

DISAPPEARING CATEGORIES: USING CATEGORIES IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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Scholars of religion are certainly no strangers to the problems posed by terminology. Indeed, we continue to hotly debate the meaning of our subject matter—or is it a discipline?—“religion”. And the problems extend down the terminological ladder. As Philip Tite (2001) has recently shown in this journal, the names that we assign to traditions such as “Gnosticism” are equally problematic. How is Gnosticism, or for that matter Judaism, Christianity, Islam or Hinduism (especially!), to be defined in a meaningful way?

Nor do things improve further down the ladder. Like all scholarly fields, religious studies has developed its own specialized vocabulary or “critical terms” (cf. Taylor 1998). Distinctive to the field are categories such as “myth”, “asceticism” and “sacrifice.” As has long been recognized, the terms are slippery: An enormous international conference on asceticism, for example, failed to develop any consensus on the meaning of the term. The elusiveness of these analytical categories is not a minor matter. Scholarly studies can only be as precise as the language they use; and not a few recent and otherwise outstanding scholarly studies have been caught in terminological muddles.

My modest goal in this essay is to untangle the ways in which scholars do, and can, use analytical categories in a meaningful way. This essay is more methodologically reflective and programmatic than theoretical; it results from my own struggles, as a self-reflective but not particularly theoretical scholar, to make some sense of the field and to add clarity to my own work. There are, I will argue, three primary ways in which we can use such categories: (1) as first-order categories embedded in their specific contexts; (2) as descriptors of human phenomena; and (3) as utilitarian, second-order constructs. My constructive argument will focus on the third way, which has perhaps fallen out of favor recently, and suggest some methods for making it more useful.

First-Order Categories

Categories of knowledge, of course, are local constructs. Although there may be some underlying similarities that are based on biological and cognitive constraints, human societies often organize knowledge in radically different ways. One long established scholarly pursuit, especially in anthropology and religious studies, has been to tease out and describe these native categories and examine how they function within their local contexts. As Wayne Proudfoot asserts, “Religious experience must be characterized from the perspective of the one who has that experience” (Proudfoot 1985: 181). Thus, one scholarly goal is the description of these experiences told from within.

In religious studies, the first-order use of categories is most apparent in discussions of “religion” (Braun 2000). Nearly all recent discussions of the concept of religion begin either with the claim that “religion” is a relatively recent, Western Christian category, or that it is in fact not a native category at all, but a second-order abstraction used by scholars (cf. Molnár 2002). Both claims, as several scholars have noted, are exaggerated. Many societies have terms and concepts that *in some way* are analogous to modern Western notions of religion. *Religio*, as used in ancient Latin texts (including but not limited to Augustine) is one example, as are the Hebrew terms *halakhah* and Torah. Several Eastern religions also contain terms that refer to the relationship between the divine and humans as a distinct type of activity (cf. Company 2003). Despite the facile denial that the concept “religion” exists in other cultures, there is much room here for scholarly investigation.

Religion is only one concept, of several, that is amenable to first-order investigation. “God,” or more broadly, the “divine,” is the subject of several fine scholarly studies. The first part of Bruce Lincoln’s *Theorizing Myth* (1999) is an exemplary study of the transformation of the concept of “myth” (*mythos*) in early Greek language and thought. Fritz Graf has explored the concept of “magic” as ancient Mediterranean texts have understood and theorized it (Graf 1997). Many older studies examine ancient concepts such as *askesis* (asceticism) that have made their way into the New Testament: Although the goal of such studies is to establish the “background” of early Christianity (an approach largely frowned upon today), they remain useful and important.

Description can end at this point, or it can open up into explanation or comparison. Clifford Geertz, and to a lesser degree, William James, wants to stop at description (Geertz 1973: 3-30; Taves 2003; cf. Proudfoot 1985: 48-60). They adopt a hermeneutical approach, suggesting that

the scholar's task is a "thick description" of religious activities in their native contexts. As Proudfoot points out, this approach comes close to Eliade's program of "reliving" native experiences (Proudfoot 1985: 192).

For Proudfoot, first-order investigations are just the first step of scholarly activity. He argues that religious experiences need scholarly explanations that take seriously first-order imaginings (Proudfoot 1985: 196-98). That is, the focus of scholarly activity for him is trying to explain *why* a particular person or society used the first-order categories that they did.

A second trajectory for first-order category investigations is comparison. However similar they may appear, only rarely will any two first-order categories from different cultures be exactly congruent. More commonly, native concepts will be *in some way* analogous. Any investigation of first-order categories, then, can lead in two directions. First, it will raise the questions about the purported resemblance: In what ways, precisely, are the concepts similar? Are they similar "enough" to constitute a useful pair for comparison? There is, of course, a rich theoretical literature on similarity that can aid such evaluations.

I will return below to the issue of comparison, but it is worth noting here where such first-order comparisons can lead. Once the argument is made, for example, that the modern Western concept of "religion" is similar enough to "*religio*" or "*halakhah*" to warrant comparison then the actual comparison must be made. At this stage we move from examining the similarities that have made the comparison possible to the differences between them. To my mind, asking who shares our modern concept of "religion" is beside the point; the real question is how different societies define—or do not define—a sphere of activity that has at least some resemblance to constructions from other cultures and to use the differences between these constructions in ways that can be mutually enlightening.

Categories as Descriptors of Human Phenomena

Scholars, however, more commonly use categories as second-order descriptors. From the beginning of the practice of what would become "religious studies", its practitioners have seen these categories as representing unique, *sui generis* spheres of human activity. From its roots in nineteenth century Germany through Marcel Eliade's prolific project, a major goal of the field was to discover the "essence" of human "religious" activity. This enterprise grew from the assumption that the human being was a *homo religiosus*, and that all humans exhibited similar patterns

of religious activity as part of their very essence (cf. Eliade 1959; Kippenberg 2002: vii-ix, 36-97).

Eliade's approach and the assumption that humans are "essentially" religious have fallen out of scholarly favor (cf. McCutcheon 1997). Yet the assumption persists that these categories represent something "real" and perhaps even universal about human behavior. Just as the field of economics assumes the universal existence of markets and then constantly tests that assumption as it also attempts to describe the universal "laws" of market activity, so too do many scholars of religion attempt to explain the universal laws of religious behaviors, while at the same time questioning and rectifying their hypotheses.

Jonathan Z. Smith has been a persistent advocate of this social-scientific approach. Smith is primarily interested in comparison and although he laments the absence of any mature theory of comparison behind much work in religious studies, he remains committed to the comparative enterprise. Smith proposes "four moments in the comparative enterprise" (Smith 2000a: 239): description, comparison, redescription, and rectification. It is the latter two that comprise the goal of the enterprise: "The aim of such a comparison is the redescription of the exempla (each in light of the other) and a rectification of the academic categories in relation to which they have been imagined" (Smith 2000a: 239). Redescription is important, but the real goal is rectification. For Smith, the primary goal of the comparative enterprise is to make a hypothesis that is encoded in a category (e.g., asceticism or myth) and then to test and refine it. This recursive sharpening of a category, in Smith's view, leads not only to its greater utility, but also to a generalizable hypothesis about the nature of certain spheres of human activity.

There is, it seems to me, a tension in Smith's epistemology. On the one hand, he claims that "Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization" (Smith 1982: xi). On the other hand, the "exemplum [should] be displayed in the service of some important theory, some paradigm, some fundamental question, some central element in the academic imagination of religion" (Smith 1982: xi). The problem is breaking out of the hermeneutic circle. Clearly Smith is claiming more than that scholars create a heuristic field to make arguments that are useful only within that field; the implication is that the "fundamental question" engages something outside of the scholar's study.

Let me very briefly illustrate this problem with but a single of Smith's many influential contributions to the study of religion. His essay, "The

Bare Facts of Ritual” (Smith 1982: 53-65) makes an important, generalizable claim about the function of ritual as “*a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are . . .*” (Smith 1982: 63, original emphasis). But “ritual”, like religion, must be for Smith an imaginary category. By sidestepping the delicate question of definition, Smith undermines his attempt to develop a generalizable approach to “ritual” that moves it into the real world. Smith also ignores this problem in his essay on “Classification” (Smith 2000b), focusing on the ways that religions classify, and the ways that scholars classify religions, without addressing the problem of how scholars classify discrete elements of “religion.”

Smith’s approach to religion has, of course, been highly influential. Yet despite its popularity and the general utility of social-scientific approaches to the study of religion, this use of categories—even when well done—is problematic. The primary problem with this approach is its definitional subjectivity and circularity. A term like “ritual” cannot easily sustain either a substantive or a functional definition (cf. Bell 1997). As a second-order abstraction (as distinct from limiting study to first-order “rituals”, as explicitly termed by their local cultures), a substantive definition can be created only from some *a priori* judgment of what data counts as belonging to the category. A functional definition is even more arbitrary. The result is that we, for example, select data that based on some *a priori* judgment appear to us to be rituals then create from this data the category, “ritual.” By the time we arrive at rectification of this constructed category we have moved through a full circle.

Bruce Lincoln’s illuminating book *Theorizing Myth* (1999) illustrates this problem. Lincoln begins by eschewing a definition of myth. Any definition of myth, he argues, “would not only be misleading, it would undercut and distort the very project I intend to pursue. For in the pages that follow I will not attempt to identify the thing myth ‘is’; rather, I hope to elucidate some of the ways this word, concept, and category have been used to identify the most dramatic shifts that occurred in their status and usage” (Lincoln 1999: ix). The first two parts of the book do precisely this. The first part traces the use and understanding of the Greek words *mythos* and *logos* through early Greek thought, admirably showing that the Platonic denigration of *mythos* was by no means a linear development. The second part of the book shows how modern writers and scholars have appropriated “myth” in order to advance their own (primarily political) agendas. In both sections Lincoln unproblematically follows a first-order approach, examining how different

writers use the term “myth”, and comparing and contrasting these usages to arrive at some intriguing conclusions about the scholarly construction of myth.

The third part of *Theorizing Myth*, however, is constructive, and seems to me to depart from his attempt to provide “a critical genealogy [sic] for the study of myth” (Lincoln 2002: 196). Here, Lincoln argues, “that when a taxonomy is encoded in mythic form, the narrative packages a specific contingent system of discrimination in a particularly attractive and memorable form. What is more, it naturalizes and legitimates it. Myth, then, is not just taxonomy, but *ideology* in narrative form” (Lincoln 1999: 147, original emphasis). The basic point of this section of the book, that myths reinforce political and religious hierarchies, is compelling. It is the journey to this conclusion that is fraught with slippage.

Despite his initial words of warning, Lincoln here does attempt to define myth. Lincoln is not explicit about whether he is using this provisional definition as a tool to gather relevant data, or whether this is the definition that emerges from this his data of myths. Either way, though, he finds himself in a circle; Robert Segal, in his review of Lincoln’s book, enters a similar circle of definition (Segal 2002). The structure of this section of the book appears to pick “myths” at random, only to show that they encapsulate ideology in narrative form. So ultimately, this becomes a definitional discussion, albeit one that makes an important point for those who sometimes neglect that ideological component of naturalizing narratives.

This suggests a second problem with this use of categories, its potential aridness. What is the intellectual pay-off of arbitrarily defining a category primarily in order to rectify it? This problem is exemplified, ironically, in an enormous and excellent collection of essays on “asceticism.”

Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis claim that the purpose of their collection, the proceedings of an ambitious conference, is to create “a comprehensive theoretical framework for the comparative study of asceticism” (Wimbush and Valantasis 1995b: xxv). The papers are shoehorned into four categories: origins and meaning of asceticism; politics of asceticism; hermeneutics of asceticism; and aesthetics of asceticism (Wimbush and Valantasis 1995b: xxvii). The quality of the volume is high and the effort to bring scholars from so many disparate disciplinary and cultural fields into conversation with each other is only commendable. The volume as a whole, however, founders precisely at its stated goal, which is to be *about* asceticism. Thus, Elizabeth Clark’s response to the volume’s essays raises a number of excellent methodological issues and yet is framed as a discussion of the meaning and definition of asceticism

(Clark 1995). Her frustration is evident as she struggles to get out of the definitional circle that the very project imposes.

Here it is worth reflecting on the ways in which categories drawn from religion are dissimilar to categories drawn from other social-sciences. "Asceticism" might be similar to "markets" in that both attempt to describe a real, universal (or nearly so) human activity. But they differ in that most economists use the concept of markets as a starting point for the creation of predictive models. The utility of these models helps to validate or falsify the original presupposition. Many social-scientific categories, whether qualitative or quantitative, have the same function; they allow for the creation of models of human behavior. Asceticism, on the other hand, does not result in predictive models, certainly not in quantitative ones. Its definition thus can never be falsified in any kind of social-scientific way, and its utility will always remain fuzzy.

Categories as Utilitarian, Second-Order Constructs

More promising than the attempt to turn these second-order categories into hypotheses of human behavior, I believe, is to use them in a purely utilitarian fashion. Like the use of categories as descriptors of human activities, their utilitarian usage constructs categories as second-order abstractions. Unlike the former, however, this use of categories makes no claim about the reality or essence of the category. The category becomes a mere tool for comparison, shifting the emphasis of the comparative enterprise from rectification to redescription.

Remember that for Smith, the first moment of the comparative enterprise is description. Clearly the first task of description is the selection of the relevant data and the exclusion of all else: What, precisely, are we going to compare? It is at this early stage of data selection that the use of categories can be most useful.

I am suggesting the use of categories as mental, or stipulated, formulations created by scholars in order to make useful comparisons. Categories, that is, can be used as entirely utilitarian, functional, constructs. They are definitions that we create in order to select data to compare. *These categories have no independent existence; they need not indicate anything "real"*. In any given analysis, then, "myth"—in theory—becomes whatever we say it is. There are reasons (see below) why in practice our definitions of categories are not, and should not be, random, but neither the native use of the category (e.g., Plato's definition of myth)

nor traditional essentialist scholarly definitions should limit our individual use of a category. The category becomes a *heuristic* means of gathering data. Only once the data is gathered and the appropriate descriptions made can one proceed to the second, and far more important, operation of actual comparison. At this point, the category “disappears”; it has done its job of bringing interesting things together. When we move to the second and analytically more central task of actual comparison we dispense with the category itself. It has served as a kind of clamp, holding two pieces of wood together until the glue has dried.

The primary purpose of such comparisons, then, becomes their explicative utility. Well-constructed comparisons allow us to redescribe local phenomena in fresh ways. This becomes, incidentally, the primary contribution of the *Asceticism* volume. It might set out to investigate the “real” workings of “asceticism”, but in the end it brings together a series of rich local portraits that can be read against each other. Confronted with sets of three disparate papers to which to respond, several of the respondents used their own informed and creative abilities to draw connections far more interesting than those suggested by the four rubrics of asceticism. Responding to papers on female ascetic practices in one Hindu tradition, ascetic tendencies in Paul, and Athanasius, Dianne Bazell, for example, suggestively discusses the ways in which these three topics help to inform, and raise questions for, the others (Bazell 1995). The point is to bring different things into conversation with one another—however artificial the link that connects them—and to see where it leads.

Although they are heuristic constructs, analytical categories need not, and should not, be completely random. Scholarly analytic categories tend to have two sources. First, they grow out of “native” categories. Graf has convincingly argued that ancient Greek and Roman discussions of magic ultimately inform James Frazer’s much maligned (essentialist) definitions in *The Golden Bough* (Graf 1997: 27). Second, they now carry with them a century or two of sustained scholarly discussion. Often, of course, these two definitional sources are hopelessly entwined. Nevertheless, there is no reason to ignore either source. Lincoln is correct to emphasize that scholarship involves “a dialectic encounter between an interested inquirer, a body of evidence, and a community of other competent and interested researchers, past, present, and future” (Lincoln 1999: 208). When we use a term like “myth” as an analytic category, we should certainly draw on the scholarly tradition of the definition, while not hesitating to modify this definition for our own purposes. Although here I am criticizing scholarly preoccupation with heuristic categories, one

important legacy of this scholarship is sustained reflection on the categories and their usefulness in different contexts. Every time we search for a critical term we need not reinvent the wheel.

What, then, separates a “good” heuristic category from an idiosyncratic or “bad” one? I think that ultimately this judgment needs to be reserved for the pay-off of the comparison. If the category allows for comparisons that a community of scholars find interesting, it has succeeded. If, however, the comparison is arid, then the term was not usefully defined. Like any utilitarian object, a heuristic category is a tool, and its usefulness needs to be judged in each individual case. The advantage of drawing on the scholarly tradition for our category definitions is that this tradition presumably preserves categories that scholars have found useful in different contexts. Thus, there is a good probability that these categories will “work” in a new context. But there is also the possibility that the category might not work, or might need some tweaking in order to make a useful comparison. At this point previous definitions of the term need not confine us. We should not even pause to wonder whether, for example, we are using a definition of “myth” that is not really “myth”: Myth is whatever we say it is in the context of a given argument and in relation to specific sets of concrete data.

The implications of this shift of understanding of categories can be subtle. It still should allow for, or indeed even encourage, generalizable claims. But it is more explicit about the ontological nature of these claims, treating them as “sensitizing concepts” rather than theories of human behavior (Wuthnow 2003: 22). Smith’s claim about ritual (or Lincoln’s about myth), for example, is no less important if seen as a sensitizing concept rather than as a descriptor of “real” functions.

This loose definitional approach necessitates a strong caution. Loose definitions can lead to a weakening of a shared vocabulary. I am not suggesting that we abandon an attempt to find a shared technical vocabulary, only that we resist the urge to define rigidly and essentially. I am proposing an organic living vocabulary; one that we recognize is dynamic. Such an approach to the definition of categories necessitates that we define our terms explicitly. A scholar writing on myth would, and should, have to account for her or his definitions, even if this account merely appropriates definitions currently in circulation. We should cease to use valuable analytic terms, like “myth” or “asceticism”, with no definitional comment, as if all readers know what they mean. Without an explicit stipulated definition, they mean nothing. Analytical clarity more than recompenses the minor, mainly stylistic, cost of definitional precision.

Conclusions

Jonathan Z. Smith has lamented our inability to articulate “either the method for making comparisons or the reasons for its practice” (Smith 1982: 35). Although he makes some constructive suggestions in *Drudgery Divine* (Smith 1990: 36-53) and softens his critique in a later essay (Smith 2001), Smith’s dissatisfaction with the state of the field is still cogent. At the same time, there is increasing scholarly interest in comparative work, as a recent self-reflective volume of essays devoted to this area attests (Patton and Ray 2000; cf. Poole 1986; Doniger 2000; Taylor 2000: 13-15). While there is, and will remain, scholarly disagreement about appropriate methods for the comparative study of religion, whether in its “macro” forms (e.g. Holdrege 1996) or in more discrete chunks, as I have primarily been discussing here, this is a discussion that can only be good for the field.

I have here attempted to untangle one aspect of the “method for making comparisons.” Minimally, scholars need to be self-conscious and explicit about the way that they use such loaded categories as analytical tools. Whether one uses categories to describe and compare first-order concepts, to develop generalizable theories of human activity, or to make local comparisons for the purpose of redescription, self-awareness can at least help to avoid slippage between these different uses. More ambitiously, I also argue that the popular scholarly use of categories as descriptors of real human activities can actually hinder comparative scholarship. More fruitful would be a focus on local comparisons. The goal of these comparisons is redescription rather than rectification; we seek to describe one thing in the light of another. Rectification thus becomes an act of tidying up, a short discussion at the end of the comparison of the usefulness of the original heuristic category. In this sense, rectification is a footnote, not the argument.

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