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Aaron J. Bonham is an interdisciplinary PhD student in religious studies and sociology at University of Missouri, Kansas City. He has recently completed the coursework in his disciplines and is preparing for comprehensive exams. His research interests include Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian movements, the history of discourses about science and religion as parallel phenomena, and the cultural effects of Modernity.

Since I began graduate work in religious studies, some of the more challenging conversations I've had are the ones where I attempt to explain what I do as a religious studies scholar to family, friends, coworkers, baristas, or the various others I encounter who ask me what I'm studying. Don't get me wrong; it's not as if I don't enjoy talking about what I do and it's rare that I'm at a loss for words when someone does ask me. Where the challenge lies, for me, is in graciously fielding some of the typical questions that I encounter in response to my disclosure. Two of the more common questions include, "So, you want to be a minister?" and, "What religion are you?"

For the first question, my ready answer is "No," but this is usually accompanied by a follow-up question along the lines of, "Then why study religion?" Seems simple enough, but it turns out this is one of those questions that can turn polite conversation into contentious discourse. Usually, I end up clumsily trying to explain that I find religion interesting on a number of levels and that I really think that by studying religion we can learn something about people, then offering a shoulder shrug as if to imply that I recognize these rationales are probably not sufficient in the eyes of the person asking the question. After all, those don't seem like the types of reasons that have anything to do with transferable 'job skills' or earning a great salary.

In response to the second question, regarding my 'religion,' I usually offer — after some hemming and hawing — a response along the lines of, "Well, I grew up as an

Evangelical/Pentecostal Christian, but I'm not sure that is an adequate description of me now." Which is, of course, true; but it doesn't really answer the question either, at least not in the definitive terms that a person asking that question must be expecting. Perhaps this is my own passive-aggressive attempt to resist placement into categories that I, as a scholar, find less certain than we, scholars and non-scholars alike, like to imagine. Or, maybe I'm just reluctant to explicitly abandon the idea that I'm somehow still connected to family and friends through the faith of my youth, even if, according to the standards of the faith of my youth, I would no longer qualify for eternal salvation. Either way, the open-endedness of my response is usually taken to imply that I'm "seeking," and have not yet found, a genuine experience of God, or that I'm simply waffling out of negligence to consider the "truth" as others see it.

For each of these questions, the hesitancy of my responses probably has at least something to do with a tension between my desire to not offend my interlocutors' sensibilities pertaining to reality and truth and the scholarly necessity of denying preference to some (religious) truth claims over others. So, rather than tell them that, for me, the ideas that they hold as sacred truth are no less sacred (or valid) than any other person's sacredly-held ideas, I err on the side of sensitivity to the fact that they do hold some ideas as sacred truth by implying that they may indeed be true. I may also be trying to avoid confrontational conversations with people who think that the implied pluralism of my chosen discipline is 'dangerous' from the perspective of the normative values of the Judeo-Christian culture that I'm embedded in. This perceived danger has been communicated with particular urgency by a number of people in the Evangelical Christian milieu from which I originated.

The fact is, much as I try to occupy a position of 'above the fray' academician, I am still very much embedded in a culture that defines "religion" in particularly discrete terms, and accompanied by particular assumptions. I also maintain a number of interdependencies with people who identify themselves according to specific truth claims under these discrete terms — truth claims that I may not endorse. I experience a tension between my desire to preserve those interpersonal relationships and to define myself as an entity autonomous of the social relations that have shaped me. Of course, this sort of tension is probably experienced by most people in some form or another, but it is we, as scholars (or people with ambitions to be scholars) who are especially inclined to deny that we continue to be shaped by the contingencies of our personal histories and contexts. Moreover, the broader North American culture that we participate in is typically Western in its adoption of discrete, 'either/or' terms for depicting the world, and we often lack a capacity and language that would allow us to embrace the ambiguities and contradictions that we necessarily encounter as we engage the world and try to find our place in it. It may be the case that were I to feel more at ease about some of the ambiguities of my own status, my responses to the questions I encounter would feel less hesitant and uncertain. I see this as a pursuit that will make my scholarship more interesting, and more importantly, will make me better able to relate to people and maintain important relationships with them.

