

RITUAL RE-DESCRIPTION AS PASSPORT CONTROL: A REJOINDER TO
FITZGERALD AFTER BOURDIEU¹

ANDREW M. MCKINNON, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

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In an article appearing in this journal, Timothy Fitzgerald (2003) provides biting critique of my article on the definition of religion in sociology (McKinnon 2002). I think highly of Professor Fitzgerald's work, especially his book *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000); for this reason I am flattered that he has provided such a thorough critique—even if I am bemused by his appraisal. In this rejoinder, I will not provide a point-by-point response to his commentary, because, although such a response might satisfy my desire to “set the record straight”, it likely wouldn't be of much interest to anyone else². Instead, I will limit myself to the major points, and attempt to respond in such a way that might

¹ I would like to thank Randy Hart, Lesley Kenny, Nadine Blumer and Martina Klubal for several very helpful conversations on this topic, and Nadine and Martina in addition for also carefully reading an earlier draft. Of course, I alone am responsible for the remaining errors of thought or of expression.

² This would also require a very long paper: there are 41 references made to my paper in the course of Fitzgerald's article. Many of the points raised there would require its own response.

contribute to the ongoing efforts to understand the field of religious studies. Given the recent contributions to *MTSR* in the form of a debate between Hugh Urban (2003, 2005) and Bradford Verter (2004) on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, it seems appropriate to frame my response in the terms Bourdieu uses to analyse social fields.

Fitzgerald understands me as a philosopher, and excepting the times he calls me a “ritual specialist” (2000:232) he refers to me as such consistently throughout his paper (cf. 2003: 215, 216, 222, 241, 249). I am pleased that Fitzgerald, who is a philosophy Ph.D. himself, sees me as part of his professional clan; in fact I don’t really belong there. I am a sociologist by training, affiliation and practice. I have never taken a class in philosophy, and I have not been involved in a religious studies department since my undergraduate studies. I strongly suspect, therefore, that several of Fitzgerald’s critiques arise from the differences in the local language games of our respective academic fields: sociology, philosophy, and Fitzgerald’s adopted field of religious studies. My paper to *MTSR* (2002) was an attempt to come to terms with the conceptual organization of my own field by stepping outside of it. In retrospect, I can see how this generated some misunderstanding; it has also raised, in the form of Fitzgerald’s critique, a number of interesting and potentially fruitful questions for religious studies, as well as for sociology.

Reification, the Secular and Power

Despite Fitzgerald’s critique of my paper, we actually agree on what I consider the most important point of my paper. Both Fitzgerald and I have argued that “religion” is a *socially constructed* category; there is no *essence* or *sui generis*³ reality to which the

³ I am adopting the meaning of this term as it is used in Religious Studies in this paper. In Sociology, following Durkheim (1915) the term means quite the opposite—that religion is a product of society.

concept points. There is no such thing (*res*) as religion; rather it is a category that has been socially constructed, that has emerged historically in the modern period to designate particular (sets of) beliefs and practices, as well as to create particular social fields. Fitzgerald nonetheless argues that I use Wittgenstein's writings to reify "religion", to make it a both inevitable and natural term.

Perhaps part of the misunderstanding stems from my argument that despite the debate among sociologists and anthropologists over the past hundred years about how to define religion, there is a latent consensus on what "religion" means (2002); the manifest disagreements about how to define religion are only possible because of this latent consensus. Implicitly all of the parties agree (more or less) what kind of phenomena should be included, and what should not—thus the same arguments get repeated over and over again, as each successive definition inevitably leaves something out. Thus, despite the isolation provided by the groves of academe, the sociologists in the debate tend to replicate the same (implicit) conceptions shared by the wider members of (western capitalist) society: Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam are examples of "religion". The search for an essence, for that characteristic which distinguishes religion from not religion *already* presupposes this common-sense cultural notion of what phenomena belong and which do not. In light of that, I used Wittgenstein to propose a non-essentialist conception of "religion", one which recognizes that those phenomena that are typically included as examples of religion are arbitrary, contingent, conventional, and yet emerge from a particular set of socio-historical forces which have constructed particular, distinctive fields, and made these phenomena seem like a natural genus.

As I argued in the earlier paper (2002), “religion” is a modern western conception; it is no longer confined to the west, however, but circulates globally by means of ‘freedom of religion’ and ‘separation of religion and state’, it is written into human rights agreements, international law, national constitutions, legal decisions, national censuses, and so forth. Of course it is true, as Fitzgerald emphasises, that these are imposed by western colonial and neo-colonial powers (for a brilliant recent study, see Haan 2005), or they have been imported by élites because they fit with the hegemony of ‘rational’ capitalism and ‘democratic’ nation-states. Fitzgerald suggests that I have neglected to theorize the relation between the concept of religion and the exercise of power; I take the point that I should have made this more explicit. I assumed, however, that when we talk about the struggles between groups, the conflicts of the enlightenment, and western proselytizing (2002: 68-9), as well as nation-states (75) and régimes of international law (76) we are talking about questions of power. Wittgenstein was the central theoretical resource for that particular paper, and Fitzgerald is quite right that his work is probably not the best place one would look for an adequate theorization of power (2003:217). One would be much better advised to look elsewhere, for example, to the work of Pierre Bourdieu (who is a sociological inheritor of Wittgenstein), to make sense of the symbolic violence of power operating within language games. I am glad that Fitzgerald has afforded me the chance to make this more explicit, which I will do a bit later.

As I argued in my earlier paper, “religion” may be a conventional term, but we cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the way the concepts organize the worlds we live in. Concepts and particular social fields are mutually constitutive. Thus, I argue, as scholars

we cannot afford to give up the term—properly historicized and recognizing that it is a social construct. There may be no ‘essence’ of religion, but it has become a designated social field—continually distinguished from, but related to, other fields, such as politics, the economy, law, the academy, and so forth. When we insist that religion is a social construction, this forces us beyond treating religion as a reification; it pushes us to analyze “religion” using the same tools and concepts we would use to look at any other social phenomenon. While Fitzgerald prefers to start with the analytic tools of religious studies (ritual, myth and the sacred, *etcetera*) and apply these to the “secular” world of the university, as a matter of disciplinary habit, I tend to begin with the “secular” tools and concepts of sociology and apply them to the field of religion. While the process has different starting points; the end result, I suggest, can be mutually enriching and enlightening for both disciplines.

The word “religion” cannot be easily dispensed with, not only because it helps to organize a particular field of activity, but because it organizes those of us who study this field—whether we like it or not. This is particularly true for those who teach and do their research in departments of religion or religious studies; it is also true, although in different ways, and perhaps to a diminished degree, for those of us who identify ourselves as sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists or historians *of religion*. One could rename all of the relevant institutions and journals: *Method and Theory in the Study of Culture*, The Department of Cultural Studies, and The American Academy of Culture, etceteras; even if it made sense to insiders to do this, outsiders would no doubt still find it odd that the primary preoccupation of those institutions and journals still had to do with “religion”.

Fitzgerald argues that I neglected the relationship between “religion” and the secular in my previous paper. He writes:

“religion” is actually only half a category, the other half being “the secular”. The production of “the secular” is facilitated by the production of “religion”, and vice versa. The division of the world into a secular and a religious sphere is a basic part of modern cosmology (2003:210).

I think this is true; I doubt that there is anything unique about the “secular”/ “religion” pairing in this respect, however. The tendency for cultural concepts to come in opposed pairs (in western cultures at least) is a marked one, which is what has kept first the structuralists, and then the post-structuralists and deconstructionists so busy: male/female, white/black, good/evil, order/chaos, west/east, rational/irrational, scientific/theological, active/passive mind/body and beautiful/ugly. *Nota bene*: hierarchy is built into all of these two-part concepts, which fits with the configuration that Fitzgerald proposes in terms of “secular”/“religion”.

Fitzgerald argues that the two terms “religion” and “secular” are mutually constitutive, as, I would add, are the social fields constituted by these terms. A boundary, however, does not only separate two spheres, but also constitutes them and marks a relationship between them. In Fitzgerald’s analysis, “religion” is constituted as a residual category to “the secular” which legitimates the “secular” (capitalism, the modern state, bureaucracy and science). Framing the question in this manner raises important questions for the field of religious studies. Borders, such as that which separates “religion” and “secular” are socially constituted, but they are also constantly disputed, reinforced, defended, moved, and challenged.

Fitzgerald argues that “[o]ur discipline tends to elide the connection between ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’” (214). Given that “religion” versus “secular” seems to be one of the most disputed boundaries within the field of religious studies itself, I assume he means that the terms are elided in the analysis of what goes on outside the field of religious studies, in the so-called “real world”. Within the discipline itself, this seems to be a major rift, whereby the differences between those who take a theological (or “religious”) approach to the study of religion and those who approach their subject in a “secular” way, is arguably the major division in the field. Further, the very condition of possibility for the academic, secular, study of religion depends on this separation of the secular from “religion”, whereby secular universities (established by the state) provide the space for such an analysis⁴.

The Field of Religious Studies: Towards a Reflexive Sociology after Bourdieu

Although Pierre Bourdieu’s work has been of central importance for sociologists who study culture over the past twenty years, it is only recently that his influence has begun to be felt in the study of “religion”. In the recent debate between Hugh Urban and Bradford Verter about Bourdieu in the pages of *MTSR* (Urban 2003, 2005, Verter 2004), Urban raises the question of what an analysis of the field of religious studies modeled after Bourdieu’s analysis of fields would look like (2005:166). Despite the fact that the question is posed for somewhat unfair purposes, it is an important question. It is perhaps even the fundamental question for the very possibility of a scientific study of religion⁵.

⁴ In this respect, the “secular” is likewise a contested and contradictory space, as Christopher Brittain (2005) has recently argued.

⁵ While I do have some questions and hesitations about Verter’s sociology of religion *après* Bourdieu, it is without question the best exegesis to date of Bourdieu’s work as it might apply to the study of religion (especially Verter 2003), and an important contribution to Bourdieu studies. Urban’s heavy reliance on Bourdieu’s early work on religion, on the other hand, and only that which has been translated into English, results in a portrait of Bourdieu that is almost unrecognizable. Urban observes (quite rightly) that

Bourdieu's notion of a "field" (*champ*) is complex and one, and he was always reticent to provide a "professorial definition" of it (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 95). Loïc Wacquant provides a reasonably concise summation of the concept of a "field" in a book co-authored with Bourdieu. Wacquant writes:

A field is simultaneously a *space of conflict and competition*, the analogy here being with a battlefield, in which participants vie to establish monopoly over the species of capital effective in it—cultural authority in the artistic field, scientific authority in the scientific field, sacerdotal authority in the religious field, and so forth—and the power to decree the hierarchy and "conversion rates" between all forms of authority in the field of power. In the course of these struggles, the very shape and divisions of the field become a central stake, because to alter the distribution and relative weight of forms of capital is tantamount to modifying the structure of the field (in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 17-18).

Bourdieu's sense of "field" is much more expansive than, for example, the field of religious studies, sociology, or anthropology, but these are also "fields" in his sense (cf. Bourdieu 1987b). We can certainly see, in Wacquant's description, some of the primary dimensions of the field of religious studies, in which we find major conflicts over the shape of the field—particularly in the ongoing struggles over whether the field ought to be the preserve of the "scholar devotee" or the "scholar scientist" (Wiebe 1999). Far from being purely academic questions over the way the field *is*, these are struggles over what the field will (and *ought* to) become.

Bourdieu's work on the religious field (in particular what has been translated into English) is the least promising part of his work for our needs, and then he proceeds to let it govern his understanding of Bourdieu's work *tout court*.

Both Urban (2003) and Verter (2003 and 2004) have criticized Bourdieu's relative inattention to the interconnection between various fields, and Verter suggests that Bourdieu treats fields as an archipelago of islands (2003:162). Bourdieu always suggested that the relation between fields was an "extremely complex" question that he was reticent to try to answer, in part because of his distaste for the rigid schemas of the grand theorists and models that provide answers rather than relevant questions for empirical research⁶. He also was reticent to schematize these relations precisely because they are contingent, the products of struggle, and because, as a result, they change (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 109). While I think that the schema Verter provides, in which fields are related to one another as circles in Venn diagrams, is a potentially fruitful intervention in this arguably under-specified area of Bourdieu's work, it also poses a certain analytic risk. Bourdieu does sometime suggest that particular fields overlap, or even dissolve into one another (1987a), but he consistently argues that the borders of fields are *always* a stake in the contest of the field itself and each field has "admission fees" that they exact from those who enter the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 94-115). Figuring the relation between fields as overlapping circles, it seems to me, makes the question of borders less "central" to the configuration of fields themselves.

The field of religious studies itself suggests a good case study, which cannot be any more than briefly delineated here⁷. Religion and social science are all component parts of what Bourdieu refers to as the "field of symbolic manipulation" (Bourdieu 1987a, 1987b). Thus Religious Studies shares a border with the field of religion (its

⁶ "I blame most of my readers for having considered as theoretical treatises...works that, like gymnastic handbooks, were intended for exercise, or even better, for being put into practice" (quoted in Karakayali 2004: 359).

⁷ Bourdieu would also insist on the need for further empirical research of the field in the manner that he suggests in *Homo Academicus* (1984) in order to adequately "objectivize the objectivizer".

object of analysis) as well as with (social) science and these borders constitute some of the most significant stakes and forms of capital as they are imported into the field of religious studies itself. On the one hand, the “scholar devotees” claim certain forms of capital, “religious experience”, from the field of religion, insisting that without it, one is unable to understand the field of religion at all, since the tools of science do not allow for knowledge of the “Something Else” that constitutes the field of religion. This is a strategy for converting certain forms of capital, what Verter (2003, 2004) has nicely termed “spiritual capital”, into intellectual capital in a different field. It is therefore also a strategy for making those who do not possess such capital illegitimate participants in the study of religion.

The “scholar scientists”, on the other hand, claim the symbolic capital (authority) of science, arguing that only this symbolic capital will allow scholars to understand the field. Furthermore, they treat “religious experience” capital as a kind of debt, rather than as capital, since those who possess it are blinded by their ‘insider’ status, and hence not legitimate participants in the academic study of religion. Each side has “strategies for discrediting the forms of capital upon which the force of their opponents rests...and to valorize the species of capital they preferentially possess” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 99). The players struggle over the “conversion rate” of capital from one field to another; whether those in the religious field accept the “spiritual capital” of the scholar devotees, or those in the scientific field the scientific capital of the scholar scientists, is entirely irrelevant. What matters is how the forms of capital play themselves out within the field of religious studies itself⁸.

⁸ Bourdieu argues that it is not only the scholar-devotee that has investments in the field of religion, a fact that is misconstrued when we equate investment with belief. He argues that “critics” no less than

This question, whether it is framed as a question of “insider/outsider” or science verses religious experience, is an important intellectual question, an important epistemological premise for the study of the field of religion. But it is not *only* an intellectual question: it is a contest that involves all the stakes and rewards present in the field itself. The disputes have as much to do with what the field *ought* to be (and hence the distribution of symbolic capital within the field) as with what the field *is*. Insofar as this is the case, the analyses offered, are not, in Bourdieu’s sense, scientific⁹ analyses at all (Bourdieu 1987b). Instead they reflect the location and defense of the observer’s symbolic capital.

Timothy Fitzgerald (2000) has provided an excellent critique, among other things, of the way that investments in the field of religion (to re-frame their discussion in Bourdieu’s terms) has fashioned the field of religious studies, through spiritual capital. In order to engage in what Bourdieu calls reflexive sociology, and what Fitzgerald calls “self-critical reflection” (2003: 213), we must consider the field as a whole: to understand only a part of the field, one side in a contest, is to misconstrue the whole. The secular study of religion needs to account for its own position and condition of possibility. In other words, each analyst must take account of their own position in the field, and the investments this entails (Bourdieu 1987a, 1987b).

Fitzgerald “discounts” my argument by treating it as a quasi-theological argument: he claims that my argument falsely universalizes and naturalizes religion, and

“caretakers” (to use McCutcheon’s (2000) terms) have their forms of investment in the field, “et des comptes à régler avec l’institution” (1987b:107)

⁹ For a variety of reasons, I prefer Bourdieu’s terminology of “reflexive sociology” to “scientific sociology”. He uses them interchangeably, and some have suggested (cf. Griller 1996) that his sociology is more positivistic than he is willing to admit. For an excellent assessment of the limits of reflexive sociology in Bourdieu, and the domination of his thought by epistemological concerns, see Karakayali (2004).

he refers to me as a “ritual specialist” (232) who is “protecting a myth” (237) by drawing on the priestly authority of Wittgenstein (216). He maintains that his description of my paper is simply a strategy of useful re-description (cf. 212-3) to analyse “secular” phenomena (like the modern university) in “religious” terms (ritual, the sacred, etc.).

While I will happily concede that this is indeed an often-fruitful strategy, in this case, it is a rhetorical re-description that places my argument outside of the bounds of the secular (and hence, legitimate) bounds of the academic study of religion. In this way Fitzgerald replicates the same process he critiques in the macro-political sphere, whereby “that [which] looks as though it is characterized by ritual, myth... the irrational or non-rational, the unscientific, will probably also be placed in the ‘religion’ basket” (2003:211).

Fitzgerald’s critique of my paper, then, is not simply an analysis of the secular/religion border, but it also functions as a kind of passport-control that constitutes the very border in describing it. His work constitutes and defends the “secular” study of religion against all *perceived* challenges to that project and its form of symbolic capital. As Fitzgerald argues in his paper,

the emergence of the modern category “religion” enables the “secular” to acquire a taken-for-granted characteristic, to become transparent and to appear compellingly “in the nature of things” (2003:227).

This “taken-for-granted characteristic”, as reflective of a position in the field itself, needs to be constantly put into question if the goal really is “self-critical reflection” (Fitzgerald 2003:213). Bourdieu writes:

What distresses me when I read some works by sociologists, is that people whose profession it is to objectivize the social world prove so rarely able to objectivize

themselves, and fail so often to realize that what their apparently scientific discourse talks about is not the object but their relationship to the object (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:68-9).

The reflexive sociology of religion, “self-critical reflection” (Fitzgerald 2003:213) cannot proceed on the basis of taken for granted assumptions—rather it demands epistemological vigilance and constant *self*-criticism. Only when we are able to continually objectivize our own positions in our academic fields—as well as our relation to the religious field and the field of power—will we be able to meet Bourdieu’s criteria for a scientific study of religion (cf. Bourdieu 1987a, 1987b).

Department of Sociology, University of Toronto

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