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"CULTURE: WHAT DOES ONE DO WITH IT NOW?"

CATHERINE BELL

With so many sleek and exciting methodologies about today, to speak
to the strengths—and weaknesses—of the cultural method appears to
have a particular subtext: is it possible to give any legitimacy to this
old jalopy?[1] And there may be another possible subtext, that only a
member of an older generation would or *could* try to do this. However,
no generational is intended, I am sure; rather, the youngest scholars
on the scene simply have little sense of the cultural method as a method.
The cultural method appears so ubiquitous and thus so ill-defined that
to be methodological self-aware today seems to require that one *react
against it* in some way.

To address this situation, I would like to take a circuitous route,
beginning with the observation that the description for this panel
employed a rather gentle version of a familiar discursive trope—after
being told that "the era of big theory was over," the emergence of two
new ones (cognitive science and economic theory) has sown confusion
among graduate students who were advised to forget the big picture,
focus on what's at hand, and put together a more efficient theoretical
toolbox targeted for specific needs. So now there is confusion not sim-
ply about the new big theories, but also about such unperceptive advice
from the older generation of teachers (not me! big theory is always out
and about). You recognize this trope: the darkness that has descended
on the field might lift only if we are bold in taking a fresh start. This
is, one suspects, Harold Bloom's old theory of the "anxiety of influence,"
which many have observed that Americans play out to the death,
Oedipal style.[2] Even when our German and Japanese colleagues are
out trolling for the next "big" thing, they assume they will contextual-
ize it in order to minimize the implication that they themselves invented
it whole cloth, and therefore comes without vetting, sponsorship, or
approval from above.

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[1] This paper was originally presented at the annual meeting of the North American
Association for the Study of Religion, November 2004, San Antonio.

[2] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*. New York: Oxford University Press,
1973.

The trope of disarray-needing-a-new-answer, however, dismisses every-thing that came before; the new answer that is pulled like a rabbit from a hat is presented as fresh if not original, certainly not tied to any predecessors. In a small piece for a recent issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, a column entitled "The Short List: Misunderstood Concepts," Mark C. Taylor contributed the following: "The field of religious studies—if it is a field—is in a perpetual state of crisis because it can neither define its object of study nor agree on distinctive methods or strategies of interpretation."[3] I have heard this hundreds of times, but for relative newcomers to the field—if there *is* a field—this public statement might well sow unnecessary confusion, doubt, and perhaps even panic, which could result in undue attraction to the very modest answer that Taylor proposes, or any answer that looks like a safe bet in the horse race of ideas.

It is worthwhile I think to make two points about the subtle and not so subtle uses of this trope. First, although the tendency to downplay intellectual lineages may be linked to the greater diversity and open-ness of the American academy, an unquestioned good, it can also be a silly disservice and obvious theoretical weakness. Second, and more substantively, it is not hard to see that the field, if we *are* a field, would not make any progress should a particular definition of religion be accepted by all. That is a perfect recipe for stagnation. Indeed, if a clear and accepted definition is necessary for the existence of a field, then there are very few fields at all in the modern academy. The mod-ern "field of study" is a very loosely organized conversation in which the parameters are always ill-defined; it is not centered on any one clear definition, or definer, although efforts at definition play a useful part. A field is a "blurred" arena for immediately countering, tweak-ing, or "riffing" (to play with Clifford Geertz and Vincent Wimbush in the same sentence) on every point that emerges for attention, no matter how temporary or enduring.[4]

In a field in its usual state of semi-confusion, the issue of method-ological choices always comes steeped with anxiety. People may stake all on embracing or repudiating the new. Reputations are readily made

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[3] Mark C. Taylor, "Defining Religion," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. November 5, 2004, p. B4.
[4] See Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought," *American Scholar* 49 (1980): 165-179; and Vincent L. Wimbush, "Scripture: Fathoming a Complex Social-Cultural Phenomenon," Claremont Graduate University, Institute for Signifying Scriptures, February 27, 2004. Forthcoming, p. 4.

and unmade—at least until the next book. In terms of clarity and con-fusion, definitions and deconstructions, I think the study of religion today is not much different than it was 25 years ago when I joined it. It is a significantly *larger* field today, yet its health and feistiness can be seen, in part, in the many new conversation partners who have joined in the dialogues. Sometimes with quite different training, and therefore poorly read in both the religious studies classics and recent books of interest, some new members have entered with expectations of sweep-ing everything else aside, providing a whole new way of thinking.[5] There may be a fair amount of posturing in this, of course. We *are* a large audience and competition for attention is intense; we demand a real performance. Yet for us, these new conversations also mean, as you all know, many more books and journals to read in addition to the pub-lications of the various subfields in which we try to stay abreast of things. Who can keep up? No one, really—unless you focus *just* on methodology, the only good argument I know for doing so. So the field of religious studies may be healthy, but I believe that everyone in it is stressed by the pace. If someone should sweep it all away with a sin-gle new way of thinking, might we not all be grateful?

As a field, we bear our history like a shadow institutionally attached to our feet lest we fail to recognize it and let it drift away. Historically, the study of religion pulled free of theology (in part with the help of the best of Protestant theological scholarship) in a period when the lure of a science-like paradigm helped generate many new fields of study. But the 1960s saw growing fears of scientific claims to be the ultimate arbiter of truth in the academy as well as the cold war. In letting go of the "soft" science model, there was little heady excitement about pushing into new realms and a lot more nostalgia for the old confidence of common assumptions last known only in the early, semi-theological days of religion as *sui generis*. Now I have just implied a relatively neat historical succession of approaches—and there was nothing neat about it, of course. Some scholars are still doing *religionswissenschaft* today; while others, like me, found the *sui generis* model of religion to be over, done,

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[5] For example, in their first book, E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, make many remarks about the utter newness of their approach, such as their claim to generate not simply a better interpretation of religion, but a new explanative theory intent upon replacing and even eliminating current conceptual schemes. This is a revolution, they suggest, in the science of religion. *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

out, kaput, but respectfully so, when I arrived in Chicago in 1975 to study with Eliade.

It was possible to lay aside the *sui generis* model because the study of religion was learning that cultural theories (the *least* scientific of those in anthropology) need not to be feared, although they were no remedy for nostalgia. Logically, these early understandings of religion as a cultural phenomenon led to the post-modernist realization that we have *cultural understandings of cultures*—and that is all we can have. There is no solid ground in that direction. Before long there was also the nervous fear that all and any explanations can now proliferate without any disciplinary criteria to establish a consensus of validity—and that became a reason for some to go back a few steps and follow other lines of analysis. But most of us thought such fears about theory manageable—it was only theory, after all—although these theories were curiously oblivious to how it is actually practiced. So it was fun to romp in French for a good decade and more. Now some are alarmed by the rise of terribly self-confident economic and cognitive theories, a new naturalism, which they say is a mere reaction to insecurities of post-modernism. I myself think it may be another British-French thing—which has a long history in this area. Yet if cognitive theories are a solution to post-modern angst for some, for others they fill what is a vacuum; and perhaps the pause in the wake of post-modernism is finally allowing some other approaches to be heard.

If there is indeed a predicament among graduate students who are lost, without even a trail of breadcrumbs in this threatening forest—then nothing has changed since my day. But I don't think this is a very good description of the current theoretical options, even if it captures something of the frustration we have all felt.

When asked about the "cultural method," I must say I was surprised to hear it enumerated as just one theoretical option alongside the others suggested; so I wondered how it looked to younger scholars. I have undoubtedly become a bit complacent about a method that is, for me, the story of my years studying religion—and one that is fully wrapped up in a very American version of the contemporaneous as well as often contemptuous coexistence with primitive religions, be they Huron, Inuit, Irish Catholics or Polish Jews. But I know it is not old hat, that it is still being freshly experienced and tried out in unexpected and non-marginal places. For example, at a recent conference of archeologists sponsored by the Department of Archeology at UCLA, a terribly learned and excited group of scholars were just beginning to take seriously the

implications of the method and wander with anticipation in the rooms it seemed to be opening up.[6] In fact, I tried to caution them a bit!

A Cross-Theoretical Contribution

It may be very useful to demonstrate that the "models" on display need be neither outmoded nor so extreme and total as to sweep away all else in their paths. In other words, we can demonstrate that there really are options, and non-exclusive ones at that.

Let me start on the cultural approach by noting that it has been done a big favor by the more radical and reductive sounding theoretical newcomers, something that it could not quite do for itself. It is interesting to me that the radical newcomers have contributed to the comfort and confidence of scholars in explicitly addressing how the belief systems of religion are simply beliefs, they are not *real* in any experienced way; the new naturalist style suggests that the soft cultural way of being "in the closet" on this basic issue has probably discouraged better analyses of how religion gets off the ground, what *is* that ground, and how it is floated and maintained. The attempt to find a purely natural explanation of religion, which I think displays many problems, still has done the great service of making us "get real" about what we think we are talking about and comparing from one culture to another. We were comfortable with all the great social theories and the vague, over-written *cultural* naturalism, but biological or psychological alternatives that sought no middle ground are very unusual. And current openness to theoreticians who roundly assume an unequivocal atheism distresses some in this academy: very few atheists began graduate school in the study of religion. However, this frankness is long overdue. We can be religious and held to another new level of argument, or we can be atheists and not forced to sound obtusely empathic. When we are all comfortable with this, we may even see forms of less arrogant reductionism emerge.

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[6] *The Archeology of Ritual*, Third Cotsen Advanced Seminar, University of California at Los Angeles, January 8-9, 2004. My concluding response to the presentations was entitled, "Defining the Need for a Definition" (in press).

320   CATHERINE BELL

Using Cultural Theory Today

As this opening tribute to its competitors suggest, I have what is probably
a rather idiosyncratic appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of
cultural approaches to the study of religion today. To begin with, there
is the big tent conundrum. A cultural approach has helped generate a
big tent that can include not just the very sensible presentations given
by my colleagues here today, but also some less-than sensible ones—
and there always have to be *some* people willing to push ideas farther
than we may want to end up. But the benign big tent role begins to
falter if I try to pin down the nature of the tent more precisely: do
cultural approaches subsume the theories we have been discussing?
Those colleagues might disagree. And I might not want to have a cul-
tural theory that is so broad and accommodating that it cannot be got-
ten out from under. The tent should be an "institutional" phenomenon
even if theories have a real role in creating it. A *theory* that can accom-
modate everyone and everything is no longer analytically very useful.
It has taken on so much that it becomes a wallpaper assumption—on
which the graffiti will eventually take its toll.

So the broadness of cultural theory today is a weakness and strength;
it is often depicted in hyphenated forms to identify more analytically
precise formulations, such as cultural-performance or cultural-practice
theory, terms used perfectly correctly in talking to me about my work
and remarks here today. But the sense of being stretched too far does
not mean that cultural theory really is or wants to be everything, even
as an unvoiced assumption. When analyzed in its historical developments
and engagements, cultural theory has a number of specific features—
represented more in some theorists, less in others—that define it rather
precisely. Let me enumerate what I see as some characteristics of a
cultural theory approach that define its particularity, rather than its
generality.

First, cultural theory tries to catch its own tail. Usually it never does
so very successfully and it could become a neurotic form of behavior
(I think they give dogs Prozac if they are unable to stop running after
their tails), but it sees catching it as a theoretical possibility. In other
words, cultural theory tries to account not only for the phenomenon
that is its immediate focus, but also for the conditions that have led
some people in one type of institution to ask such questions in study-
ing other people in a different type. For example, I can use cultural
theory to explain how it is that I, in the 21st century and a member
of various secularized institutions ascribing to many of the frayed

principles of the Enlightenment, am researching Chinese ancestral rites on the village level in the pre-modern period, for example—using the same theory for the observer as for the observed.[7] This is a strength: it undermines a bit of the power hierarchy imposed by the analytical relationship. Still, in so far as *we* can account for our analysis of *them*, we have acknowledged the loop relationship, but we have not escaped it. In other words, we have not met them on any sort of reciprocal footing. Perhaps we may not be listening seriously to how they are analyzing us, and this may be impossible in historical situations. Yet we are able to acknowledge the sort of relationship we are creating. As the tent that is the study of religion gets broadened by post-modern realizations of the circle we created when we saw through our simplistic polarizations (me in pith helmet, you in loincloth to put it in cartoon terms), we are hearing very new voices, speaking in the manner they have had to adopt to be allowed into the tent to talk at all. It is an improvement.

Second, cultural theory tends to assume individuals as much as groupings. Today, culture does not exist off somewhere like a great Jungian collective unconscious. It resides in the activities of people, which in turn constitute the learned "unsystematic system" from which people generate creative activity. They generate ideas, stories, material objects, social organizations, traditions, and events like war, baseball, and ancestral rites—all continuing to constitute, for individuals, the resources for producing more individualized cultural activity. There are regularities across cultures that tantalize some of us, and stark differences that attract the attention of others. We might generate theories of personal agency, transmission by memory practices, or the special roles of oral, textual, or artistic media, etc. The recognition of individual activities in cultural theory today is much of what makes Durkheimian sociology inadequate, although I would not say he has been proven wrong. Likewise, the symbol-meaning approach of Turner and Geertz, which has been so important to this field for so long, has proven inadequate for uncovering or appreciating the individual.

But if cultural theory is broad, it builds on what has come before; actually, it hyphenates and subsumes. As its tail passes through the early social anthropology of Durkheim and the symbolic-cultural anthropology of Turner, we do not cut it off. It gets heavy to carry around and quite ponderous to teach—adding to the reification of theory as

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[7] When this question was asked of Robert McCauley at a panel at the AAR in Atlanta 1994, it provoked lively discussion particularly from the audience.

a thing in itself, as well as the attraction of those theories that are one stop, more tool than extended intellectual family history. Yet, the history of theory makes us remember history in general. I can say more about the historical in cultural theory, as a separate point, which has been an on-again off-again problem until historians became cultural and cultural anthropologists did history. But that is a story a bit better known and perhaps there is no need to retell it here.

There is a fourth point that I want to try to articulate as smoothly as I can. Cultural approaches are still analyses, which mean that even if the theory is able to account for the theoretician and the theorized, it does not mix them up at any one time. Religion is not, to be explicit, the study of religion. The academy's discourse on religion has had an effect on the seminaries and the pulpits, as well as the popular press, but not as much effect as we have been apt to see.[8] We did not create the modern practices of religion. Our fixation on the power of our theories can risk ignoring, by taking too much credit for it, what our surrounding culture is doing and how it is affecting *us* in our studies. There are many arguments around today that make their central theme by playing with the ambiguity that can be given the term religion— whose religion and whose notion of religion can be quite unclear. We can do better than that. My point is that cultural analysis distinguishes without creating a privileged gulf. It does bear more analysis, I think, to consider how the requirements of any one act of theorizing may demand the imposition of distinctions that we say are problematic when discussing the nature of theorizing.

Finally, the cultural method was introduced at the turn of the century, some argue by Franz Boas as much as anyone else, although some studies trace it back to the Victorians. Louis Menand's provocative book, *The Metaphysical Club*, finds its roots in 19th century arguments about race. My point is simple—since its introduction, the cultural method has, despite its spongy ability to absorb and hyphenate, been a clear enemy of any ideology that comes under its radar as totalitarian, racist, imperial, or ideological. Maybe it has found these tendencies in

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[8] See Tomoko Masuzawa's critique of Jonathan Z. Smith's "koanic" statement: "Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytical purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy" (Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. p. xi) in "The Production of 'Religion' and the Task of the Scholar: Russell McCutcheon Among the Smiths," Review Symposium, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 1:1 (April/May 2000), 123-130, quoting page 126.

its own workings; and maybe we are a bit too quick to get nervous about the apparent reductiveness of a theory that does not do what a cultural theory does, or evokes something of the old self-confidence of a "natural" science (although that does not automatically make it fascist!). Some of the more threatening emphases may be a way to get heard outside of an academy built on the assumptions of cultural theory. Still, some nervousness in our reaction is not a bad way to force new methods to respond to more general ideas about what makes for a better theory.

Conclusion

"Big theory" has been pronounced dead and then resurrected several times in my short career alone. In so far as we have choices, that is, real choices, there are no big theories—just people attempting to explain everything without recourse to any other identifiable method. Yet it is the relationship between the theory and the phenomenon of interest that we should look at, without worrying for the moment at least, about claims for irreducible "facts" that validate such an approach. How big does a theory have to be to explore such topics as the significance of geographical and historical variation in worshipping the dead in one cultural province in China; or the similar gender rules that define the role of masks and secret societies in totally unrelated tribal societies; or the theological principles being stressed in Christian communities across Africa? The size of the theory will have to fit the size and complexity of the phenomenon. "Religion in general," the topic that Taylor was addressing, will need a pretty big theory, one that inevitably collapses a lot of ground while being able to hold its own when some particulars are raised. The same is true for explanations of how the academy created, or destroyed, or reinvented religion. Some of us are more fastidious in what we bite off and chew; others are apt to be less careful when drawn to the larger pictures. I have found that the variety of personalities and styles is not only an inevitable principle behind our choices, but it makes for the intellectual fun, frustration, and humanity of the field.

I am sure that graduate students today do not feel like they have a big theory ready at hand or even anything so neat as a tool box of discrete theories from which to choose. Of course, their theoretical tools will develop as their problem unfolds—and the problem unfolds as they find or develop a theoretical language for identifying it. It is a mutual

process to a great extent, rarely well-paced, often lopsided, with dead-lines apt to make a lot of difference for either direction. Still a good fit will demonstrate that theory is not just *a tool to open a can of data.* It is the gestalt against which data emerges, with the ability to illuminate something of the value of the methodological principles informing the context. In a piece on performance theory I tried to demonstrate how the phenomenon and the theory reveal each other, or perhaps it is more accurate to say "construct" each other; any one project is just one of many ways of exploring both.[9] The particular and practical goals of a project, the questions being asked, and the amount of data mobi-lized for review, are the determining factors for the size of the frame—is this a dissertation that has to be careful and defendable, or an article to provoke? Is the focus on how the ancestors reflect attitudes toward the dead or is the focus on how established ritual patterns can limit the influence of new ideas about the dead?

If the goal is to determine which theory of religion is best, we would have to ask best for what? To validate a field, to show that it does indeed exist, to attempt to define religion either in order to have con-trol over the so-called field or the very instances of what people have taken as religion—we have undoubtedly used our theories in every way possible. One likes to think we use them most successfully when we are exploring rather than confirming, inquiring rather than claiming, dialoging rather than pronouncing. Then again, this may be the ide-alism of a cultural theorist and I should not make too many such assumptions. A tendency towards cynical idealism and the appearance of compulsive self-questioning are, of course, two more characteristics of cultural theory that can be taken to arrogant proportions, but they may be the best things about it.

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[9] "Performance," in Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 205-24.