Chapter 28

Religion and culture

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from *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*
ed. John Hinnells (New York: Routledge, 2005), 489-508

How do we begin to consider a subject so broad as 'religion and culture'? Starting from common usages of the term 'culture,' one could make an umbrella category covering every topic in this book. At the least, this umbrella would encompass religion and the arts, religion and anthropology, and postmodernism and the study of religion. Beyond this, cultural analysis commonly refers to work on language and other forms of symbolic communication: textual studies, linguistics, theology, ritual studies, and media studies. By extension, culture may refer to anything that we can analyze like a language (including dreams, conventions of visual art, or universal structures of cognition), read as a cultural text (including material artifacts, forms of entertainment, or social dramas such as revolutions), or understand as a discourse (including systems of law and medicine, sexual practices, or issues of colonialism).

Obviously, scholars who can claim expertise in 'religion and culture' have a license to pursue many fascinating topics. Unfortunately, this also means that the term 'culture' can lose all precision. By taking culture as our subject, we enter a zone in which it is hard to draw lines between anthropology, literature, history, sociology, philosophy, ethnic studies, and media studies. The idea of 'cultural studies' can dissolve into 'all studies with a foot somewhere in the humanities.' At an extreme, one UNESCO discussion about cultural policy failed because, for some participants, 'culture permeated the whole social fabric and its role was so pre-eminent . . . that it might indeed be confused with life itself' (Tomlinson 1991: 5).

This essay explores some of the key things that 'studying culture' means in the field of religious studies. It is divided into three sections: approaches from the social sciences, approaches from the study of arts and literature, and reflections on the relations between culture and religion. The point is not that any given reader should aspire to use all the approaches we will discuss. In fact, one cannot use all of them, at least at the same time. The goal is to help readers clarify which subfields of religion and culture best address their specific concerns.

Let us begin with two simple questions. First, can we identify any aspects of life that are more 'cultural' than others, toward which 'cultural analysis' directs our attention? If not, then culture refers to everything in general but nothing in particular, and we would be better off abandoning the term; there would be no difference between 'cultural practice' and 'practice' or 'cultural interpretation' and 'interpretation.' Second, suppose we can answer the first question in ways that offer a focus for analysis – but we can give numerous answers that are mutually exclusive. Are some of these answers more useful than others?

Two common-sense responses to the first question will provide our center of gravity: cultures can be understood as whole ways of life, or as especially valorized literature and art. However, there are complications. These approaches are often defined in opposition to each other. Moreover, some critics suggest that anyone who thinks with these approaches will overstress social consensus and moral regulations, underplay struggles for power and changes over time, and obscure aspects of life that cut across multiple groups. In light of such critiques, cultural theory has become a battlefield on which some scholars repudiate the idea of using culture as an analytical category at all. In response, other scholars refine the concept to give greater attention to history, power, and difference as part of cultural analysis. Meanwhile, some people have begun to use the name 'cultural studies' for a specific movement within this larger field. We must try to clarify all these matters.

Turning to my second question – whether some ways of studying culture are better than others – we will assume that approaches have varying strengths and weaknesses. There are good reasons to use certain approaches for specific purposes. However, no one can offer such reasons from a value-free standpoint outside culture. Determining what counts as a strength emerges from the processes of debate and struggle within specific contexts – what scholars call 'cultural contestation.' Does it reflect wisdom or elitist irrelevance to valorize canons of high culture as strongholds of spiritual insight and social critique, distinct from popular culture? Does it demonstrate minimal competence or disreputable arrogance to discuss the rise of human civilization or the need for cultural consensus? Are scholars who explore what is changing under postmodern conditions trendy nihilists? Are scholars passé if they do not explore such changes? Such disagreements are pervasive in current debates. The main issue at stake is not whether Professor X or Y does a better job at studying a given problem, but the strengths and weaknesses of different forms of inquiry.

The fascination and frustration of working in the field of religion and culture is its lack of agreement about how to judge such issues. True, we can clarify a range of approaches and analyze it with as much fair-mindedness as we can muster, given our human limitations. We can resist the temptation to use the complexity of our world as an excuse to replace critical and comparative thought with mere assertions of opinion about religious beliefs or scholarly methods. We can gain enough perspective to repudiate the type of academic gamesmanship – sadly popular among cultural theorists – wherein one 'wins' by comparing the strongest applications of one's favored approach to the least flattering implications that can possibly be attributed to opposing approaches. Still, at the end of the day we cannot gain enough focus to begin cultural analysis without choosing (explicitly or implicitly) certain working definitions and analytical priorities. These choices have ethical implications; they reflect certain values over others.

For example, when studying any given aspect of culture, one comes into dialog (at least implicitly) with the dominant attitudes and expectations related to this topic, as viewed from the standpoint of elite groups. Thus, scholarship will have implications for the outcome of debates between people who endorse the dominant cultural standpoints and people who critique them from other standpoints. Becoming self-conscious about this dynamic does not require us to become obsessed with it to the exclusion of all other concerns. Nevertheless, contrary to scholars who argue that entanglement with values should be out of bounds for the study of religion –

the self-defeating idea that the study of religion would be better if it purged categories such as 'better' – we should acknowledge that we are inevitably entangled with values whenever we clarify our priorities. We should discuss (forthrightly rather than implicitly) how to make our scholarship more constructive and critical – and indeed what 'constructive' and 'critical' should mean. As we will see, building bridges between religious studies and the interdisciplinary study of culture holds significant promise for deepening such discussions.

Cultures as whole ways of life – a few approaches and their critics

Does cultural analysis focus on some aspects of life more than others? When I asked my young children what culture is, they answered matter-of-factly: the ways of a people. People are different in how they work, dress, eat, organize families, and so on. Culture can be a name for talking about these differences as whole patterns. When I pressed my children harder – what is a 'people' and how could they tell? – their response was equally matter-of-fact: people had different cultures. These answers formed such a tight circle that it seemed obvious. Yet culture is not a stable thing waiting out there to be recorded. Until recently, there was no category of culture to interpret practices we now call cultural. We should understand culture less as a neutral category and more as 'an argument, a theoretical object that comes with a certain discipline, persuasions, and admonitions' (Masuzawa in Taylor 1998: 87). What does this argument argue? What exactly are we looking for if we look for the 'ways of a people' – and in that moment what might we *fail* to notice?

A leading approach to this problem is Clifford Geertz's anthropology, which analyzes cultures as sets of symbolic meanings shared among groups – 'webs of signification' which constitute their ways of life, especially through creating meaning and value. Geertz interprets symbols through 'thick description' with a goal of 'enlarg[ing] the possibility of intelligible discourse between people quite different from each other' (1988: 147). He offers a famous definition of religion as a cultural system: 'a system of symbols' which 'establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations' and naturalize 'conceptions of a general order of existence' (1973: 91). This definition is useful both for scholars who celebrate how religions can center quests for meaning and order, as well as for scholars who stress more pernicious aspects of religious 'moods and motivations' – for example, their capacity to 'invest specific human preferences with transcendent status by misrepresenting them as revealed truths, primordial traditions, divine commandments and so forth' (Lincoln, in Braun and McCutcheon 2000: 416). Geertz's methods can blend with sociological approaches such as Max Weber's, or with approaches from comparative religion such as Mircea Eliade's; both blends are common in religious studies.

Notwithstanding Geertz's wide range of allies, we should distinguish his interpretive (read: 'cultural') anthropology from other social scientific approaches to culture. Self-styled 'harder' social scientists paint Geertz as a humanistic 'softie' weakened by reading too many literary critics. Interpreting symbols seems hopelessly imprecise to scholars who march under banners such as quantitative sociology or materialist cultural ecology. For Geertz, such approaches are not wrong, but are too thin to account for the richness of culture. However, critics charge that his thick description stresses secondary issues at the expense of fundamental structural ones, and blurs

important distinctions between science and literary analysis. Thus, a zone of broadly Geertzian cultural analysis of the 'ways of a people' comes into relief – as distinguishable from 'less cultural' forms of social science such as cognitive and physical anthropology or quantitative political science (Harris 1999; Lemert 1998; McCauley and Lawson 1996; Morris 1987). In practice, this may amount to the difference between digging up bones versus analyzing rituals or counting attendance at Hollywood films versus exploring why a film is popular.

For the moment, let us restrict our attention to symbolic or cultural anthropology. By no means does this conclude our quest for focus, because there remain worlds within this narrower world. To begin, we can distinguish between a 'sweeping, up-from-the-ape, study-of-mankind sort of business' and a 'focus on particular people as crystal wholes, isolate and entire' (Geertz 1988: 146). Scholars trace the roots of the former approach to E. B. Tylor's 1871 book *Primitive Culture*, which defined culture as a 'complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities acquired by man as member of society.' Tylor discussed the evolutionary progress of 'man's culture' from a primitive and magical stage to a modern and scientific one. Compared to alternatives during his lifetime, his approach had strengths.[1] However, later scholars stress its weaknesses. They see Tylor and his colleagues such as James Frazer as 'armchair anthropologists' who overgeneralized and took data out of context. For example, creation myths of different languages, from various centuries and continents, might be torn from the societies that produced them and juxtaposed to illustrate some abstract point. Tylor overplayed the intellectual aspects of change from magical to scientific worldviews – and he did so with strong Eurocentric biases, as when he stated that 'few would dispute that the following races are rightly in order of culture: Australian, Tahitian, Aztec, Chinese, Italian' (cited in Stocking 1968: 81). In short, 'Tylor took data from all over the world out of context and arranged it in a sequential scheme according to a preconceived plan' (Morris 1987: 99).

Although no contemporary scholar would endorse Tylor's methods without extensive qualification, his scale of ambition and way of framing questions have continuing resonance. One can underline problems with Tylor's methods but respond by seeking better arguments on a similar scale. Thus, Robert Bellah (1970) offers an evolutionary panorama of growing 'differentiation' on a world-historical stage – a presentation overlapping with research on secularization and globalization. Much work in Eliade's tradition extends Tylor's sweeping comparative approach.[2] For better or worse, inquiries on this scale will remain significant in religious studies as long as textbooks keep trying to survey changes from primal to modern religions or mount catch-all chapters on things such as ritual, and as long as syllabi try to satisfy (rather than reorient) students who seek to learn a body of knowledge in line with such global appetites.

More important to the common sense of religious studies, however, is the anthropology pioneered by scholars such as Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski. Geertz works within this tradition, which addressed the limitations of scholars such as Tylor through grounded research on specific groups using ethnographic methods. This means studying people through participant-observation at one slice of time, rather than across broad sweeps of time. It also means studying one group at a time and discussing its holistic coherence – for example, relating Mayan creation myths to

other practices and artifacts of the Mayans, rather than to myths from more and less 'advanced' people. Although ethnographers sought dispassionate scientific knowledge, their work had ethical dimensions. They championed cultural pluralism against prevailing assumptions that groups such as the Mayans were 'backward' and racially inferior. Often they used cross-cultural comparison as a form of cultural critique – for example, by calling into question the givenness and universality of Western gender systems (Hegeman 1999; Marcus and Fischer 1986).

Both of these frameworks for studying cultures as whole ways of life – those that stress 'up-from-the-ape' evolution with limited appreciation for cultural pluralism, and those that champion the pluralism of 'isolate and entire' peoples with limited attention to change over time – have been strongly criticized by a generation of critics. These critics stress internal conflict and complexity rather than consensus within whatever remains of 'cultural wholeness' by the time the critics have finished. They underline historical changes, now approached not as sweeping evolution but as the local dynamics of the history of colonialism (Asad 1973; Hymes 1969; Clifford 1988). One author advocates 'writing against culture' in order to evade three assumptions embedded in the concept: (1) positing *stability and coherence* in the group being analyzed, (2) the *ahistorical* quality of culture as a conceptual frame, and (3) the *discreteness* of cultural boundaries as opposed to the ways that real life includes transnational migrations, hybrid identities, and global flows of information and commodities – in short, a kaleidoscope of local, regional, national, and global forces. For such critics, thinking with the concept of culture drastically oversimplifies complexity. It does so in a way that 'inevitably carries a sense of hierarchy.' Culture 'is the prime anthropological tool for making "Other"' (Abu-Lughod in Fox 1991: 147; see also Appadurai 1996; Clifford 1997).

Such critics worry when cultural analysis dovetails with colonization – as in the case of E.E. Evans-Pritchard's research on the Nuer during a British war against them, or as discussed in David Chidester's (1996) history of religious studies in Southern Africa. They also worry when efforts to study 'authentic' cultures before modernity transforms them beyond recognition (so-called 'salvage anthropology') are informed by imperialist nostalgia. This is a habit of thinking about cultural difference that emphasizes the noble but doomed ways of 'exotic others.' Scholars with this habit prefer to think about victims of colonialism as untouched by colonialism – however, if questions arise about resisting colonization, scholars focus on past defeats (which they lament as tragic) rather than ongoing resistance (which they treat as irrelevant to their scholarly priorities.) Imperialist nostalgia – which commonly informs not only books but also museums, tourism, and popular films – enables people who are complicit in imperialism, or who fail to address the legacies of imperialism, to transform their guilt into self-congratulation about their liberal sensitivity (Lutz and Collins 1993; Rosaldo 1989; Haraway in Dirks *et al.* 1994: 49–95). The practice of writing in an 'ethnographic present' – for example, one might read that 'the Lakota hunt buffalo on horses' although this was only true for one century of Lakota history – appears less quaint and more troubling when approached in this context.

Even if scholars evade such problems, there are further questions. If one works with the concept of cultural wholes at all – even anti-colonial wholes, or wholes that are clearly not static essences, such as an interpretation of Moroccan culture that does not posit 'any deep Moroccanicity . . . struggling to get out of history'

(Geertz 1995: 23) – what is the analytical standpoint needed to imagine such wholes? Is it the standpoint of a Western observer in a colonial encounter trying to impose narrative order (read: 'cultural wholeness') on the shreds and patches of a reality that is complex enough to defeat such order? Even if the resulting narrative wholes might unravel by themselves without any help, is it the job of cultural theorists to hasten such unravelling? If so, culture begins to appear less as a stable source of meaning and more as a rhetorical strategy; it changes from a fact that allows children to study 'the ways of the Lakota' to a mere fig leaf masking difference and conflict. Is cultural analysis simply a way for outside analysts to express their 'superstitions' while intervening in other people's business in self-interested ways?[3] Scholars can no longer 'write culture' without arousing such suspicions (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

The high tide of the rage to treat every claim about culture as a narrative construction and then call every narrative into question appears to be passing (Fox 1991; Clifford 2000). For all its important contributions, this approach (often called 'deconstructive' or 'postmodern') produces diminishing returns in certain contexts.[4] Pervasive suspicion toward overarching narratives can create a void, so that scholarship only 'escorts one to the edge of one's ignorance and then leave[s] one to contemplate the vacancy' (Limerick cited in Tweed 1996: 130). What starts by critiquing problems that are internal to cultural discourses (for example, imperialist nostalgia) can end by losing track of other forms of power besides discursive ones, so that cultural critique in effect becomes a parasite on the discourses it criticizes – it is able to attack their internal weaknesses but not able to imagine critiques from other frames of reference. The radical celebration of cultural difference and complexity sometimes (which is not to say always) functions to depoliticize people and dissolve group solidarities into a form of liberal individualism (Eagleton 2000). Although postmodern critics see themselves as the cutting edge of an advancing critique of power, their history might equally well be traced to elitist and apolitical textual criticism (Hegeman 1999).

Importantly, if we use deconstructive approaches to dissolve all stable identities, we undermine not only dominant discourses, but also the standpoints from which underdogs in social conflicts stake their claims – for example, both ideologies of white supremacy and 'black' identities that are rallying points for anti-racism. One response is to defend 'strategic essentialism' – positive cultural identifications that appeal not to monolithic essences of groups such as races and sexes, but rather to evolving identities inherited from historical processes and embraced in specific contexts (Omi and Winant 1992; Rajchman 1995). Another response is to lament the erosion of universal values such as democracy and human rights (Palmer 1990).

In weighing such challenges, it is crucial not to dismiss the strongest postmodern insights in light of their least helpful applications. Rather, we need to discern in what contexts postmodern approaches do – and do not – produce diminishing returns. In any case, patterns of difference among human groups will not disappear simply because scholars can point out serious flaws and oversimplifications in past efforts to conceptualize these patterns. If we refuse to trust the most sophisticated forms of cultural analysis to chart such patterns, we may wind up reinventing something very much like cultural analysis under a new name.

Scholars who hope to refine (rather than abandon) the study of culture in light of the above critiques must be alert to a dispute that informs much recent debate.

Both the 'hard' social scientists introduced above and scholars grounded in structuralist and poststructuralist theory have a longstanding concern about scholars who approach culture as a tool or resource that people can deploy to accomplish their goals.[5] If one thinks this way, what understandings of the self and models of social change are being presupposed? Do common-sense assumptions about culture overestimate human agency? Suppose that culture is not like a tool to wield; suppose it is a structural matrix that shapes people's subjectivity before they pick up their tools and limits their ability to attain their goals. If so, it is misleading to talk about autonomous actors who use culture to create identities or change history. In fact, some critics use the term 'culturalism' for wishful enthusiasm about social change and naïve assumptions about individual autonomy. 'Even the inmates of a concentration camp are able . . . to live by their own cultural logic,' Talal Asad notes. 'But one may be forgiven for doubting that they are therefore "making their own history"' (1993: 4). 'Choices and desires make actions before action can make "history,"' he continues. 'But predefined social relations and language . . . shape the person to whom "normal" desires and choices can be attributed' (1993: 13).

Anyone who uses the category of culture must grapple with this challenge, and indeed stress it in many contexts. But on balance this challenge does not discredit cultural analysis in general, nor cultural agency in particular. In response to critics such as Asad, Sherry Ortner offers solid arguments for continuing to explore cultural agency and symbolic meaning, as long as scholars also give careful attention to sociohistorical power structures and the complexities of cultural hybridity. She also responds to Asad's complaint (1993: 27–54) that a Geertzian approach to culture is static and focussed too much on ideas that create social consensus. According to Ortner, one can draw on Geertz but see culture as an active communicative practice; that is, it involves not consensus, but conflict and negotiation over fluid and contested meanings. Ortner refuses a zero-sum choice between culture as agency and culture as a structural matrix that constitutes agents. Any approach that cannot account for agency and resistance carries the burden of proof for her (Ortner in Dirks *et al.* 1994: 372–411; Ortner 1999; see also Nye 2000). We could build a broad consensus for this abstract proposal, although the devil is in the details.

From culture as arts and literature to interdisciplinary cultural studies

I was not surprised when my children needed prompting to appreciate how many choices they had, if they wanted to study 'the ways of a people' – approaches that stress sweeping evolution, ethnographic wholes, instability and deconstruction, imperialist nostalgia, history and power, hybrid and diasporic identities, agency or structure, and so on. However, I was surprised when they did not mention arts and literature. Is it not common sense that 'cultural' analysis – as opposed, say, to sociopolitical or ecological analysis – pays special attention to this? Such common sense leads toward a second range of things that we could study if we are studying culture: literature versus science, literary theorists versus novelists, canonical works versus popular culture, written texts versus electronic media, specific forms of art (music, film, etc.) versus other forms, meanings intended by writers versus meanings discovered by readers, and many others. For every anthropologist who claims the high

ground of cultural analysis because literature is shaped by whole ways of life, there are two literary theorists who respond that cultures are built of language and anthropologists must communicate through narratives.

Raymond Williams (1983) shows how the word 'culture' developed in this context, starting from the Latin word *colere* that was also the root of 'cultus' and 'colonize.' Originally, culture referred to cultivating crops and animals. Gradually, its meaning extended to a process of human development (the cultivation of people), an abstract state of achieved development (culture as a trait of educated people), and a body of artistic works exemplifying such development (culture as canon.) We have seen how anthropologists have used the term 'culture' both in universal evolutionary narratives and to focus on groups such as the Maya. A related distinction between universal and particular cultures operates in literary and philosophical scholars. Notably, the idea of culture was used by Johann Gottfried von Herder to draw contrasts between the distinctive virtues of German *Kultur* and the universal civilization propounded by the *philosophes* of the French Enlightenment.

Following Herder, literary scholars have distinguished many particular cultures from 'universal' contexts, or at least wider contexts. For example, students of US literature discuss how an 'American' cultural identity was imagined in opposition to an 'Old World' European civilization. Extending further, we could identify a 'culture of rock and roll' or an 'African-American culture' distinct from the wider US culture. In each case, scholars can analyze the focused culture or subculture through its representative art forms. At this point, literary variants of criticisms we have already discussed take hold. What groups are 'made other' by books that valorize German identity or Enlightenment progress? If deconstructive critics are willing to grant that an 'American' literary canon exists, what groups does it exclude and how does this relate to US imperialism? What theories of strategic essentialism or cultural hybridity are needed to understand hip-hop music?

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Williams (1958) shows how the tradition of distinguishing literary/artistic cultures from larger 'whole ways of life' – as opposed to approaching cultures *as* whole ways of life – evolved in relation to conflicts inside Western societies during the rise of capitalism. Writers such as Matthew Arnold, the author of *Culture and Anarchy*, presented culture as a bulwark against the spiritual impoverishment of modern life. Culture was 'a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know . . . the best which has been thought and said in the world,' thus 'turning a stream of fresh and free thought on our stock notions and habits' (Arnold 1993: 190). Williams traces Arnold's influence to the present through Edmund Burke, T.S. Eliot, and many others – all of whom contrasted 'cultured' people not so much with 'primitive' foreigners (as in Tylor's vision of the higher versus the lower stages of evolution) as with the 'mechanical' aspects of industrial society at home.

Arnold transmuted conservative religion into half-secular cultural conservatism. For him, culture and religion sought 'identical' goals; culture simply did so 'through *all* the voices of human experience,' including 'the arts, science, and history,' in order to 'give a greater fullness and certainty to its solution' (1993: 61). Although Arnold criticized the middle class and was more liberal than the aristocracy, his conservatism was unambiguous as he championed culture against the 'anarchy' he saw threatened by a rising working class. In this connection, Terry Eagleton (1996:

20) suggests that a major reason for the rise of English Studies – a field that Arnold helped to found – was 'the failure of religion.' (He has in mind conservative religions that are 'closed to rational demonstration and thus absolute in their claims.') Eagleton sees much textual study carrying forward similar work as conservative religion, because it creates a discourse framed in ahistorical categories, linked to the values of a 'cultured' elite. However, Eagleton argues that literary canons (much like religious values) do not simply exist out there waiting to be described. Rather, he asks three questions: (1) Which texts do scholars valorize as literature? (2) How do they interpret them? (3) What social purpose does this accomplish?

Williams presents much evidence in this same vein, but he stresses that literature can be also used as a mode of critique from the left. This is a matter of no small concern, since Williams is offering far more than a genealogy for today's cultural conservatives; he is seeking the roots of the general logic used to explain why students should be liberally educated (read: 'cultured') in liberal arts departments of universities. He shows that formally similar appeals to artistic value can express many kinds of politics. Thus, William Morris, whose socialist politics contrasted sharply with Arnold's, wrote about his love of life, then continued:

> Think of it! Was it all to end in a counting-house on top of a cinder heap . . . [with a committee] dealing out champagne to the rich and margarine to the poor? . . . Civilization has reduced the workman to such a skinny and pitiful existence, that he scarcely knows how to frame a desire for [a better] life . . . It is the province of art to set the true ideal of a full and reasonable life before him.
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> (Williams 1958: 149–50)

Many artists and intellectuals found no satisfying place for themselves in modern society and tried to create such a place (a 'cultural' one) imaginatively. If we approach Arnold in this light – allowing different readers to select the works of art they find essential, then use this art to critique the aspects of society that they most dislike – we can better appreciate Arnold's view of culture. After introducing us to people who 'believe that our greatness and welfare are proved by our being so very rich,' Arnold asks us to

> consider these people, then, their way of life, their habits . . . the very tones of their voice . . . [Observe] the things which come forth out of their mouths, the thoughts which make the furniture of their minds; would any amount of wealth be worth having with the consideration that one was to become just like these people by having it?
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> (1993: 65)

Many scholars who work with religious literature, or with other canonical texts that can be approached as strongholds of insight, pursue this sort of argument doggedly against aspects of life that they wish to critique.

Williams and Eagleton both argue that literary studies have often been too conservative and circumscribed, especially when they focus on narrow canons rooted in the past and/or do not explore how texts are embedded in dynamic historical processes.[6] Nevertheless, Williams wants to know under what conditions, and in what

imaginative forms, literature can give voice to emergent 'structures of feeling' – his term for shared cultural sensibilities that include the 'moods and motivations' that readers may recall from Geertz, blended with the concept of hegemony from neo-Marxian theory. Hegemony roughly means ideas and practices that are taken for granted as common sense by a group, but which work to the power advantage of certain people (hegemonic elites) more than others. Williams describes hegemony as 'culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes' (1977: 110; see also Harris 1992; Nelson and Grossberg 1988). Those who seek a different kind of society must develop different (counter-hegemonic) forms of common sense. Structures of feeling do not always take the emergent and counter-hegemonic forms that Williams desires; they may extend traditions rooted in the past ('residual' traditions) or reinforce hegemonic values. However, insofar as social transformations unfold, changes in literary/artistic culture are part of this process. They may even play a leading role, insofar as one precondition for change is imagining such change in the first place.

Charting tendencies in the study of literary/artistic culture is far beyond the scope of this essay. We could pursue endless forking paths to explore literary variations on every distinction we have already introduced – universal versus particular, residual versus emergent, culturalist versus structuralist, deconstructive versus traditional, and so on – plus dozens of others (Eagleton 1996; Lentricchia *et al.* 1995; Payne 1997). However, just as one might consider Geertz 'more cultural' than a flat-footed functionalist who studies economics – so that in some sense he is paradigmatic for the social scientific analysis of culture – similarly, one might understand Williams as a paradigmatically *cultural* scholar within literary studies because of the connections he makes with social science and history. Although Williams grants that specialized definitions of culture may be needed for certain inquiries, he contends that 'in general it is the range and overlap of meanings that is significant.' He objects to books on culture in which 'usage in North American anthropology is in effect taken as the norm' (1983: 91, citing Kroeber and Kluckhorn 1952). For Williams, cultural analysis should chart 'relations between general human development and a particular way of life,' and between both of these anthropological matters and the 'works and practices of art and intelligence.' Overstressing differences among these meanings of culture 'conceals the central question of the relations between "material" and "symbolic" production, which . . . have always to be related rather than contrasted' (1983: 91).

Although we have noted how Williams criticizes scholars who approach texts as autonomous worlds of meaning, this does not imply that he neglects the nuances and complexities of textual meanings, much less reduces them to simple reflections of sociohistorical contexts. On the contrary, he attacks scholars who theorize that a material base creates a dependent cultural superstructure. For him, this is an inverted version of the same problem he sees with conservatives: culture as a 'constitutive social process' is reduced to 'a realm of "mere" ideas' separate from the concrete practice of those who produce it (1977: 19).

Thus we arrive – not as the end-point of all the forking paths mentioned above, but along one path of special interest – at the movement that currently claims the name 'cultural studies' for itself. This scholarly network traces its genealogy to work in the 1950s by Williams and colleagues such as E.P. Thompson in history and Stuart

Hall in the sociology of media. (As the movement spread around the world by the 1980s, its subcurrents often rebelled against these founders or blended their influence with others, but they remain a touchstone.) Although defining this proudly decentered field is risky, we can identify some common themes (Storey 1996; During 1999; Morley and Chen 1996). Cultural Studies (hereafter CS) focuses on symbolic communication – not only literature but also many forms of everyday rituals, popular media, body art, subcultural identities, and other practices from both sides of the collapsing divide between high art and popular culture. It favors multi-layered analyses that draw on many disciplines – especially sociology, literary studies, ethnography, and media studies – and pays attention to both producers and consumers of texts. A key emphasis is on the relation between symbols and power, when power is conceptualized within broad neo-Marxian traditions. Often CS uses the concept of cultural hegemony to analyze not only class, but also race, sexuality, empire, and other issues. It frequently emphasizes postmodern themes such as those we discussed in relation to anthropology: questioning received understandings of power in light of cultural difference, interrogating 'culturalist' understandings of agency, investigating global culture flows, and studying emergent media cultures. Finally, CS accents how scholarship relates to political struggles beyond academia; it promotes various forms of social activism and cultural critique.

Unfortunately, scholars in CS tend to treat religious identities as optional additions to longer lists beginning with race, class, and gender. Frequently, they approach religions as monolithic models of hegemony and fail to appreciate religions that are equally complex and internally diverse as other cultural forms. Although this creates obvious challenges for alliances with religious studies, it does not prevent students of religion from using CS categories (e.g. King 1999; Tanner 1997; Hoover and Lundby 1997; Jakobsen 2000; Hulsether 2004). In fact, this situation represents an opportunity for students of religion to fill a key gap in the literature.

Beyond these points it is hard to generalize about CS. Some find it too theoretical, although it focuses more on concrete cases than do many literary theorists, philosophers, and theorists in the social sciences. Some find it too postmodern, although it uses modern categories like democracy and economic justice as often as postmodern ones like difference and hybridity. Indeed, many postmodernists detect a permanent stench of working-class white maleness in its Marxian lineage. Some consider CS ungrounded and inattentive to economic class, even though it relates thick cultural descriptions to analyses of power; simply because it treats culture as one factor of power, this need not deny that other forms of power exist. In general, the work accomplished by 'doing CS' depends on which of its scholars are in view and what alternatives one compares to them. The movement hangs together as a loose network exploring intersections of culture and power. More than a body of work, it is a way of framing questions.

On the relations between religions, cultures, and cultural theory

Let us return to our opening query – is anything more cultural than anything else? – and relate it to another concept that we could define so broadly as to lose all focus. Is anything more *religious* than anything else? And how does studying culture fit together with studying religion?

One might hope that by shifting from a question about defining culture to one about defining religion, we could narrow our focus. After starting with a term broad enough to be confused with life itself, is it safe to assume that religious culture is a subset of culture at large, with meanings that are distinguishable from (although overlapping with) other subsets such as political culture or media culture? Alas, even this minimal narrowing is contentious. Many scholars associate culture with concepts such as the secular, profane, or 'merely human'; they contrast these ideas with religion, thus conceiving religion as something that can be analyzed only using incommensurate categories. Some see religion standing in judgment upon culture from a transcendent standpoint. For example, H. Richard Niebuhr's influential study, *Christ and Culture* (1951), builds on categories of 'Christ' (meaning Christian identity and practice, understood as a response to revelation) and culture (meaning broad sociohistorical experience) that are basically opposed to each other. Niebuhr presents these categories as entangled, but typically in creative tension or sharp conflict. He criticizes religions that lack such tension – notably his 'Christ of Culture' model in which religion is trivialized through making peace with modernity.

Other scholars put less stress on religion transcending culture, but still understand the territory covered by religion to be as broad as culture, if not broader. For them, religion may refer both to human constructions and overarching categories transcending them: life *and* afterlife, things experienced through language or sense perception *and* mysteries stretching beyond them. Catherine Albanese's umbrella category for religious diversity encompasses both 'ordinary religions' which she describes as 'more or less synonymous with culture,' and 'extraordinary religions' which 'help people transcend, or move beyond, their everyday culture and concerns' (1999: 6). In effect, culture becomes a subset of religion in approaches such as those of Niebuhr and Albanese. Scholars may explore how religion relativizes culture, serves as a principle to ground culture, or moves beyond cultural limitations.

Is culture a subset of religion or vice versa? We cannot ride both these definitional horses at the same time. I propose to ride just one horse for the rest of this chapter – religion as a subset of culture – and bracket any further inquiries about how religion may extend beyond culture. If some readers are nervous about this suggestion, they might consider that we can remain agnostic about possible senses in which religion may transcend culture. We can explore case by case whether the religious parts of culture are significantly smaller than culture at large, or are more nearly coextensive with it – although at times we will definitely need to distinguish between more and less religious parts of culture, since this distinction is important for some religious groups. Nor does my suggestion prevent us from thinking about transcendence. For example, we can interpret Niebuhr's arguments as a form of cultural discourse – a form that uses the language of prophecy to critique other aspects of society.[7] We can interpret Albanese as speaking about two forms of culture – one that distinguishes between the religious and the ordinary and another that does not. We can approach religions as subsets of culture that often seek to ground cultural claims, deepen their resonance, or test their limits.

For better or worse, let us move forward with a premise that culture is an umbrella category with religious culture as a subset. We have seen that religious subsets of culture may overlap extensively with the umbrella category, sometimes to a point where for practical purposes they coincide. Because of these overlaps, there is a major

benefit in approaching religious studies as the study of religious *cultures*. It allows us to translate analyses of religions – their genealogies, relations with power, prospects within postmodern society, and so on – into analyses of culture. At present, many scholarly conversations under the rubric of culture are more sophisticated than conversations under the rubric of religion per se. In such cases, translating from 'religion' to 'religious culture' to 'culture' and back again can save scholars of religion much effort at reinventing the wheel, and it can insert analyses of religion into fresher debates. Moreover, since many subjects besides religion can be approached in this same way, cultural theory has become a lingua franca for work from many disciplines. A common language of culture can translate between incommensurate vocabularies used in different disciplines, thus bringing diverse research to bear on particular problems.

This situation has both advantages and disadvantages. At worst, it merely leads back to our original problem – culture as a boundless field in which to flounder – and shifts incommensurable vocabularies to a new place – namely, incompatible approaches to culture. Even at best, the level of abstraction required for cross-disciplinary conversation can be off-putting. Learning to use cultural theory to bridge disciplines may feel like trying to decode an obscure train timetable in an unfamiliar city – and it does not help that some theorists are notorious for writing in a way that disrespects their readers. One may prefer the quiet predictability of home to the noise and novelty of travel, or know of books that are more gracefully written than the train schedules. Many scholars of religion have no desire to become 'theorists' who live full-time in a train station. They feel that, even though someone may need to work there, too many people who live in train stations are homeless.

Nevertheless, the skill of using cultural theory like a rail network to connect scholarly places – to move between different homes for constructive purposes – is extremely useful. This remains true even for scholars who do not wish to travel extensively, since the network connects their research to wider discussions. It remains true even though terrorists may also ride the trains. There is no reason to be excessively bullish about cultural theory, as if train stations were the only hip place to live, only virtuous people rode trains, and modern technology cannot tear apart communities as well improve them. But by the same token, there is no reason to treat the least helpful examples of cultural theory as typical. On balance, it is clear that fluency in cultural theory has become important for thriving in today's academy. If we ask *how* one thrives – for what purposes – we return to the question we posed at the outset: how scholarly priorities relate to specific problems. There are no simple answers to this question.

One example of how cultural debates may inform overlapping religious ones is the discussion about the status of insider perspectives in religious studies. Such controversy is by no means unique to religious subfields of the study of culture. Other fields have extensively discussed matters such as the prospects for objective scholarship, the challenge of clarifying subject positions from which to speak, and the risks of trying to speak for others. Can committed feminists be trustworthy scholars of gender? Do musicians have knowledge that is useful for academic studies of music? Does participation in a racial subculture enable scholarship? Anyone can cite examples that suggest a need for caution – brittle appeals to racial essences, puff pieces masquerading as music criticism, sermons in the guise of scholarship on religion, and

so on. But it is all too easy to play tit-for-tat once this sort of criticism begins, pointing to more traditional scholars who make unconvincing claims of neutrality or defend noxious political ends in the name of universal values. On balance, scholars of culture widely accept that one can be a critical scholar of music and still love to listen to it, a critical scholar of politics with strong political commitments, and so on. One might not even trust scholars who fail to situate themselves explicitly, nor be deeply interested in reading scholars who are not themselves deeply interested in an issue. Insofar as the study of religion denies that scholars can be critical about religious practices that they may share, just as they can be critical about other cultural identities that they may embrace, scholarship on religion will be conspicuously out of step with trends in the interdisciplinary study of culture.

These considerations lead back to the problem of focus. One way to address the challenge we have confronted throughout this chapter – that 'religion and culture' may refer to almost anything but nothing in particular – is to begin from grounded case studies of practices that are conventionally understood as religious, and to take our cues for how we focus our analyses from the self-understandings of the people involved. This is a fundamental part of the repertoire of religious studies method. Of course, it is not enough by itself. At a minimum we also need comparative categories that can relate specific cases to a wider spectrum of religion. Beyond this, we may meet people who do not use the category of religion at all; we may also mistrust insider understandings or need to sort out conflicting insider definitions. We cannot clarify our focus solely through letting it emerge from analyzing cases in the 'real world,' because the priorities and interpretive frames we bring to our inquiry will help to determine both how we select our cases in the first place and what we notice as we study them. 'Religion is not an independent subject matter just sitting there for all to see, but a *term* that its user chooses to associate with certain kinds of phenomena' (Paden 1992: 5; see Idinopolus and Wilson 1998; Taylor 1998; Nye 2003).

At the same time, simply because we must clarify our categories, it does not follow that 'religious culture' can simply mean whatever scholars stipulate it to mean. Such an approach cannot solve the field's overall problem of focus (although obviously it could help focus a specific study.) More importantly, people have long done things that we know as religious without scholars from religious studies to interpret them. They have engaged in rituals reflecting their social priorities, described interactions with supernatural forces, used dreams to cope with death, and so on. If scholarly inquiries bring such activities into focus, there is concrete information to analyze. This may lead to a back-and-forth dialog in which scholarly interpretations are tested and revised toward such goals as accuracy, depth of insight, or contribution to analyzing a given problem. Such dialog is especially important when scholars do not analyze inert data, but living people who propose their own interpretive frames for understanding their religious practice – frames which may be fully commensurate with scholarly ones and/or call scholarly ones into question. Often different people from the same religious group have conflicting ideas; in such cases, scholars may not be able to avoid taking positions that affect the outcome of intra-religious competition.

None of this denies the value of a broad distinction between theological studies, and critical and comparative religious studies, although hard boundaries do blur once we acknowledge that insiders can be critical and outside scholars cannot be neutral. Nor does it deny that scholars may pursue scholarly inquiries for which insider claims

are unhelpful, and may sometimes find insider religious claims unintelligible and/or dangerous. In such cases, the best scholarly option may be to think less about dialog and more about redescribing insider claims within alternative frames of reference. A key trend in the study of culture, however, is to criticize anyone who attempts this sort of redescription without first wrestling with a problem that has bedeviled much past research – that scholars and the people they study may have very different ideas about what should count as 'the best scholarly option.' As we have seen, scholarly approaches have often been entwined with exercising power and misrepresenting others.

In short, no one has a monopoly on critical skills, nor can we predict in advance whether any given encounter between people – including their concerns and priorities related to culture and religion – will lead to overlapping consensus or to misunderstanding and conflict. Since there is no court of last resort to judge which concerns and priorities trump others, the field of religion and culture is best understood as a multi-leveled dialog about these concerns, carried on by many kinds of scholars (some of whom practice religion) and the religious practitioners they study (some of whom are scholars). This dialog is not neutral with respect to values. Rather, it is a process of cultural contestation focusing on what the study of religion should be: what it is good for, and for whom. Translation among cultural discourses in light of contextual issues, rather than a search for final explanation or universal adequacy, becomes the watchword for scholarship. The study of religion and culture becomes a broad field of debate structured by the ways that people talk about their concerns – and by the ways they use power to promote their concerns, since this is certainly not a level playing-field, whether or not we wish it could be.

Although some might describe such a field as postmodern because of its diversity and lack of universal ground-rules, the fear that this situation implies a formless relativism will only come true to whatever extent that relativists dominate emergent discussions.[8] The situation does imply that if someone believes that a given concern must not be neglected in any vision of religious studies worth sustaining into the future – for example, I contend that one such issue is how religions relate to survival in the face of oppression – then one must insert the issues into the conversation and offer good reasons for others to share these concerns.

Conclusions

What has been the point of these reflections? Does it matter if we can clarify a few approaches to our question, 'Is anything more cultural than anything else?' Suppose we want to relate the term 'culture' to the following sentence: 'At this stage of history, our country needs social norms that encourage goal X; thus, artists should create works to strengthen people who pursue goal X.' Does it help that we are now prepared to rewrite this sentence using the word 'culture' indiscriminately? 'At this stage of global culture, our culture needs a culture of X; thus, cultural workers should create culture to strengthen subcultures that pursue X.' By reviewing the above sections, we could reflect on the scholarly traditions that inform various parts of this sentence: evolutionary theorists for stages of history, literary critics for art, CS for activists, and so on. Still, one might ask whether this has all been a game – whether our inquiry has been like touring a train station when we would rather be traveling.

Although we have noted the drawbacks of living in such a train station full-time, the ability to navigate within it matters a great deal. Fluency in cultural theory allows one to pursue a wide range of important topics, bring them into dialog, and relate them to larger scholarly debates. It offers one of the best vocabularies to enable research that integrates multiple disciplines. Framing questions with cultural theory is only the beginning of analysis – a platform from which to embark and a map that might keep us from losing the forest for the trees during later stages of research. Nevertheless, no one should underestimate the value of clarifying how different approaches lead one to focus on certain issues and *not* to focus on others. We should pay as much attention to this matter as travelers do to boarding the right train. Clarifying these issues is crucial for scholars who seek not only to thrive amid interdisciplinary debates, but also to thrive in ways that minimize their complicity with oppression and combat the complacency that declares scholars immune from worrying about such matters.

As we have seen, there are pitfalls in the study of religion and culture that no one should ignore. Scholars informed by common-sense notions of culture have often found it natural – with the best of intentions – to travel to foreign lands under conditions of colonialism and spend years writing books that abstract from issues of power and change. Their books have reinforced elitist hierarchies of high versus low culture that do not stand up under scrutiny, and they have made dubious assumptions (often linked to nostalgic sensibilities) that abstract art from its social contexts. They have presented hegemonic ideals as inevitable forms of consensus, and have undermined traditions under attack by colonialism. At times they have displayed an 'astonishing sense of weightlessness with regard to the gravity of history' (Said 1993: 278–9).

Should we then give up on cultural analysis and move to other approaches? No doubt we should approach this question case by case. However, we often need frameworks for comparing interdisciplinary perspectives and translating among practices that involve local, national, and transnational flows of ideas, technologies, and people. If we do not use culture as our lingua franca for such work, we may have to reinvent something very much like it. And why go to this trouble? If we are careful, we can conceptualize culture and power at the same time and relate them both to historical processes. Cross-cultural comparisons can destabilize hegemonic common sense. Artistic culture can nurture profound insights vis-à-vis other parts of life – and surely it is important to have approaches that are flexible enough to engage with music and literature, alongside approaches that declare such topics off-limits for 'value-neutral' science. Despite the risk that cultural analysis may oversimplify or harden human boundaries, sometimes it is crucial to understand that people live amid intelligible patterns of difference, rather than to pretend that postmodern complexity defeats every effort to interpret such patterns. We can learn to think about all these matters in light of the gravity of history, rather than as a distraction from it.

In short, we need to learn how to choose wisely among approaches to culture. It is because such choices are important in people's lives – as applied toward specific goals in concrete cases – that the field of religion and culture matters and we need good maps to navigate within it.

Notes

1 We are stressing a change from evolutionary approaches to later methods, but other maps of this terrain are possible. Tylor was in dialog with scholars who explained human difference as decline from a common culture suspiciously reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, or who stressed racial difference even to an extreme of denying the unity of humanity (Stocking 1968). Within evolutionary theories, it mattered whether one understood Darwinian natural selection as condemning 'backward' groups, or used a rhetoric (more like Tylor's) of 'older school chums rooting for them' (Lutz and Collins 1993: 27).

2 As noted above, Eliade's categories may be blended with Geertz's and deployed within more focused contextual studies. However, a broadly comparative and decontextualized approach is common. In some ways Eliade repudiates Tylor's stress on change over time, but he shares Tylor's contrast between modernity and earlier periods – Eliade's sensibility is simply nostalgic whereas Tylor's is progressive.

3 Herbert (1991) argues that 'superstitions of culture' is a more accurate term for Émile Durkheim's work than 'social science.' He presents Durkheim's core idea of social consensus keeping anomie in check as rearticulating the ideals of missionaries (Christianity keeping sin in check) and dovetailing with Matthew Arnold's vision dicussed below (literary culture keeping anarchy in check).

4 We cannot fully treat *postmodernity*, one aspect of which is a breakdown in the ability to take for granted universal narratives about things such as reason or progress – a breakdown which is related to changes in the world system and which is happening whether or not one considers it warranted. Nor can we chart the many forms of *postmodernism* that clear space – through rupture and/or organic development – from things that are labeled modern in various discourses (Best and Kellner, 1991; Connor 1989; Harvey 1990; Jameson 1998; Nicholson 1990). However, we can note two common patterns within this tangled discourse: (1) analyzing certain dominant practices as modern, then using deconstructive arguments to undermine them, and (2) analyzing postmodernism itself as dominant – perhaps reflecting a hypermodernism that dovetails with postindustrial consumerism or a hyper-reflexivity that disables moral commitments. So far, our argument has mainly discussed the first of these patterns, but we will consider both as we proceed.

5 Treating the complexities of structuralist and post-structuralist theory is beyond the scope of this article. Both stress how structures of language shape consciousness and society; for structuralists discourses are relatively stable and generalizable, while poststructuralists stress that meanings cannot be pinned down and subjectivities are fluid and unstable. See Morris 1987; Nicholson 1990; Harris 1992; Zizek 1994.

6 Consider how Williams responds to Eliot's suggestion that 'culture includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people: Derby Day . . . dog races . . . the dart board . . . boiled cabbage cut into sections . . . Gothic churches, and the music of Elgar.' He points out that Eliot includes only 'sport, food, and a little art' but not 'steel-making . . . mixed farming, the Stock Exchange, coal-mining, and London Transport.' Eliot only expands to popular culture from 'the older specialized sense of "culture" (arts, philosophy)'; he should explore how art relates to the ordinary lives of working people (1983: 233–34).

7 In this regard it is interesting to compare what Niebuhr says about Christ as a critique of culture to what Matthew Arnold says about culture as a critique of middle-class 'Philistinism.'

8 Scholars who see postmodernism as hegemonic (see note 4) often fear relativism in two forms – liberal individualism and nihilism. However, a postmodern lack of consensus about universal standards opens the door not solely to this specter, but to *whatever* one fears: bloodthirsty fundamentalism, humorless structural Marxism, narcissistic media criticism, sadly limited masculine Euro-centrism, beleaguered humanism which cannot shake its nostalgia for universals, etc. Postmodernity is a condition in which none of these tendencies can be silenced even if one wishes they could. Taking this context for granted, most scholars informed by postmodernism do not see themselves as nihilistic; they are simply trying to make the most constructive moral interventions that they can.

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