RESPONSE

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

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In an article appearing in this journal, Timothy Fitzgerald (2003) provides a 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 else. Instead, I will limit myself to the major points, and attempt to respond in such a way that might 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 scholar 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,

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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 separate and detailed responses.
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.

1. **Reification, the Secular and Power**

Despite Fitzgerald’s critique, 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* reality to which the 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

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1 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.