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On Boundary Hopping & 'Primitivism': Reply to Graham Harvey

'None is beyond debate'.¹

In *AASR Bulletin* 21 (May 2004), I concluded my review of four recent books on 'indigenous religions' with the following reservation:

'Harvey, as editor, clearly also pursues his own agenda. He has a partisan interest in indigenous religions and modern neo-paganism. His purpose is 'to aid and abet' dialogue with them, promote 'joyous participation' in them, and engagement with the struggle of the First Nations of the Fourth World movement. Though many of the points he makes are historically and methodologically correct, he clearly pushes the 'new primitivist' approaches which Armin Geertz criticized'.²

I should have written again that 'he clearly *also* pushes ...', for, having read many more of his publications recently, it is indeed true that 'many of the points he makes are historically and methodologically correct'. They should be taken to heart, for Harvey is therefore making valuable contributions to the ongoing methodological discussions. And I should have added references for my assertion that he has 'a partisan interest in indigenous religions and modern neo-paganism', and for the quotations. The reference for the quotations is the following:

'The intention of this Companion is *to aid and abet* the collaborative engagement in dialogue – with its central emphasis on respectful listening and *joyous participation* – that is the essence of the study of indigenous religions'.³

His 'partisan interest' is my, perhaps unkind, qualification for two pervasive traits of his publications. One is the polemical manner in which he defends, and

¹ Harvey (2002a: 6): the means by which academia has constructed both itself as subject and its object, indigenous religions, are not 'equally just or equally valuable', but 'none is beyond debate'. Cf. also Harvey 2003.

² *AASR Bulletin* 21 (May 2004): 52.

³ Harvey 2000a: IX; also Harvey 1997: VII, VIII.

identifies with, neo-paganism and indigenous religions, by collapsing the complex history of the methodology of ethnography and the anthropology of religions into a dichotomy of aggressive, abusive, exploiting, partisan colonial ethnography⁴ *versus* post-colonial dialogue of guesthood ‘beyond insider and outsider’,⁵ which he quite rightly advocates. Since several decades, however, reflection on the *emic* approach has been central in anthropology of religions: how the views and practices of believers may be accurately and respectfully translated into Western idioms intelligible to Western and global audiences and useful for further comparative and theoretical studies in (Western?) academia, itself caught in a process of rapid globalisation in this imploding world.

The other is his promotion of one recent, contested paradigm in anthropology of religions, that of the ‘anthropology of extraordinary experience’. He writes:

‘*Readings* is intended to enhance the more recent tendency towards a fuller mode of participation, [... the] celebration of indigenous or insider’s sovereignty. Academics who ‘go native’ [...] to the degree [...] that they ‘see the spirits’ can now say that they have had this experience’.⁶

‘Edith Turner’s participant-observation took a major step forward not principally when she shared her host’s experience of the reality of intrusive alien spirits [...], but even more so when she accepts and insists that it is data for reflection and discussion. Academia does need to deal with the reality of such experiences – and also, perhaps, the reality of that of which they seem to be experiencing’.⁷

‘Having stood back and tried not to be moved or involved, the study of religions [...] is beginning to find out how guests and friends relate. The old choices between objective distance and “going native” or between insider, outsider, and researcher, now seem tired’.⁸

Apart from the fact that the ‘guest’ does not become an insider, but remains an improved outsider, guest-researchers of the Edith Turner-type ‘go native’ in a manner which seems to me to conflict with a basic limitation on academic scholarship in religions, to wit that the (ontological) ‘reality’ of the meta-empirical realm postulated by believers can neither be verified nor falsified by empirical research. Nor

⁴ Harvey 2002: 5, 6

⁵ Harvey 2002: 6.

⁶ Harvey 2002a: 5.

⁷ Harvey 2002a: 8.

⁸ Harvey 2002a: 13

can that of its intra- or sub-empirical variety when they believe the meta-empirical to be manifest in, and to operate in tangible form within empirical reality.⁹

The ontology of belief-assertions is therefore out of bounds to academic affirmation or denial, the first being confessional, the second positivist. For neither the scholar who does the original research, nor his/her colleagues who test it, can conclusively prove or disprove the claims of the believers. The truth-claims of believers can empirically and historically be described only, therefore, as beliefs, as postulations, as non-verifiable/non-falsifiable assumptions, and as powerful imaginations and inspirations.¹⁰ Whereas believers and theologians may constantly hop the boundary between the empirical and the meta-empirical, scholars of religions may not.¹¹

Harvey lists Edith Turner and other anthropologists ‘of extraordinary experience’ as foundational ancestors of his approach.¹² Reading his *Listening People, Speaking Earth* (1997), I was struck how time and again his description of the various modalities of modern neo-paganism subtly drifts into affirmation. Just one example from his chapter on Druidry when he discusses the role of the Bards:

⁹ Cf. e.g. Platvoet 2004; Harvey 1997: 1, 9, 20-21, 27-28, 37-38.

¹⁰ In this respect, all beliefs in respect of the meta- or intra-empirical are perfectly equal, whether neo-pagan, indigenous, folk or elite, esoteric or mainstream, Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim or whatever. I agree with Harvey (1996: XVII, 1n2; 1997: 3) that all terms of opprobrium, such as ‘superstition’, ‘credulity’, ‘magic’, ‘witchcraft’, ‘sorcery’, ‘paganism’, ‘heresy’, etc., by which outsiders dismiss beliefs in respect of the non-empirical of insiders, should be banned from scholarship on religions. An exception, of course is, when particular groups of believers, often of a more marginal or esoteric kind, re-adopt a term such as ‘pagan’, or ‘witchcraft’, or ‘magic’, as an *emic* designation in defiance of its established pejorative denotation and connotations, usually after having significantly re-constituted its belief contents in respect of the non-empirical as Harvey (1997) amply documents. I may point out in this respect also, that we need to trace the semantic histories of the terms we use as our conceptual tools. Such histories show that the meanings of some terms have shifted from neutral and/or socially approved to biased and dismissive, and others from disapproved to approved or neutral. For examples, cf. Platvoet 1999, and Platvoet forthcoming.

¹¹ They need to stay within the empirical realm, for only assertions about that realm can be subjected to proof and disproof by testing, and/or to other instruments of scholarship for progressing towards as high a degree of objectivity as is achievable in the several fields of research. Those available for research into human mental constructs, such as constitute our cultures, societies, histories, literatures, languages, art and religions, are notoriously weak. They consist of qualitative, non-repeatable research into extremely complex and dense data by the trained intersubjectivities of scholars, who need to form a democratic community of organised scepticism by much research into research and methodological discussion in order to arrive at a modicum of objective knowledge.

¹² Harvey 2002a: 8; Harvey 2003 132.

‘The invocation of Awen [inspiration] is not only or even primarily an individual activity or experience. Most Druidic ceremonies include some form of chant both invoking and expressing Awen. The assembled group together and still themselves, gently take a deep breath and chant “Awen” or “A-I-O” in one long unbroken breath. This is usually repeated three times. Such chanting shifts the consciousness of participants. Before the chant it is possible to feel like an observer of the select few who establish the circular space in which the ceremony takes place and that there is a division between participants and observers, or, worse, clergy and laity. The chant makes everyone a participant, which is what they are meant to be from the beginning. Those who greet the four directions and mark the circle are supposed to be giving voice to what the entire company is thinking, feeling, doing, envisaging. Participating in the chant changes this from imagination or intention into experienced reality. The chant enchants; it is not only a symbol or an expression of hope that Awen will descend or rise, but an experience of inspiration. Awen flows not only into the Bard but through the Bard, around the circle and outwards, changing the world which witnesses the story or song’.¹³

This, and the joyous participation and celebration for which he repeatedly thanks his pagan hosts, seem to me to underpin the ‘reservation’ I voiced in my review in *AASR Bulletin* 21. His dialogical guest-approach is in itself fine. The assent to pagan beliefs which his descriptions regularly seem to suggest, however, suffuses in particular his book on contemporary paganism with an Eliadean, ‘primitivist’ quality, not because his object of study is neo-paganism – a very modern object of study – or indigenous religions – my own field of study –, but because he shares with Eliade and some of his other ‘foundational ancestors’ the agenda of what Eliade termed ‘creative hermeneutics’. Its aim is to represent (a) religion in such persuasive manner that it restores modern desacralized man as *homo religiosus*. Eliade charged all historians of religions to join him in that project.¹⁴ Harvey’s affinity with Eliade is apparent in his closing lines:

In the end [...], Paganism might be summed up as a poly-theophany in which the [...] Gods [...] declare an end to religious wars’.¹⁵

Does this ‘primitivist’ quality disqualify Harvey’s impressive scholarly production. Not to me! All the various modalities of scholarship in religions have their peculiar virtues and vices, whether positivist and ‘reductionist’, or religiously inspired, or agnostic on grounds of methodology. It is a main part of our duty as

¹³ Harvey 1997: 21-22.

¹⁴ Eliade 1969: [V-XI], Preface; 1-11 (‘A New Humanism’).

¹⁵ Harvey 1997: 227-228; also 82, 84: Goddess spirituality should not be decried as ‘an [escapist] obsession with a comforting Golden Age’ [which never existed], but respected as ‘an inspiration for change *now*’ [his italics], ‘a goal to aim for in the future’.

scholars of religions to discuss honestly and fairly both the qualities and defects in the work of our colleagues. That was what I attempted in my review, and have attempted again in this reply to his response. I certainly meant no insult.

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