Concessions, Confessions, Clarifications, Ripostes:
By Way of Response to Tim Fitzgerald

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Abstract

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It seems I am hoist on my own petard. As Tim Fitzgerald rightly observes, my “Theses on Method” were a deliberate provocation that invited critical response. For reasons of the most basic academic principle, I am thus obliged to read, ponder, and comment on the “Antitheses” he has offered, however repetitive, plodding, misinformed and misguided these may be (Fitzgerald 2006). In truth, they prompt varied responses.

1. Concessions

1.1 Signifiers are not identical to signifieds. There is always some gap between the two that makes for both art and trouble. When the gap is particularly large, the relation particularly tendentious, and this state of affairs so normalized as to pass without comment, the potential for mischief is high.

1.2 Abstract nouns are notoriously slippery, English “religion” (and its cognates) being a case in point.
1.3 One can react to this state of affairs in various ways, which include withdrawal into silence, bemused (or malicious) playfulness, and prolonged angst-ridden navel-gazing. Mr. Fitzgerald can advocate what he likes, but personally, I think it impossible to eliminate all problematic signifiers from one’s vocabulary, all signifiers being problematic. It is also cumbersome—and ugly—to place them all in scare quotes or to introduce defensive phrases like “the phenomena previously, conventionally, and naively referred to as ‘religion’.”

1.4 This being the case, I still employ the word “religion,” although the objections Fitzgerald raises are as familiar to me as they are to any academic who has been reading and listening over the last half century.

1.5 It is not that I reject or ignore such arguments, but my response is admittedly old fashioned. Cognizant of the fact that language is neither the world, nor its reflection, but an imperfect instrument with which one engages (and sometimes distorts and sometimes remakes) the world, I struggle to define key terms with a certain precision and rigor, continuing to rethink and revise my usage as its inadequacies and flaws become clear. Not a sexy solution, but where Fitzgerald accuses me of proclaiming eternal essences by professorial fiat (as if I or anyone else had such power), I am simply trying to clarify the way I use the terms in question.

2. Confessions

2.1 Notwithstanding Mr. Fitzgerald’s careful examination of the website for the University of Chicago Divinity School, this is not a text or a genre to which I pay much attention. In point of fact, it was his article that first prompted me to read it.

2.2 Like Mr. Fitzgerald, I find this prose pompous, banal, self-contradictory, vapid, and downright embarrassing. Possibly also revealing.

2.3 For all that Chicago’s website may be an extreme case, I react similarly to most institutional literature of self-promotion and to most of what passes for scholarship in the field of Religious Studies.

2.4 Many of my colleagues no doubt view my own work in like fashion. My tenure at Chicago has never been entirely comfortable, but I’m grateful that my home institution tolerates me as well as it does. There’s a long story here, but this is not the place to tell it. Had Mr. Fitzgerald done some serious research, he might have come up with something of interest, but his superficial web-browsing produces nothing worthy of comment.