

The Problem of Religion and the Lust for Dogmatic Rule

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For some time there has been a growing number of scholars who have begun to see the classification “religion,” and its relation to the equally interesting category “secular,” to have a practical effect on the ways in which people in Europe and North America think and act—not to mention those who have been impacted by our exported economic and political systems.

Perhaps this is best phrased by the anthropologist Talal Asad, in his recent book, Formations of the Secular: “What interests me particularly,” he writes,

is the attempt to construct categories of the secular and the religious in terms of which modern living is required to take place, and nonmodern peoples are invited to assess their adequacy. (2003: 14)

If, as the British anthropologist, Mary Douglas, convincingly demonstrated in the mid 1960s (1991), the distinction between soil and dirt refers not to some essential feature in the objects being classified but, instead, is an effect of the group of classifiers who employ the distinction as a means of establishing a particular world comprised of a system of dos and don'ts, then the group of scholars to which I refer are interested in the social effects of those common distinctions that go by such names as religion/politics, sacred/secular, faith/practice, and private/public. These classifications are understood to be used not because of their uncanny ability to identify some feature in the objects so named, but because, once entrenched in minds, actions, and social institutions, they enable people to distinguish and group themselves and, in the process, to form self-identities and allocate (or withhold) material and social capital.

This shift in scholarly focus—from studying politics and religion to studying the politics of the category “religion”—may, at first, sound counter-intuitive. For it has become a truism of

the so-called modern world that such terms as religion, faith, and belief correspond to some deeply human(e) aspect of spirit, consciousness, or human nature. Although we may recognize it as our modern, Latin-derived word, “religion” is nonetheless thought to refer to an eternal, inner spark, either nurtured or stifled by ever-changing external forms of control and organization. For instance, consider a 2002 textbook—already in its second edition—entitled, World Religions Today (Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis 2002). In an introductory section entitled, “Understanding Religious Experience and its Expressions,” the authors request their undergraduate readers to picture themselves in ancient Rome, asking someone on the street: “What religion are you?” Not letting their admission that people in antiquity did not speak English stand in their way, they press on with their example: “Frustrated, you try rephrasing your question and ask: ‘Are you religious?’ Suddenly their faces light up and they smile and say, ‘Of course, isn’t everyone?’” (5).

This example of the historian as time-traveler strikes me as having something remarkably in common with tourists in a foreign country who seem to think that if they just spoke loudly and slowly enough everyone would understand them. For, in the process of acknowledging the historicity and thus inherent limitations of their categories, these authors nonetheless presuppose that the adjectival form of the modern noun “religion” is a feature of all human beings. What’s more, it’s not just any old feature but, quite possibly, the most authentically human quality of all. For, as they conclude:

Religion as a form of human experience and behavior ... is not just about purely “spiritual” things.... [W]hatever powers we believe govern our destiny will elicit a religious response from us and inspire us to wish “to tie or bind” ourselves to these powers.... (7)

Despite the fact that many people seem to think that the model of religious studies represented

by the work of the late University of Chicago scholar, Mircea Eliade, has shuffled off this mortal coil—and that scholarly criticisms of this model are pathetically tilting at antique windmills—Eliade told us pretty much the same several decades ago: because it is part of this thing we call human experience, everyone is religious, whether they know it or not, whether they call it “religion” or not. We can therefore hear faint echoes of Juliet proclaiming that “by any other name a rose would smell as sweet.” Or, updating Shakespeare, we could quote David Denby, film reviewer for The New Yorker magazine, commenting on the films of Quentin Tarantino: “a filmed image has a stubborn hold on reality. An image of a rose may be filtered, digitally repainted, or pixilated, yet it will still carry the real-world associations—the touch, the smell, the romance—that we have with roses” (213).

But anyone familiar with such films as “Pulp Fiction” or “Kill Bill” will know that, as Denby goes on to write, “Tarantino wants us to give up such [real-world] associations.” Scholars who take the historical and the social far more seriously than textbook authors also want us to give up a few of our cherished associations, such as the assumption that the word “religion” and its associated concepts are anything but historical accidents to which some of us have become accustomed when going about the business of living in the modern world. But going down this road means that some of our peers who think they are doing history must relinquish not only their cherished metaphysics but also some political assumptions concerning the ability of their local concepts and curiosities to set a universal table at which some posited communion of saints can happily feast. But few are willing to give up such things; instead, they reverentially chronicle the history of their categories while continuing to assume that behind their words there lurks an enduring, universal presence that transcends time and place—some Esperanto that will

finally let everyone understand each other. Sadly, the history that such scholars offer does not go very far, for their readers are told that behind the transitory world of appearances there is an enduring permanence lodged deeply within the immutable confines of this thing we call experience or human nature—that intangible thing that you and I supposedly share, despite never having met one another.

Feeling overly secure in this metaphysical confidence, such people become perplexed when so-called “people of faith” do what we take to be bad things. For instance, anyone who watched television or read newspapers after the attacks of September 11, 2001, will know that making sense of such human behavior understandably poses a considerable interpretive challenge for those who rely on the popular conceptions of religion and politics as being two distinct domains—and, lucky for them, countless pundits are up to the challenge, authoritatively wielding such loaded notions as “cult” and “fanatic” as if such terms were neutral descriptors of stable states of affairs that, once deployed, will help us to safely orient ourselves in a dangerous world. Of course we don’t ask “Safe for whom?” and we do not entertain that so-called fanatics may merely be putting their own (admittedly different) preferences into practice, much as those in dominant groups routinely do without every thinking of the need to defend or explain themselves. In turn, this allows us to avoid entertaining that the seemingly neutral conditions that make possible one social world might be understood by others—correctly or not, in our opinion—as a form of coercive or threatening behavior. (For an example, we need to look no further than the ongoing, worldwide reaction to editorial cartoons featuring the Prophet Muhammad published first in Denmark this past September, and then again this past month in various European newspapers—an idle exercise in free speech to one can just as easily be

understood as blatant threat to another.) Instead, the challenge of understanding the possible motivations and effects of what we see as provocative actions is met with grandiose theories of social deviance and religious extremism, speculations premised on the distinction between religion and politics, between belief and practice, between experience and expression, and between pristine originals and flawed reproductions—distinctions that conveniently enable us to dismiss any so-called anomalous and uncivil behaviors before ever seriously studying them.

If, as I'm suggesting, discourses on origins, principles, spirit, and faith are not innocently concerned with deeply moral, timeless, other-worldly issues, but are instead profoundly this-worldly rhetorics that help social actors to accomplish practical goals in the here and now, then the hotly contested debates over what gets to be named as "religion" should draw our attention to the set of assumptions "in terms of which," to quote from Talal Asad once again, "modern living is required to take place." For, much as the presumably eternal and uniform intentions of the Founding Fathers are invoked whenever a catastrophe is thought to befall the U.S. (a point made by Darnton 2003: x), the rhetorical appearance of an essential and uniform inner trait is evidence of a social boundary under contest. In fact, signifiers such as faith or experience, used as if they correspond to some invisible, inner quality, may be among the best examples of what Sarah Vowell—that wonderfully ironic contributor to National Public Radio's "This American Life" and the voice of Violet, the daughter in the recent animated film, "The Incredibles"—likens to a soybean: "a versatile little problem-solver that can be processed into seemingly infinite, ingenious products" (2002: 5). Although she was speaking of the virtually limitless uses for the rhetoric of Abraham Lincoln's often quoted "Gettysburg Address," the modernist invention of the concept of religion, and the so-called civil nation-state that is said to result once a wall of

separation is erected between the political and religious spheres, is an even better candidate for the title of “versatile little problem-solver.” For, much like the increasingly popular I-POD or my new, cyborg-like wireless cell phone headset (handy devices that afford one the appearance of being alone in a crowd), the truisms that we call “religion,” “faith,” “opinion,” “principle,” and “belief,” nicely process socio-politically enmeshed human beings into seemingly distinct, self-absorbed, and disembodied believing souls, all the better for getting on with the everyday work of social formation—which is none other than the art of ensuring conformity of behavior and organization while providing the fiction of a socially safe site where differences that threaten a certain sense of group membership can be suppressed and thereby tamed.

Of course, these truisms long predate their most recent uses in the post September 11th world, in which commentators are still falling over each other in their race to identify the timeless principles and core values of that thing we call the Islamic tradition, in hopes of using it as a counterpoint to the apparently polluted and flawed thing now known as “political Islam.” Although it is tempting to say that such pundits are drawing on an intellectual tradition, in keeping with my tactical goals, I’d prefer not to lodge our object of study solely within the confines of the intellect. Instead, I choose to refer to it as a loosely related network of political actors distinguished by a common rhetorical strategy that they employ to achieve a variety of practical ends. That strategy is nicely represented in the U.S. by the still celebrated nineteenth-century psychologist, William James (1842-1910). Although the privatization, or sentimentalization, of what might otherwise be understood as contestable interests and contingent preferences, goes back much further than James’s writings on religion, his work provides a useful example of this technique, if for no other reason than the continued utility of

his writings for those who use them to authorize their own views concerning just what (and therefore who) gets to count as authentically human.

Near the opening of a chapter entitled, “The Value of Saintliness,” in his famous Gifford Lectures of 1901-1902 (soon after published as The Varieties of Religious Experience [1902]—a book that has continuously been in print to this day¹), James writes as follows:

The word ‘religion,’ as ordinarily used, is equivocal. A survey of history shows us that, as a rule, religious geniuses attract disciples, and produce groups of sympathizers. When these groups get strong enough to ‘organize’ themselves, they become ecclesiastical institutions with corporate ambitions of their own. The spirit of politics and the lust of dogmatic rule are then apt to enter and to contaminate the originally innocent thing; so that when we hear the word ‘religion’ nowadays, we think inevitably of some ‘church’ or other; and to some persons the word ‘church’ suggests so much hypocrisy and tyranny and meanness and tenacity of superstition that in a wholesale undiscerning way they glory in saying that they are ‘down’ on religion altogether. (1985: 334-5)

There may be no more succinct statement of the position whose practical effects I am inviting you to consider. To sum up, James makes three key assumptions:

1. An inner, pure, dynamic, and private experience is both logically and chronologically prior to historically-embedded human behavior and institutions (i.e., “the originally innocent thing”);
2. This experience is best exemplified in individuals who, by means of their charisma, are the driving force of a social group’s development and growth (i.e., “religious geniuses”);
3. Once organized, the public behavior of the genius’s followers is prone to deterioration and, lamentably, apt to be bogged down by such things as doctrine, ritual, and institution (i.e., “dogmatic rule”)

With all this in mind, James understandably says from the outset that his study of religious experience is devoted not to the “ordinary religious believer, who follows the conventional observances of his country ... [for] his religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit.” Given his

presumption that the driving force in history is the spark that is thought to animate the lone, charismatic genius—what amounts to a highly individualist sociology—it makes sense that James concludes that “[i]t would profit us little to study this second-hand religious life” (6). Instead, he focuses exclusively on what he calls the “acute fever” of the lone genius who possesses “the original experiences which were the pattern-setters to all this mass of suggested feeling and imitated conduct” (6).

Although it may now seem to be a quaint relic from a bygone era, this nineteenth-century rhetoric of dynamic spirituality versus stifling institution is surprisingly alive and well today. To persuade you of this, I could easily cite my own students who sometimes inform me that they are “not religious but spiritual”—tacitly assuming, much as the so-called Protestant Reformers did long before them, that there exists a distinction between the public thing they call “organized religion,” on the one hand, and the private affectation they call “faith,” on the other—I will instead ask you to consider how, precisely one hundred years after James delivered his own lectures at the University of Edinburgh, another Gifford lecturer drew on the same distinctions. In a series of lectures delivered in Vienna not long after his own 1999 Gifford lectures, the well known philosopher, Charles Taylor celebrated James’s influence while attempting to update his thesis so as to take into account that the social expression of religious experience may itself be but one more variety of religion that ought to have caught James’s eye as well. Because James “has trouble getting beyond a certain individualism,” as Taylor phrases it (2002: 23), Taylor argues that he failed to understand “the phenomenon of collective religious life” (24); so Taylor proposes, in his little 2002 book Varieties of Religion Today, to update James by having us entertain that “the link between the believer and the divine (or whatever), may be essentially

mediated by corporate, ecclesial life” (23; emphasis added).

Presenting this example of a scholar attempting to update James’s overly individualist study allows me to ask you to consider whether the social dimension that Taylor introduces ought to be understood as a gain for those of us who wish to take seriously that human beings are unavoidably historical, social creatures enmeshed in political worlds and are not, as James assumed, solitary souls lamentably stuck within the constraints of history. So I ask: What have we gained by learning from Taylor that “[t]he ideas, the understanding with which we live our lives, shape directly what we could call religious experience; and these languages, these vocabularies, are never those simply of the individual” (28; emphasis added). For, much as with those who study the history of words yet presume the transcendence of the concepts to which our words are thought to correspond—thereby betraying that their histories are anything but historical—so too sociological language can be anything but social.

So let us reconsider Taylor’s reworking of James by focusing on some of the words used in Taylor’s text. For instance, contrary to James’s exclusive focus on isolated, original experiences, scholarship, Taylor tells us, also ought to take into account that such sentiments can be enhanced and shaped in their expression. Although I wish not to place too much emphasis on the choice of a single word, it strikes me as profoundly significant that Taylor is not arguing that ones history and social location determine or cause certain things and moments to stand out as an experience. Instead, along with James, Taylor posits the existence of some sort of inner spark that is expressed publicly to varying degrees of satisfaction and sophistication. Of course Taylor does not lament, as James once did, the limitations of this public expression; but, nonetheless, they agree on the autonomy and thus priority of the inner world over the outer, the individual

over the group, insomuch as the social merely provides a shape for the dynamism of the personal. This is none other than the common technique of determining the meaning of a text by reading it in light of its context. Although this seems to be a gain for the socially-inclined theorist, the many contexts in which some text can be read are generally presumed to comprise the contingent media that house expressions of a necessary, prior thing that we call meaning or intention. Although expressed publicly and shaped socially, the animating force to symbols is yet assumed to be an inner, intangible disposition lurking somewhere in the head of the writer, a disposition that is capable of skipping across time and space to land in the head of the careful reader—much like Taylor’s pre-social sentiments merely being shaped by the site of their public expression. So, despite Taylor’s promise to socialize what James once took to be private, we see that such truisms die hard.

But just why are such truisms problematic? To help answer this, consider the example that Taylor uses to make his argument. He writes:

I am sitting at home watching the local hockey team win the Stanley Cup. I rejoice in this. But the sense of my joy here is framed by my understanding that thousands of fans all over the city, some gathered at rinkside, others also in their living rooms, are sharing this moment of exultation.

With this example in mind, he concludes:

There are certain emotions you can have in solidarity that you can’t have alone; the experience mutates into something else by the fact that it is shared. How much of what James thinks of as individual experience is socially enhanced or affected in this way? (28-9; emphasis added)

As a displaced Canadian from southern Ontario who grew up a died-in-the-wool Toronto Maple Leafs hockey fan (whose sworn enemies are the fans of the Montreal Canadiens, the “local hockey team” to which Taylor—an emeritus professor of philosophy and political science at

McGill University in Montreal—no doubt refers), I too have had my share of solitary experiences of joy while watching hockey on television—in fact, I had one a couple years ago when ESPN was kind enough to broadcast the game in which Toronto advanced to the quarter finals of that year’s playoffs. But if you knew the Leafs’ win/loss record since they last won a championship in 1967, you’d also know that I’ve had more than my fair share of solitary experiences of disappointment as well. However, having lived and worked in the U.S. south since 1993, I would no longer call myself a hockey fan since games are rarely broadcast and, when they are, the play-by-play announcers often describe it to their audience in such a way that an aficionado of the game feels like an untutored moron. For example, as some of you may know, one U.S. television network once experimented with a computer enhanced graphic that provided the televised image of the hockey puck with a colorful aura as it zipped around the rink, supposedly making it easier for fans to follow. As one weaned on televised hockey games instead of baseball or golf, and hence not all that accustomed to watching a tiny white ball soar against a faint blue sky, I could never figure out why television executives thought that a black puck moving across white ice was all that difficult for their viewers to see.

That I found it patronizing for the network to fiddle with what I guess I should call my experience of the game makes it all too obvious that the social location of my beginnings in the Great White North, and my current placement south of the Mason-Dixon Line, have indeed—just as Taylor argues—shaped my experience. But there’s more to it than that, for, as I first read Taylor’s hockey example, it dawned on me just how wide of the mark he was in using it to make his point concerning pristine emotions being merely shaped by the location of their expression. Perhaps this is because I read his book while preparing to teach it to a group of

undergraduate students in Tuscaloosa, Alabama—which prompted me to realize that, as in buying real estate, making meaning is a matter of location, location, location. For my students found themselves reading about hockey in a place where frost, let alone snow and ice, are seldom seen and where you must order “hot tea” to get what I once thought was simply called “tea.” It soon became apparent to me that what Taylor presents as pure, inner emotions (for example, his feelings of joy and exultation) are hardly pre-social dispositions that are merely shaped, mediated, and framed by the location of their expression (such as watching the big game with friends at the local bar). For my students—for whom “arena” signifies somewhere that you play basketball, not hockey, and, moreover, for whom “hockey” is redundantly known as “ice hockey” and skates as “ice skates”—had trouble understanding an argument that took for granted that exultation attends watching your team win what the initiated simply refer to as “the Cup.” I would therefore argue that the experience of the game is itself the product of—and is not simply shaped or framed by—ones social location. As phrased by the historian of architecture, Witold Rybczynski: “A recreational vehicle in the rain is just a wet metal box; a screened porch with wide, sheltering eaves is a place to experience the rain” (1990: 49). Applied to Taylor’s example, Rybczynski’s point is that the context or frame does not merely enhance the picture; instead, the it transforms limitless and centerless background into a picture, much as the comforting porch makes the rain into something one can sit back and enjoy rather than something to dread while hydroplaning down the interstate. To phrase it in terms of text and context, it is not simply that the context is the site at which the text’s prior meaning is expressed but, instead, the text and its meaning are both an effect of a prior context comprised of, in our case here today, the rules of English grammar and a learned set of social preferences that value listening patiently while

someone such as myself drones on and on. Fail to learn these conventions and our present moment is hardly worth plumbing for its deep meaning. Simply put, place a copy of National Geographic Magazine in an outhouse a hundred years ago and it doesn't take a charismatic genius to know that it's not there for its meaning.

What Taylor therefore fails to see—but what is more than evident to anyone who does not share his northern locale—is that, regardless the apparent sincerity of his claims or the supposed depth of his convictions, the joy and exultation he feels whenever a small black rubber disk crosses the other team's goal line, accompanied by a red light, a siren, and the broadcaster proclaiming, “He shoots, He scores!,” are internalized echoes of a very particular, contingent social world that made it possible for this biological individual to adopt and internalize a specific subjectivity known as “hockey fan.” It's therefore not that the pure, inner emotion mutates when it is expressed and thus shared; instead, the very fact of reporting that we are having this or that inner emotion is evidence that a lot of sharing has already taken place! Surely these social echoes (a.k.a. emotions) can be reinforced and thus compounded, based on such factors as whether other people are also in the room cheering (which is none other than Emile Durkheim's notion of “collective effervescence”) or, instead, trying to wrestle the remote control from your cold dead hand—but this does not lessen the fact that the game is not inherently joyous, exciting, or boring. Despite having worked in the U.S. for over a decade, I still cannot sit through an entire Superbowl (though I admit that this year I did catch a few of the expensive commercials that previewed during the game). But this says little, if anything at all, about the event itself; instead, it says everything about the expectations I have learned (and, stubbornly, have refused to forget) regarding such things as how I ought to spend my time on a Sunday afternoon in early February.

We can therefore conclude—using James’s own words against him—that Taylor’s emotional response to the game, even his sense of certain social activities being games, has inevitably “been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit.” For, prior to the advent of our social frames, prior to the well-meaning but no less coercive adults who leaned in close to us as babies, saying “B-b-b-b-b-b...,” there was no game, let alone exultation and joy, suggesting to us that an intellectual hunt for the Holy Grail of individual emotion, charisma, genius, piety, principle, or experience is a misguided quest for it amplifies the echoes of just one particular social world, thereby representing it—and this is the problem with the individualist truisms that continue to inform our field—as if it inhabited an eternal present, thereby inhibiting us from taking history, contingency, competition, and accident seriously as characteristics of the social world. Much like our time-traveling textbook authors’s attempt to escape history, Taylor’s attempt to shift some of the weight of James’s analysis from the “private breast” displaces nothing; for by giving a thin social veneer to supposedly pristine inner emotions Taylor reinscribes the priority of the stable center adrift in the tempestuous seas of historical happenstance. This sentimentalizing of the political amounts to a form of obscurantism inasmuch as it hides the happenstance from view, thereby obscuring the choices and accidents that led to just this, rather than that, experience, thereby naturalizing what was in fact a contestable “one among many.” Accordingly, rhetorics of origin, privacy, authenticity, spirit, tradition, essence, faith, along with the common distinctions between belief/practice and between private/public, are versatile political techniques that massage and manage an unruly social world that generally does not meet with any group’s expectations—whether the group being constituted is a family, a race, or a nation. These

rhetorics therefore fulfill a crucial management role by seeming to privatize, and thereby either domesticating and suppressing or naturalizing and legitimating, certain forms of inescapably public action and organization—much as Taylor’s experience of joy authorized a specific social world by suppressing the fact that was all too apparent to my students in humid Alabama: it could have been otherwise!

My hope is that you are beginning to see that research into the category “religion” is not simply an idle dispute over the names that we give to real things in the world. Instead of dismissing all of this as mere semantics, you may now understand that such research investigates the links between systems of classification, on the one hand, and, on the other, disputes over socio-political turf, status, and identity. For example, if you consider a case such as the accusations made these past few years against a number of Roman Catholic priests, you quickly see that at the heart of these sexual abuse lawsuits is the issue of legal jurisdiction (i.e., turf!); for, as lawyers for the Cardinal of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles have argued, “civil authorities don’t have the constitutional right to intervene in church affairs” (Lobdell and Winton 2003: B6). Yet, in basing their position concerning the private, and thus privileged, nature of bishop-priest communications on the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution we see a wonderful irony: in liberal democracies it is the nation-state (and in the U.S., it is that aspect of the State known as the Internal Revenue Service) that classifies certain mass movements and voluntary associations as religions, thereby granting to them a degree of latitude in their self-policing activities. The all too public collectivity known as the State therefore creates the no less social, yet seemingly private, zone known as “faith,” and by lodging it within the confines of individuals’ hearts and minds, expressed in their politically ineffective rituals and forms of

worship, the State establishes the conditions by means of which a specific sort of public collectivity—namely, itself—can come into existence.

Taking James's own words more seriously than he might have liked, we can therefore say that there is indeed a spirit of politics—what Karl Marx once called the world's spiritual aroma—and it is none other than the discourse on faith, which can now be understood as a public, political rhetoric, a means for establishing a system for dogmatic rule—whether it be of the left or the right. As phrased by the scholar of Christian origins, William Arnal, “the modern democratic state ... creates religion as its alter-ego: religion, as such, is the space in which and by which any substantive collective goals ... are individualized and made into a question of personal commitment or morality” (2000: 32). Apparently, religion and politics, faith and practice, not only require one another in order to play their respective roles, but are one and the same.

If so, then—contrary to the popular opinion—it is not the case that the once dynamic and pervasive life of the spirit was coercively secularized and privatized and that it will, perhaps, one day rise from the ashes to defeat secularism in order to reclaim its rightful throne (a view commonly found among contemporary political commentators trying to make sense of what they characterize as the rise of Fundamentalism, both at home and abroad). Instead, what we today so commonly call faith, belief, experience, and spirituality can now be seen as the products of an effective and all too public rhetorical technique of governance; somewhat like Charles Taylor's emotions, they are internalized echoes of types of behaviors and types of organization—but unlike Taylor's joy, they are evidence of those that too aggressively contest some presumed status quo. As with the case of the seventeenth-century English dissenters studied by the late British historian, Christopher Hill (2000), only by means of that picture frame we know as

privatization or sentimentalization can certain forms of collective life appear as natural, thereby standing out from the background of the many other social practices and sets of values jostling for preeminence. Those unsuccessful in this contest are either condemned as fanatical aberrations—as in the now widely used category “political Islam”—or tolerated as idle curiosities in our museums of multicultural wonders. For, as Hill concludes in his study of the historical roots and political effects of discourses on tolerance: “Once dissenters had accepted their position as a subordinate part of the nation, with freedom of religious worship at the expense of exclusion from central and local government and from the universities, a modus vivendi [or way of living] could be worked out.... Dissenters, or most of them, now asked only to be left alone.... Toleration proved a more effective way of controlling dissent than persecution” (40, 43). After all, the alternative to sentimentalizing ones disagreements and dissenting behaviors as merely private opinions and beliefs was, at least in seventeenth-century England, either imprisonment or death.²

Although both of these options remain for those in power who seek to curtail behaviors that stray too far afield from so-called accepted standards of civility, there is now a third option. For with the advent of a rhetorical split between belief and practice, between ones so-called private and public selves, dissenters can now roll their eyes and grumble under their breath while participating in voluntary associations that we come to know as religions, where highly constrained differences are encouraged to flourish. For, as the critical theorist Theodor Adorno wrote, a certain form of “activism is tolerated only because it is viewed as pseudo-activity” (2002: 200-1)—a fact long known to the parents of rebellious teenagers. So long as difference remains at this level of pseudo-activity—what we might classify as rituals or merely symbolic

behaviors in contradistinction to public, political activity, or what the U.S. literary critic Stanley Fish names “surface pieties ... abstractions without substantive bite” (2002: 38)—it is greeted as, in Adorno’s words, mere theater and opinion, and thus tolerated because it is so easily policed or even ignored. The trouble, of course, comes when the teenager’s rebellion amounts to more than just the length of his hair, the music to which she listens to, and the “Do Not Enter” signs on their bedroom doors—that is, when members of the group contest the parameters of just what gets to count as good taste, common sense, and goals worth pursuing.

Learning to hear talk of religion, meaning, faith, experience, spirituality, intention, etc., as nothing more or less than artful social rhetorics used by potentially conflicting historical agents to “reason around” the complexities and ambiguities of their daily lives, is therefore at the heart of the project to rethink the category “religion.” Much as some people hear FOX News’s claim to being “fair and balanced” as nothing other than a ploy that accomplishes important political work, such a project will lead us to reconsider the innocence of our classification systems, seeing them instead as sites where forms of social engineering have been taking place all along, much as differing sets of social interests have long used such concepts “soil” and “dirt”—or even “citizen” and “foreigner”—to manage the various uses for the same generic stuff. Efforts to rethink the category “religion” are therefore part of a larger effort to map the socio-rhetorical conditions that have helped to make possible the largest social formation that—for good or ill—we have so far come up with: this thing we call the modern, liberal-democratic nation-state, an imagined space in which diverse people with potentially conflicting interests are said to become equal citizens whose uniform behavior is premised on their having the right to believe anything they like, so long as those beliefs that stray too far from the

recognized norm stay firmly lodged between their dissenting two ears.

Studying the function of this rhetoric therefore begins with examining how the discourses on faith, in contradistinction to practice, makes possible a specific sort of public, populated by specific sorts of subjects. It is a public where—to borrow some phrasing from the scholar of antiquity, Peter Brown—members of groups can “iron out the tensions and anomalies of real life” (2003: 18). That the anomalies of modern life that need to be ironed out—the unruly subjects that apparently require subjection—are those “others” who fail to have the good manners to pursue their competing interests in the privacy of their idle hearts and minds, cannot, of course, go unnoticed.³

Notes

1. See James 2002 for the “centenary edition” of the book, complete with sixty-three pages of new introductory material.

2. See McCutcheon 2003: 274 for elaboration on Hill’s work.

3. Although not necessarily cited, the preceding argument is indebted to the work of such writers as William Arnal (2000, 2001); Talal Asad (1993, 1999, 2003); Daniel Dubuisson (2003); Tim Fitzgerald (1997, 2000, 2003a); Gary Lease (1994); Attila Molnár (2002); and Malory Nye (2000). As an example of a recent exchange on this topic, one that nicely demonstrates the often emotionally charged nature of this debate, see Fitzgerald (2003b), Reader’s reply (2004) and Fitzgerald’s response (2004). For additional background to this argument, see: McCutcheon 2001: chapter 10; McCutcheon 2003: chapter 12; and McCutcheon 2004.

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