ON DEMONIZING EXPERTISE

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Lofton, Kathryn. “A Professor of Religion in a Time of Pop Power.” *Sightings* (newsletter of the Martin Marty Center for the Public Understanding of Religion at the University of Chicago Divinity School). 5 Nov. 2020. 9 Nov. 2020. Web.

Scholarly Background

All persons develop feelings, beliefs, commitments (philosophical, political, emotional, etc.) based on all that they have experienced up to that point in their lives.

Scholars develop such personal backgrounds as much as other people. Hence, they always bring their backgrounds to the study of their subjects. For example, I may be a British citizen who is committed to my culture’s norms; but when I study ISIS, I try to be objective and not let my beliefs and commitments cloud my view of the movement.

Background Skews Knowledge

The recognition that background skews knowledge has become increasingly prevalent. It is found in Marxism, which (in addition to other assertions more crucial to its central concern, the interpretation of industrial society) affirms that underlying all interactions are relationships of power, which influence all else. It is also found in deconstruction and postmodernism.

Some assume that no one can detach from his or her background sufficiently to understand a subject objectively. Thus, a British citizen cannot objectively study ISIS because his or her beliefs and commitments, formed in a non-ISIS culture, will inevitably skew the analysis.

Objectivity Skews Knowledge

Some also think that the attempt to be objective itself skews the view of a subject. This is the idea that, in the words of Kathryn Lofton (professor of religious studies and American studies, professor of history and divinity, and dean of humanities at Yale), “distancing is itself a deception.”

Identity Claims to Culture

The fact that background skews knowledge supports a foundational assumption of identity claims to culture. That assumption is that, since no one can detach from his or her background sufficiently to understand a subject objectively, only those whose background is the culture that produced the subject should be allowed to speak concerning it: everyone else will be too biased. From this assumption flows the assertion that artifacts (material and immaterial, including knowledge) produced by one culture belong to it and are not to be appropriated by members of other cultures. Hence the designation, “identity claims to culture.”

In Favor of Objectivity

Certainly it is true that scholars cannot escape their backgrounds. It also follows that no knowledge resulting from scholarly investigation can ever be completely objective. Reminding scholars of the limitations that result from their backgrounds, therefore, can be salutary.

But I disagree that distancing is necessarily deception. From the inescapability of background, it does not follow that scholars cannot detach from their backgrounds *sufficiently* to produce true and valuable knowledge.

I also disagree with identity claims to culture. It may be that a Hindu will notice aspects or emphases in Hinduism that I, as a non-Hindu, will not. But scholars with Christian, Muslim, or Confucian backgrounds may also see aspects or emphases in Hinduism that a Hindu might not. The scrutiny of a subject to develop knowledge about it can and should be done by persons with varied backgrounds.

Again in the words of Lofton, “interpretation is a common set of practices, not a prescribed identity.” Interpretation—the scholarly enterprise—is the principles and procedures that have been developed to produce knowledge (logic being chief among them). Interpretation should not be restricted to scholars whose background culture is the culture that developed the subject.