

*In 2008, I began my work as a master's student at the University of Chicago Divinity School. In the eight years since I first entered Swift Hall, I have received no greater honor than the opportunity to know and work with Professor Bruce Lincoln. In celebration of his work and commemorating his retirement, it is my privilege to offer the text of the speech below, a version of which I first gave at a ceremony in Professor Lincoln's honor in November 2016. Since that time I have considered, again and again, the ways in which I might have spoken better, or more clearly, the truth of his singular importance to my own work and development as a scholar, and to the academic study of religion in general. Each time I have concluded that, regardless of my efforts, I will always fall short of the goal. There are not sufficient words, except perhaps "Thank you."*

In Honor of Professor Bruce Lincoln  
November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016  
Swift Hall

When I was asked to give this speech, I spent some time considering exactly what I wanted to say. Like so many of Professor Lincoln's other students, there are dozens of stories I could recount. For instance, one of my favorites, from when I was his TA in his "Contemporary Theories of Religion" course. One day he strolled into Swift 208—a minute or two after the class was due to start, as always—and settled onto the edge of the table at the front of the room, crossing his signature cowboy boots in front of him. He picked up a book, clearly very well-used, and said, "I'm going to do something I hardly ever do. I'm going to quote from scripture." And then he proceeded to read: "the criticism of religion has been essentially completed, and the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism."

Needless to say, Marx wasn't what we were expecting, but he should've been, because, well, it's Bruce Lincoln.

There isn't enough time for me to recount the best Lincoln stories I know, or the ways in which he has shaped my intellectual life. Instead, I thought I would offer a list of things he's taught me, totally free of order or hierarchy.

So, The "All the Things I Know Thanks to Bruce Lincoln" List

- 1: There's no such thing as a list without hierarchy.
- 2: Pretty much everything is about hierarchy. After all, what's greater than that?
- 3: If there's any scripture worth reading, it's Marx.
- But, 4: Even Marx must be read with the skepticism with which we should treat all gods, or own and others'.
- 5: Tolkien didn't make up all that stuff in Lord of The Rings. That one still hurts.
- 6: Hallgerd's hair is about much more than just Hallgerd's hair.
- 7: You should really pay attention to where you're seated at a host's table or who stands where at a bridge dedication ceremony.
- 8: A conversation about the weather is never just a conversation about the weather.

9: The answer to most questions, whether you like it or not, is, “Capital.”

10: Joking about the Phillis is NEVER a good idea.

In some attempt at seriousness, let me say that the arrival of this moment of Professor Lincoln’s retirement is a difficult one for me, as I know it is for so many of my fellow students. Where will we be without him? I, for one, have spent more hours in Professor Lincoln’s office than probably any other place in Swift Hall. I can’t tell you the number of time I’ve sat across from him at that table where so many others of you have sat. In our conversations he’s helped me think through the nuances of countless papers and arguments, from when I was an MA to now, writing my dissertation. I’ve asked him questions about Tacitus and Judith Butler and Benjamin and ... the list could go on. We’ve discussed the future of our own work, of the history of religions, and of the field of religious studies.

Without Professor Lincoln I wouldn’t know what deuteroscopy is, or why it mattered to Feuerbach. I wouldn’t know how the Dreyfuss affair shaped Mauss and Hubert’s essay on sacrifice, or how Victor Turner’s experiences during WWII produced his notion of *communitas*. I wouldn’t know how Robertson-Smith’s painful relationship to his church helped to create an incredibly moving reading of how one becomes part of a community. Professor Lincoln has a talent for seeing beyond the surface of things; this is, to me, one of the most beautiful things about him.

Professor Lincoln has been unfailingly generous with his time, his advice, his praise, and his constructive criticism. And thus he has taught me, too, to be generous—but not too generous—and respectful, but never reverent, even of him. He has taught me that there is value—and, indeed, a kind of nobility—in the willingness to tell a sad story, and that there can be beauty and community in grief. He has been a moral compass and a ballast in the sometimes rough waters of this place and this profession. In his classes and in our conversations, I was—and for a few more weeks, I hope I will continue to be—the best version of my intellectual self. Needless to say, I will miss him.

Lest I’ve given you the impression that I think of Professor Lincoln is some kind of inerrant deity, let me just state clearly: he isn’t perfect, and he isn’t always right. I’m sure he’s been wrong at least once. Maybe. I wasn’t actually there, but I’m pretty sure it has happened.

I know that these speeches and this reception and this entire conference, must be difficult for Professor Lincoln. There’s nothing he hates more than vanity ... except maybe piety. I can only imagine that, for someone who has spent his career as the conscience of the academic study of religion, and thus perpetually on the margins of our profession, it must be uncomfortable to now be at the center in this way.

But, Bruce, please know that what we offer you isn’t empty praise. It isn’t flattery. It’s our own—my own—way of recognizing all that you’ve meant to us.

And by suffering this, by letting us fawn all over you and tell you how great you are, you've performed for us a last act of generosity—giving us closure, and the opportunity to say goodbye. And for that, as for so many other things I've said here, and even more for the things I haven't said, I offer you my most sincere thanks. You will be missed, more than I can say. I wish you the best in your retirement. And in the event that you are annoyed with us for doing this to you, let me quote from my own version of scripture: Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*.

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