Religion as Je Ne Sais Quoi

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Why the hesitation of Corduan and other scholars of religion? It has to do with a debate over the definition of religion that has simmered for almost a century within the fields of sociology of religion and religious studies. Scholars have some difficulty pinning down exactly what religion is, and some even propose scrapping any attempt to define it altogether, claiming that religion is a pseudo-category.[7] The majority of religion scholars, however, are quite certain that religion is a valid concept, and that it is a useful and helpful tool for understanding different cultures.

Most religion scholars have pursued one of two strategies for defining "religion": substantivism and functionalism.[8] The older strategy for defining religion is substantivism (or essentialism), which arose in the mid-nineteenth century. It seeks to understand religion in terms of a core essence or substance. That substance can be construed as, for example, a belief in the supernatural, or a key mystical experience, or a certain institutional structure. One example would be the great religion scholar Mircea Eliade's understanding of religion as an encounter with a numinous sacred that is clearly separated from the mundane, everyday aspects of life.[9] Functionalism, on the other hand, arose at the turn of the last century in anthropology when substantivism proved to be too narrow to deal with the religious behaviors of certain native peoples that were then being studied. Functionalism is more flexible in that it seeks to define religion not in terms of what religion is, but what it does. Religion is defined by how it meets certain human needs such as providing meaning, emotional comfort, or whatever. For example, a pioneer in the anthropology of religion, Emile Durkheim, proposed that religion is really a force for social cohesion. Whatever finally holds a society together, that phenomenon is, by definition, religion.[10] So religion potentially can be as extensive and multiform as human needs are.

The most recent addition to this debate has come from a small but growing number of scholars (mostly American) who work in a variety of disciplines: cultural studies, religious studies, anthropology, sociology, and even literary theory. Using the insights of the functionalist theories of anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner, they have sought to extend the accepted definition of religion further to include popular cultural phenomena. They seek recognition of popular culture's sacred spaces, the way it creates its own web of meaning, its own rituals, myths and communities.[11] For these scholars, even though religion is slippery and hard to define, it is nonetheless an indispensable category for understanding popular culture.[12]

This paper is an attempt to further this network of metaphorical associations to arrive at a specifically Christian understanding of popular culture as a functional religion. To get there, I will appropriate the work of a language-philosopher, the late Paul Ricoeur. I will focus on his theory of narrative as a "threefold mimesis," especially his concept of "text worlds" and their transforming power in the lives of readers. Bringing his ideas into conversation with certain biblical concepts, especially the ideas of general revelation and idolatry, I will argue that religion can likewise be theorized as a threefold mimesis.

There is more at stake here than simply a subtle shifting of theoretical boundaries between cultural studies and religion. Rather, I seek a reorientation in the way we perceive popular culture itself. If popular culture constructs the worlds of meaning in which we dwell and through which we move in our everyday lives, then truly understanding its dynamics is well worth the time and effort. My broader hope is that Christians will be given tools with which to deepen their own engagement with the popular cultural worlds that surround us all.

Notes...

[7] See, for example, Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[8] For a brief overview of these two definitional strategies, see Meredith B. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1992), 9-15.
[9] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1957).
[10] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1965), 463-76.
[11] Two fascinating collections of articles by such scholars are Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds. *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), especially the second half of the book; and Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, eds., *God in the Details: American and Religion in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001).
[12] Ironically, this project is met with hostility from both the established religious studies departments and cultural studies departments. Many popular cultural scholars feel that to see popular culture as a conduit of religious significance would distract us from the real business of cultural studies—to expose the ways popular culture is a tool for hegemony or symbolic resistance to oppression. In other words, for most popular culture scholars, popular culture is properly viewed only with a view to its political or economic effects.

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