TAMING ETHNOCENTRISM AND TRANS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDINGS

RUSSELL T. McCUTCHEON

While a number of contemporary scholars of religion continue to refrain from—or have actually expressed what amounts to a disdain for—discussing theoretical issues, and instead go about what they say is the business of “taking religion seriously” (whatever that may actually mean), yet another anthropologist has stepped into this void and made a contribution to theorizing in the academic study of religion.¹

One of the more notable aspects of Benson Saler’s work, Conceptualizing Religion (1993), is his effort to, in his words, “tame” ethnocentrism by examining its foundations in the very concepts and assumptions operative in the Euro-American study of religion. He acknowledges that, from the outset, both the observer and the observed—the outsider and the insider—are entrenched in their own specific cultural, and hence conceptual, contexts and that, in his words, “some amount of ethnocentrism is probably unavoidable as a cognitive starting point in the search for trans-cultural understanding” (1993: 9). Thus, from the start at least, both observers and informants—the latter of which is a better term than Saler’s odd and rather dated choice of natives—are separated by a gulf, each inside their own cultural and historical context making neither position ultimately authoritative nor normative.

Regardless of the gap in respective starting points, it is clear from Saler’s work that this initial gulf ought to be bridged and that some convergence of understanding is desirable; for developing trans-cultural understanding is the goal of his anthropology. Although it is uncertain whether this gulf will ever be completely overcome, Saler’s effort to diminish our and their situatedness comprises a three-fold

¹ Since delivering this paper in Mexico City in 1995, portions of it were revised and included in my book, Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia (1997).

² For a survey of the rich history of anthropological theorizing on religion, see E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s Theories of Primitive Religion (1992 [1965]). Most recently, the work of Stewart Guthrie in Faces in the Clouds (1993) comes to mind as example of anthropologists making contributions to theorizing about religion.
task: (i) it is incumbent on scholars to acknowledge the culturally entrenched, and hence partial and limited, nature of their own observational starting point, i.e., recognizing the entrenched nature of our idealized, prototypical notions of just what constitutes religion—and for that matter, what constitutes and counts as race, kinship, nation, gender, society, and all other folk categories that we as scholars translate into analytical, comparative categories; (ii) due to this perspective-bound nature of our starting prototypes, we must always hold them tentatively, as exemplars instead of norms. Accordingly, we must be thoroughly familiar with their history, implications, limitations, and various uses. This is accomplished through conceiving of them as “unbounded categories”, which are to be distinguished in terms of loose sets of family resemblances that are always open to being revised; (iii) and last, due to the variety of not only behaviors and beliefs but also the variety of both folk and scholarly categories that overlap and can be grouped together and compared through one or more shared family traits, Saler calls for scholars to explore the use of other people’s folk categories as possible scholarly, analytical categories. While the other studies us through what we can only hope are equally open-ended folk categories, we can venture to explore using their categories as our own starting points. Regardless of where or when—if ever—such dialogue ends, Saler maintains that religion, conceptualized as just such an unbounded category, serves as a possible cultural bridge; for, from the outset, such an unbounded category excludes no one from gaining entrance to the dialogue and the bridge-building game. In other words, since religion is best conceived polythetically rather than monothetically, as an issue of more-or-less rather than yes-or-no, we never know where the comparative enterprise will lead us nor who will join in the conversation.

Right off, let me say that I welcome Saler’s efforts to demonstrate the contextual nature of not just the subject under study but observing outsiders complete with their categories as well, a demonstration which is all the stronger since I read his recognition of cultural and contextual relativity as not necessarily implying that there is no difference or no point of demarcation between the insiders and outsiders. All too often, post-modern critiques of authority are appropriated by scholars of religion and used to legitimize and relativize all contexts; in other words, because we are all contextually-bound, or so the argument goes, then all viewpoints deserve equal time in any one given discourse. Surely, Saler’s work will help us in the effort to