

Theology Unbound: Timothy Fitzgerald and Religious Studies

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Does the study of religion improve our understanding of societies, or does it merely pigeonhole them into the structures we associate with Christianity? Is it possible to get away from our own assumptions in the study of religion, or do we merely hide our theological motives in ever subtler ways? Both of these questions have been raised in the past few decades in the academic field, and Timothy Fitzgerald argues strongly for the latter answer to each. The hypothesis of his investigation into the problems with religion as a category, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, is that "there is no coherent non-theological theoretical basis for the study of religion as an academic discipline".¹ If this claim is true, religious studies should be dissolved as a discipline, replaced with either seminary schools or a subcategory of anthropology and sociology. According to his critics, though, this is not necessary. Therefore, I am examining two separate questions here: first, is there a non-theological basis for religious studies, and second, is objective analysis of theology relevant to the disparate areas of human life studied by religious scholars?

Standing Up to the Critics

Fitzgerald's book made a splash in the community of religious studies when it was first introduced, and it was reviewed in a number of journals, including a joint criticism by three authors in *Religious Studies Review*. Unsurprisingly, the reviewers defended continuing the study of religion despite its conceptual problems. It is these reviews that I will examine first.

The first review is by Benson Saler, a professor of anthropology at Brandeis University. Saler has agreed elsewhere that religion "requires clarification if it is to become ... academically useful",² but he thinks Fitzgerald is overreaching. He notes in the review that criticism of religion as a discipline could also be applied to many other topics in anthropology, and writes generally that "Fitzgerald

¹ Timothy Fitzgerald. *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. p. 1.

² Benson Saler. *Conceptualising Religion*. New York: E.J. Brill, 1993. p.1.

depends largely on his own resources, developed from narrow readings and largely in a field that he would radically alter", rendering his arguments "irrelevan[t]".³

There are two major problems with Saler's review which make it an ineffective apology for religious studies. First, and most importantly, he does not make any specific criticisms, leaving Fitzgerald at a loss to respond.⁴ Secondly, he incorrectly concludes that the book is simply an amateur philosophical critique of the word "religion" as an artificial construction,⁵ and asks Fitzgerald to reread Wittgenstein in order to address his questions about "family resemblances".⁶ But what Fitzgerald is actually dealing with is far less heady, and much more directly related to the utility of religious studies as a whole. Saler does not answer any questions about the current and future role of theology in religious studies, and that is Fitzgerald's thesis.

Gustavo Benavides, a professor in the Theology/Religious Studies department at Villanova University,⁷ offers a much more relevant critique of the book's thesis. He asserts that contrary to Fitzgerald's "assumption", there are indeed religious scholars who approach their study without latent "theological concerns". He also points out that religious studies as a discipline can easily be refocused to include awareness of varying theological interpretations of a society's ideological forms and ritual practices. As for Fitzgerald's idea of religion being a category imposed onto foreign cultures by the monolithic "West", Benavides suggests that this imposition has been far from universal, and that religion as a term including "ritual practices" and divine "activities" was recognized by various world cultures centuries before Christians arrived. He concludes that although "much of contemporary North American scholarship" may be flawed in its examination of religion, it can still stand on its own as an

3 Benson Saler. "Some Reflections on Fitzgerald's Thesis." *Religious Studies Review* 27.2 (2001). pp. 103-104.

4 "...it would be helpful to have more specific references, arguments and counterarguments ..." Timothy Fitzgerald. "A Response to Saler, Benavides, and Korom." *Religious Studies Review* 27.2 (2001). pp. 110-115.

5 Saler says Fitzgerald "should have" moved on from religion to critiquing all analytical categories, and from there "should have" questioned the role of "language and language's relation to the world", but he "does not turn in any seriousness to the literatures that systematically address those questions: philosophy". Saler 2001, p. 104.

6 "I do not think that Fitzgerald has a good understanding of ... Wittgenstein". He should figure that out before discussing definitions because "confidence in one's analytical powers is no substitute for homework". Saler 2001, p. 104.

7 Don't blame the messenger, I'm just quoting his faculty profile (accessed March 14, 2009):

<<http://www.villanova.edu/artsci/latinamerstudies/faculty.htm?mail=gustavo.benavides@villanova.edu>>

anthropological category independent of theological motives.⁸

The third review, by Frank J. Korom, a professor of religion at Boston University, agrees with Benavides that to eliminate religion entirely is to "throw the baby out with the bath water". He also echoes Saler, saying that to look for an ideology behind the idea of religion takes one down a slippery slope that would make "the entire academy ... crumble like a house of cards", and furthermore dissolving religion departments would make a lot of professors lose their jobs. But he brings some of his own arguments to the table as well. He notes that the East/West dichotomy, which infiltrates several of the book's topics, is a problematic one. His most powerful question comes at the end of the review: if the correct course of action when finding religious studies is a conglomeration of various other fields of humanities is to merge it into those fields, "should we then simply reduce physics, astronomy, mathematics, and so on to one monolithic department of science?"⁹ Just as having a separate department of chemistry allows scientists to focus on the most important parts of that field and bridge together biology and physics, so can religious theorists focus on finding the sort of coherence Fitzgerald seeks, and bridge together literary analysis, psychology, sociology, and so forth.

Fitzgerald, in his response to these more pointed criticisms, only addresses some of them. He especially focuses on the criticisms that have little impact on his argument: for example, both Korom and Benavides give a list of other categories that have recently been called into question, and Fitzgerald responds simply that none of those categories have been granted their own departments of study. (This is not a completely satisfying response, because categories that do have departments, such as "music", "art", and "literature", have also been questioned.¹⁰) He also responds to Korom by pointing out that he never mentions the "East" in his book. But he continues to rely on the menace of Western-capitalist-liberal-ecumenical-democratic hegemony¹¹ without acknowledging the vast differences of motive and

8 Gustavo Benavides. "Religious Studies Between Science and Ideology". *Religious Studies Review* 27.2 (2001). pp. 104-108.

9 Frank J. Korom. "(H)ideology: The Hidden Agenda of Religious Studies". *Religious Studies Review* 27.2 (2001). pp. 108-110.

10 Thomas A. Tweed. *Crossing and Dwelling*. New York: Harvard University Press, 2006. p. 41.

11 Although he defends his concept of the West, he also states out of the blue that the "myth [of religion] persists because

ideology within that enormous category, instead concluding with the self-affirming truism that "for many non-Western societies the West is a reality (albeit a contradictory one) that has to be confronted."¹² Where does the West end, ideologically or geographically? Do Eastern European Marxists, or pro-secular supporters of Atatürk, count as Westerners? Do you have to believe in, to use one of Fitzgerald's examples, "the right to private property" to be considered "Western" enough that you impose an "ideological configuration" onto other cultures by using the word "religion" to describe some of the things they do? If religious studies has a single hidden motivation, "*the*" ideology, Fitzgerald has not defended it very well against his critics.

Other reviews of this book, which do not have a response from Fitzgerald, also emphasize this point. Thomas Tweed cites Sigmund Freud's infamous equivocation of religion to a childish delusion to demonstrate that definitions of religion are informed by various, diverse ideologies.¹³ Jim Stone writes that "the cross-cultural inapplicability of the contrasts [between the Christian religious and non-Christian secular] doesn't prove the inapplicability of 'religion'", and affirms Benavides' view that some bad apples in the literature of religious studies don't necessarily spoil the barrel. Nevertheless, Stone is "nervous that [the] thesis is true", and part of his criticism, if Fitzgerald were asked to respond to it, would find his eager embrace as a demonstration of the failings of religious studies: Stone dismisses Ambedkar Buddhism as "a political movement in Buddhist trappings",¹⁴ but that completely ignores how Ambedkar Buddhists have developed an alternative soteriology that gives their rejection of the caste system legitimacy. Their beliefs stand in clear contrast to the theology and soteriology of Hinduism. Even if the movement is not "Buddhism" in the vague sense of the theologically defined "world religion" spanning dozens of traditions throughout Asia and the West, surely the way the pious worship Ambedkar alongside the Buddha cannot fail to suggest a new religious movement worthy of

the modern ideological configuration of democratic capitalism depends on it." Woah! Fitzgerald 2001, p. 111.

12 Fitzgerald 2001, p. 113.

13 Thomas A. Tweed. "Marking Religion's Boundaries: Constitutive Terms, Orienting Tropes, and Exegetical Fussiness." *History of Religions* 44.3 (2005). pp.264-266.

14 Jim Stone. Review of *The Ideology of Religious Studies* by Timothy Fitzgerald. *Religious Studies* 37.2. pp. 242-246.

study?

Another interesting current in criticism of Fitzgerald's thesis is that even if there is an ideological motivation behind the category of religion, it's a motivation that is only beneficial for the true role of academia. Jeffrey Long, while finding absolutely no complaint with the facts laid out in *Ideology*, refers to the "myth of scientific objectivity" as the ideology underlying its own thesis.¹⁵ Brian Pennington points out dryly that the secret aim of the theology underlying religious studies, according to the examined works in *Ideology*, seems to be "to foster fruitful dialogue, peaceful coexistence, and perhaps even, Fitzgerald seems to fear, a mutual recognition of the validity of distinct religious communities."¹⁶ This description seems to be accurate for at least some recent works of religious studies: for example, Robert Orsi's *Thank You, St. Jude*. Orsi unashamedly asserts in his conclusion that understanding women's relationships with St. Jude on their own terms, as part of their tumultuous lives and mental well-being, is a more beneficial interpretation than trying to cast St. Jude as a delusion or crutch, and he provides many examples of this in his analysis.¹⁷ But not all religious scholars are as open about their biases as Orsi. As Long concludes, perhaps what Fitzgerald ought really to be arguing for is "an open disclosure of one's metaphysical commitments".¹⁸

Application to Case Studies, or Lack Thereof

Brian K. Pennington's *Was Hinduism Invented?* is rife with discoveries of hidden theological bias among British academia in early colonial India, including the belief of William Jones, the founder of the Asiatic Society and originator of the study of comparative linguistics, that all religions were derived from a primeval worship of "the only true God".¹⁹ This is exactly the sort of situation Fitzgerald means to address in his book, specifically the focus on aspects of Indian ritual that fit a certain theology to the extent that other ritual aspects of society are overlooked. But Pennington shies away from

15 Jeffrey Long. Review of *The Ideology of Religious Studies* by Timothy Fitzgerald. *Journal of Religion* 81.3 (2001). pp. 494-496.

16 Brian K. Pennington. *Was Hinduism Invented?* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. p. 180.

17 Robert A. Orsi. *Thank You, St. Jude*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

18 Long 2001, p. 496.

19 Pennington 2005, p. 121.

Fitzgerald's conclusion, noting his selectivity of sources and how he excludes more careful scholars from his study.²⁰

Part of the problem with applying Fitzgerald's work to case studies is that his critique applies more to religion as an area of study than religious studies as a discipline, despite his arguments to the contrary. He argues that separating religion from other departments puts unnecessary limits on analyzing specific case studies, but it need not be that way. If there were a department of linguistics, for example, that focused religiously on diagramming sentences while refusing to accept research about English literature or philosophy, it would be right to criticize that department as blind to its own implications for other academic fields. But couldn't that department be revitalized, instead of dissolved, by allowing greater dialogue with other kinds of study? I think this parallels what Fitzgerald thinks to be the segregation of religious studies from other fields. He focuses on topics that could benefit from the analysis of religious scholars despite their lack of commonly understood "religious" meaning, such as "Asian values" or communism, without recognizing the utility of religious studies for linking together the various ways of looking at that ideology. In other words, just because religion departments don't *currently* look at communism doesn't mean there is no benefit to talking about ritual, soteriology, and sanctity within communist societies. He focuses on the worst of religious studies (primarily introductory textbooks and liberal-ecumenical overviews of the "world's religions"), but does not address the claim made by his critics that religious studies, when shed of theological overtones, can be a useful tool for examining both ideology and theology in relation to human societies. To this extent, Pennington agrees: "Religious studies departments are not, by and large, simply factories for the maintenance of Christian hegemony but do, in very many instances, work assiduously to overcome their own histories and discover truly meaningful and instructive ways to characterize human difference as well as a shared humanity across cultures."²¹

20 Ibid., pp. 179-180.

21 Ibid., p. 177.

In addition, several centuries of pro-religion ideology have already worked upon most human societies, leading to modern-day constructs like Hinduism and Shinto that undoubtedly exist, even if they did not exist before European contact. As a result, "religious studies" makes more sense as a discipline now than it might have in the colonial age. Thomas A. Tweed concludes that

[A]s [David] Chidester notes, "After reviewing the history of colonial productions [...] we might happily abandon *religion* and *religions* as terms of analysis if we were not, as the result of that very history, stuck with them." If, as even Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Timothy Fitzgerald acknowledge, constitutive terms establish disciplinary horizons, religion scholars need such terms. We are "stuck" with them. ... Definitions matter.²²

Unfortunately, simply acknowledging the utility of religious studies as a discipline and its necessary "disciplinary horizons" is not enough to resolve the general complaint about ideology. Returning briefly to Pennington's analysis of Hinduism, we find that even Russell T. McCutcheon, whose "work is far better informed about the field" than Fitzgerald's, does not escape his critical eye: he concludes that McCutcheon has an anti-religious motive, and provides his own opinion that "responsible scholarship on religion must seek productive engagement with practitioners that does not scoffingly dismiss their faith."²³ It appears that Pennington has dismissed this author on ideological terms, finding affirmation of religion more useful than denigration. What exactly prompts this decision? Should Pennington's conclusion be rewritten in order to return to ideological neutrality, or is neutrality not possible here? In order to look further at the two ways to answer this question, let's turn to the ideology reflected by a much more venerable scholar: Clifford Geertz.

Conversations with Geertz and Asad

Although the main subject of Geertz's famous essay is his long-standing definition of religion, I think it would be useful here to talk specifically about the anthropological examples he uses to justify that definition. For Geertz actually acknowledges some of the difficulties in relating theology to reality, one of Fitzgerald's complaints; he paraphrases another scholar to say that there is a difference between

²² Tweed 2006, p. 42.

²³ Pennington 2005, p. 181.

"reading a poem about having children by marriage" and actually doing it.²⁴ Rather than giving undue weight to the theologies of religions, he acknowledges that theology needs to be compared to reality. In other parts of his essay, the examples Geertz gives to justify his definition show that he is actually making ideological choices, as Thomas Tweed would be eager to point out. For example, he claims that religion usually "affirms" the reality of suffering, "with the possible exception of Christian Science", and that this reality gives way to the problems of evil and meaning, solved by creating an "order of existence".²⁵ He makes explicit that not *all* religions address these problems, but the definition he constructs best fits and gives the most weight to the religions that do. A similar thing happens in his discussion of ritual: he considers a ritual a kind of "cultural performance" which, in its fullest expression, happens in public in order to induce "moods and motivations",²⁶ even though some religions emphasize that rituals should be carried out in private.²⁷

This is close to the conclusion of Talal Asad when he contrasts Geertz's definition from the medieval Christian definition in his essay, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category". Asad employs the view of St. Augustine in particular, writing at a time when Christianity was rapidly becoming the religion of the Mediterranean. Augustine's religion was *embodied* in all the instruments of power, from social institutions and legal systems all the way down to individual decisions, precisely because "human events are the instruments of God". Asad concludes that for this disposition to be boiled down to a supposedly *symbolic* relationship between power and religion demonstrates that "the configurations of power in this sense have ... varied profoundly ... from one epoch to another—from Augustine's time, through the Middle Ages, to the industrial capitalist West of today."²⁸ Asad does not deny that Geertz's definition can be applied in some sort or another to any

24 Clifford Geertz. "Religion as a Cultural System". 1966. In Seth D. Kunin (ed.), *Theories of Religion: A Reader*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. n.d. p. 209.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 217-220.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 223. Note that only public examples are supplied.

27 c.f. Matthew 6:6

28 Talal Asad. "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category". In *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993. p. 35.

religion; instead, he points out that Geertz has a model of power best suited to a specific kind of religion, not all kinds.

Superficially all of this fits Fitzgerald's thesis: the definitions of religion laid out by various academics actually give undue weight to the forms of religion that represent their preferred model, potentially biasing future research in favor of their favored ideology. But nevertheless, Geertz is defining *something* here that is recognizable as an aspect of human society, which is why his definition is so long-standing. What is interesting about Geertz's definition is that it purposefully contains no reference to gods, ancestors, nature spirits, and so forth—the familiar elements which usually seal the deal on concluding that a belief is religious in nature. In fact, if we ignore the specifics he outlines in his essay and look at his general definition alone, it arguably applies to ideologies like "Asian values" which we do not think of as religion. Watching a video produced by ASEAN, a foremost promoter of the "Asian unity" theme, we see all of the elements of Geertz's model: (1) an organized "system of symbols", most prominently Peace, Prosperity, and People, which stand for the virtues of an ideal, modernized Southeast Asia, (2) the suggestion that ASEAN has a unifying goal all Southeast Asians should work towards, intended to establish "moods and motivations", (3) an idealized "order of existence" ASEAN claims it will bring to the region, and (4+5) the "aura of factuality" throughout the video, which aggressively suggests that ASEAN really is the combined, representative power of all Southeast Asians and not just a powerless figurehead organization. The video even has a cartoon specialist whose role is to teach all the children this dogma.²⁹

Is it possible that Geertz accidentally brought the supernatural baggage of an ancient word to what is essentially a useful definition of ideology? Of course, this does not resolve the fact that he brought his own biases to the definition, shaping it to favor particular religions. But Fitzgerald's primary complaint about religious studies is that the disciplinary horizons originally set by religious studies are more arbitrary than useful, informed by giving misguided weight to those particular aspects

²⁹ You can see this yourself at <<http://snurl.com/aseanvideo>>

of culture which claim access to the "transcendent" or supernatural. If the scope of religious studies were adjusted to remove this requirement, then this complaint would be addressed.

Conclusions

While I have not concluded beyond a doubt that there is a non-theological basis for studying religion to the exclusion of all other sociological constructions, there is definitely a basis for studying *ideology*, which includes religious, political, and economic movements. The study of ideologies is informed by all of the same academic approaches (anthropology, literary analysis, and so forth) that constitute religious studies and give it continued relevance, while lacking the bias in favor of in "transcendent" ideologies; in fact, in searching for a non-supernatural definition of religion, Geertz seems to approach a definition of ideology. This is not a proper apology for religious studies as such, but it does affirm that it has value as an independent discipline, and I do not see any reason to believe that expanding a department of religious studies into a department of ideological studies would endanger people's jobs or do damage to the religion scholar's set of tools, as Frank Korom claims would be the case if religion were folded into other departments.

As for analyses like Orsi's and Pennington's that are explicitly informed by a religious preference and aim to make a case for their "ecumenical theology", Fitzgerald makes it explicit that he is not against studies of this sort, and that there is a definite use for an informed ideology in analyzing various forms of religion.³⁰ In fact, since it is impossible to produce a study that is not informed in some way by one's own opinions, it seems to me that, as Jeffrey Long suggests, giving more legitimacy to theologies when they are openly disclosed would make for a healthier and more open-ended study of religion.

³⁰ "Theology as theology seems to me to be a perfectly legitimate intellectual exercise, and in one form or another we may all be engaged in an activity somewhat akin to theology". Fitzgerald 2000, p. 7.