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# Religion, Ire, and Dangerous Things

Russell T. McCutcheon

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In response to Ivan Strenski's criticism of those who study the history and politics of the category "religion," this essay introduces some nuance into this debate by distinguishing between the two traditions contributing to this exercise: the normative (associated with the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith) and the socio-rhetorical (associated with the work of Jonathan Z. Smith). Whereas the former position concludes that the category "religion" is incapable of capturing all that is entailed in the experience of faith, the latter is more properly historical in its presumptions because it examines only the contexts in which classification systems are developed and the practical uses to which they are put. After arguing that only the latter holds promise for the future of the academic study of religion, the essay returns to Strenski's own influential work on the category "myth," questioning why he seems to argue that the category "religion" ought to be immune from the very critique he has so persuasively leveled at "myth." The essay concludes that, as with scholarship on "history" and "culture," scholarship on "religion" may indicate that our field has finally come of age, insofar as scholars are able to historicize both themselves and their own taxonomies.

Categorization is not a matter to be taken lightly.

—George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*

Russell T. McCutcheon is an associate professor of religious studies at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0264.

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IN A SERIES OF RECENT essays and book reviews, Ivan Strenski (e.g., 1998a, 1998b, 2001, 2002) has addressed the “naivete, bad faith, or ignorant mischief” (1998a: 118) of those who study the history and politics of the category of religion. Characterizing such scholars as a nihilistic and polemical inbred clique and cabal, he claims that their scholarship threatens the future of the study of religion. For example, juxtaposing the work of this group to that of the late Ninian Smart, Strenski claims that the “progressive reform” exemplified by the latter holds far more promise for the field than what he sees to be the “dangerous,” “destructive,” “revolutionary” program represented by the former. Specifically, the work of such scholars as Gary Lease (e.g., 1994, 1997, 1999), Tim Fitzgerald (e.g., 1997, 2000, 2003), and myself (e.g., 1997, 2001) represents a program of study whose “implementation would be a disaster for the study of religion” (1998a: 118). In this vein, Strenski concludes a recent *JAAR* review of my book by serving up an ominous notice to members of the academy: “Let the readers of this book [*Critics Not Caretakers* (2001)] and this review of it look around and see what Lease and Smart, respectively, have achieved and make their own choices” (2002: 430).

I admit to having a number of difficulties with the style of Strenski’s polemic, for, as described by a reviewer of the Brill volume in which one of his essays appears, it is “somewhat vituperative” (Geertz: 344). However, despite his apparent ire over scholarship on “religion,” his comments raise a number of important issues that deserve to be addressed. For although the work of those who study what we now generally term “method and theory” is sometimes accused of being too specialized and too arcane, I believe that the topics here under debate have direct relevance for all those who call themselves scholars of religion: To what does the category religion refer? Does it name an ontologically distinct referent? Is it a natural kind necessarily corresponding to something in the so-called real world or merely a heuristic tool? What follows is therefore not simply a reply to one scholar, for I believe that this admittedly minor controversy is indicative of generally undisclosed theoretical and political issues that lie at the heart of our enterprise. Therefore, my hope is that the following is of interest to the admittedly diverse readership of *JAAR*. Knowing that our field is not often characterized by open polemics—especially because many in the field see the study of religion as a vehicle for building consensus through interreligious dialogue—I also hope that readers who usually try not to explain away religion will not try to explain away this disagreement as merely the result of conflicting personalities.

As with scholarship on “literature” (as carried out by literary critics), “culture” (as carried out by anthropologists), and “history” (as carried

out by historiographers), making “religion” our object of study involves examining this malleable, Latin-based taxon as a tool specific to certain sets of human beings who currently use it to name, demarcate, and rank specific zones of human practice. A presumption that grounds this sort of work is that, as stated by Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, systems of classification regulate the conduct of people and “make intelligible the relations which exist between things” (71, 81). The study of competing classification systems, then, is but one opening onto the study of competing systems of intelligibility. I am therefore in agreement with Strenski when he observes that “what we are as a civilization in fact is the result of our having marked certain boundaries”; indeed, “‘we’ are the kind of people who assume the reality of a world carved up along the lines represented by these sorts of distinctions” (1998a: 116). However, for those interested in the politics, and not simply the sociology, of classification, an additional question concerning what is at stake in this or that system of demarcation becomes relevant. Taking “religion/not religion” or “sacred/secular” as but examples of the classificatory tools used by some groups of people (notably, those impacted by exported European cultures) to establish relations and identities between things means scrutinizing various moments when particular groups not only establish intelligibility but also contest the identities they help to make possible.<sup>1</sup> For those interested in studying what is practically at stake for various groups in the use of this or that classification system—just who gets to count in this “we” and just what gets to count as “reality”—some examination of the effect of how the pie is cut up is therefore required.

So, contrary to Strenski’s claim that “some of the contexts of the use of the word, ‘religion,’ will be formally trivial and technically uninteresting” (1998a: 113), for those who study the practical implications of categorization, all instances of classifications are potentially useful as evidence of a deployed system of intelligibility/identity. Therefore, no use of a classification system is deemed vulgar, commonplace, uninformed, or ignorant (all judgments Strenski [1998a: 114] too easily makes). For, as Lakoff states, “whenever we intentionally perform any *kind* of action, say

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<sup>1</sup> I fully realize the difference between Durkheim and Mauss’s thoughts on “making intelligible” and my own sense of “establishing” the relations that exist between things. Despite the difference between their more positivist stance and my own social constructionist position, I believe that the latter—dependent as it is on developments over the past forty years in the sociology of knowledge—is nonetheless indebted to the former. Recognizing that it is human beings who collectively develop and enact the prohibitions that result in such things as the quality of sacredness, I would like to think that Durkheim would agree that classification systems do not merely help us to understand preexistent relations between stable things but, rather, systems of intelligibility are the means by which the background noise of existence is made significant and meaningful.

something as mundane as writing with a pencil, hammering with a hammer, or ironing clothes, we are using categories” (6). Take, for instance, Strenski’s example of how the *Los Angeles Times* “religion” section failed to list Roman Catholic churches. Far from demonstrating, as he concludes, that the newspaper’s use of the term is incorrect, insufficient, or uninteresting, the manner of its use—or, in this instance, its lack of use—tells us a great deal about how this newspaper and its editors (not to mention the wider society that turns mere stuff into useful information by means of such categories and such periodicals) make their worlds intelligible by means of deployed classifications. Only if we assume religion to comprise an obvious family with stable characteristics would we conclude, along with Strenski, that “we would learn little by using the *Los Angeles Times* list to guide our thinking about the definition of religion, and, indeed, because of the exclusion of Roman Catholics, we even would have been badly misled in our efforts to do so” (1998a: 113). I could not disagree more; studying any group’s use of its classification systems—rather than either contesting an indigenous system or using it as a prototype to guide scholarly thinking on the matter—tells us a great deal. Accordingly, in arguing against those who wish to “purge ‘religion’ from our conceptual vocabularies,” Strenski seems to miss the point that his supposedly dangerous interlocutors are not trying to purge the category from indigenous vocabularies but, instead, are trying to prompt their colleagues to become scholars of classification systems and not merely participants in local classification systems. Therefore, unlike Karl Barth, whom Strenski seems to group together with all the other misguided despisers of “religion” (1998a: 114–116), the members of the so-called cabal wish merely to study the history and contemporary use of *religion* and its role in helping to make possible certain groups’ conceptual and social systems. The writers and readers of the *L.A. Times* certainly constitute one such group; scholars qualify as another.

With Strenski’s use of Barth in mind, it may help us to distinguish among those scholars who have focused their scholarly gaze on “religion.” To create a rough taxonomy, I would distinguish between at least two broad camps in light of their relationship to the work of one or another of our field’s two better-known Smiths: the late Wilfred Cantwell and Jonathan Z.<sup>2</sup> The former’s well-known critique of “religion” shifts attention away from what he understood to be the merely secondary externals (e.g., rituals, institutions, traditions, etc.) to the logically and, I imagine he would say, chronologically prior thing that he calls “faith in transcendence.” Accordingly, he distinguishes between “inner piety” and

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Masuzawa for this way of tracing differences among scholars interested in “religion.”

“outward institution” (1991: 193–194), seeing both to be unfortunately combined under the insufficient umbrella term *religion*. As Tomoko Masuzawa has aptly phrased it, W. C. Smith “was proposing to abandon the use of the term ‘religion’ in order to forefront what it *really is*” (125). And what it *really is* is a personal experience or faith that, as Masuzawa concludes, “is by nature, as he would have it, off limits to naturalistic analysis and explanation” (125). Unlike Wilfred Cantwell, Jonathan Z. Smith’s equally well-known dictum—“religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study” (1982: xi; see also 1998)—signifies an interest not in recovering the preclassificatory insight or intuition that unites those practices and institutions we name as religious but, rather, in having scholars become self-conscious concerning the theoretical interests that drive their selection of data, concepts, and methods.<sup>3</sup> For if, as Smith goes on to argue in the often-quoted opening to *Imagining Religion*, “religion has no independent existence apart from the academy,” then “the student of religion . . . must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study” (1982: xi). To rephrase, if one agrees with writers such as Susan Sontag, who argued forty years ago that “none of us can ever retrieve that innocence before all theory” (4), then one will likely follow scholars such as Smith who recommend that we examine the interests reflected in, and the effects of, our choices and theories.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas “What *is* religion?” is a question the former Smith tries to answer, “What gets to count as religion and why?” would be a question in line with the latter Smith’s work. An example of someone trying to answer the first question—for lack of a better label, let us refer to this group as normative critics—can be found in Nicholas Lash’s *The Beginning and the End of “Religion.”* In a vein similar to W. C. Smith’s

<sup>3</sup> In his review of *Guide to the Study of Religion*, Strenski (2001: 694) disagrees that “religion” is solely the creation of the scholar and argues, instead, that in order for the term to have some efficacy it must correspond to something real in the world. Of interest is that in setting up his point he first quotes Smith’s dictum and then embarks on his critique of it by writing, “Jonathan Z. Smith notwithstanding, religion may not be solely the creation of the scholar’s study” (2001: 694). This is but one example of the troubling form of argumentation Strenski sometimes employs, for it is not clear how he can critique a point basic to much of Smith’s work without actually addressing Smith’s own arguments (i.e., “Smith *notwithstanding* . . .” [emphasis added]).

<sup>4</sup> J. Z. Smith’s emphasis on scholars as being the community that has imagined religion has often been read to mean that he somehow fails to study other groups that have also used “religion” in acts of classification (e.g., colonialists). I am not persuaded by this criticism because I read his 1982 comments as directed at a specific audience: scholars of religion who have grown to take their primary taxon for granted and who have therefore failed to be cognizant of their own role in making parts of the world stand out as data. That the practical utility of “religion” has been documented in so many other social sites since Smith first penned these words is evidence of just how suggestive his work is, rather than evidence that he has overlooked more important materials.

efforts to recover the original and pristine core that predates the inevitable institutionalization that deadens a creative spirit, Lash argues that “the invention of ‘religion’ carried with it the reduction of faith’s attentive wonder to the entertaining of particular beliefs” (13). Already signaled by his book’s title (whether or not Lash intended it, I read it as an allusion to both a line from Schleiermacher’s *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* and W. C. Smith’s familiar title),<sup>5</sup> this critique owes much to a long tradition associated with the work of polemicists who—to their group’s tremendous rhetorical advantage—distinguish the prior and interior piety felt only to them (i.e., their own group) from what they portray as a degraded system of mere doctrine and ritual (i.e., the groups formed by others). Although the authors I would place into this normative camp do not necessarily agree on all things (i.e., Karl Barth’s evangelical critique of religion in vol. 1, pt. 2, of his *Church Dogmatics* is not the same as W. C. Smith’s critique; nor does it seem to share much with the politically liberal, anti-imperialist criticisms of “religion” found in such recent works as Richard King’s and Jeremy Carrette’s post-colonial and postmodern studies of “religion”), I believe that they would at least agree that behind the word *religion* lies a more real, universal, human(e), or necessary thing to which the contingent concept points, however inadequately. Whether we ought to scrap *religion* or put up with it despite its inevitable shortcomings is, of course, an ongoing debate within this group. Despite such debates, I believe that they would likely agree that the inadequacy of *religion* is that it tries to capture within what Frederic Jameson aptly terms “the prison house of language” that which cannot be caught, much less described, but only experienced and discussed analogically.

An example of the second critique of “religion”—for lack of a better word, let us term it the rhetorical critique—can be found in Lease’s work, as in when he argues that “there is no religion: rather such a history [of religion] can only trace *how* and *why* a culture or epoch allows certain experiences to count as ‘religion’ while excluding others” (1994: 472, emphasis added). I refer to this as the rhetorical critique because scholars in this second group have little or no interest concerning what the category “religion” or “sacred” really ought to mean or what it actually refers to; instead, they are interested in examining how such categories, whatever

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<sup>5</sup> In his *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, Schleiermacher juxtaposes “this miserable love of systems” (55) with his attempt to define religion as an inner emotion and affection. In the closing paragraph of his second speech he writes: “The usual conception of God as one single being outside of the world and behind the world is not *the beginning and the end of religion*. It is only one manner of expressing God, seldom entirely pure and always inadequate . . . . Yet true religion is neither this idea nor any other, but immediate consciousness of the Deity” (101; emphasis added).

their definition, function for those groups that employ them—whether those groups be scholars, U.S. Supreme Court Justices, or post-September 11 political pundits intent on persuading listeners that the world is neatly divided between peaceful and tolerant allies and dangerous and fanatical enemies. For all these groups it seems that “religion” is a wonderfully useful rhetorical tool that packs a significant rhetorical punch, thus assisting them to accomplish acts of identity formation within a busy social economy. So, regardless of the use to which “religion” is put, scholars in this second camp do not examine the category in relation to some inexpressible essence and inner piety or its supposedly natural correspondence to certain brute facts of social life. Instead, they see its use, definition, and application to be part of a social engineering strategy (or rhetoric) found in certain groups and at specific historical times, one that has tremendous utility for the groups that choose to use it or those who have it used on them (as in Chidester’s [1996] historical study of the use of “religion” on the colonial frontier or Derek Petersen’s more recent study of the missionaries who made use of “religion” in central Kenya in the early parts of this century). For this loosely connected collection of scholars, the presumption of, or search for, a stable, natural, self-evident, or normative meaning for “religion” misses out on studying how it is actually used in scholarly practice; for instance, whereas the equation “religion = irrational = superstition = survival” once figured prominently within the work of European intellectuals, thereby allowing them to demarcate themselves rather dramatically from the “uncivilized” masses, today many scholars use “religious = good = apolitical = tolerant” to help make a very specific sort of liberal democracy possible. Depending on in which manner and in which context one employs the term, a very different Other (i.e., them) and Self (i.e., us) result, or so representatives of the rhetorical critique would likely argue.

Such studies of the classification religion, or the attendant binary sacred/secular, then, share much with the way others have studied the sociopolitical and cognitive impact of other classificatory systems, be it male/female, white/black, child/adult, primitive/modern, clean/unclean, purity/danger, cooked/raw, citizen/foreigner, province/metropolis, or even Strenski’s own use of such idealized oppositions as reform/revolution, safe/dangerous, and progressive/regressive. Whether or not it is either desirable or, as he thinks, “too late . . . to reverse the segmenting of the human realm into one in which ‘religion’ will occupy a space alongside politics, art, economics, and the like” (1998a: 117), some people happen to think it worthwhile to study this segmentation process itself and to examine the effects of this or that cultural a priori (as Strenski refers to “religion”).

As I once argued, there seems to be something rather significant and all too practical at stake in reading such behavior as, say, the organized suicide-by-burning deaths of a small number of South Vietnamese citizens in the early 1960s as a specifically religious or Buddhist issue—whatever those labels may refer to. In fact, there is something going on when we call such behavior a “self-immolation” rather than, say, a suicide or a desperate political protest (McCutcheon 1997: 167–177). Because our categories have impact and reflect interests, we should ask if those specific collections of diverse beliefs, practices, and institutions that some of us so easily group together and call religion, in distinction from other sorts of social behaviors and organizations, are so obviously a distinct part of “the Human Condition.” For instance, did the September 11 hijackers, as Strenski argues, “behave according to very different rules of rationality than those who are profit or power maximizing in a cost-benefit calculus of a political or economic sort” (2002: 429)? This line of argumentation leaves me puzzled, for I do not understand how their actions were *not* part of a complex calculus based on how they understood the way negotiations over power and privilege (i.e., politics) ought to be connected to the manner in which people negotiate systems of value and exchange (i.e., economics). To my way of thinking, one need have no sympathy or affinity whatsoever for their actions or their apparent motivations to be able to understand that calling their actions religious or the result of “different rules of rationality” is merely a form of obscurantism that shelves, rather than addresses, the matters of most importance. Instead, why not shift the ground a bit and study this and other such conflicts in terms of how historically situated groups draw on competing sets of discursive markers to authorize their all-too-practical and conflicting sociopolitical interests?

Such a shift entails seeing sacred/secular or church/state as ways in which some groups make it possible to plot, delineate, demarcate, and rank, all of which are some of the many ways that human beings make habitable cognitive and social worlds possible and—to their peers, at least—persuasive. As Mary Douglas phrases it in the introduction to her influential study of classification, a basic presumption of this alternative approach is that such systems of distinction, and the punishments that attend their transgression, “have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience” (4). With the idea in mind of making social sense of an untidy experience, I should therefore refine my taxonomy and say that this alternative approach to classification is better termed socio-rhetorical, for the intelligibility derived from such rhetorical and classificatory techniques has practical impact in making worlds of meaning and action possible and persuasive (a point

developed in Asad 2003, McCutcheon 2003). As phrased by Burton Mack, imposed systems of classification that are based on starkly distinguished abstract types

function . . . at a certain distance from the actual state of affairs experienced in the daily round. They articulate a displaced system (imaginary, ideal, “sacred,” marked off) as a counterpoint to the ways things usually go. The inevitable incongruence between the symbol system and the daily round provides a space for discourse. It is the space within which the negotiations fundamental to social intercourse take place—reflection, critique, rationalization, compromise, play, humor, and so forth. (21)

A particularly useful example to which one could productively apply this socio-rhetorical approach to studying classification can be found in Strenski’s (2002: 430) own text: his citation of the closing of the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), undergraduate program in religious studies as evidence of the dangers posed to the field by those who study “religion.” In his reform/revolution binary, I suspect that the stark juxtaposition of Smart-the-reformer to Lease-the-revolutionary not only perpetuates a sad caricature of the latter but also unfairly typecasts the former. Case in point, as a member of the three-person external review committee appointed by the then dean for UCSC’s Humanities Division, Smart (along with Christine Downing and Ray L. Hart) visited the campus in fall 1978 and coauthored a stinging report. Although not recommending closure (“it would be a *tragedy* were the illness of the patient solved by murder,” the committee wrote [Downing, Hart, and Smart 1978b: 10]), they found the “present state of the program to be appalling”: “The program combines a reactionary approach to the subject matter almost unparalleled in the experience of your consultants with a vagueness of structure redolent of well-meaning liberalism” (Downing, Hart, and Smart 1978b: 1–2). They not only found it “fragmented and reactionary, dependent on the whims and fancies of the instructors and reminiscent of seminaries where the beliefs of the students are a central focus of the instructional program,” but also “were appalled to learn that the campus ministers have regularly attended the meetings of the Board”; the committee read this as evidence of the “confusion in the approach to the early stages in the evolution of religious studies at Santa Cruz [that] should be ended immediately” (Downing, Hart, and Smart 1978a: 9–10).

Given that this assessment shares much in common with the so-called inbred clique’s sense of how the study of religion is carried out in many North American departments, Strenski’s use of Lease/Smart and

revolution/reform is based on a highly misleading simplification of both authors' actual positions. It is a simplification that is, however, rhetorically useful, inasmuch as it creates a discursive space in which some scholars can portray themselves as the protectors of a commonsense, safe, reform tradition doing battle with the conspiring fanatics who threaten our institution. It accomplishes this by means of what one author has called a rhetoric of consensus that legitimizes only one group identity by blurring discrepancies that would threaten its authority by complicating matters significantly (Bercovitch: 47).

Leaving aside scholars fighting over issues of purity, consensus, and academic lineage, another example of the rhetorically effective use of binary distinctions involving "religion" can be found in the words of Malcolm X, in his famous "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech, delivered in April 1964. "Islam is my religion," he said, "but I believe my religion is my personal business":

It governs my personal life, my personal morals, and my religious philosophy is personal, between me and the god in whom I believe. . . . Were we to come out here discussing religion we'd have too many differences from the outside and we could never get together. So today, though Islam is my religious philosophy, my political, economic, and social philosophy is black nationalism. As I say, if we bring up religion, we'll have differences, we'll have arguments, we'll never be able to get together. But if we keep our religion at home, keep our religion in the closet, keep our religion between ourselves and our god, then when we come out here we'll have a fight that's common to all of us against an enemy who is common to all of us.<sup>6</sup>

We see here the use of the private/public binary aligned with the religion/politics distinction, both of which function to suppresses what the speaker sees as potentially irreconcilable differences, all for the sake of what he understood to be a common interest requiring common action. Surely an accurate description of his speech will use these distinctions, thus reproducing the notion that internal, religious belief is apolitical and concerned with deep issues of morality, whereas organized public action is political through and through. But if the premise that makes the human sciences possible is

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<sup>6</sup> This quote is transcribed from a recording of the speech at [www.brothermalcom.net/mxwords/whathesaid13.html](http://www.brothermalcom.net/mxwords/whathesaid13.html). The recording was made on April 12, 1964, in Detroit. The more familiar version of this speech was delivered a few days earlier, on April 3, at the Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland at a debate sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality. For a text of that speech, see George Breitman's edited volume, *Malcolm X Speaks* (23–44). My thanks go to Ted Trost, at the University of Alabama, for bringing this speech to my attention.

that human behaviors *always* originate from within and endlessly refer to messy historical entanglements, then to study the impact of this speech requires one to redescribe it as a masterful piece of practical rhetoric working to construct an “us” within a zone in which possible disagreement is contained for the sake of collective action. There may be no better way to phrase it than to say that here “religion” functions repressively. In making this claim I presume that all behaviors, including the behavior of working to protect certain things from public gaze and argumentation, inevitably take place well outside the fictional closet of privacy. So, despite what the people we study may assert, and despite their self-reports and our accurate descriptions of their self-reports, as scholars in the human sciences we always begin from the premise that there is to be no release from the historical and the public. Following from this, we can see that our task is not to disagree with such speakers and inform them that they have misused “religion,” for—just as with Douglas’s studies of purity—we lack a normative standard against which to measure their usage. Instead, scholars of classification are interested in the practical work that the use of taxonomies accomplishes.

For those interested in an application of this method to a more traditional piece of datum, consider Bruce Lincoln’s (1999) study of the politics of myth scholarship. Interested in the political impact of the use of this category to demarcate certain sorts of narratives—and, by extension, certain sorts of people and their sociopolitical systems—Lincoln studies the manner in which such idealized binaries as *mythos/logos* and myth/science have been used to advance the interests of competing groups. “It would be nice to begin with a clear and concise definition of ‘myth,’” he writes in the opening line of his preface,

but unfortunately that can’t be done. Indeed, it would be nice to begin with *any* definition, but to do so would not only be misleading, it would undercut and distort the very projects I intend to pursue. For in the pages that follow I will not attempt to identify the thing myth “is”; rather, I hope to elucidate some of the ways this word, concept, and category have been used and to identify the most dramatic shifts that occurred in their status and usage. (1999: ix)

With little interest in just what myths really are, how they actually function, or how we ought to be using the term (thus distinguishing his analysis from those searching for a normative sense of *myth*), Lincoln instead examines the political effect of scholars who classified and, based on this classification, distinguished and ranked certain sorts of narratives *as* myth, regardless of their particular theory of myth’s origin or function. As I read him, then, he is not

studying myth; instead, he is doing social theory to explain one discursive mechanism used in identity formation and contestation.<sup>7</sup>

In this way, Lincoln's work considerably extends Strenski's earlier *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History* (1987)—an extension praised warmly by Strenski's jacket blurb to Lincoln's book.<sup>8</sup> As Strenski writes in the opening pages to his book:

Myth is everything and nothing at the same time. It is *the* true story or a false one, revelation or deception, sacred or vulgar, real or fictional, symbol or tool, archetype or stereotype. . . . Thus, instead of there being a real thing, myth, there is a thriving *industry*, manufacturing and marketing what is called "myth." "Myth" is an illusion—an appearance conjured or "construct" created by artists and intellectuals toiling away in the workshops of the myth industry. (1987: 1–2)

Instead of simply taking up some local use of the classification as his analytic guide (at least local to the vocabularies of the four scholars whom he studies), Strenski theorizes their usage of the term and concludes that in all four cases *myth* is a particularly efficacious rhetorical tool. Much like Lincoln, then, Strenski concludes that *myth* does not refer to some deeply abiding essence in certain sorts of narratives, stages of human social evolution, or *mentalités*; instead, it is a device used by scholars to accomplish practical sorts of socio-political work in the here and now. Accordingly, one should not rely on such things as the supposedly mythopoeic mentality of this or that group to account for other aspects of behavior (i.e., "myth" is of little use as the *explicans*), for "current concepts and theories of 'myth' have been *manufactured* according to larger theoretical, professional, and cultural projects assumed by the twentieth century's leading myth theorists" (Strenski 1987: 2). Thus, to explain something by appeal to its supposed mythic status is simply to put into practice uncritically the usually undetected cultural projects that drive its

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<sup>7</sup> Lincoln's effort to develop a sociopolitical theory of "myth," rather than most scholars' efforts to arrive at a social or psychological theory of myth, accounts for a least one review of his book (Segal). As Lincoln phrases it in the opening to his reply, "I fear he misunderstands both my purpose and my method" (2002: 196). Such a misunderstanding is evident when Segal likens Lincoln's work on "myth" to Malinowski's studies of myths, inasmuch as the latter understood myths "to secure obedience by rooting laws, customs, and institutions in the primordial past. Myth confers on social obligation the authority of tradition" (Segal: 192). Comparing Lincoln with Malinowski seems to miss the fact that scholars such as the latter, who use "myth" to identify an isolated genre of narrative, are in fact data for the former.

<sup>8</sup> In Lincoln's own words, the first six chapters of his book "extend a discussion begun by such admirable works as Ivan Strenski's *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History*" (1999: xi). As Strenski writes on the back cover blurb: "With its combination of high moral purpose, great learning, and stimulating interpretation, *Theorizing Myth* should be required reading for anyone concerned with the moral and political dimension of scholarship" (Lincoln 1999).

various usages. Should one wish to recover evidence of these cultural projects, then “myth,” and not just myths, becomes one’s datum.

If my reading is correct, then the early Strenski made a significant contribution to what I am calling the socio-rhetorical critique of classification systems. His current criticisms of those who work on “religion” is therefore rather puzzling, for if one were to replace the word *myth* with *religion* and then reread the above quotations from Strenski’s 1987 work, they would qualify what I shall call the First Strenski for a position of leadership among the dangerous, revolutionary, inbred clique about whom the Final Strenski now so urgently warns his colleagues.<sup>9</sup> To paraphrase, instead of there being a real thing, religion, there is a thriving industry, manufacturing and marketing what is called “religion,” a construct created in workshops housed in an assortment of institutions throughout our particular society, not least of which is the academy. The socio-rhetorical critique of “religion” revolves around the assumption that—once again to rephrase Strenski’s earlier thoughts on “myth”—current concepts and theories of “religion” have been manufactured according to larger theoretical, professional, and cultural projects. Because linking classification techniques to these wider projects is the goal of socio-rhetorical critics, such writers are understandably weary of simply adopting some supposedly commonsense notion of “religion” and just getting on with the work of the descriptivist who searches for God in the details.<sup>10</sup>

Despite this relationship between Strenski’s own early work and those who examine the politics of “religion,” he now seems to believe that this sort of metascholarship is dangerous and mischievous.<sup>11</sup> It thus seems

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<sup>9</sup> My reference to the First and Final intentionally alludes to Strenski’s (1998b) lament for what he considers to be the disproportionate, even unfortunate, influence that Michel Foucault’s earlier works (e.g., *Discipline and Punish*, by the author Strenski calls the First Foucault, as opposed to the Final Foucault, who authored such works as the *History of Sexuality* volumes) have enjoyed among some scholars of religion. Specifically, he takes issue with the thesis of David Chidester’s *Savage Systems* (1996) and also Lease’s work. For their replies and his rejoinder, see Chidester 1998, Lease 1998, and Strenski 1998c.

<sup>10</sup> Although such a critique is more than likely not at home in a first-year undergraduate survey course—just as literary critics who eventually historicize “literature” for their students are still able to teach introductory-level literature courses—I believe that there are productive ways in which to teach even entry-level students to be aware of, and thus responsible for, their intellectual interests (see, e.g., Smith n.d. and McCutcheon 2001: chaps. 10–13).

<sup>11</sup> The relationship between Strenski’s work on the politics of “myth” and, e.g., my own interests in the politics of “religion” has been noted by such writers as Hans Kippenberg in his recently translated *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age* (ix). I am not sure to whom this sort of metascholarship is dangerous, for Strenski also argues that such work is irrelevant: “The lords of the theory class might profitably reflect on their irrelevance to cultural creation and cultural understanding at the level of mass human existence” (1998a: 117). If it is indeed as irrelevant as he seems to argue in this essay, then how can anyone take it seriously enough to be threatened by it? Strenski therefore presents us with a classical dilemma because it cannot be both dangerous *and* irrelevant. As noted above (see note 3), Strenski’s style of argument presents the respondent with a moving target.

that, fifteen years after *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History* was first published, the terrain looks entirely different to him. Of course, such a change in an author's thinking needs no defense; as Foucault famously quipped, "Leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order." But given the vehemence of his recent criticisms of those who subject "religion" to a critique dramatically similar to his own critique of "myth," I admit to having enough of a bureaucrat in me to be curious as to just what has changed for him and why he no longer seems to see an important role for categorical historicization and critique.

But perhaps no change in the substance of his position has actually taken place; perhaps the category religion—unlike myth—is a natural kind and thus refers to something real and enduring, such that the former is not open to the same sort of historicization that Strenski once applied so persuasively to the latter. As he has written: "The particular wisdom of ordinary usage [of the category religion] lies in its reflecting a deep feature of the world in which we live. Thus, just as 'everyone knows' what religion is, so also do we all know what 'art,' 'politics,' 'language,' 'nation,' 'race,' 'sex,' 'privacy,' 'economics'—all common places of our culture—are" (1998a: 116). Knowing the difficulties that Strenski (1993) himself has with claims concerning such things as deep structures, I can only presume that by "deep feature" he does not mean to say that "religion" corresponds to an ontologically distinct, nonempirical thing somehow lodged in human nature or neural pathways. In other words, given his past writings and his understanding of religion as a cultural a priori, I do not believe that he is advocating a normative position, akin to those writers cited above. However, this having been said, I do find his comments to be oddly reminiscent of both U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's oft-cited 1964 aside concerning defining *pornography* and the opening lines of *The Idea of the Holy's* famous chapter 3, inasmuch as Strenski could be read to be claiming that just as everyone knows what art is when they see it, so, too, everyone knows what religion is when they see it. They are reminiscent inasmuch as they seem to put into practice a commonsense or indigenous classification system (an act that shores up a certain group's boundaries and thus interests) rather than—as he does in his work on "myth"—historicize these boundary-making devices by studying what interests might be at stake in cutting up the pie in this particular manner.

To rephrase, just who is this "everyone" Strenski mentions? Consider once again his use of Roman Catholicism's absence from the *L.A. Times* religion section. In first reading his comments I was perplexed how Strenski knew Roman Catholicism to be a religion. For, according to

some of the more outspoken undergraduate students I have taught in Tennessee, Missouri, and now Alabama, Roman Catholics are not even Christian, much less religious. Although their use of the category “religion” certainly does not correspond to Strenski’s or my own, they are nonetheless articulate users of their own classification system, and I do not believe it is my role *qua* scholar of religion to contest and then correct their usage of the term.<sup>12</sup> However, Strenski seems to argue that the newspaper’s use of the term is simply wrong, uninformed, or downright vulgar because it fails to match either his own technical definition or some seemingly commonsense (i.e., normative) understanding of the term that is more than apparent to everyone else. Despite such appeals to common sense, I am not persuaded that Strenski’s sense of the term—although probably shared by a number of *JAAR*’s readers—is more of a fit with the facts than the newspaper’s. As with all differences over issues of classification, it simply represents and enacts the interests of a very different social group.

So, in reading “just as ‘everyone knows’ what religion is,” I think we ought to draw particular attention to Strenski’s use of quotation marks, for as I read it his “everyone knows” refers not to just anyone but only to those who happen to claim membership in a particular group, evidenced in their specific use of a classification system. Should one wish to study how such group membership comes about, I presume that one is not limited to employing the group’s own classifications and self-reports. In fact, I suspect that Strenski agrees; in his 1974 article on deep structures (reproduced as a chapter in Strenski 1993), he takes issue with those who would argue “that one cannot study the ‘rules’ of society independently of their use” (1993: 71). I too hope that scholars could study competing groups that follow differing social grammars by using “religion” to divide up their worlds without those same scholars having to choose sides and thus claim membership in one or another of the groups by seeing “religion” as so deep that it cannot be excavated.

To sum up, in his critique of those who study “religion” Strenski seems to conflate his participation in a cultural system (signaled by his strong support for a particular use of *religion*) with the study of the means by which this same cultural system reproduces itself. As the common usages of *myth* as lie, moralistic fable, or protoscientific problem solving were once just as deeply ingrained as are current folk

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<sup>12</sup> However, inasmuch as their presence in my class indicates to me that they are gradually being initiated into the academic study of religion, I will certainly work to clarify the institutional contexts in which their folk usage functions and try to persuade them that the public university is a different institutional setting, thus requiring a different, more technical use of the term.

usages of *religion*, I fail to understand why the former were fair game for a thoroughgoing historicization whereas the latter is not. This is not a rhetorical question; it is a sincere invitation to learn why one would protect one cultural *a priori* after having served up such a convincing critique of another.

“There have been surprisingly few recent meditations on classification by scholars of religion”—so writes Jonathan Z. Smith (2000: 43). If Strenski’s recent critique of those who study “religion” is taken as an example, then perhaps this lack is because such work is carried out from within a cultural system where the concept “religion” is still intimately tied to the ways in which its members continue to construct their individual and group identities, making a study of its history and function a real threat to these seemingly stable identities. Perhaps we are therefore not removed enough from the worlds made possible by our group’s use of *religion*; after all, the world we now inhabit seems no longer to need “myth” in quite the way it once did, allowing scholars to scrutinize the antiquated culture industries that were once fueled by various uses of that term. If this is the case, then the gradual shift away from simply putting into practice a local classification—as in those whom Strenski (2002: 428) approvingly cites as putting religion “back into” historical explanations<sup>13</sup>—and toward a thorough historicization of such a classification technique is a sign of the field’s maturity and, perhaps, a sign of its members’ disaffection from a one-time self-evident social world. I say a sign of maturity because such scholarship is able to entertain that its own tools and its own cultural location can equally be studied as curious human artifacts and that no cultural *a priori* is off-limits.

But even if the study of core cultural markers is more difficult when done from within one’s own cultural system, scholarship on “myth” has

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<sup>13</sup> For instance, Strenski approvingly cites Mack P. Holt’s *The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629* as an example of a work not afraid of using “religion” as the subject of explanation (i.e., the *explicans*) rather than the object to be explained (i.e., the *explicandum*). I am not sure, however, what it means to use religion as part of one’s explanation. For, as Holt himself phrases it, “I am not suggesting that three generations of French men and women were willing to fight and die over differences of religious doctrine, whether it be over how to get to heaven or over what actually transpired during the celebration of mass” (2). But a so-called religious explanation, one that presumably takes religion seriously, ought to be willing to entertain just this! Significantly, then, Holt concludes that “the principal—though clearly not sole—motivating force behind the violence of the civil wars was the *perception* of safeguarding and defending a sacred notion of community defined by religion” (190, emphasis added). Following Holt’s example, then, we learn that using religion as part of one’s explanation simply means providing a descriptive report on indigenous self-perceptions, something very different from trying to contextualize and thus account for the existence and persuasiveness of these perceptions. Unless one is satisfied with explaining (rather than simply describing) historical events by referring to the participants’ own self-perceptions, historicizing these perceptions, along with the local classification systems that allow social actors to perceive their worlds as intelligible, is necessary. Sooner or later religion must therefore become the *explicandum*.

not killed myth studies, just as scholarship on “gender,” “race,” “literature,” and “culture” has not decimated the fields of study and the cultural groups that organize themselves around these taxa. One can still be an anthropologist, and even a member of a certain culture, while also problematizing “culture”; in fact, I would hazard a guess that the critique of “culture” makes better anthropologists. However, if the rhetoric of crisis that often awaits such scholarship is any indication, such work certainly threatens those whose particular social worlds are rationalized and authorized by the presumption that such things as gender, race, literature, and culture are self-evidently useful and meaningful human artifacts. I think here of the debates that once spread through departments of history regarding just what was designated by their disciplinary taxon “history.” Traditional historians met these challenges with a rhetoric and hyperbole comparable to those of Strenski. It was in that context that Joan Wallach Scott offered a most helpful insight into what underwrites the disciplining effects of such responses, and I believe that her words shed light on our current situation as well: “For those who think their position is or ought to be hegemonic, the appearance of critical challenges constitutes a ‘crisis.’ By representing themselves simply as the guardians of ‘History’ [or, in our case, ‘religion’], they deny the possibility of fundamental disagreement about the boundaries of the field, instead representing those who challenge these boundaries as outsiders . . . [and] as either ignorant or willfully destructive enemies” (682).

The question, then, is whether the academic field of which *JAAR* readers claim membership is either too fragile to sustain interests in classification (in which case Strenski’s essays are evidence of his well-meant, paternal concern for the delicate temperament of the field and its members) or so obviously in sync with a deep feature of reality that to scrutinize it prompts one’s interlocutor to question one’s grip on reality. In light of Scott’s comments, a third option presents itself: that a rethinking of the field and the role played by its primary taxon may bring with it a reallocation of resources and cultural capital, such that some current high places might be made rather low in a reinvented field. My hope is that we as scholars are willing to take this risk by seeing our intellectual and institutional pursuits as being no different from any other human pursuit and thus open to the same sort of analysis we employ in the study of other groups’ efforts to make their worlds intelligible and thus inhabitable. If such a change in perspective is possible, then we may take not religion but ourselves seriously enough to find our own institutions worth studying.

Therefore, I side with those who believe that a real opportunity has been presented to scholars in the invitation to turn their attention to the analysis of the very classification that makes possible their discourse and

thus livelihood. As phrased by J. Z. Smith, this opportunity can be understood as presenting our field “with an occasion for rectification, not resignation or renunciation.” I could not agree more, for the sort of questions posed by the socio-rhetorical critique do not threaten our field so much as indicate that, just over 100 years after F. Max Müller dared to speak about a science of religion, interest in the science of “religion” may mean that our field has finally come of age. In conclusion, then, I can say that if there is a threat to our field—not to its continued *existence*, as Strenski believes, but to its continual *development* and *reinvention*—it is from those who indignantly circle the wagons, portray “business as usual” as progressive reform, and thus fail to find their own tools and social groups to be just as interesting as those that come with prefabricated exotic charm. It is precisely this inertia, and the rhetorical ire that greets those who draw attention to it, that is the real danger to our profession as scholars; for, as Smith concludes in his essay “Classification”, “the rejection of classificatory interest is . . . a rejection of thought” (2000: 43).

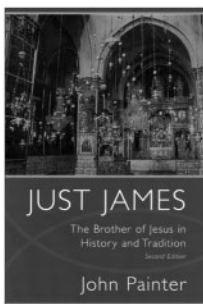
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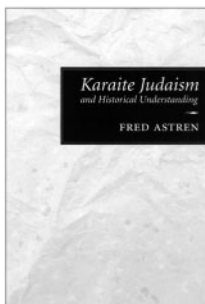
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