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After We Deconstruct 'Religion,' Then What?
A Case For Critical Realism

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Abstract

Some scholars of religion have turned their attention from religion to "religion" and have then deconstructed the conceptual category, arguing that the concept of religion is an invention of the scholar that corresponds to nothing. In Schilbrack (2012), I used the work of Tim Fitzgerald to identify what such arguments get right and what they get wrong. In the present reply to Fitzgerald, I make a case for critical realism as a methodological stance for the study of religion that can learn from deconstructive approaches without abandoning the concept

Professor Fitzgerald's response to my paper admirably avoids the defensive-ness that is common in such replies, as well as the complaint that the critic has misinterpreted the author. One of the central criticisms I raised was that Fitzgerald deconstructs "religion" as an ideological projection and therefore as chimerical and imaginary, but does not-as consistency would require-do the same for the categories of politics and economy. His non-defensive response is that this criticism is just and that in his more recent work he has begun to address this issue and to deconstruct the ideas of secular politics and secular economy and, he now notes, education and law as well.

In that same forward-looking way, I would like to use our exchange to make progress on a deeper question that is, I think, at issue between us, a question that often arises in discussions about the status of "religion." I judge that our disagreement can be profitably framed as the difference between two approaches to the conceptual category of "religion": deconstruction and

critical realism.[1] Deconstruction, at least in part, takes concepts that are assumed to be necessary or natural and shows that they are the product of historical contingencies and complicated hermeneutic contexts. Fitzgerald describes what he is doing as deconstructing "religion" both in his earlier work and in his response to me. Critical realism similarly seeks to critique the socially produced concepts with which one categorizes the world, but it does so in order better to describe realities that exist, according to critical realists, apart from one's language and thoughts. In this response, I would like to make a case for critical realism with regard to the concept of "religion."

On the topic of the concept of religion, the two approaches share a fair amount: religion is often taken, naively, as a given, as part of the furniture of the world. But Fitzgerald and I agree (1) that religion does not exist apart from human practices and discourse, (2) that "religion" is not a stand-alone concept but operates as part of certain conceptual pairs such as religious/secular, and (3) that the emergence of "religion" as a category distinct from "secular" is a modem rhetorical move that serves efforts to frame secular modernity as the good side of pairs such as evolved/primitive or rational/superstitious. He and I do not disagree about these three points (Schilbrack 2612: 98-9). I take these three as his way of deconstructing the category of religion and showing that a concept that has been treated unreflectively as a real force (like lightning) or as part of the human condition (like the liver) is instead the product of certain historically emergent and politically invested ways of speaking and living.

Where we disagree is over the question: after we deconstruct "religion," then what? Once we understand that the way we carve up the world is not only historical and socially dependent, but also politically implicated, then what? As a scholar of religions, I am interested in understanding and explaining the phenomena that we now call religious texts, religious practices, religious experiences, religious movements, and so forth-in short, religious phenomena. But Fitzgerald calls such things: the "supposed phenomena." He reiterates that there is "no category of religion" and he wants scholars to drop the concept.

Deconstruction is a reflexive exercise. It shifts our attention from the phenomena to which our words supposedly and as if transparently refer and it moves our attention to those words themselves. As Fitzgerald says:

> My own method is to look at the actual deployments of these vague terms in a number of texts and try to observe how they are actually used, what differences

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[1] The seminal texts of deconstruction and critical realism, respectively, are Derrida (1998) and Bhaskar (1975). I don't address the question whether Fitzgerald's version of deconstruction accurately reflects Derrida's.

are being claimed between them, what presuppositions are being imported unconsciously into the text, why anyone would think this was an important thing to do. (2013: io6)

I think that this reflexive moment of deconstruction is an invaluable part of the academic study of religion. My concern is that this moment can become an end in itself. It can rest content with disassembling our concepts without ever reassembling them, and then the study of religion becomes exclusively the study of "religion." Some deconstructionists seem to reject realism in any sense (perhaps with the slogan that "there is nothing outside the text") and do not ever refine or improve the questions that we ask about the world. But is it possible to reflect critically not only on our conceptual categories but also on that which they are intended to describe? Those who answer Yes to this question will perforce move beyond deconstruction to a constructive effort of developing terms that can refer to a world that exists outside the scholar's study. It is out of my interest in that project that I reach for the tools of critical realism.

The notion of realism may be a stumbling block for some. To be a realist about religion is to talk about religions as forms of life that exist in the world. It is to hold that religions have achieved the kind of intersubjective reality that, unlike my plan to visit my parents or my admiration of Michael Chabon's novels, they do not depend for their existence on what I think. In Fitzgerald's response, he objects that to think of religion as real is to treat it as a natural entity. He worries that I treat religion like the planet we now call Venus, which exists whether or not there are human beings around to name it. Another objection he makes is that to think of religion as real is to assume that religion is "set apart" from politics and economics as a "separate domain." It is to treat the religious and the nonreligious as "as if they are essentially different, along the axis of binary either-or alternatives" (Fitzgerald 2013: 104). But both of these objections are easily dispatched. On the first point, the critical realist about religion should see religions not as aspects of nature but as historically emergent social realities. Fitzgerald seems to operate with only two possibilities: either something exists as a human-independent entity that exists in nature, or it is imaginary. But social kinds like religions are a third option. Like the borders of one's country, they don't exist apart from human language and practice, but they do exist independently of what I think of them. I may not like the border and I know that it is historically contingent, that its existence depends on the use of force, that the claim that the border is where it is reflects a political agenda, and that to recognize national borders at all is to presuppose the emergence of the modem state. But when people are fighting over borders, to speak of them as fictions or chimerical does not seem to me to be an analysis

that is illuminating or helpful. The same is true of religions. On the second point, to say as a realist that religions really do exist in the world in no way suggests that phenomena may not be simultaneously religious and political. Think of the apotheosis of Caesar, or readers of my earlier paper (2012) may recall my analogy of a man who is both a father and a professor. Being one in no way impedes the possibility of being the other. Fitzgerald is therefore wrong to claim that realism about religion implies that there are separate domains, essences, or some "binary either-or."

The more difficult question for critical realists, I judge, is not whether one can distinguish religious from non-religious aspects of culture, but whether it is useful to do so. Let me end on this pragmatic question.

In the previous paper I wanted to be clear that I do not believe that I can *separate* religion and culture (since I am trying to study religion precisely as an aspect of culture), but that I could nevertheless *distinguish* religious and non-religious aspects of a culture; I can distinguish churches from post offices. When Fitzgerald responds to me by asking, "Why would anyone need to separate religion from culture?" I fear that my contrast between separating and distinguishing has been missed. But I am not proposing that religion, politics, economics, and law can be separated: these institutions and aspects of human behaviour inform each other all the time. So I take it that Fitzgerald is really asking the pragmatic question why one might want to distinguish them.

To deny that religious and nonreligious aspects of a culture can be distinguished is to eliminate the concept of religion as an analytic tool. This is another way of saying that religion is merely a projection or that "religion" does refer to anything. Moreover, Fitzgerald now says that he wants to do the same for education and law. To erase the distinctions between these ways of seeing human behaviour is to remove our conceptual tools. But it is not easy to imagine how we will talk about human lives if the categories of "culture" and "politics" and "religion" and "education" and "law" *cannot even be distinguished.* The study of culture requires us to make distinctions about the world. In the end, that is why I think that the critical realist cannot lose this debate.

The issue here is whether there is value in distinguishing between forms of life that are religious and those that are not. Grant me, for the sake of this discussion, that forms of life can be individuated in terms of the norms to which their members are committed. The Ku Klux Klan, the Harry Potter Fan Club, The Church of Latter Day Saints, the U.S. Supreme Court, and the Miami Dolphins are forms of life that recognize different sets of ideals about behaviour, dress, and proper ends. My own working definition of religion distinguishes religious forms of life in terms of non-empirical norms whose existence, accord-

ing to the participants, does not depend on human activity.[2] This definition of religion leads me to distinguish between those people who draw their norms *from].* K. Rowling, the NFL, or the U.S. Constitution, and those who see their norms as independent of human creativity. Are there any such norms? Are forms of life based on such norms losing their role in modernity, or are such norms unavoidable? How might one justify them? One cannot ask such questions unless one distinguishes between "religious" and "secular." To repeat, making this distinction does not suggest that religions are ahistorical or that they are apolitical. Granted, to focus on this distinction will illuminate certain aspects of these forms of life while it obscures others, but that is a nec- essary aspect of all conceptual categories and language. Fitzgerald claims that to make this distinction is to limit, marginalize, and police what we call reli- gious communities (2013: 104), but this seems to me like the genitive fallacy.

Given the obscuring effects of the term, some critical realists may decide that the vocabulary of "religion" is too distorting and they will develop replace- ment terms such as "cosmographic formation" or "social formation" (Dubuis- son 2003; Mccutcheon 2001: 21-39). Whether one retains the tool of "religion" or not, however, the student of culture seeks to describe patterns of behaviour that exist independent of being so described. When Fitzgerald says that "there is no essential difference between religious and nonreligious domains ..." (2013: 104), even this is an attempt to describe the way things really are. Fitzger- ald's claim about the lack of difference takes a position on what is objectively the case. Moreover, one also sees in Fitzgerald's earlier work the desire to develop a new vocabulary: it seems that he is almost ready to be a critical real- ist. For example, in *The Ideology of Religious Studies,* he suggested that a better way to describe what we now call "religions" is to drop that label and replace it with ritual, politics, and soteriology (2000: 121-133). To recommend a better description of the contested data would be to step towards critical realism, but he pulls himself back. He now says that the term "politics" itself (and presum- ably the other two terms) also need to be deconstructed. Fitzgerald combines religion and politics and economics, etc., and speaks of the resulting lumps as "very different, powerful, collective *imaginaires"* (2013: 102). Since Fitzgerald grants that they are "very different," surely there is value in distinguishing *types* of collective *imaginaires.* The important point is that however one does so will require one to move beyond Fitzgerald's version of deconstruction to develop terms for social realities out there in the world.

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[2] I expand on this definition of religion in Schilbrack (forthcoming), ch. 6.

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