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A REVIEW OF TIMOTHY FITZGERALD'S *DISCOURSE ON  
CIVILITY AND BARBARITY*

A review of Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xii + 354 pp. \$49.95 (cloth). ISBN: 0195300092.

Timothy Fitzgerald's *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity* resumes the argument he began in *The Ideology of Religious Studies*: discourses on "religion" are ideological and scholars should beware reproducing them. In this book Fitzgerald sets out to demonstrate that the contemporary distinctions between "religion" and "politics," "economics," or "secularism" are ideological insofar as they naturalize the "secular" sphere as an ideologically neutral and objective space. In addition, he argues that this way of ordering the world is unique to western modernity—the use of the religion/politics distinction is both anachronistic when applied to premodern Europe and distorting when applied to nonwestern cultures.

The book proceeds genealogically; following an introduction and two methodology chapters, Fitzgerald proceeds by tracing the use of the word "religion" in premodern discourses, in early modern discourses, and, last, in American discourses on the Constitution and the First Amendment. He shows that prior to the emergence of the modern religion/politics or religion/secular distinctions, religion was primarily used to refer to Religion as Christian Truth. The opposite of Religion was not the secular sphere, but superstition, idolatry, heathenism, barbarity, etc. In addition, this distinction was connected to a particular cultural hegemony; Religion as Christian Truth was "a collective identity, a total ritual system, which ideally every individual practiced from birth to death, and which encompassed, teleologically, all the practices of civility and rationality" (120). Conversion to Religion, then, was not about assenting to a creed, but involved changing an entire way of life—to have Religion was to have a certain kind of family, wear certain types of clothes, and eat certain types of food. Those without Religion (such as the natives in North and South America) could be dismissed as being like children, or, worse, as inhuman; this ideological discourse on Religion therefore assisted in legitimating the European exploitation of alien cultures.

Fitzgerald then proceeds to a consideration of the use of the word religion at the beginning of the early modern period. Fitzgerald utilizes an edited collection of documents, titled *English Historical Documents, 1485-1558*. He moves back and forth between the content of the documents in the collection and the editor's taxonomy and commentary. To begin with, religion was very much still Religion as Christian Truth—the authors from this time period saw religion as the totalizing Christian system, and its opposites were still superstition, false

religion, idolatry, etc. In addition, Fitzgerald also demonstrates that although the editor of this volume in his commentary speaks of politics, economics, and religion as separate things, and organizes the collection into sections on these topics, the relationship between that apparatus and the content of the documents is rather strained. The original texts make no real distinction between politics, economics, and religion, and most of the texts cover simultaneously those things that might be separated by later authors. For instance, these early modern authors run together discussions of apparel, the king's authority, the forfeiture of estates, civil administration, family wills, Christian marriage, etc. (181-2). The division made between religion, economics, and politics is the anachronistic projection of the editor who uses a later set of categories.

Fitzgerald's next chapter considers the use of the word religion in Samuel Purchas' thousand-page commentary on non-Christian cultures, titled *Purchas, His Pilgrimage*. Fitzgerald demonstrates that Purchas uses two analytically separable senses of the word religion side by side; this analysis of Purchas' book gives us an insight into a discursive shift in motion. On the one hand, religion was Religion as Christian Truth, evidenced by the fact that the "method" part of Purchas' book frames the consideration of non-Christian cultures with a Christian story about the creation of the world, humankind's fall into sin, and the splintering of cultures at the Tower of Babel. On the other hand, he also uses the word religion in a universalist sense—whereby "religion" is something that all cultures have. Purchas shifts back and forth between thinking in terms of Religion and superstition and thinking in terms of every culture having religion. The latter sense was supported by his Christian natural law theory, according to which "religion" is written on the hearts of all humans. For Purchas, Fitzgerald explains, "We have true Religion; they have false 'religions,' e.g., superstitions. Yet behind this is a universal concept of humanity, for everyone is inherently capable of receiving the dim images of Truth in their hearts, and it is as a result of great calamitous events such as the Fall, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel that some humans have drifted further from the Truth than others, and have been less able to hear the gospel by being geographically separated around the world" (212). In hindsight we can see our contemporary discourse on world religions in the making.

Fitzgerald then returns to the *English Historical Documents* series, this time focusing on the volume covering 1660-1832. The language of "separation of church and state" becomes dominant during this time period, and with it the distinction between civil powers and ecclesiastical powers. However, Fitzgerald shows, just as he did with the earlier volume, that (for the most part) the religion/secular distinction could only be applied anachronistically. He allows that the discourse on "liberty of conscience" was new, and possibly one of the roots of the discourse on secularity-as-neutrality, insofar as the "liberty of conscience" language permitted states to be in some sense "neutral" toward different religious beliefs. Nevertheless, European states largely continued to be thought of as Christian—the state was *not* nonreligious or secular but simply tolerant of multiple Christian groups.

The discourse that really separated out religion and politics as somehow ontologically distinct originated in part through John Locke's assertion that religion concerned the salvation of the soul and the civil authorities were concerned with matters of the body. He homologized the religion/state distinction with the soul/body distinction. It is with this line of thought that religion becomes associated with private inner faith, individual conscience, and voluntary association. Thinkers like John Locke and William Penn utilized a series of distinctions between religion and society, inwardness and outwardness, the private soul and the realm of law, and the means of persuasion and the means of the sword (273). As Fitzgerald points out, "these rhetorical oppositions have to be taken as prescriptive rather than descriptive; they seek to persuade; they are forging the ideas, constructing them, inaugurating a discourse on the inner and the outer which still captivates us today" (273). It was this view that was later taken up in the American discourses on the First Amendment. Religion was viewed as something ontologically distinct from the economic and political spheres ruled over by the state—consequently the state could rule over those spheres while remaining neutral toward religion.

In his "Postscript" Fitzgerald returns to reiterate the suggestion that these discourses on religion are ideological in the sense that they are connected to economic and colonialist interests. On the one hand he suggests in his analysis of Religion as Christian Truth that the imbrication of the delimitation of religion with the distinction between civility and barbarity justified European colonialist and imperialist abuses of native populations in the Americas. In this context, the claim that some group did or did not have "religion" was never a descriptive neutral claim. On the other hand Fitzgerald suggests that the contemporary religion/secular distinction puts in place an epistemological dualism that justifies the authority of the claims made in the secular sphere. For instance, Fitzgerald discusses the distinction between theological (= religious) approaches and sociological (= secular) approaches in Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy*:

What we should notice here is the explicit distinctions which Berger makes, which in turn carry some further tacit assumptions as well. "Religion" is a "phenomenon," which means that it is a thing which can be observed from the outside. The ground of this objectification is the sociology of knowledge, which is explicitly distanced from theology. The implications of this methodological statement seem to be that, whereas theology can only offer partial and metaphysical claims about ultimate truth based on speculation rather than real knowledge, only sociology as a secular science can be objective, neutral, and truthfully descriptive. (98)

Presumably this distinction between religion and its others is used to naturalize as objective, neutral, or truthful the actions of "secular" states: "What ends up being classified as religious or nonreligious . . . is quite arbitrary, and now has significance not so much in terms of any positive conceptual content . . . but as an

ideological operator that destabilizes any practices that seem to challenge the interests of American power" (41).

The connection between Religion as Christian Truth and imperialism is well documented, so Fitzgerald's claim about the ideological work done by discourses on religion in that context is easy to understand. However, the connection between the religion/secular distinction and American power remains merely suggestive. This connection could be spelled out a bit more explicitly; this is an area where further research could produce valuable and interesting results.

One substantial criticism I would offer is the following: I found Fitzgerald's varying criticisms throughout the text of what exactly people are doing with the word religion to be imprecise and confusing. It seems to me that he runs together four different types of criticisms without distinguishing one from another, and, as a result, generates a bit of confusion about what precisely he is trying to argue. Here I will try to separate out these criticisms for purposes of clarification.

The first criticism is what I will call the *reification criticism*. According to this criticism, there is no such thing as "religion" built into the nature of the universe; there is no veil we can lift in order to find a platonic form for "religion" incarnating itself in our world. At a recent AAR conference I attended a panel on bodies and religion where the reification criticism was offered. At one point the panelists fielded a question from an audience member who asked about "the body," to which they responded by saying that there is no such thing as "the body"; there are only bodies. Nevertheless, the panelists had no difficulty reifying religion, and made a number of claims about "religion" doing this or doing that in the world, as if it were some transcendent thing manifesting itself in different times and places. Fitzgerald rightly suggests that there is something ridiculous about this sort of talk – it reifies an imaginary thing that does not exist. The second criticism is the *naturalization* or *eternalization criticism*. Fitzgerald rightly suggests that "words create worlds" (68) and that "religion and politics today have been defined [in a way] that make them mutually exclusive and inhabiting distinct domains" (173). The invention of modern discourses ushered in "new configurations [which replaced] previous categories and configurations. This is a change of cosmology" (186). Unfortunately, these "two distinct domains are essentialised and transformed into the nature of things" (289). Although categories do not have fixed meanings (23), we often become accustomed to the local way of organizing the world and think that that is the way the world naturally is. We assume that the categories we use to order the world actually reflect the eternal order of the universe – we mistake our local cosmology for the world itself. For instance, some territories in North America have variously been part of Mexico and the United States; a territory that was a part of Mexico 200 years ago may be a part of the United States today. We would be making the naturalization or eternalization mistake were we to assume that the territories now considered a part of the United States were always thus. The distinction between a religious and a secular sphere is not built into the nature of the universe, but is unique to the modern period. It is for this reason that the application of these terms to premodern worlds is anachronistic.

The reification criticism and the eternalization criticism are different in important ways. According to the reification criticism, religion-*in-itself* (like *the* body) is imaginary and does not exist. However, according to the eternalization criticism what counts as religion in one context is different from what counts as religion in another context—it is not true that religion does not exist. Similarly, it would be wrong to conclude from the fact that the borders of the United States and Mexico have been variable that the United States and Mexico do not exist.

Following the reification criticism, Fitzgerald rightly suggests that religion is imaginary (69) and unreal (49). This is a great critique if he is talking about religion in the sense of religion-*in-itself* as a platonic form manifesting itself in the world, but, as I have argued, it would not follow that religion does not exist in any sense. However, because Fitzgerald goes back and forth between these criticisms without making it clear what his target is, when he says that religion is imaginary or unreal it confusingly seems to apply across the board.

The third criticism he makes is what I call the *gerrymandering criticism*. According to the naturalization criticism, the world can be divided up in different ways, but we are wrong to project our way of dividing up the world onto other cultures. The gerrymandering criticism goes beyond this to suggest additionally that the ways in which we divide up the world sometimes serve the interests of some groups at the expense of others. For instance, the way in which the territory of the United States was divided from the territory of Mexico in the nineteenth century was not arbitrary, but served the interests of some groups at the expense of others. Fitzgerald rightly points out that dividing the world between Religion as Christian Truth and false religion or superstition served the interests of colonialists at the expense of natives in the Americas.

The fourth criticism is what I'll call the *rhetorical slippage criticism*. According to this criticism, there are multiple and contradictory sets of meanings and associations running together in a single discourse that permit rhetorical slippage from one sense of the word religion to another. Most words have a surplus of meanings, and this fact allows some rhetoricians (knowingly or not) to slip from one meaning to the next in ways that suit their purposes. Fitzgerald suggests "that until we, the community of scholars, begin to take notice of how 'religion' pops in and out of our thinking and writing in a number of logically unaligned ways, which it does with a feeling of entire naturalness, then we will continue unawares to do ideological work in the construction of our own cosmology" (108).

I think each of these four criticisms is right, but when run together the reader is left a bit confused: does religion not exist, is it one thing in one context and something else in another, or is it too many things at once? Future research on the social construction of religion could be improved if these different criticisms were distinguished from one another.

In particular, I favor the further pursuit of the rhetorical slippage. This criticism supplements and complicates the picture painted by the second and third

criticisms. It is not sufficient to say that we divide the world differently than premoderns did. It is necessary to add that our categories are contradictory and unaligned—the world is not exactly divided in the way we say it is. For instance, in the past the categories used to understand the body included the four humors. However, this was not just a different way of understanding the body; it was a *wrong* way. Certain diseases are caused by bacteria and not by a surplus of blood in the body. Consequently, one cannot cure such diseases by “bleeding.”

The great insight of social constructionist criticism is that the categories we use to understand the world do not map it so much as serve as blueprints for the world—we are not “reflecting” the world when we use the religion/secular distinction, we are inventing the world. The naturalization criticism shows how this works and the gerrymandering criticism shows how it can serve the interests of some groups at the expense of others. What the rhetorical slippage criticism shows is that sometimes the map/blueprint is contradictory and does not fit the world at all. A map/blueprint dividing Iceland from Greenland does not match up with icy lands and green lands, just as public/private rhetoric neither matches up with any ontologically discrete spheres in our world.

Of course, such a conclusion operates with a non-relativist epistemology—if I say that the public/private rhetoric does not fit with the world, then I must have some alternate access to the world that is somehow more accurate or more useful. There is not room in this review to justify such a position, but I should point out that Fitzgerald’s book is interesting only if he takes a similar approach. The claim that religion/secular rhetoric authorizes the secular sphere as neutral or objective is pertinent, as far as I can tell, only if it is *not true* that the secular sphere is actually neutral or objective. For myself, I cannot go along with the view that we cannot say that one conceptual scheme is more accurate or more useful than another. If I were sick I would unconditionally prefer my doctor to apply one conceptual scheme to my body and prescribe antibiotics to kill bacteria rather than to apply another conceptual scheme and bleed me to equalize my four humors.

In conclusion, although Fitzgerald’s analysis is at times a bit long-winded (he considers *many* examples along the way), I found this book to be a valuable contribution to the literature on the social construction of “religion.” Despite the criticisms I have, I learned a great deal from this book and would recommend it to others.

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