Discipline in Dialogue

With this issue we are pleased to announce the inauguration of a new section in ARC, Discipline in Dialogue, offering a forum for stimulating discussion and debate. Welcome are short articles on method and theory in the academic study of religion, pedagogical reflections, state-of-the-art reviews of the field or its sub-fields, as well as responses and rejoinders. Submissions should be no longer than 3000 words.

Theorizing at the Margins: Religion as Something Ordinary*

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> There is nothing more difficult to convey than reality in all its ordinariness. Flaubert was fond of saying that it takes a lot of hard work to portray mediocrity. Sociologists run into this problem all the time: How can we make the ordinary extraordinary and evoke ordinariness in such a way that people will see just how extraordinary it is?
>
> – Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*

Last year I watched part of a Memorial Day celebration broadcast from Washington, D.C. From the perspective of its participants, this is an annual celebration of benign patriotism that commemorates those who have lost their lives for the sake of freedom and democracy. Although I would never contest those who characterize this holiday in just this manner—for in my opinion they do it quite sincerely—I do happen to think that Memorial Day can be redescribed and then theorized in a rather different manner. Should one proble-

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matize the abstract notions of *freedom* and *democracy*, taking into account such things as the fact that, although representatives of various marginalized or minority groups do indeed win U.S. elections today, real power is still reserved for a relatively small, privileged group whose sphere of activity is not limited to public office and the halls of representative democracy, then the freedom and rule of the *demos* celebrated on Memorial Day takes on new meanings. Instead of seeing past wars as the defenses of abstract, inalienable freedom and justice, we come to see them as the exercise of imperial right and might. All the bells and whistles of nationalism—the fireworks, the flags, the uniforms, the somber speeches, and the sentimental anthems played on lone bugles—heighten emotions and make possible the egalitarian illusion. After all, if we are to mobilize a population to risk great public expenditure, as well as risking the deaths of huge segments of its younger membership (traditionally drawn from the lower classes) in the service of private enterprise (after all, are not wars often fought over private ownership of productive land, private ownership and access to trade routes, private ownership and access to natural resources and trading markets?), then the *material gains and losses to the private system* must be universalized and dehistoricized, thereby represented as *moral gains and loses credited to "the public good."* This is democratization in an ideological sense: the gains added to, and the losses inflicted upon, the various parts must be portrayed as gains/losses to the whole.

I open with this brief reflection on the ideology of the whole to make a simple point: what appears to the non-participant gazing in from the margin to be a playfulness and adhocishness that characterizes human attempts to know and act, appears to the participant as utterly self-evident, universal, and utterly legitimate. To rephrase it, people go to extraordinary lengths to decorate that which is entirely ordinary. Instead of owning up to the mundane fact that we generally act in accordance with a set of specific, tactical interests local to our own social group (whether it be a nuclear family, our class, our gender, our race, or our nation-state), we decorate and universalize these local interests by attributing them to everyone (e.g., Human Nature), beings from other realms (e.g., the Will of God) and to time imme-

morial (e.g., Natural Law, Manifest Destiny). But this marginal stance that allows an insight into the workings of culture, value, and social identity is the same marginal stance that ensures this critical insight will receive only a brief hearing, if at all, and then be either dismissed or demonized. Although all social formations are founded on contradictions of various sorts—something Marx told us long ago—their members work very hard to gloss over these social self-destruct mechanisms. They will not suffer gladly critics who are foolhardy enough to stick their fingers in the collective social eye by pointing these mechanisms out.

As you by now might have no doubt guessed, glossing over social contradictions and gaps is made possible by something I term religion—be it the work of the theologian or the liberal humanist, they both work tirelessly to avert our gaze from the local to the universal, from this specific human actor whose subjectivity is a function of structural constraints to the Holy/Human Spirit writ large and timeless.[1] Despite the theological and humanistic pre-occupation with conceptualizing religion as the realm of ahistoric meanings which must be interpreted and appreciated, religion, for me, is more an issue of discursive form, medium, and structure. That's why I have no trouble looking for data in such seemingly non-religious items as Memorial Day celebrations.

I think here both of Marshall McLuhan's well known dictum, "The medium is the message," and Frits Staal's conclusion that Vedic ritual—indeed, all ritual—is meaningless, patterned activity (1989). In Staal's words, when asked why they perform their rituals, the participants answer as follows:

> [W]e do it because our ancestors did it; because we are eligible to do it; because it is good for society; because it is good; because it is our duty; because it is said to lead to immortality; because it leads to immortality. [Most frequently, however, the answer is that] we act according to the rules because this is our tradition.... The effective part of the answer seems to be: look and listen, these are our activities! To performing ritualists, rituals are like dance, of which Isadora Duncan said: "If I could tell you what it meant there would be no point in dancing it" (Staal 1989, 115–16).

This approach to seeing meaningful content as a function of rhetorical form can be applied all throughout the study of culture. Take, for instance, the music of the contemporary alternative band, Blues Traveler, a group whose work strikes me as a far more sophisticated form of cultural analysis than what many scholars of religion produce. For example, consider just the first two verses of their 1994 song, "Hook":

> It doesn't matter what I say
> So long as I sing with inflection
> That makes you feel that I'll convey
> Some inner truth or vast reflection
> But I've said nothing so far
> And I can keep it up for as long as it takes
> And it don't matter who you are
> If I'm doing my job it's your resolve that breaks
>
> Because the hook brings you back
> I ain't tellin' you no lie
> The hook brings you back
> On that you can rely
>
> There is something amiss
> I am being insincere
> In fact I don't mean any of this
> Still my confession draws you near
> To confuse the issue I refer
> To familiar heroes from long ago
> No matter how much Peter loved her
> What made the Pan refuse to grow
>
> Was that the hook brings you back...[2]

What attracts me to this song is that it offers moral judgments coupled with explicit contradictions and outright lies, making its criticisms self-implicating. Given the manner in which the chorus's admittedly catchy tune is overlapped with the glib lyrics concerning the shallowness of musical "hooks," it is both a critique of, as well as the triumph of, form over content. When studying this song in class it is apparent that students like it very much but neither do they know the words nor have any idea what it is "about"—as Staal tells

us, *rituals are not about anything* (i.e., they have no meaning or content); if they are about anything it is simply following the rules (form) properly.

If this thing we call ritual is an empty rhetorical technique, then it follows that varying contents can be attached to the same ritual, or rhetorical form, so that in different discourses contents of assorted political stripe will be authorized by means of this common technique. For instance, appeals to "the will of the gods" say nothing about just what this will might be. In the history of the United States, such a rhetoric helped to normalize the institution of slavery and it also helped to establish the civil rights movement. Although I happen to side with the latter over the former, I can still recognize that their persuasiveness has little to do with some inherent correctness to these different social systems but, rather, to such factors as changing rhetorical situations, changing demographics, and changing sociopolitical interests. While the content changes, the form endures. We see the same technique up and running all throughout culture: in Memorial Day celebrations, Vedic ritual, the music of Blues Traveler, and religion. Because the rhetoric concerning the utter uniqueness of the ivory tower has always struck me as misleading and self-serving, one would expect to see these techniques working in academe as well.

Yes, academe as well. Case in point: in the summer of 1996 I wrote an essay that criticized scholars of religion for not living up to their potential as critical rhetors. In doing so, I borrowed some terminology from an unpublished paper of the scholar of Christian origins, Burton Mack, and argued that scholars of religion should abandon their role of religious caretaker, sympathizer, and all around mythmaker and should, instead, fashion themselves as culture critics. I made this recommendation for two reasons: (1) I was tired of seeing scholars of religion selling their prescriptive wares in the popular media, prescriptions drawn from their supposedly deep knowledge of the essence of religion and the enduring value of culture; and (2) I came to the study of religion with a rather different understanding of religion, seeing it instead as a social mechanism that is employed in the construction and contestation of value, meaning, and identity—whatever the content of these may be. Religion, for me, is not a noun

with an essence or a meaning, but is a category that I choose to employ to delineate a series of rhetorical techniques employed to authorize and thereby reproduce assorted forms of meaning, behaviour, and organization. Accordingly, there is nothing particularly religious about religion as I conceptualize it; it is an interrelated series of beliefs, practices, and institutions, a mythmaking activity that constructs cognitively and physically habitable worlds by normativizing what Roland Barthes, in his wonderful little book *Mythologies* (1972), referred to as mutable, contingent History "dressed up" as immutable, necessary Nature (on "myth" see McCutcheon 2000). Given my above-stated interest in theorizing acts of social formation (Mack 2000), I argued that those beliefs, behaviours, and institutions usually named "religious," are, like the names and the lineages we give ourselves, a completely natural part of our social life—Emile Durkheim understood as much at the outset of this century. Just as our genealogies are narrative devices that, in hindsight, normativize who and where we happen to be, religious discourses efficiently remove a claim, a practice, or an institution from the vagaries of history; regardless of the content of the behaviour or belief in question (be it reactionary or revolutionary), religious discourses take what is tactical and ad hoc (i.e., sets of assumptions, customs, institutions, or even worldviews which are developed and employed for a specific purpose and which are, therefore, strictly temporary) and make it eternal and permanent.

Unlike those who are concerned with defending and extending these privileged practices for whatever political end, I argued in that essay that the scholar of religion in the public university was in the position of studying the all-too-human mechanisms that facilitate the widespread slippage from *History* to *Nature*, and from *is* to *ought*—a slippage that is likely inevitable if we are to reproduce enduring identities of whatever kind. To paraphrase from the epigraph I have borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu, religion is not some extraordinary impulse or intuition of deep and self-evident meaning whose knowledge prompts one to offer cures for society's various ills (the opinion of no doubt well-meaning insiders); instead, for the scholar of religion, it is a completely ordinary rhetorical practice. That many students of re-

ligion do not normally see this is what strikes me as extraordinary and worthy of study.

In 1997 I was fortunate to have this article accepted for publication by the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (1997a), the widest circulating North American periodical for publicizing the research of theologians and scholars of religion alike. Apart from receiving several kind e-mails from readers of that article (sent mostly by younger scholars, mind you), I received an obviously angry e-mail from a scholar at Pepperdine University. Given that I had argued that the scholar of religion came not to inform the world on deep meanings and transcendent truths, he basically asked why "the good people of Springfield" were paying me to do what I do. Presuming that religion was somehow an essentially good force, or at least an other-worldly and therefore utterly extraordinary impulse with whose true nature he was all too familiar, my correspondent seemed to have taken great offense at my suggestion that religion was an ordinary component of socio-political existence and, as such, was susceptible to the very same methods of research used throughout the rest of the human sciences. Despite continued debate as to whether Plato's writings constitute philosophy proper or an extended political manifesto (and whether these two are even different to begin with), he presumed that the nature of "the good" had been settled long ago and that scholars in the employ of taxpayers should be getting on with the business of realizing that good in public life. I disagree with him and I wrote a brief e-mail in reply stating as much. Needless to say, we have not become pen pals.

Not long after this, my book on the history and politics of the study of religion—a book that had been at press when I wrote the public intellectual essay (making the essay, for all practical purposes, the unintended last chapter of the book)—was published (1997b). The first two reviews that came to my attention—one published in a politically and religiously liberal and the other in a conservative, U.S. periodical[3]—agreed with my Pepperdine colleague. Whereas one was a long, argumentative rebuttal that concluded that, at worst, my book was "a tissue of self-aggrandizing confusions," the other was terse, misrepresented my thesis significantly, invoked incredulity

(twice writing, "McCutcheon argues—get this, one is tempted to say..."), and concluded that I write "mean-spiritedly" (Griffiths 1998a; Anon. 1998).

Although most subsequent reviews have had a rather different tone, the Pepperdine e-mail and these two reviews, along with one of those same reviewers' response to my essay on public intellectuals (Griffiths 1998b), tell us a lot about writing from the theoretical and political margins within academia. Add to this list another reviewer's conclusion that I have an "ax to grind" in my "aggressive attack" (Ludwig 1998, 36) and it should be clear that representatives of the dominant discourse in our field are easily able to suspend the usual requirements of scholarly discourse when responding to work that arises from an oppositional position. While the burden of argumentation and evidence generally falls on critics, rhetorics of incredulity, sheer assertion, dismissive paternalism, and complaints about bad form await them in reply. Or, to put it another way, while the members of a dominant group are the ones to establish and police the normally transparent rules by which the game of academia is played (think, if you will, of your grade nine English teacher talking about "point, proof, justification," the institution of peer evaluation, and the tradition of reference letters—what the cultured elite once called "letters of introduction"), they are also the first to suspend these rules when critics make their case by playing by them. The irony—I will not call it an "injustice" for I theorize that it could not be otherwise—is clear: in supporting their work with appeals to evidence and argumentation, critics are easily dismissed for being too "aggressive" and not playing nice. Form not only wins out over content, it establishes the context in which texts are allowed to be meaningful or persuasive. Offer the wrong text, and the gatekeepers will collect up their toys and go home.

What have I learned in all this about the ideology of the whole and the politics of the margins? Well, for one thing, making recommendations that scholars study religion as an all-too-human practice—rather than a private experience—does not win you friends either among Christian theologians (who study religion as a transcendent message inspired by a fleeting Holy Spirit) or Liberal

Humanists (who study religion as the expression of some timeless Human Spirit). In the words of the literary critic, Stanley Fish, writing on the tactics employed by seemingly well-meaning types who nonetheless police the status quo: "the guardians of orthodoxy rise up in a combination of outrage and incredulity—outrage at the very fact of an assault on truths so perspicuous that no one could, or should, deny them; incredulity at the spectacle of intelligent credentialed men and women who seem unaccountably to have forgotten what everyone knows and shouldn't have to say" (1999, 52).

Surely there are a great number of people who—like my various critics—presume that religion is a special impulse or feeling that is somehow manifested in human affairs (they've dutifully read their Schleiermacher, Tillich, and Eliade). The origin of this impulse is variously known as God, the Sacred, Meaning, or Human Nature. Despite the fact that, as one moves from left to right in this list—moving from God to Human Nature—there appears to be an apparent declining religiosity to these posited sources of religious impulses, they are for me different names for the same thing, or, to be more precise, clever names that refer to no-thing. (I wasn't just being cute in the paragraph above when I selected the same initials—H.S.—to stand in for the object of theologians and humanists alike.) After all, my suggestion that religion is an ordinary rhetorical devise met with condemnation—not too strong a word, I think—from the religious/political left *and* the religious/political right, indicating that, despite their superficial differences, some foundational presumption shared by both must be in jeopardy. What these otherwise different viewpoints share is that in each case the historical, material world of happenstance human doings is portrayed as the local and accidental context of necessary and cosmic events that defy re-presentation and expression. For example, when it comes to talking about this thing religion—in the words of a U.S. Supreme Court Justice—it is generally thought to inhabit "the citadel of individual heart and mind";[4] what we have here is a classic example of Liberalism. By intentionally choosing the uppercase "L" I mean to make clear that I am not talking about liberal as opposed to conservative political positions as we today define them (e.g., classifying people based on whether they ar-

gue for more or less "big government"), but, rather, to the wider and older political philosophy presupposed by both contemporary liberal and conservatives alike.

Liberalism denotes a tradition of political thought that understands human beings as: (1) individual moral agents who ought to be free of, or who can rise above, essentially oppressive structural constraints, and as (2) reducible to universal yet interior mental or emotive processes. To appeal to Fish once again, in Liberalism "what counts is the moment of private inspiration in which the superior consciousness rises above its surroundings and proclaims an atemporal truth.... [T]he person is [thereby] reduced, or exalted, to the status of pure mind, a bodiless agent whose paradigmatic act is the act either of forming an expression or expressing it. Everything else is accidental, in the strict philosophical sense; everything else is dross" (Fish 1999, 50).

When first reading that passage—a passage which, for Fish, characterizes the supposedly apolitical stance of traditional literary criticism's quest for the essence of creativity and meaning of Literariness—three things immediately came to mind: (1) the writings of countless phenomenologists of religion intent on "taking religion seriously" by removing it from history; (2) the current popularity of equating the academic study of religion to the practice of religious pluralism, an effort which resolves material diversity and contestation by appealing to the abstract universality of some disembodied "faith," "drive," or "hope" we all supposedly share; and (3) the infectiously quaint nationalistic paintings of Norman Rockwell, specifically, his "Freedom of Speech," a 1943 cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*.[5] Despite going some distance to quiet the guilt of those who occupy positions of privilege and to soothe those who do not, none of these strikes me as particularly appealing since they effectively gloss over the role played by material difference as well as the effects of unanticipated structural imposition in human affairs while rushing to resolve conflict by arguing its existence away.

As suggested already, given my own personal politics I happen to agree with the substance of some of the claims (content) that theologians and humanists authorize by their appeals to the rhetorics of

faith or Human Nature (form). But, because I have no idea how to adjudicate the truth of either their or my own claims, I am a little more timid than they are in making grandiose claims about the sort of Human Nature that somehow unites all people (past, present, and future) with little old me.[6] Knowing the trouble second-wave feminists got into when Third World women and women of colour stood up to say that they did not recognize themselves in these feminists' claims about "woman," one would think that today we would be a little more timid in making such universal claims about "the triumph of the Human Spirit." Armed with this hunch that parts all too easily slide into wholes, some scholars of religion focus their attention instead on the way groups negotiate the distinctions of fact/value, contingent/necessary, History/Nature, and local/universal. Or, to phrase it more accurately, (1) because they see no way of ascertaining fact apart from value, and (2) because they understand value to be fundamentally a negotiable, historic item, they are intrigued by the manner in which material interests are encoded in supposedly timeless values and principles—values and principles which all too obviously arise from specific situations but which are used as if they were atemporal, establish truths with application in all possible situations.

With a tip of the hat to the reflexive anthropologists, they accept that claims to knowledge are tactical and conditional, that they are based on perspective, on viewpoint. However, because my viewpoint is not necessarily your's, they also assert that non-participants may see something that participants do not—this presumption is the basis of scholarship, no? Although we are all insiders to various socio-semantic worlds, they are not all the same world—after all, I am a white male in my late thirties who grew up as the youngest child in a lower middle class family in southern Ontario. As I once phrased it, "as much as we are all immersed within a framework, we are not all swimming in the same conceptual pond" (1991, 256). To know anything is therefore to know just a bit of something.[7] The part (empirical) is hardly the whole (non-empirical) and there is something at stake in glossing over their obvious differences (e.g., just who are the "We" in "We the people..."?). Following this line of reasoning, what is so utterly fascinating about human beings is the manner

in which we continually avoid recognizing this (whether the "we" is constituted by religious fundamentalists, moral absolutists, nationalists, or scientists intent on unlocking Nature's code). Instead, there is a bold certainty encoded within the manner in which most people act; a certainty that, when seen against the background of what I assume to be the ad hoc nature of the physical world, is profoundly interesting. How is it that just this opinion, just that behaviour, or just this way or organizing ourselves gets sanctioned and reproduced? How does one go about making the move from a viewpoint to The Viewpoint? How is it that a part (and which part?) gets portrayed and authorized as the whole? I happen to think that this thing we call religion has something important to do with this; and by "religion" I mean an intertwined social system comprised of discourses on absolute origins (myths of origins or cosmogonies), discourses on end times (apocalyptic, utopic, dystopic myths), and discourses on nonhuman, immaterial agents (gods, angels, demons, and so forth). And by discourses I mean coordinated systems of thought, action, and organization.

If you think that in making these claims I am criticizing religion, saying that "anything goes" in our relativistic universe, or that my analysis of religion finally wins the day as true and accurate, then you have misread my point. As I wrote elsewhere, the role of culture critic entails being a bit like Dorothy's dog, Toto; culture critics fully participate in, but also peek behind, the curtains that normally pass for just part of the scenery; they look for what makes the scene possible, the manner in which we make things stand out as significant.[8] Now, of course we can't live without benign scenery passing unnoticed in the background—who but a madman could give equal attention to all pieces of sensory information? But every now and then a marginalized observer will come along and see the scenery not as inevitable but, due to their skewed perspective, as the context that makes places possible; a view that makes it possible to represent "mere scenery" in a new way, as the medium that allows the all-too-ordinary-world to stand out for a short while and be perceived as meaningful. It is this marginal, wiley culture critic who treats our claims, our behaviours, and our institutions as artful, ad hoc, inventive, and marvelous re-

presentations that transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. But the short-lived privilege that comes from such marginal status is only half the story—for incredulity and outrage await those who speak from the edge.

Notes

[1] See Perkins (1995) for a persuasive account of how discursive pre-conditions enable humans to think and experience their subjectivity.

[2] Words and music by John Hopper, from their CD, *Four* (1994).

[3] The former was the *Christian Century*, edited by—among others—the well known liberal and historian, Martin Marty, and the latter was the recently founded *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, edited by the conservative Richard John Neuhaus.

[4] These words can be found in Justice Stewart's majority decision in the 1962 case of Abington v. Schempp—the U.S.'s classic "school prayer" case. Fish's second chapter, "Sauce for the Goose" (1998, 34–45) wonderfully demonstrates the manner in which this rhetoric privileges religion within such an air tight zone of isolated human experience so as to ensure that any normative claims as to how the world ought to work which arise from a so-called religious discourse will easily be brushed aside by Liberal claims to represent the public, inclusive good over exclusivist, private intuitions and matters of conscience.

[5] This well known painting shows a confident looking, flannel-shirted, working class man standing alone, speaking his mind at what appears to be a town hall meeting. He is surrounded by seated people stretching their necks to watch and listen to him, two of whom are men who are likely of a higher class since they are wearing jackets and ties.

[6] Note that liberal humanists talking about "human nature" are hardly interested in the empirical, biological similarities that we commonly use to differentiate Homo sapiens sapiens from other species. Although I certainly assume that ancient Greeks procreated, digested food, excreted, laughed and died in much the same manner as my contemporaries, moving from this biological similarity to positing some non-empirical commonality that transcends space and time is another matter altogether. Although we all cry, we don't all cry at the same thing or "mean" the same by our tears. If by "the human condition" one means "man's quest for meaning," then this is something entirely different from the utterly neutral, biological imperatives of birth, growth, and death.

[7] I try to persuade my students that, despite living in the age of so-called inclusivity, the utility of a definition is in its ability to exclude items from consideration. This act of exclusion (call it focus, if you will) is, of course, directed by one's pre-observational theoretical context as well as one's political interests.

[8] It is telling that Blues Traveler drew explicitly on the image of Dorothy and Toto in one of their videos, having the dog pull back the curtain to reveal Blues Traveler, hidden off-stage, playing and singing for a front band comprised of suitably macho but untalented rockers.

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