

There Be Monsters

Reply to the Interreligious and Interfaith Studies Group
American Academy of Religion, November 24, 2014

Russell T. McCutcheon

Given what I have written in the past—and I think here, for example, of some of the chapters in my 2001 collection, Critics Not Caretakers, such as my critique of Jacob Neusner's thoughts on the, in his words, "special promise of the academic study of religion . . . to nurture this country's resources for tolerance for difference, our capacity to learn from each other, and to respect each other" (155-177)—I admit that I was somewhat surprised to receive Patrice Brodeur's email, last March, inviting me to respond to today's panel. For this group's name—"Interreligious and Interfaith Studies"—along with its statement of purposes—to "create a space for critical interdisciplinary engagement with interfaith and interreligious studies, which examines the many modes of response to the reality of religious pluralism"—caused me to pause before hitting the reply button. For I am on the record arguing that engagement (not an insignificant word, I'd argue) with interfaith and interreligious studies is not an activity in any way akin to the academic study of religion, inasmuch as it inevitably champions but one of many positions along a complex, cross-cultural theological spectrum—simply put, not every so-called religious position wishes to be in a conversation with those with which it disagrees, so why should scholars play favorites and advocate one over the others?¹ After all, for many people there is no so-called "reality" of religious pluralism but, instead, there are merely the faithful as opposed to the damned or heathens or infidels or criminals or enemies or whatever other local term is used for those who threaten "our" taken-for-granted. Moreover, in past work I have also made plain that, to me, the rhetoric of faith is itself a modern, liberal humanist technique that effectively

depoliticizes the social, making the category “faith” (which, presumably, names some interior, causal [inasmuch as it is said to motivate subsequent action], non-rational disposition that, of course, can’t be critiqued or observed) a predictably useful trope that helps social actors to create the impression of immaterial commonality in situations where there is something to be gained by disregarding yet other publicly observable differences.

So, given such a starting point, I wasn’t sure what I had to contribute to this panel; why would anyone in such a group be interested in, as they say, caucusing with me on these issues?

But, reading more of that email, I found the proposal for this session intriguing; for, as I read it, the panel was to be concerned with investigating the “limits of interreligious dialogue activities,” with an aim toward identifying the “power relations that underlie these activities.” This struck me as a fresh approach, inasmuch as it seemed to entertain what I would term the positionality, even the historicity, and thus inevitable limits and unstated interests, of discourses on the one and the many. For because any act of identification requires something to be excluded, no matter how large we claim the so-called big tent to be, examining the borders of the canvas might prove illuminating, especially when the tent’s occupants, much like those skilled Cartographers in Borges’s well known fable, “On Exactitude in Science,” seem to think its edges are coterminous with reality itself. As for what might be past its edges? “There be monsters” said the old map makers.

So, examining limits, interests, and effects seemed an innovative project, especially when carried out within the confines of the American Academy of Religion, given that, in my reading, its now established phrasing of “religious studies and theology” signals a very particular type of acceptable theology to the exclusion of many others—an exclusion never defended nor made explicit, of course. For, like the undisclosed boundaries of the big tent, if it were to be examined,

if the normative engine that drives determinations concerning what sorts of theology do or do not appear on the program of this conference or in the pages of our journal were to be made public, thereby becoming an item of debate, then the illusion that this scholarly, non-profit organization is something other than a liberal theological interest group would be dispelled—and who wants to entertain the implications of that? (Though, come to think of it, should it then fit the Internal Revenue Service’s definition of a church the AAR may get even more tax benefits, making admissions of theological investments more profitable than we might at first think.)

But, to return to the topic at hand: my presence here today should indicate that I found this promised change of focus intriguing and so I accepted the kind invitation.

Now, although I only had one complete paper, a brief outline of another, and just the title of a third when I began to prepare this response last week, something became apparent to me while looking them over or after chasing down previous works by some of today’s panelists, so that I felt somewhat prepared. For contrary to what the proposal for this session characterized as three disciplinary strands that might be profitably consolidated—i.e., interreligious dialogue as carried out under the auspices of theology, conflict and/or peace studies, and, finally, sociology—I instead saw in the co-written outline an attempt at a social theory concerning the motivations for even engaging in this sort of activity, along with an analysis of the techniques used to create the impression of similarity, and then, in the others, I found two instances of data that, I would suggest, Koch and Lehmann could profitably use as test cases to explore their theory’s explanatory power. For instance, their hypothesis that, in order to be useful in interreligious dialogue activities, the category religion must be constructed in “a particularly ambiguous way” (an ambiguity presumably evidenced in grounding it in individual faith or non-empirical experience, as so many do) equally applies, I think, to such notions as “ultimate

reality” and “peace.” For example, I think here of Leonard Swidler’s definition of religion as “an explanation of the ultimate meaning of life” (emphasis in the original), drawing as it does on the category “ultimate”—what I would characterize as a usefully vague rhetorical term (akin to “ $n+1$ ” in mathematics, where n can be assigned any value that one wishes to trump), since I’m unsure what can be signified by a signifier that purportedly identifies the final terminus and thus end of all forms of signification. This tactical ambiguity is also evidenced in Mohammed Abu-Nimer’s 2003 book, Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam (University Press of Florida) and its undefined (at least as far as I could tell) notion of peace; for, despite a 1992 UN Secretary General report’s assertion that “[t]he concept of peace is easy to grasp,”² I would think that it too is a purely rhetorical term that, today, often names (in an undisclosed way) the socio-political conditions deemed by those who own the means of production as being favorable to their long term investment and profit. As but a quick example of its rhetorical and not analytic utility, consider British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s famous proclamation concerning “Peace for our time”; depending who you were are, and what your interests may be, this is likely heard as not being about peace, whatever that may in fact be, but, instead, as a way to sell what others might simply call acquiescence or appeasement. (For instance, would you call it peace if you were a Czechoslovakian of non-German descent who, in late 1938, awoke to suddenly find oneself now living in the newly invented Sudetenland thanks to the Munich Agreement of September 20, 1938?) That both Swidler and Abu-Nimer not only anchor their work around such usefully ambiguous terms but also propose philosophically idealist approaches (inasmuch as the former asserts that “how we conceive of reality determines how we will act” [emphasis in the original] and the latter presumes that the social lives he studies to be “rooted in Islamic belief” [2003: 6], emphasis added) confirms for me that their approaches are best understood as data for

Koch and Lehmann's project, therefore indicating that today's topic—a possible consolidation of these three positions—is not possible since one of our three is not like the others, inasmuch as it actually studies the other two.

If I am correct in thinking that we have two entirely different conversations going on up here, then how might a research project in the vein of Koch and Lehmann's actually proceed and what might it accomplish? Given that I am not entirely certain what ultimate reality or peace signify—that is, as already indicated, neither is an term of much analytic utility—they strike me as doing much the same work as the category faith and thus, given the approach outlined by Koch and Lehmann, it makes sense that we find such terms among the tools used by some social actors to create the conditions in which those who differ with regard to certain items could nonetheless imagine themselves as having something in common in terms of yet other, non-empirical items—as all being part of so-called Abrahamic religions, for example (itself an origins rhetoric already critiqued so nicely by Aaron Hughes in a book by that very name [Oxford University Press, 2012]). That is, the key to successful coalitions in a world comprised of all too obviously conflicting practical interests and competing representations is indeed to premise affinities for one another on sufficiently vague designators (and what counts as “sufficient” should probably be a focus of such a research project, for it must be just vague enough...)—“Hope” and “Change” from Barak Obama's first Presidential election campaign strike me as rather good examples of such a coalition-building technique, not to mention colleagues on hiring committees who, failing to work out in advance differences in their own thoughts on what their Department needs and toward what future it ought to be moving, end up maintaining the peace (as we say) by agreeing to advertise for applicants who are “excellent” (a

move that merely puts off to another day the arm wrestling over just what this excellence might entail).

On a previous occasion—introducing a co-edited anthology (with Craig Martin) that examined the rhetoric of experience as found in our field (yet another vague term of tremendous practical use)—I offered up as an example of the social utility of ambiguity a linguistic convention that is well-known in parts of the onetime British empire, and most certainly in Canada: the designator “eh?”. As I wrote in 2012:

Waiting at a bus stop, it would not be unusual to hear someone say, “Nice weather, eh?” But the person saying this is not, in fact, posing a question. For, despite the upward inflection as their sentence ends, one would never expect to find “eh?” used at the end of a sentence that put forward a controversial claim—one that risks the sort of disagreement that marks a break or a gap in social life. That is to say, the linguistic signal “eh?” ... [is an] occasion to solicit agreement from the person with whom one is having a conversation—“Yeah, it’s great weather” is therefore the expected, and thus the correct, answer. And by correct I simply mean the answer that signals your participation in the group—the group’s expectations for weather on an autumn morning, perhaps, or the group’s expectations for what sort of behavior can reasonably be expected to take place between strangers waiting at a bus stop. Important to recognize is that this exchange is therefore not about the weather (much like questions such as “How are you doing?” are not about how you are doing but, generally, are simply a way of saying hello; the correct answer, regardless of your disposition, is therefore “Fine”), for the observation on the quality of the weather simply provides an occasion for group affirmation and group building. “Eh?” is therefore a way to invite, perhaps even to force, agreement and thus solidarity by putting forward a claim already known to have the agreement of your conversation partner—it is already known because you each already know the other to be a member of your group, sharing your tastes, your sensibilities, your expectations, and most importantly, your language. Despite being strangers, you are both waiting for the same bus, after all. This agreement therefore is a mark of shared social affinity: “Are we both in the group who thinks that the weather is pleasant today?” to which someone answers, “Yes, we are peers.” “Eh?” questions are therefore simply occasions for massaging the group and your place within it. (Introduction, Religious Experience: A Reader, Routledge, 2012: 4-5)

I then concluded by posing a question: “If queries about the weather may not actually be about the weather, then could experience talk not actually be about supposedly pristine, internal things

called experiences either?” And today I would add, what about claims concerning faith, ultimate reality, or peace—not to mention hope, change, or excellence? Might we see in the very use of these semantically ambiguous signifiers a form of coalition-building taking place, as soon as two or more agree to play the game in which “peace” is presumed to actually name something, a game that is in competition with those that not only undermine the achievement of our shared interests but, more importantly, that undermine the efforts to constitute the impression of a shared “our” in the first place? To put it another way: if there is good reason why we often don’t clearly articulate what we mean but, instead, sometimes simply look over at someone and say, “Know what I mean?” (for why place what we might actually mean on the table, and thereby risk disagreement, when we can instead assume that meaning is effortlessly transmitted over the airwaves, simply registering deep in our interlocutor’s consciousness?), then might it be useful to begin our work with the assumption that shared social affinities are not built around or motivated by such vaguely defined notions as belief, ultimacy, and peace but that those who agree to participate in such a discourse, those who thereby invent the impression of commonality and shared purpose, were already standing at the same bus stop, ready for a conversation with others who also found themselves there, because they already have sufficiently shared practical interests—long before deciding to have a so-called dialogue with one another about it. For an affirmative head-nodding reply to the query “Know what I mean?” signals not the agreement over the meaning that is transpiring but a willingness to suspend the usually operating rules of specificity and limitation by which meaning-making takes place—an agreement to overlook, for example, the fact that my notion of ultimacy or peace or faith may have very little to do with yours. What this suggests to me is that interreligious dialogue—i.e., when we start talking about deep things and ultimacy and peace—might not be the causal force in successful coalition-

building but, instead, may be the secondary and merely subsequent effect of already established but perhaps not articulated affinities, making it merely rhetorical wrapping paper. For lacking those common practical circumstances, or lacking a common language, dialogue is likely not even considered an option.

To my way of thinking, this is the direction that we ought to be moving if we decide to follow Koch and Lehmann—investigating not shared beliefs or common faith but identifying the prior material conditions that make this sort of coalition-building desirable to just some parties (after all, we don't try to settle every dispute in this fashion, correct?)—if, that is, our goal is to investigate, as outlined in this session's proposal to the AAR, the “limits of interreligious dialogue activities,” with an aim toward identifying the “power relations that underlie these activities.” If, however, our goal is not to study the techniques of coalition-building and thus the workings of identity formation but, instead, simply to practice these techniques and thereby create collations that are advantageous to what some of us take to be our shared interests, then this is likely not a research project we would tackle. But if that is our practical goal, then I'm not sure how a session at a scholarly association with one paper offering a theory to account for the other two helps us to accomplish it.

¹ See Ramey for a critique of the manner in which scholars who claim to be engaged in disinterested description are often actively involved in constituting a specific, normative sort of orthodox subject to the exclusion of other data sets. (Ramey, Steven W. [forthcoming]. “Accidental Favorites: The Implicit in the Study of Religion,” in Monica Miller [ed.], Claiming Identity in the Study of Religion Social and Rhetorical Techniques Examined. Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishers.

² “An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-Keeping” (17 June 1992); Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to the statement adopted by the Summit Meeting of the Security Council on 31 January 1992. Posted at http://www.unrol.org/files/A_47_277.pdf (accessed November 10, 2014).