FILLING IN THE CRACKS WITH RESIN: A RESPONSE TO JOHN BURRIS’ “TEXT AND CONTEXT IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION”

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The very opposition between what is inside and what is outside texts is rendered problematic, and nothing is seen as being purely and simply inside or outside texts. (La Capra 1983: 26)

I am grateful to the editors of MTSR for inviting a reply to John Burris’ recent article (2003). Because David Chidester’s Savage Systems (1996) was published after the manuscript for Manufacturing Religion (1997) had been submitted to the press in late-1995, I am pleased that Burris juxtaposes these two books, for I think that they have some important things in common, not least of which is the manner in which both squarely place the study of religion into a geo-political context. Moreover, I think it sensible to identify the influence that some of Ivan Strenski’s work had on my thinking at a formative stage in its development, notably his use of the “text in context” method in his Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History (1987). But at some points Chidester and I diverge, I think, although not necessarily because I emphasize text whereas he emphasizes context, as Burris argues. And, because of the rather harsh criticisms that Strenski has leveled at the work of those who focus on the category “religion”—e.g., Gary Lease, Tim Fitzgerald, and myself—I think it unwise to place too much emphasis on those points where our works appear to converge, despite both of us being concerned with contextualizing theories and theorists of religion.¹ And despite being flattered to find

¹ Despite Burris’ claim that my work “follows largely in the same vein” as Strenski’s, I concur with Chidester’s critique of Strenski’s emphasis on establishing direct and demonstrable causal links and his aim to ascribe individual culpability; such an approach strikes me as failing to entertain the structural nature of political institutions. For an early formulation of this critique, see McCutcheon 1997: 96-100; 2003: chap. 11; forthcoming c. For examples of Strenski’s own criticisms of my work, see Strenski 1998 and 2002.
my book placed in a tradition that also contains the work of the late Eric Sharpe, I see my work as dramatically different from the sort of apolitical history-of-ideas approach that characterizes this way of telling the story of our field’s past. Given that the various similarities and differences that are crucial to Burris’ argument all have something to do either with text or context, I would like to focus my response on the way in which he uses this pairing, as well as to examine the view of history, including the task of historical research, that seems to inform his attempt to “imagine the discipline as a whole” (2003: 39).

Although generally supportive of Burris’ interest in moving beyond the regnant idealist approach to writing the history of an academic field (e.g., Burris 2001), I am somewhat suspicious of any attempt to recover “the full historical context of a field of religion” (2003: 33) by a synthesis that overcomes that which is characterized as a series of merely partial viewpoints, each of which is judged, “from a historiographical perspective”, to provide “an excessively narrow perspective” (2003: 33). So, despite the fact that he welcomes my critique of “the subject of transcendence and its political implications” (2003: 31) that has acted as a “driving force” throughout the field’s history, I find Burris’ presumption that there exists some definitive and full historical picture to be informed—ironically, perhaps—by the very same technique I critiqued in Manufacturing Religion. For the rhetoric of uniqueness that comes packaged with claims that something is sui generis necessarily implies that there is some definitive and final vantage point from which something ought to be seen, a perspective to end all perspectives. This technique is present no less in studies that advocate obtaining a full understanding of the history of the study of

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2 The work of the late Walter Capps also comes to mind as an example of this approach to writing the field’s history. In a review of his Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline (1995), I phrased it as follows:

Capps’s use of the “great man” heuristic is itself problematic, for he presents the history of the study of religion as essentially an intellectual adventure, a virtual Hegelian narrative unfolding in history, failing to take into account the material and social origins of the field. Indeed the Enlightenment played a considerable role in our history, but today it is rather difficult to talk of the Enlightenment simply as a purely intellectual event, as Capps does. As important as the beliefs and conscious intentions of our field’s founders may have been, such things as European colonialism and the more recent advent of American imperialism have played a considerable role as well. (McCutcheon 1999)