

Although the science of religion in the nineteenth century is often critiqued and mocked today for its fixation on origins—whether such a search is grounded in a social or biological evolutionary model, evokes orientalist values of the exotic other, proffers a grand theory explaining “religion” cross-culturally, or romanticizes the *homo religiosus*—the centrality of “stories of origins” remains firmly fixed in our scholarly imagination, especially when we study cultures and texts of antiquity. This issue of the *Bulletin* looks at one prominent origin story, namely, the discovery and preservation of the fourth-century Nag Hammadi codices from the late 1940s up to the 1970s. The key “storyteller” of the find has been James M. Robinson, whose final grand telling of the discovery was published in a massive two-volume work just prior to his death (Robinson 2014a and 2014b).

Stories of origins are tantalizing tales that we use in our classrooms to entice our students to fall in love with the materials that we hold so dear. They are tales that have been passed on to us by our mentors. Stories are legacies, and legacies are not easily challenged. In recent decades there has been a flurry of “discoveries” that have stirred up our imagination. The Nag Hammadi find in Egypt—with all of the delightfully dangerous heretical texts coming to light—was second only to the Dead Sea Scrolls in public controversy. More recently, Codex Tchacos got the buzz going once more when it was first released to the public in 2006 and 2007, given the “discovery” of an apocryphal *Gospel of Judas* (though oddly the other three texts in that codex are generally ignored). Just a few years ago the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* sent the academic Internet aflame with controversy over what looked like either a modern “forgery” or a challenge to accepted—“authentic”—narratives of formative Christianity. And the *Secret Gospel of Mark* is a well-known example of possible forgery or discovery (see especially Burke 2013).

But origin stories of ancient texts often focus on the modern discovery of those texts. And such origin stories of texts can be enchanting for our imaginations, such as the 1886-87 discovery of the Akhmim fragment of the *Gospel of Peter*, supposedly in a

monk’s grave: a discovery that sent scholars of that generation into a frenzy of activity. Sometimes these stories are fantastical, centered on exotic details of blood feuds, murder, black market deals, shadowy figures, destruction of ancient materials by “primitive” locals, and intense detective work by the Euro-American scholar, such as Robinson, to “save” these ancient treasures for posterity. Thus, these treasures are transformed into *our* heritage, safely secured from the exotic yet uncivilized people currently occupying these ancient lands. Even in bringing such treasures to the academic public, the stories are better than any dime novel (and here the Berlin Codex comes readily to mind). These are academic detective stories that we love to read alongside our Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. But unlike the famed detective of 221B Baker Street, London, our academic detectives are real, and their tales are accepted by many as fact. In a way, that aspect of reality makes them all the more worthwhile for our consumption.

Such origin stories of antiquities, however, are no less mirrors than the various anthropological origin stories of Müller, Tyler, or Frazer. Like the Victorian anthropologists, we treat our origin stories as *windows* into ancient worlds, into the life experiences of once living people, and into the broader cultural forces that we are so fixated on. And perhaps, at some level, that is what they are: windows into the past. But they are also *mirrors* for the present. They refract and reflect our own discourses, our modern concerns, debates, and self-authorizing worldviews. When we look into our mirrors, we typically see distorted aspects of ourselves embedded within our narratives, often because we fail to see that they are *our* narratives. Often the stories of antiquarian discoveries evoke persistent colonial and orientaling attitudes that we in the “West” continue to internalize (even if unconsciously). In this sense, David Chidester’s comment on Müller is apt:

Müller knew that those raw materials had to be *extracted* from the colonies, *transported* to the metropolitan centers of theory production, and *transformed* into manufactured goods of theory

that could be *used* by an imperial comparative religion. (Chidester 2000, 431 emphasis added)

It is this very process of extraction, transportation, transformation, and utilization that is served by such origin stories, such as what we see with Nag Hammadi. And the persuasive force of story should not be overlooked. Stories contain, normalize, and perpetuate such processes while obscuring their very presence. Even the storytellers may not be (fully) aware of these processes. And there may even be facts underlying those very narratives. They, like any story, may be true, they may be windows—but they are also mirrors that we, as both storyteller and listener, gaze into believing that we are at the window. In the end, we may see our origin stories telling us more about modern scholarship than ancient cultures and textual productions.

This issue of the *Bulletin* centers on two significant articles that have challenged the “authentic” tale of the Nag Hammadi discovery. Mark Goodacre (2013) and Nicola Denzey Lewis and Justine Ariel Blount (2014) have raised serious questions about the widely accepted account of the Nag Hammadi discovery. Denzey Lewis and Blount, in particular, have offered an alternative tale for us to hear, one that strives to move away from orientalist discourses of the exotic savage and the civilized scholar. It remains another tale, another mirror perhaps. But it is also an invitation to continue to weave stories, while challenging underlying presuppositions of such stories. Contributors were invited to respond to these two seminal articles, to respond to these works in constructive and critical ways, yet also to extend our discussion beyond just Nag Hammadi. Following the reactions by Dylan Burns, Brent Nongri, Eva Mroczek, Tony Burke, and Paul-Hubert Poirier we are pleased to include a response from Denzey Lewis. Both Goodacre and Blount declined our invitation to also write responses, though Goodacre was pleased to see the conversation being extended beyond the initial two articles. In facilitating this conversation within the pages of the *Bulletin*, it is my hope that scholars of the academic study of religion will take this conversation as an entry point into exploring the mirrors and windows that we—as scholars—internalize in

our treatment of our sources, be those textual, material, or ethnographical data sets.

Beyond our main set of articles, we are also pleased to include a “Tips for Teaching” piece by Justin Tse on guest lecturing as a mode of conversation with students. Justin’s reflection arose from two guest lectures he recently gave on geography of religion theory, one being in my own theories course. We are also pleased to publish an interview with Donovan Schaefer on his recent and provocative book, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (2015), a book where he applies affect theory to the study of religion and thereby raises several major theoretical challenges in how we study religious phenomena. I wish to express my appreciation to my associate editors, Nathan Rein and Matt Sheedy, for such a fascinating discussion with Donovan’s work on affect theory.

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