

**Signs of Life:
Critical Thinking Beyond Critique
in Religious Studies and the Humanities**

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I. “I have to begin with this”

Ever since Religious Studies emerged as a distinct area of inquiry in the 1960’s and 1970’s, scholars in the field have worried about its academic legitimacy. To put it a bit simplistically, they’ve worried about what constitutes the difference between teaching religion and teaching about religion. Debates over this issue have been fierce. The book I published last year explores some of the recent versions of these debates and argues that efforts to tie the field’s academic legitimacy to conceptions of the critical, as in the critical study of religion, fail because advocates of this position are far too narrow in their understanding of what it is to think critically. I’ve continued to work on this question since the book was published and I want to share some of this work with you here. I’ll first offer a brief introduction to my field and explain why studying religion demands critical thinking beyond critique; then I’ll discuss the limits of critique in the context of the Humanities and why we humanists, as scholars and teachers, need a more constructive sense of humanistic criticism; finally, I’ll suggest that Religious Studies might be of help in this effort.

In the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, Rowan Williams, shortly to become Archbishop of Canterbury, published a brief meditation on grief entitled *Writing in the Dust*. Williams had experienced the destruction and the dust at first hand, having been near the World Trade Center when the planes hit. He opens the book by invoking the “last messages” from passengers on Flight 93: simple words of farewell and love sent by cell phones to friends and family. And he contrasts these words to the words of “spiritual advice” found in documents left behind by the terrorists. The passengers’ “nonreligious words” he writes, “are testimony to what religious language is supposed to be about—the triumph of

pointless, gratuitous love, the affirming of faithfulness even when there is nothing to be done or salvaged.”¹ From there, he moves to grapple with the words he will use, as a Christian, to respond to these horrific events. He moves very deliberately. I’ll quote him at length.

Simone Weil said that the danger of imagination was that it filled up the void when what we need is to learn how to live in the presence of the void. The more closely we bind God to our own purposes, use God to help ourselves avoid our own destructiveness, the more we fill up the void. It becomes very important to know how to use the language of belief; which is why the terrible simplicity of those last messages matters so intensely. And why also we have to tread so carefully in not making some sort of religious capital out of them. Ultimately, the importance of these ‘secular’ words has to stand as a challenge to anything comfortingly religious we might be tempted to say. This is what human beings can find to say in the face of death, religion or no religion. This is what truly makes breathing space for others. Words like ‘transcendent’ hang around uneasily in the background of my mind. Careful again. But that moment of pointless loving communication is the best glimpse many of us will have of what the rather solemn and pompous word means. I have to begin with this. I know I shall be feeling my way towards making some verbal shape out of it all in terms of my Christian faith. But there is nowhere else to start except with that frightening contrast: the murderously spiritual and the compassionately secular.²

Williams comes to his “religious” words only in the shadow of the “murderously spiritual,” that is, the religious violence that was the occasion of his reflections. And the words he does come to are words “written in the dust”—Williams compares them to those sand mandalas made by Tibetan monks that, after the festivals for which they are made, are swept away. Williams’s words slip away, releasing themselves, and us, into the midst of grief and so into the midst of life.

Mark Taylor, a scholar with a keen eye for seeing religion at work in the most unexpected of places, claims that “religion is about what is always slipping away.”³ It is, in other words, about the fact that as we pursue and try to articulate and grasp the things that most matter to us—whether “God,” “meaning,” “value,” “identity,” “love,”—they

¹ Rowan Williams, *Writing in the Dust: After September 11* (Wm. B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2002) 3.

² *Ibid.* 11-12.

³ Mark C. Taylor, *About Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999) 1.

elude us. They don't slip away because we are not going after them correctly, but because in some sense their power and their elusiveness are intimately connected. We can observe numerous kinds of slippage in Williams's meditation: between one's own purposes and God's, between self-aggrandizement and self-effacement, between self and other, between the "religious" and the "secular." What strikes me is the way Williams acknowledges and accepts this slippage. He worries about capitalizing on the words and on the tragedies of others, yet he neither mourns nor defends the purity of his own intentions. Rather, he practices a kind of self-effacement in his writing. In the counsel to allow the void its "presence" and in his hesitation before the word *transcendence*, he absolves the reader of an expected, obligatory response. To my mind, what makes *Writing in the Dust* powerful and exemplary of a basic Christian and—if we follow Taylor—religious, gesture, is that he does not try to halt, explain, or apply too much friction to this slippage. In this, I think, his words manifest Taylor's claim that, since religion is about that which slips away, it is impossible to grasp what religion is about "unless, perhaps, what we grasp is the impossibility of grasping."⁴

Now, before I go all mystical on you, I'll stop here to give voice to an objection. Against the notion of religion as the impossibility of grasping, many will argue that religion is all about grasping, even more, that in its claims to the Divine or the Truth religion is the *most* grasping of human endeavors. This, I think we should admit, is also true: if we consider the wide range of human religious behavior through history, there is little question that religion is never just or even primarily about what slips away. Rather, it is about normative claims, practices, and powerful social institutions that justify themselves and often seek to impose their particular visions on others by claiming divine, that is to say, absolute authority. When I ask my students to define religion, many of them will often point to the ineffability of religion, to the impossibility of pinning it down because it's so elusive or—their favorite word—so "personal." But on some level, at least, this is wrong. It is not so hard to define religion if we look at its social and material effects, the way it grasps the world with classifications and prescriptions that, because they are "sacred," brook no question or dissent.

⁴ Ibid..

What does this mean for those of us who study religion? Most immediately, given my starting point tonight, we should acknowledge that neither Williams nor Taylor somehow captures the “essence” of religion and, further, we should recognize that Williams is no more a “real” Christian, or “really” religious than any number of contemporary “fundamentalists” or “militants.” As Williams himself recognizes in the opening pages of *Writing in the Dust*, he is responding to terrible *religious* violence, violence the likes of which, as we know, religious people of all sorts have visited on those they call heretics, apostates, or unbelievers. To my mind, both the attacks of September 11 and the abhorrent response to these attacks by Christians such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell are as much real religion as Williams’s powerful and admirable words.

More generally, this means that scholars of religion are not in the business of distinguishing between real, true or genuine religion and fake or false religion. Our job, instead, is to study all types of religious phenomena, whether peaceful or violent, wise or not-so-wise, spiritual or material. And we have to do this as academics, that is as scholars who study religion critically. Which is to say that, although it is always crucial to understand what religious people think and feel about their religious lives, we scholars can’t be bound by these “insider” perspectives. For the insider, the faithful, religion is all about what is holy and pure, about that to which they defer and before which they bow down. But the academic scholar of religion needs to think about how this all works, about the worldly causes and effects of religion, about, for instance, the power that accrues to those people who successfully claim to speak for the divine. Religion makes sacred; we scholars, thinking critically, make religion profane.

Over the past few decades, this profane approach to religion has taught us a lot. Employing the critical theories and tools that have changed the face of the humanities and social sciences since the 1970’s, we have learned how Christian paradigms of religion have distorted efforts to understand other religious traditions; we have learned to study popular and lived forms of religion beyond the elite, textual, usually male representations of religious traditions; and we have learned more about how religious power works in and

on societies, minds, and bodies, often in ways that are marginalizing, oppressive, and violent, often in ways that disguise the very operations of this power.

Accordingly, my colleagues and I in the department here at Grinnell believe that one of our primary tasks is to teach our students the basic distinction between studying religion in an academic setting and studying religion religiously. Yet, when I opened my book, and this lecture, with Rowan Williams, a theologian and, until recently, one of the world's most powerful and influential religious leaders, I ceded some authority for thinking about religion to a religious thinker, a move that crosses a boundary that many scholars of religion go to great lengths to police. I did so because, in my view, when pushed too far, the distinction between the secular, academic study of religion and the religious study of religion becomes extremely elusive and leads us to lose sight of important matters and subtle distinctions. More specifically, critical scholars of religion who police this boundary too often ignore the various critical resources within religious traditions that serve to counter the most grasping and absolutizing elements of religion, the way Williams, for instance, invokes the secular words from the passengers of Flight 93 to criticize the “murderously spiritual.” In my view, these critical scholars have deployed the distinction between the “secular” and the “religious” and therefore the concept “academic,” too uncritically. This has begun to change over the past decade as the very concept of the secular has come under critical scrutiny: religious revivals around the world have led scholars to question the secularization thesis and historians and others have argued that the very concepts of the religious and the secular have been mutually constitutive and even that the concept of the secular is deeply Christian. Yet, the field is still dominated by a critical attitude grounded in the secular suspicion of religion. It is my view that when we try too hard to escape the ideological constraints of religious discourse, we find ourselves bound up in a different ideology that I will call “secularist.”

What do I mean by *secularist*? In general terms, I refer to an academic, social and political ideology grounded in a narrative of enlightenment and progress that ties religion unalterably to premodern exclusivism, authoritarianism, blind faith, and heteronomy and the secular to tolerance, democracy, critical reason, and autonomy. More specifically,

with the word *secularist*, I refer to an academic stance with respect to religion that is grounded in a binary opposition between the secular and the religious supported and elaborated by other oppositions such as tradition/modernity, public/private, and most importantly for what I'm arguing here: the critical and the non-critical. Let me cite two scholars of religion who express this secularist position in programmatic and influential statements on how to study religion. First, Bruce Lincoln, in a 1996 article entitled "Theses on Method," distinguishes religious discourse from historical discourse and, by extension, academic discourse more generally. Religion, he writes, "speaks of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal." The historian, by contrast "speaks of things temporal and terrestrial in a human and fallible voice, while staking its claims to authority on rigorous critical practice."⁵ And Willi Braun, co-editor to *The Guide to the Study of Religion*, contrasts the "uncensored curiosity" of the critical study of religion to the "confessional and apologetic requirements of religious bodies."⁶

What I'll emphasize here is that both Lincoln and Braun construct the boundary between the secular and the religious with the claim that secular, academic discourse is rigorously critical and religious discourse is non- or insufficiently critical. On one side, they place critical scholars uncensored and unconstrained by religious or other kinds of piety and therefore able to study religion in critically responsible way. On the other side, they place religious thinkers whose faith and piety prevents them from asking hard questions and who seek to detach religion from history and society with concepts such as "eternity" and "transcendence." But they also place on this religious, non-critical side scholars of religion such as Mircea Eliade, one of the founders of Religious Studies as a field, that they consider to be not critical or profane enough in their treatment of religion. For Lincoln, Braun and others, such scholars function as apologists for religion or worse, as

⁵ Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on Method" (*Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8, no. 225 [1996]) 225.

⁶ Willi Braun, "Religion" (*Guide to the Study of Religion*. W. Braun and R. McCutcheon, eds. London: Cassell, 2000) 7.

quasi-theologians. One handy way of making this distinction has been to call the first, the legitimate academics, the critics of religion and the second mere caretakers of religion.⁷

In my view, for all the emphasis these secularist scholars place on critical practice, they are not critical enough, in at least three respects. First, they tend not to acknowledge, much less think carefully about religious forms of criticism. Second, they generally fail to account for the normative and historically contestable claims they make about what counts as secular and academic. Third, and to move to my main point, they are too caught up in “critique” and therefore fail to consider more expansive and nuanced views of what it is to think critically.

The word *critique* is used in many different ways and it has a complicated history, so I should explain how I am using it. For Immanuel Kant, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the word refers to a philosophical project of determining the conditions of possibility for experience and knowledge. Given our experience of the world, Kant asks, how must the human mind be structured so that it can know objects in the world? In answer to this question, he pointed to universal structures of reason. Many philosophers and cultural critics of the 19th century, however, saw things differently. In Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—sometimes referred to as the masters of suspicion—reason itself, as well as our fundamental values, ideals, and social arrangements were explained not primarily in terms of the structure of reason, but in terms of historical, material, and psychological mechanisms that are hidden from view by operations of power and desire. From this perspective—and it is a perspective that has informed various critical theories from the Frankfurt school to contemporary social constructionisms—critique becomes a process of unmasking these conditions and operations. So, to take the example of religion, critique shows how the objects and practices of religious devotion are, in Nietzsche’s words, only human, all too human. That is, they are projections of the interests of particular social groups by which those groups construct social reality and exert power over others. Of course, the object of this kind of critical procedure does not have to be religion. Deployed

⁷ This distinction has been made well known by Russell McCutcheon. See *Critics Not Caretakers: Redefining the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001)

in the context of gender studies, cultural studies, science studies and other fields of inquiry, critique identifies the social and historical conditions and exposes the interests and the powers by which we construct our meanings, values, identities and even facts. The task of the critic, from this perspective, is to show that when we appeal to such meanings, values, identities or facts as reasons for acting in a particular way we are under the sway of ideology—which is to say that the objects of our devotion or commitment are really just socially authorized projections of wishes and interests that we refuse to acknowledge. The cause of such projections goes by different names, depending on the theory being deployed, but include “material forces of production,” “unconscious desire,” “society,” “discourse” “habitus” and others.

I want to emphasize that critique so defined does have a crucial role to play in Religious Studies. Religion does often serve the interests of the powerful; it does often function ideologically. Yet in my field there has been a strong tendency to have critique stand in for the critical study of religion more generally and to have it serve as a kind of rallying point for scholars attempting to legitimize Religious Studies by appealing to what they think the academy demands. This emphasis on critique ends up reducing religion to a discourse of what scholars in the field refer to as “social formation.” Thus Russell McCutcheon, co-editor with Willi Braun of the *Guide to the Study of Religion*, defends “a thoroughly social theory of religion [that] posits individual actors’ intentions, plans, and organizations not as causes of but as artifacts that result from social formation.”⁸ In other words, for social formation theorists religious experience, belief, or feeling are not useful explanatory categories because they obscure the real, that is the social causes of human behavior. Hence, the human subject becomes but a function of his or her social and historical context, an “artifact”: all our thoughts, feelings, and actions—including those we call “religious”—can be explained as always the effect but never the cause of historical change and religious behavior. As Kevin Schilbrack puts it, this renders the individual as “merely the internal echo of social discourse, merely a reflection of

⁸ Russell McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001) 27.

ideology.”⁹ Or, more polemically, we have this from philosopher and sociologist of science Bruno Latour: under the name of critique, critics “debunk objects they don’t believe in by showing the productive and projective forces of people; then, without ever making the connection, they use objects they do believe in to resort to the causalist or mechanist explanation and debunk conscious capacities of people whose behavior they don’t approve of.”¹⁰

The reductionisms of critique and social formation theory are not just a problem in my field, but have been noted by observers of other fields in the Humanities. Thus, Amanda Anderson points to what she describes as a “sociological reductionism” that emerges from an alliance between the politics of identity and the poststructuralist critique of reason. This reductionism, she argues, limits our understanding of individual agency and makes it difficult to explore shared forms of rationality. So we need to consider how we can better explore the way that individuals “cultivate habits, dispositions, and attitudes that can in no simple way be attributed to any easily identifiable and limiting determination” by history or society.¹¹ Terry Eagleton, one of our most well-known theorists of ideology, has questioned the dominance of the hermeneutics of suspicion in literary criticism—as he himself had practiced it at one point in earlier work—and has contrasted it with what he calls a “redemptive hermeneutic” as practiced by Walter Benjamin and Bertold Brecht. Along these lines, he has taken to task cultural critics such as Marx and Frederic Jameson for a materialism that too easily reduces morality to ideology and he argues for forms of moral criticism that explore “the texture and quality of human behavior as richly and sensitively” as possible.¹²

In addition to criticizing these reductionisms, Anderson and Eagleton also argue that champions of critique often fail to acknowledge and explore the normative underpinnings of their own critical programs. Literary critic Michael Warner makes this point in a

⁹ Kevin Schilbrack, “Bruce Lincoln’s Philosophy,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 17.1 (January 2005): 6.

¹⁰ Bruno Latour, “Why has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern (*Critical Inquiry* 30, Winter 2004) 240-1.

¹¹ Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) 6.

¹² Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 143.

particularly effective way. He argues that when we practice and teach critique we are not simply passing down a useful skill, but are modeling and helping to propagate a host of assumptions, values, and ideals that together entail, in his words, an “elaborate discipline of subjectivity.” He thus agrees with anthropologist Saba Mahmood that “the standard of the critical. . .could and should be parochialized. . . as an ethical discipline of subjectivity rather than as the transparent medium of knowledge.”¹³

Arguments such as these lead me to ask whether critique tends to explain away some of the phenomena at the heart religious life, and life more generally, such as the moral, creative life of human agents. Which, in my view, is also to say that critique tends to explain away some the very stuff humanistic inquiry. If this is the case, don’t we need to be working to identify forms of critical thinking that are more humanistic? I turn to this issue in the next section of the lecture.

II. The Humanities and Constructive Criticism

As an epigraph to his *The Discipline of Religion*, Russell McCutcheon appends the following passage from Michel Foucault:

Criticism is a matter of flushing out. . .thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that which is accepted as self-evident will no longer be seen as such. Practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult. . . . As soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult and quite possible.¹⁴

I share McCutcheon’s admiration for this vision of criticism, but I’ll note that he appends this passage to a book about transforming the way we study religion to make it more critical, more legitimate, more like ideology critique. However, Foucault, as I read him, is

¹³ Michael Warner, “Uncritical Reading” in *Polemic*, Jane Gallop, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004) 18.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, as quoted by Russell McCutcheon, *The Discipline of Religion*, New York: Routledge 2003), vi.

much is less interested in transforming any given academic discipline than in criticism that enlivens us, criticism that transforms life. He puts this more clearly in another passage: “I can’t help but dream about a criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life. . .it would multiply not judgments but signs of life.”¹⁵

Critique, as I have defined it here and as McCutcheon and others deploy it to expose religious commitments as “ideology,” certainly can enliven, at least in contexts in which it enables resistance to stultifying modes of thought and oppressive norms or in contexts in which it opens up encounters with difference. But the relentless exposure of ideology and the reduction of everything to social formation is itself stultifying. When every norm and every way of life is explained in terms of interest and power, and when criticism is understood to be primarily a matter of distancing oneself from one’s meanings, values, and commitments, it becomes exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, to think about how to live as a moral agent and how to embrace a way of life. However, if we understand criticism deployed in the service of fundamental commitments, or if we agree with Michael Warner and Saba Mahmood that critical thinking is itself constitutive of a particular normative discipline of subjectivity, as itself a way of life, then things get complicated. I’ll suggest that in cases like these, we need to think more deeply about criticism that works in and through, as opposed to or distanced from, our fundamental attachments and commitments and forms of life. Criticism that multiplies signs of life can never simply be “transgressive” or “oppositional” but also has to be affirmative and constructive.

I’ll come at this from another angle. Grinnell’s mission statement makes two basic claims about the pursuit of knowledge: we value the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and we value it for what it, through our students, can contribute to the common good. And I trust we all agree that critical thinking is central to our pursuit of these goals. Our mission statement is a normative document and to the extent that we succeed in realizing our

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, “The Masked Philosopher,” *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, (New York: New Press, 1997) 323.

mission we are contributing to the formation of our students as subjects and moral agents. What kinds of thinking, what kinds of practice, what forms of intellectual, moral, and even spiritual discipline enable us and our students to think critically with respect to the common good? There is probably a wide range of answers to this question, especially given the fact that critical thinking is taught across the curriculum and so takes many different forms. Here, though, I want to focus on critical thinking in the Humanities (And I should say, as I do so, that for me the Humanities are not confined to the disciplines and departments we happen to include in our own Humanities division here at Grinnell.) My point is this: we in the Humanities need to move beyond critique to an expansive vision of critical thinking that includes the kinds critical work of attention, discernment, and decision by which we cultivate our attachments to the world and to each other.

Two definitions of the humanities have helped me think through these issues. The first comes from the philosopher Lorenzo Simpson: he writes that “the importance of the humanities in our civic culture is due to their revealing, as no other disciplines can, the full measure of worlds and epochs that are orthogonal to ours, worlds that represent differences from which we can learn and that provide a perspective from which our own strangeness can come into view, enabling a more reflective and critical awareness of who we are.”¹⁶ The second comes from the literary critic Helen Small and her recent book *The Value of the Humanities*. For Small, “the humanities study the meaning-making practices of human culture, past and present, focusing on interpretation and critical evaluation, primarily in terms of the individual response and with an ineliminable element of subjectivity.”¹⁷

Not only are both, in my view, excellent definitions, they also compliment one another nicely. Both make the basic, and I hope uncontroversial, claim that the humanities study “worlds” and “cultures” of meaning making. Further, and as I read them together, they offer a view of humanistic engagement with the cultures and the stuff of cultures structured by a dynamic interplay of self-interrogation and responsive engagement.

¹⁶ Lorenzo Simpson, *The Unfinished Project* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 139.

¹⁷ Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 23.

Simpson focuses on the former, on encounters that force one to question what has seemed natural and obvious, not just for the sake of understanding other worlds and epochs better, but also for the sake of self-awareness that enables one to live differently in one's own place and time. Small emphasizes what I am calling responsive engagement: that is, humanists don't just study meaning and culture as neutral observers, but respond to their objects of study with something of themselves, putting themselves back into their culture by responding out of their own values and commitments even as these may be transformed in the process.

I am arguing, then, that humanistic scholarship works on the boundaries between academy, culture, and self. We humanists interpret cultures and meanings, seeking to understand how human beings in different times and places create forms of life that enables them to endure and even flourish. But we don't just observe culture, we engage and work with it and on it: we don't just study what human beings are or have been like, we also reflect on how this knowledge of people in different times and places is relevant for the ways we imagine and live our lives here and now; in recalling or naming the past, we inherit it and, in doing so, come to inhabit the present and move toward the future. Humanistic scholarship is wide-ranging and involves many different kinds of tasks, but I think that one of our most crucial tasks is to sound and test the cultures of which we are a part. Stanley Cavell calls this work philosophy—I'll call it criticism. The task, Cavell writes, is to:

bring my own language and life into imagination. What I require is a convening of my culture's criteria, in order to confront them with my words and life as I pursue them and as I may imagine them: and at the same time to confront my words and life as I pursue them with the life my culture's words may imagine for me; to confront the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in me."¹⁸

If we as humanists identify and reflect on the things that most matter in peoples' lives and, further, if we respond to this mattering by refiguring and reenergizing—Cavell calls it “resuscitating”—what matters most to us, then this is something we need to teach our students. In other words, we should help them form the dispositions and critical skills by which they will be able to think critically about what matters most to them. This does

¹⁸ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) 125.

involve the ability to take critical distance from oneself but it also requires that one knows how to close that distance and re-affirm what matters.

III. Back to RS

To sum up: I've argued that critique, as I've defined it here, is not the only option for critical thinking in the humanities, indeed that when critique dominates we are in danger of losing what is most important about the Humanities, in particular careful attention to the human, moral agent in excess of social determination. I've also argued that especially in the Humanities, critical thinking entails a process of self-transformation by which one works in and through one's fundamental attachments. In this final section of the lecture, I'll develop this last point a bit further.

I began my talk tonight expressing thanks for the opportunity to give this lecture. As academics, all of us have participated in and witnessed this ritual many times. As with all rituals, sometimes thanks is given with enthusiasm and eloquence, sometimes it seems pretty rote. But giving thanks is much more than a ritualistic gesture, it is, I would argue, a critical practice. This is an idea I've been working on since the book was published, though to this point only in fits and starts. But its origins are much earlier. I grew up in a very secular family and my one real exposure to religion was when I would go visit my grandparents on my dad's side. For me and my siblings, they were the "fun" grandparents because they always came up with cool things to do. They also happened to be Christian Scientists, which, to be honest, wasn't so much fun. For one, it meant that we didn't want to catch a cold or get a headache when we were there because we knew the remedy would be prayer, not chicken soup or aspirin. They also made us go to Sunday school, which we didn't like because we didn't know any of the other kids and we had to spend part of Saturday night going over the bible lesson with my grandmother. Then there was nightly ritual of "being grateful." At least until I was 10 or 11, when my grandmother would come to say goodnight, she would sit on the side of the bed and say "Now Tyler, what are you grateful for today?" Knowing this was coming every night during our visits made me anxious: I had to come up with something and I had to sound sincere. The first

night of our visits wasn't so bad: "I am grateful I get to visit you and grandpa." But after that it got tougher.

But for all the anxiety it caused when I was a kid, and although I wouldn't say that I'm particularly good at the whole gratitude thing even now, something of my grandmother's efforts have stayed with me, sort of like one of those angels that sits on your shoulder whispering in your ear. She was a very smart and very soulful woman, and I am sure she knew that for me, as a typical child growing up in privileged but spiritually adrift circumstances, gratitude was a rather alien feeling. So I suspect that she was not too interested in how I happened to feel on any given day, but rather more interested in teaching me how to be grateful. In other words, she wanted to initiate me into a practice of attention and discernment, to teach me to see the world and my life as something I would find reasons to be thankful for.

I want to say that she was teaching me a form of critical thinking. Gratitude, as I understand it, is a form of attachment to the world and one's life, an affirmation of connection and dependence. But it is much more than a simple feeling: my grandmother was trying to help me develop a disposition and the analytic and reflective skills by which I could uncover connections and dependencies in my everyday life that might not always be obvious—she was teaching me to see these connections and dependencies, teaching me to distinguish them from other things going on in my life, and teaching me to assent to them in a way that would enliven and transform my connections with the world and with others.

Now, gratitude is not necessarily a religious disposition or practice. Indeed, the last chapter in my book focuses on what Stanley Cavell calls "criticism as a conduct of gratitude." But I want to conclude by suggesting that we as academics and critical thinkers can learn something from religious treatments of gratitude as a critical practice. In fact, I'd say that Religious Studies more generally has something valuable to teach the Humanities about thinking critically through and with our attachments and commitments. This claim shouldn't be too surprising. We find in many religious traditions centuries of

extremely sophisticated thinking not only about ultimate reality and transcendence but also about human psychology and the connection between mind and body and we can see that such thinking has informed and been informed by equally sophisticated forms of spiritual discipline. As one example, I will return to Rowan Williams.

One of the things we learn when we study Christian thought, an area central to my own scholarship, is that a lot of it is grounded in the claim that we are fundamentally dependent beings, ultimately dependent on God, of course, but also on each other and on the world God has created. As discourse about God, Christian theology is fundamentally discourse about that force or process that sustains human beings, about how people acknowledge and affirm that sustenance, and about how they act out of trust or faith in it. So in a very basic sense, Christian theology is a discourse of gratitude, a discourse, that is, emerging from the trust that everything we are and everything that matters to us is given to us as a gift. To sound a brief political note, in Williams's view, Christians don't get to go around saying "I built that." Instead, life comes ultimately from God's absolute generosity, a gift Williams invokes, to return to the beginning of the lecture, when he writes of "pointless, gratuitous love."

There are clearly all sorts of critical questions we could pose to Williams at this point. But I'll put those aside to suggest that when someone like Williams pulls together the concepts dependence, gratitude, gift, and God, he generates a faithful yet critical intensity by which he is able to distinguish unhealthy from life-giving forms of dependence. Williams, I would argue, sees in the practice of gratitude, in receiving and responding to God's gift, a critical process that is in some respects as incisive and as revealing as the most hardcore secular critique. To make this point, Williams argues that all theology is ultimately grounded in contemplative prayer, the focused practice of making room for God's presence at the center of the self. For Williams, this entails "a deeper appropriation of the vulnerability of the self in the midst of the language and transactions of the world"; it is a process by which, as one grapples with the difficulty of quieting the self, one "identifies the real damaging pathologies of human life, our violent obsessions with privilege, control and achievement as arising from the refusal to know and love oneself as

a creature, a body.”¹⁹ In the effort to turn to God in prayer, in other words, the contemplative struggles with the many ways that she is caught up in worldly power and in the need to grasp God for her own purposes. Or, to put it in classic Protestant terms, the contemplative confesses and confronts, in a particularly intense way, ways in which he is caught up in the effort of self-justification and self-aggrandizement instead of turning to God’s grace. Put more positively, contemplation, and theology too, is a turning to God that is also a turning to oneself to inquire into what it is that one loves, that asks why one loves those things and whether they are worthy of one’s love and, if so, whether one is worthy of them. It is a critical practice by which one explores, questions, and comes to understand all one’s loves.

Again, we are back to the passage from Williams I read at the beginning of the lecture and all the different ways we use God to grasp the world and exert power over others for our own ends. This is why, as we saw, Williams’s writing is full of references to and exemplifications of the difficulties of theological speech: references to silence, stammering, the void, the dangers of self-aggrandizement that so closely shadow all theological—and all human—endeavors. And so we also are back to the idea that religion is about that which slips away. But it doesn’t slip away without a trace, for the real sign of God is “pointless gratuitous love.” This is what Williams wants us to focus on, even though, in the example he gives us, it comes in the form of “secular words.” God, he is telling us, is in these words. From this perspective, the practice of gratitude is the practice of becoming attuned to the world and to other people in such a way that you can identify this love when it is present and so to share it and share in it. Which is to say that we find God not in grasping, but in giving and in being given to.

To many ears, this will sound far too nice and easy, but the point is that coming to be attuned in this way takes work, takes thought and practice, takes, at least for Williams, a willingness and ability to confront life at its worst and be able to look beyond and through that to find God. Critical thinking is always a matter of looking carefully at and also beneath the surface of things. But where practitioners of critique generally find self-

¹⁹ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000) 12.

interested power beneath it all, Williams finds pointless, gratuitous love. Is one less critical than the other? Is one more credulous than the other? If, as I do, you find that there is not an obvious answer to these questions, then you might want to ask what we—as academics and teachers—can learn from someone like Williams and how, accordingly, we might reorient our critical thinking.