (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co.: London, 1893), 36.
These words could serve as the prologue to all of the aforementioned television series.

[4] The Council of Conscience, The Charter for Compassion (2009), 30 October 2012, https://charterforcompassion.org/images/menus/charter/pdfs/CharterFlyer10-30-2012_0.pdf.

[5] You can read about Hicks' initiative at The Declaration of Dignity, 2013, https://declaredignity.com/declaration/. For a more expansive explanation of her project, see her book, *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

the human sciences to explain why such a kingdom has not come. If treating others as you would like to be treated is all there is to world peace, then what are we waiting for?

We can see the consequence of our delay in an episode from Colonial America. The Virginian revolutionary Patrick Henry wrestled with the parameters of truth making … at least, for a time. In his famed 1775 speech at the Second Virginia Convention, Henry spelled out truth's tragic difficulty in Enlightenment terms:

> Mr. President, it is natural to man to indulge the illusions of hope. We are apt to shut our eyes against a painful truth, and listen to the song of the siren till she transforms us into beasts…For my part, whatever anguish of spirit may cost, I am willing to know the whole truth; to know the worst, and to provide for it.[6]

Coming to terms with *the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth* is a confounding matter. Henry himself spoke against British subjugation "as submission and slavery," and yet his anti-royalist creed, "Give me liberty or give me death," did not extend to the manumission of his own slaves. He premised his ownership rights on the natural law undergirding the British monarchy, the American colonial government, and the United States' nascent frontier democracy. But his truth—however eloquent, however researched—was not a viable truth to those who bore his brand. It is not difficult to imagine the enslaved responding to Henry's example in a manner similar to the crowd's take on the revelation of Jesus's "true" nature in John 6:60 (NIV), "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?".

Were we to presume that Patrick Henry, like any other so-called "everyman," desired Armstrongian empathy and acted with Hicksian integrity, then we could begin to raise more basic questions about dark truths. Instead of projecting anachronistic judgments of "evil" or

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[6] Patrick Henry, "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death," Second Virginia Convention, March 23, 1775, in *The Declaration of Independence of Other Great Documents of American History, 1775-1865*, ed. John Grafton (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2000), 2

"ignorance" upon those with now unsavory morality, how do we come to terms with their puzzling social exploits? More plainly, can we explain the logics by which human beings come to understand others as subhuman and thus, less deserving of compassion and dignity?

On this matter there can remain no illusion of objectivity, for universalist gestures are part of what obscure the shadow sides of truth that are more properly our data. The problem with discussions of truth is that the ideal parameters between which they occur frequently require tabling, ignoring, or even denying the social ramifications of exercised belief. The possession of truth makes one forget both that they ever performed the dance of dominance let alone trained (or were disciplined) in its moves.

The temptation becomes—as some scholars are wont— to develop an aversion to the mention of "truth" or the incorrect attribution of truth to a phenomenon.[7] Both, however, signify the sign regardless of polarity. In order to account for the ramifications of people's best intentions, truth must be embraced as yet another object of study, reduced from intrinsically significant to a sign to be critically signified through descriptive interpretation and explanation.[8] Scholars of religion can account for the dark truths that humans would rather forget. We need only to be forthright about the social politics of truth-making.

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[7] In "Belief: Problems and Pseudo-Problems," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86, no. 3 (2018), 656, Jason N. Blum also calls into question the dismissal of "belief" and "truth" by Religious Studies scholars. While our arguments dovetail in many respects, we part ways at his suspicion of social theorists holistically disregarding or even denying "the existence of the internal mental lives of persons" or the other phenomena in which those lives connect. My contention is that there is plenty of data to sift through in our historicizing and social theorizing that speculating upon the occluded experience of the internal live is all but beyond the grasp of the human sciences, stretch as we may.

[8] For more on this parsing of Religious Studies as critical signification, see my earlier essay, "Signifying 'Theory': Toward a Method of Mutually Assured Deconstruction," in *Theory in a Time of Excess*, ed. Aaron W. Hughes (Sheffield: Equinox Publishers, [2004] 2017) 37-41.

The following paper approaches African American cultural history as an opportunity to recast the amorphous contours of truth as an empty signifier for truth-claims. Rather than trying to avoid discussing truth, it "signifies on" supposed truths to survey its holders' social politics, articulating the sociological ramifications of truth-claims, rather than the traditional application of theological characterizations. I then apply this perspective to recent race-oriented debates over the erection and destruction of memorials on three college campuses. The discussion there will demonstrate the explanatory benefit of paying attention to truth-claims and the complicated regimes of truth that render opponents imbricated in ways they would scarcely acknowledge. After showing how scholars might better compare and historicize contentions and conflicts,[9] I conclude with suggestions for how students of religion might grapple with truth-claims going forward, given the overdetermination of truth and right belief in public discourse.[10]

Signifying On Truths: From Truth to Truth Claims

If there is a right or essential truth inalienable from the circumstances of Black life, it is the persistent reminder that one's meanings are always subject to interpretation. Worth and value are speculative accidents upon which one can only temporarily depend. Cultural critic James Baldwin said as much during the height of the Civil Rights Movement.

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[9] On the methodological importance of doing so, see Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on Method," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1996): 227.

[10] The dominance of so-called "real" scholarship over theoretical work is not simply a numbers issue. It is an ideological one reinforced by academic gatekeeping and the private interests of extra-academic institutions influencing university spaces. For more on this in regard to research, see Russell T. McCutcheon, "Orthodoxies in the Field of Production," *Religion and Theology* 22 (2015): 133-152. For its impact on teaching Religious Studies, see my forthcoming essay on "Teaching in the Ideological State of Religious Studies: Notes Towards a Pedagogical Future," *in Constructing 'Data' in Religious Studies: Examining the Architecture of the Academy* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2019), *forthcoming.*

In deconstructing White supremacy, Baldwin wrote that the issue at hand cannot be reduced to differences in skin tone or saying the right word. The problem with supremacy is more frightening than the reality that some people believe themselves to be more important than they are. Far scarier is the education it takes to assume that someone is less than human, the scenario under which people have come to claim that another person's security is worth less than one's own certitude and specialness.[11] Power is being able to adjudicate when today "is such a time as this" to discount others or count their days as numbered.

African American history is a meditation on the dark truth of human politics. It acknowledges the arbitrary discourse of human rights in light of a nation that once designated some people as chattel but ruled that corporations are people (i.e. the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court case *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*) and thus "endowed with uncertain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." And all while, the daughters of the abolitionist and proto-suffragette Sojourner Truth still ask, "Ain't I a woman?"[12] and the sons of Memphis Sanitation Workers must continue to insist, "I am a Man."[13]

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[11] James Baldwin, "On Being White and Other Lies (1984)" in *Black on White: Black Writers on what it Means to be White*, ed. David Roediger (New York: Schocken Books, 1998). 179-180.

[12] On this point, I am in agreement with womanist biblical scholar Mitzi J. Smith. Smith describes Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech of the same name to the Women's Rights Convention in Akron Ohio as having:

> disrupt[ed] with her sass and back talk the racist ideology that question her womanhood because of her race and her former enslavement…assert[ing] that nothing she experienced or that was withheld from her nullified or changed the fact of her identity as a woman.

See "Race, Gender, and the Politics of "Sass": Reading Mark 7:24-30 Through a Womanist Lens of Intersectionality and Inter(con)textuality," in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*, eds. Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 103.

[13] On theorizing about this historical moment and others in terms of the politics of identity, see Monica R. Miller's "Introduction: Culture, Religion, and the Fabrication of Identities," in *Claiming*

These cries remain necessary in a world where a Starbucks barista can determine, *on spec*, whether someone might be loitering or might be a guest politely waiting for his party to arrive before ordering a cup of coffee.[14] As an intellectual curiosity, African American cultural history is a predilection for paradoxical questions over pat answers.

Here it may be said that my selection of an African American worldview—namely my own—is not a championing of a race. One could just as well avail themselves of the histories and theoretical insights of various philosophical traditions, area studies, or other intellectual domains. But I think it instructive to recognize how a nation that holds sacrosanct the ideals of democracy seems complacent in its reliance on institutions that disproportionately expel, incarcerate, and kill Black people among others.[15] In the case of African Americans, there is a clear and present need to know that the surrounding world depends on a calculus that cannot rationalize some bodies as belonging to the body politic.

Identity in the Study of Religion: Social and Rhetorical Techniques Examined (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing: 2015), 1-18.

[14] I am referring to a 2018 incident at a Philadelphia Starbuck Coffee store in which police officers arrested two Black men for trespassing after a barista had reported them for standing suspiciously and refusing to make a purchase. The accused were later found to have been waiting for a friend. Known for a third-place business strategy, the actions of the police and barista made clear the racialized tenor of the store's hospitable atmosphere. Simply put, "hanging out" is fine so long as one is not Black. Starbucks has since made reparations to the two men and have mandated diversity and inclusion training for all of its staff. Learn more about the public relations fire storm in reporting from journalist Phil McCausland, "Protests Follow Outrage after Two Black Men Arrested at Philly Starbucks, *NBC News*, 15 April 2018. https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/protests-follow-outrage-after-two-black-men-arrested-philly-starbucks-n866141.

[15] On the history and legal politics on why this is so, read Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

One response to this dark truth is to concede the pliability of meaning and a capitulation of certitude. This should not be equated with passivity but rather a "hope draped in black," to quote pragmatist Joseph R. Winters. The boon for our purposes is that:

> qualities that affect, disturb, and prompt … qualities that invoke feelings of sorrow, loss, alienation, pleasure, joy, and ambivalence within the context of black people's strivings, have the potential to alter and show the limits of traditional conceptions of politics and political resistance.[16]

Thus truth is no longer the thing for which the scholar must search. Instead it is the shibboleth that gives away the movements and location of people as our data. From there we can "signify on" these truth claims to hone in on their consequences.

In African American vernacular, to "signify" or "signify on" something is to bend the strictures of language enough to free interpreters to witness the prescriptions laden in the surrounding context. Colloquially, it is to "get woke," "to pay attention," or be put on notice. Signifying can manifest in oppositional terms, as exemplified in the insult word-game known as "the Dozens" or the folk poem "the Signifying Monkey." And it can emerge in connectional efforts, such as the intertextual conversation that happens within the burgeoning canon of African American literature, Africana history, and Hip Hop ciphers. Literary critic Henry Louis Gates uses the term as shorthand for how the "'black tradition' theorizes about itself."[17]

Signifying is the semiotics of community—its fusions and fissions. Thus, the writer and scholar of English letters, John Wideman poignantly call it "playing, not joking with language."[18]

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[16] Joseph R. Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 58.

[17] Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), ix. Gates book is the most popular touchstone for a literary and historical narration of signifying theory.

[18] This is also the title of John Wideman book essay on Gates' *The Signifying Monkey*. "Playing, Not Joking, with Language," *New York Times*, 14 August 1988. https://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/14/books/playing-not-joking-with-language.html.

So when one “signifies on” race, religion, or human rights, they are free to notice how these constructions demarcate a complex social choreography in which those dawning the mask of normalcy to perform a routine with the effect of making the bare-faced question the terms of their own being. The evocative titles of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1947)[19] and Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)[20] are just some registrations of these fraught theatrics. William R. Jones’ affirmative answer to the titular question, *Is God a White Racist?* (1972), exemplifies the tenor of play.[21] The book, subtitled “Preamble to Black Theology,” requires readers to admit that a God supportive of either the status quo subjugation of Black people in America or those White people apathetic to the plight of the oppressed must be racist.

In light of our interest in truth-claims over truths, I caution readers to engage of signifying as a spirited disposition rather than a spiritual one. The language of phenomenology (like all language) is a means rather than an end. In *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious of Racial Aesthetics*, Josef Sorett invokes the term “spirit” to draw attention to a broader, emblematic heritage of approaching social boundaries with incredulity. “Often told as a sequence of moments, the spiritual grammars outlined during each of these moments were indeed distinct historical dramas. Yet together they comprise a genealogy of spirit that continues even to the

[19] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1947) (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).
[20] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008).
[21] William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology* (1973) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

present day."[22] In theorizing truth from "the darker underside of modernity," we might further begin to lay bare some of the spookier politics of dark truths.[23]

The term "spooky" may appear to be a strange choice, but the rationale subtending my diction is multi-layered. Whimsy, we might say, is the façade that shields us just enough to weather the harsh implications of our truth claims deconstructed. Here I am indebted to the pen of Sam Greenlee, the author of the 1969 book, *The Spook Who Sat By the Door*,[24] and screenplay of the film adaptation by the same name (1973, dir. Ivan Dixon). The story begins with the U. S. Senator of Illinois learning that his re-election campaign will fall short unless he can whip the so-called Black vote. The Senator's wife contrives a plan to do so wherein he would publicly admonish the Central Intelligence Agency's racist hiring practices and calls for Langley's integration.

One Black man, the aptly named Don Freeman, is the only recruit to become a spy or "spook." But even then his superiors use him as a tokenized copyboy whose worth to the agency, ironically, lay in his ability to stand out among White peers, hence the derogatory valence of "the spook who sat by the door."

The story's signifying is not limited to the Black spy's title. Freeman turns out to be a rogue, independent double agent who is plotting to use his training to bring the United States to a colonial standstill in which the nation will be forced appraise Black liberty higher than the death toll of the Battle of Chicago. If this sounds like Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me

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[22] Josef Sorett, *Sprit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 10.
[23] J. Cameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 467.
[24] Sam Greenlee, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (New York: Richard W. Baron Publishing, 1969).

death," you will not be surprised to hear Freeman speak an eerily familiar truth toward the end of the story: "This is not about hating white folks … this is about loving freedom enough to fight and die for it."

When we subject truth claims to sociological scrutiny—namely the terms of communal boundaries—we begin to face the regimes that inform our understanding.[25] And were we to press further, we might see the faces of the casualties caught in the "wake" of our own sureness.[26] To signify on the spooky politics of dark truths, the scholar of religion needs to firmly shift from a theological anthropology to a social theorizing of differentiated soteriologies. For purposes of this discussion, I will signify on Alan Race's tri-part typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

From Theological Anthropology to a Social Theorizing of Soteriology

In *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, Alan Race categorizes the kinds of truth held by religious people.[27] These theological taxons all center on a human's potential for salvation in light of a theological—primarily Christian—framework. Exclusivism describes a belief in a single, monolithic truth. Those who disagree or do not identify with said truth are excluded from its benefits. It is a "my way or the highway" attitude toward salvific orthodoxy. Inclusivism celebrates shared belief. All people are included as soteriological beneficiaries so long as they hold the same truths as the standard bearers. Whereas exclusivism is predicated on total

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[25] Analyses of truth claims as discourse allow scholars of religion to theorize about the regimes that bolster and maintain them. See Bruce Lincoln, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Exploration in the History of Religions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 118.

[26] Christina Sharpe, "Wake," in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 1-24.

[27] Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983) 7.

agreement regarding truth, inclusivists reckon the possibility of salvation for theological others in proportion to mutual belief. "Their way is fine, as long as it is like our way." Pluralism, meanwhile, holds that truth is in the purview of all humanity. Different social contexts provide for different and useful perspectives on truth, thus pluralists should be prepared to welcome truth (not truth claims) in all of its permutations. From their perspective, "All roads lead to truth."

A. Race's typology has been qualified by a host of theologians and interfaith practitioners but it still remains among the most prominent frameworks for theological classifications of epistemic difference.[28] For our purposes, one major critique belies the social effects of truth as a political act, and that is, the overreach of pluralist rhetoric. While pluralism appears to be the most hospitable order of truth claims, its existence demands upon a hardline stance against opponents of pluralism. For this reason, Gavin D'Costa contends that "pluralism must always logically be a form of exclusivism."[29] Exclusivists—and, I would add, supremacists—and other exceptionalist identity formations are not allowed in pluralist communities as the convictions of one are mutually exclusive with the convictions of the other.

Furthermore D'Costa does not abandon A. Race's framework as much as he repurposes it for the explanatory purposes of what he calls a "criteriological typology." He writes, "the real differences between those called pluralists, inclusivists, and exclusivists are … [that] they disagree in what counts as normative truth and how it operates."[30] This is a crucial insight for

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[28] For example, Catholic theologian Paul Griffiths discusses "difference with respect to religious truth" in terms of exclusivism, inclusivism, and, what he calls, "open inclusivism." The latter is an inclusivist stance in which one has the humility or lack of "epistemological confidence" to entertain the possibility of truths (and not just truth claims) held by others. See *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 53-75.
[29] Gavin D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," *Religious Studies* 32, no. 2 (1996): 235.
[30] D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," 226.

shifting the conversation away from debatable concepts of orthodoxy and toward observable group dynamics.

But what does this shift gain or demand of the scholar of religion? In "The Impossibility of a Pluralist Worldview," D'Costa remains content with having invited scholars to ask "different questions that are generated when the typology breaks down."[31] And though this is an opportunity to assess the "metaphysical commitments" of a truth regimes ideology, we can go further by outlining the terms on which difference is observed and accommodated by a group.[32] By signifying on the criteriological typology of truth claims, we become privy to the spooky politics of exclusion and inclusion and savvy to the way pluralist rhetoric acts as a semantic vehicle for social restrictions as well.

To demonstrate the utility of critically signifying on truth-claims, I briefly present three memorials wherein we can explain the conditions on which the acceptance of difference is negotiated. What makes these scenarios spooky is that the distinct sociological dynamics are easy enough to observe yet are far more similar than the exemplars in each would care to admit, a practiced reticence that itself makes difference fraught.

The Exclusivism of "Silent Sam" and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

On August 20, 2018, some 200 protestors gathered at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill to publicly demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the racism teeming on the campus. The event reached fever pitch as the throng left the institution's "Peace and Justice Plaza" and marched to

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[31] D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," 232.
[32] Jeffrey D. Long, Book Review of *The Ideology of Religious Studies* by Timothy Fitzgerald," *The Journal of Religion* 81, no 3 (2001): 496.

the campus monument named "Silent Sam."[33] "Silent Sam" is a statue of a Southern, White frontiersman armed with a long rifle. Erected in 1913 with the beneficence of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the figure holds vigil in honor of the 1000 men who suspended their studies to fight on behalf of the South in the American Civil War.

The quiet, inanimate figure says volumes about "the Lost Cause" or end of the Antebellum ideal of a lifeworld free from government intrusion and predicated on the cultural and socio-economic edifice of the slave institution. Silent Sam reports for duty in spite of the loss to come. His virtue, as a result, reflects on the righteousness of the Southern ideology, a truth-claim challenged over the course of the statue's history but most forcefully rejected by the most recent protestor's razing of the memorial.

In this historical example, the Religious Studies scholar need not focus on whether this destructive action was truly justified. Instead we can develop a greater understanding of the social boundaries signified by the exclusivism concretized in the construction of Silent Sam. As a UNC webpage from 2004 suggests, "many students view Silent Sam as simply another place to sit on a warm spring afternoon."[34] But Eugene Scott, a Black UNC alum, and writer for the *Washington Post*, rejoins that "the real story behind Silent Sam is much darker," because it's rooted in "the darker truths of North Carolina's –and America's—history.[35]

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[33] Adam Owens and Candace Sweat, "Three Arrested as Silent Sam Supporters, Opponents Gather at UNC. *WRAL.com,* 30 August 2018. https://www.wral.com/three-arrested-as-silent-sam-supporters-opponents-gather-at-unc/17807793/.

[34] "Confederate Monument ("Silent Sam")," *UNC: The Graduate School*. 2004. https://gradschool.unc.edu/funding/gradschool/weiss/interesting_place/landmarks/sam.html.

[35] Eugene Scott, "Most People Mad at the Removal of UNC's Silent Sam Don't Know What It's Like to Walk Past the Statue. I do," *The Washington Post*, 21 August 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/08/21/most-people-mad-removal-uncs-silent-sam-dont-know-what-its-like-walk-past-statue-i-do/?utm_term=.cf43fb6a4b0a.

To begin, the memorial was constructed with the express purpose of valorizing White, Anglo-Saxon culture in the face of any attempt to dilute its worth—be they Federal integrationist policies or Black people's efforts to assimilate into Southern society. Silent Sam's early 20c. provenance coincides with wave of Confederate monuments created after *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), a U. S. Supreme Court case that legitimized de facto racism in the form of "separate but equal" treatment *contra* previous legal and social moves toward national integration during the post-Civil War period known as Reconstruction.[36] Additionally when a North Carolina philanthropist and Confederate veteran named Julian Shakespeare Carr dedicated the memorial at the behest of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, he relishes in a memory of the heyday of the "Anglo-Saxon Race" and an instance in which he whipped a "negro wench" in front of Federal soldiers as an object lesson in the protection of White rights.[37] The Black woman, in his view, had not shown the respect due a Southern White woman, and the Northern soldiers had failed in their defense of the social order.

Historian Catherine W. Bishir argues that White Southerners use post-Civil War Confederate memorials to construct a past in which they may see themselves aligned with laudable values and agency in constructing broader national futures.[38] This selective memory,

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[36] David A. Graham, "The Stubborn Persistence of Confederate Monuments," *The Atlantic,* 26 April 2016, "https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/04/the-stubborn-persistence-of-confederate-monuments/479751/.

[37] Julian Shakespeare Carr, "Unveiling of Confederate Monument at University, 2 June 1913," Collection Number: 00141—*The Julian Shakespeare Carr Papers*, 1892-1923. Wilson Library at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. https://finding-aids.lib.unc.edu/00141/#folder_26%231.

[38] Catherine W. Bishir, "Building a Southern Past, 1885-1915," *Southern Cultures* Inaugural Issue (1993). http://www.southerncultures.org/article/landmarks-power-building-southern-past-1885-1915/.

however, comes at the expense of Black persons, among others, whose "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness" is a burden and curse on their … well, "White House." The protestors of Silent Sam interpret the monument (and its removal) as a statement of who is and is not rightly welcome on UNC's campus. In summary, we can critically signify that stark distinction as a matter of exclusivism.

"The Stand in the Schoolhouse Door" and the Inclusivist Turn at the University of Alabama

Although Silent Sam's construction amounts to an exclusionary hedge of Whiteness, the assembly of memorials should not be lazily associated with impermeable social walls. Just as different signifiers can signify signs can to divergent significant ends, similar signifying tactics can be employed for opposing purposes. Whereas the University of North Carolina erected a monument in service of a White supremacist ideology over and against the rising tide of Black integration, the University of Alabama built a monument to signal their commitment to the inclusion of Black people at the expense of those who would lay claim to the University's racist past. At the steps of Foster Auditorium, the campus has replaced a shorn infamous memory of "the Stand in the Schoolhouse Door" with a "hope draped in black."

On June 11, 1963, Alabama Governor George Wallace stood on the steps of the University of Alabama's Foster Auditorium in order to obstruct the matriculation of two Black students, Vivian Malone and James Hood, who were attempting to enter the building to complete their course registration. A decade prior, the landmark U. S. Supreme Court *Brown v. Board* of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954) had abrogated the legality of "separate but equal," which had been built upon the previously mentioned *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. And in compliance with

the *Brown* decision, President John F. Kennedy used his office to execute integrationist policies. Governor Wallace rejected what he saw as federal overreach on the state's rights afforded by the tenth amendment to the U. S. Constitution. Just as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had supported the legal case of the Brown family, the NAACP sought to use Alabama's "Capstone" university as a test case of federal resolve.[39] Wallace had inaugurated his governorship upon the legacy of the Southern cause," professing "from this Cradle of the Confederacy, this very Heart of the Great Anglo-Saxon Southland" that he would defend "the greatest people that have ever trod this earth" from "tyranny."[40] Governor Wallace described his election as the launch of a new Southern campaign to find glory in the lost cause against federally mandated integration; his anthem; the metered canon "segregation now … segregation tomorrow … segregation forever."

The theater for this battle was the auditorium steps. Governor Wallace, flanked by local law enforcement, blocked the doorway. Journalists scribed and photographed the stalwart leader as he brushed off President Kennedy's Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, sent as an emissary to quell the governor's recalcitrance. Steady in his defiance, the Governor rebuffed the envoy of Katzenbach and federal marshals, pushing President Kennedy to dispatch the Alabama National Guard. Wallace's reluctant surrendered permitted Hood and Malone's enrollment.[41]

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[39] E. Culpepper Clark, *The Schoolhouse Door: Segregation's Last Stand at the University of Alabama* (New York: Oxford University Press, [1993] 1995) xviii.
[40] George C. Wallace. "The Inaugural Address of Governor George C. Wallace, Which Was Delivered at the Capitol in Montgomery, Alabama, 14 January 1963," Q20276 - Q20290—*Alabama Department of Archives and History*. http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/cdm/singleitem/collection/voices/id/2952/rec/5.
[41] "Governor George C. Wallace's Schoolhouse Door Speech." *Alabama Department of Archives of History*," 11 June 1963, http://www.archives.state.al.us/govs_list/schooldoor.html.

In 2010, the University of Alabama created the Malone Hood Plaza outside the steps of Foster Auditorium to commemorate the role of the namesakes in creating a more inclusive school. At the center of the bricked courtyard is the Autherine Lucy Clock Tower, named for a woman expelled in 1956 after three days of enrollment as the University's first African American student. Her expulsion was overturned in 1988 and received an Master of Arts in Education in 1992. James Hood had left the university two months after the standoff but returned to earn a PhD in interdisciplinary studies in 1997. Vivian Malone, however, completed her BA in business management in 1965 as the first African American graduate of the university. The University of Alabama commemorated all three figures in 2013 at the plaza and in a series of retrospective events called "Through the Doors: Courage, Change, Progress."[42]

For the scholar of religion, the pomp and circumstance now surrounding Foster Auditorium exemplifies both the malleability and rigidity of inclusive truth claims as socio-cultural expectations. The Malone Hood Plaza does not seek to erase the past. Instead it adds a strong addendum, an amendment that redirects the valence of the truth claim. The Foster Auditorium steps were renovated into a stepping stone toward the diverse future that the university wants to build for itself. But in this future, the new admission requirements are clear. The University of Alabama will accept everyone so long as they identify the wrongness of the institution's past and pledge to write a more inclusive future. But to be clear, we should remain vigilant in acknowledging the University's message as a truth-claim rather than an ontological reality. The adjudication of historical fault lines is always subject to the interpretation and needs

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[42] "The University of Alabama Through the Doors: 1996-2013," http://www.throughthedoors.ua.edu/malone-hood-plaza.html.

of the institution. In fact, as in the instance of Lebanon Valley College's Lynch Memorial Hall, pluralist truth-claims obscure the cunning politics of signifying social difference and agendas.

Pseudo-Pluralism at the Lebanon Valley College's Lynch Memorial Hall

Given D'Costa's critique of pluralism as an exclusivist truth claim in disguise, I think Religious Studies scholars would be well-served by reflecting upon a historical example that underscores truth claims as an engineering of signs rather than an excavation of significance. That is to say, our attention to the profundity or accuracy of truth claims is a matter of data collection. What these persons get "right" or "wrong" or say is "true" or "false" is informative only so longs as they help us query to whom the signifier is beholden.

This is what was on display at a small liberal arts college in a rural county in Central Pennsylvania in 2015. Like many predominantly-White institutions of higher education, the Black Lives Matter movement provoked an awareness of the racialized stratification of American colleges and universities. At Lebanon Valley College, student protesters issued a set of administrative demands that they believed would better articulate the school's commitment to all of its students, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity, ability, and most noticeably, race. Demands were typical of protests at other schools—including the diversification of the LVC's largely predominantly-White leadership (at all levels), increased staff service support for students of color and those who identify as LGBTQ+, a more accessible physical plant, and

greater diversity training for faculty and staff. What made LVC a newsworthy story at the time was a specific request to rename a campus building known as Lynch Memorial Hall.[43]

As in the protests of Silent Sam at UNC, some LVC students—presumably but not limited to African American students— felt as though the building was a hearkening to an anti-Black past. In the United States, "lynching" is a common term for mortal vigilantism targeted against a minoritized social group for purposes of punishment, intimidation, and prejudice. It most readily connotes the state's permitting of otherwise illegal violence against Black people. The students at LVC took offense to an academic building named for such a practice, complaining that it subliminally suggested to them and to others that African Americans were not welcome.

However, LVC named Lynch Memorial Hall in honor of a racist policing practice but a college president responsible for navigating the institution though the Great Depression and World War II while raising half a million dollars for new buildings. By all accounts, the building has little to no genealogical relationship to lynching, lynch mobs, or lynch laws.[44] Nevertheless, students took issue with the building's name to signify larger pluralist commitment to making all feel welcome. The question is at whose cost?

LVC and the protestors alike garnered much unwanted national media attention—with most people ridiculing this specific debate point as a politically correct farce. Students eventually

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[43] "Naming of Lebanon Valley College's Lynch Building Questioned Amid Equality Push." *Penn Live,* 8 December 2015, https://www.pennlive.com/news/2015/12/naming_of_lebanon_valley_colle.html.

[44] Associated Press, "Students Demand Building Called 'Lynch' Be Renamed Because of Racial Overtones," *NBC News 10*, 2015. December 9, https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/Pennsylvania-College-Building-Lynch-Memorial-Hall-Racial-Overtunes-Lynch-Clyde-A-Lynch-Lebanon-Valley-College-361200551.html.

revised their demand in the hope that attention might return to their more “substantive” concerns. Maintaining that the word “lynch” alone has harmful connotations, they advised the college to add Lynch’s first name and middle initial, “Clyde A.” As the college considered and obliged many of the protestors demands, the building and its name remains the same, albeit with an explanatory plaque to signify its origins. The protestors, who went by the name “Forgotten Students United,” were suspicious of this and other compromises made by the campus administration.[45] While it might be an overstatement to classify the FSU’s demands as exclusivism wearing a pluralist mask, we can register the way the students and administration wrestled over signs to signify their virtue and specific vision of an campus community. This is what pluralist truth claims may mean for the scholar of religion.

Concluding Thoughts on Studying Belief

The academic study of religion is not the pursuit of truth. It is a disposition to raise questions about truth-claims, their claimants, and the claimed. The subjects and objects on either sides of truth are the data for our historical, descriptive, and comparative work. In this paper I have argued that truth-claims provide us an opportunity for theorizing about social ordering. By signifying on the criteria of truths (cf. D’Costa), we can witness the ways statements of belief mediate in-group and out-group dynamics through their impressions of how the world is, could, and should be.

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[45] “‘Not Good Enough’: Some Lebanon Valley College Students Unsatisfied with New Equality Plan,” *Penn Live*, 21 January 2016, https://www.pennlive.com/news/2016/01/not_good_enough_some_lebanon_v.html.

For those intent on producing publicly relevant scholarship, we need to understand that our vocation is not that of Indiana Jones or Robert Langdon, saving the world from ruin. On the contrary, it is deconstructing the world and making room to observe its powerful edifices and the stratification of those surrounding them. Signifying on Alan Race's typology of epistemological difference, we can see who is excluded and included, as we have in the cases of Silent Sam, the Malone Hood Plaza, and the Lynch Memorial Hall. "Truth" can operate on the level of explanation when we signify it to trace the specter of human relationships—which are never quite as they seem. Does that task not require the work of the social theorist?

"Spooky" are the regimes that normalize our accommodation and allegiance to truth-claims while discounting those who do not fit into the paradigms already instituted. Voiced truth-claims may betray not only naivete about the other, but inevitably the lessons our teachers have taught us all to well—the truths we would not dare to question because we know better. And though such claims may be unavoidable, perhaps there is still time for us to be corrected if we have not relegated those with different answers too far into the shadows.

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