

“Boundary riding: The question of ‘and’ in contemporary religion and popular culture.”

Keynote lecture presented to the “Contemporary Religion and Popular Culture Symposium”
Monash University, Melbourne. 21st October 2011.

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I presented a paper a number of years ago at a conference of the Australian Communication Association on the topic “Larger than life: religious characteristics of television content and social functions.’ Henry Mayer, the doyen of Australian media studies, came up to me afterwards and said he found it very interesting, but said that if we followed my reasoning, almost anything could be religious: from grandmothers to condoms.

I think my response was something like, “So, what’s the problem with that.”

But the comment also provoked questions of the definitional issues for me: how do we define what we’re interested in when we study religion, and in my case media and religion, in a way that allows for some disciplinary focus, but at the same time allows us to explore the complexity and nuance of changes taking place that do not fall within those boundaries? How do we work with boundaries that are continually being crossed?

I’m not sure that I’m any closer to a resolution than I was twenty years ago, though I know a lot more about it than I did then. But when you have an interest in exploring religion in a school of media and cultural studies, it’s amazing how often the same definitional questions keep arising as soon as you depart from an understanding of religion that goes beyond people’s formal understandings.

One of my students is working on religious dimensions of World of Warcraft. In a research seminar recently he was describing field work in a gaming arcade in India in which players walked into the arcade from the middle of a religious festival in the street, touched and bowed to a shrine at the door of the arcade, before sitting down and playing a game that is replete with traditional religious iconography and mythic narratives and players adopt a classic Indian deistic form in order to play the game. He was asking the question, how do we understand what’s going on here. Two members of the seminar, whose focus is strongly cultural studies in approach, quite confidently knocked his question down by saying, That’s not religion, that’s culture. So began another extended discussion and justification.

The question was provoked for me again in the symposium title: Contemporary Religion and Popular Culture, which immediately posits a bounded difference between the two, in a way that I am sure none of us would want to argue, yet which we are driven to simply by the nature of discourse. I want to explore, and want to draw on your shared expertise to explore, some of those boundary issues.

Defining religion

Part of the problem in defining religion is a grammatical one. The word “and” is a conjunction, whose function is to join two parts of a sentence that are understood to be grammatically equal but also independent. “And” not only reflects but also constructs a reality of difference.

So in considering religion, we are almost obliged by our language to construct religion as difference. The same applies to any of the numerous alternatives:

Religion in popular culture

Popular culture in religion

Religion of popular culture

Popular culture of religion

Religious popular culture

Popular religiosity

Contemporary religion and popular culture or traditional religion and popular culture

That doesn't begin to touch the opposites: Atheism and popular culture, etc.

What we are dealing with is the paradox of trying to find a workable definition for a phenomenon, which for those within it say is about the indefinable, and for those outside it say has no legitimacy unless it can be categorized and defined.

Which brings us secondly to the politics of definition and the argument that definitions of religion are intricately bound up with the politics of secularization.

McCutcheon is one who locates this connection:

“the modern invention that goes by the name of secularism is the only means for imagining religion to exist as an item of discourse...for those interested in talking about such things as religion, faith, spirit, belief, experience, etc., there is no beyond to secularism, for it constitutes the discursive conditions by means of which we in the modern world think religion into existence.” (2007)

In practice, in the pre-modern period in the West, the term religious was applied to those living in monastic orders, who lived in communities apart from ordinary members of the church, and whose primary occupation was a life of discipline built around particular routines, rites and devotional practices rooted in theological ideas. The term secular applied to the rest, the *laity* or the people, who didn't live in disciplined religious communities and whose primary occupation was seen as being affairs of this world, not the other world.

But even there the boundaries were significantly muddied. It didn't mean that those involved in secular occupations weren't people of faith or didn't go about their worldly occupations without a keen eye to the other world. It also didn't mean that religious communities weren't also actively involved in worldly activities. The religious-secular division was a vocational demarcation.

In fact, it was because these tightly controlled religious communities had accumulated significant political and economic power that provoked those outside those communities to assert their political, economic and cultural interests based on their

alternative sources of power, which at the time were the regional princes, the merchant classes and in time, the power of printing.

What has come to be known as secularization, therefore, had its origins not in an argument about belief or not belief, but in a contest between believers over whose political power and interests were going to dominate.

Stephen Toulmin, in his book *Cosmopolis* (Toulmin, 1990) is helpful in linking the subsequent intellectual developments of secularization to these political contests. He notes in particular the deep trauma and chaos of the long-running religious wars of the seventeenth century that created a longing for a basis of certainty by which the apparent arbitrariness of differences in religious doctrines and knowledge could be managed politically. In this context the work of Descartes and other opened up for people in their generation the hope of reasoning their way out of political and theological chaos and uncertainty through an epistemology based on human cognition and sensory apprehension, implemented through the methodologies of scientific rationalism, rather than the uncontested dogma of revelation.

Initially the intent of modern thinkers was to find a more harmonious way of being Christian citizens. As it developed, however, scientific rationalism and its associated intellectual, political, economic and cultural interests came into conflict with the intellectual, political, economic and cultural interests of religious institutions.

What Toulmin is highlighting is that the intellectual shifts of the objectifying movement of secularization had a very concrete historical political impetus, the desire to escape the deep trauma and chaos of uncertainty. As it developed, as British sociologist Graham Murdoch notes, it took on characteristics of a ‘totalizing project,’ where the quest was not just to explain and understand, but also to predict, manipulate and control; to create a cosmos in which there was no room left for any mysterious, incalculable destructive forces.

Its aim was to calibrate the messiness of the world so that Nature could be tamed, workers made more docile, books balanced, and complexity contained. To this end, the champions of modernity waged an unceasing war to defend the sovereignty of reason against mystery, magic, and faith... To win the stakes, to win all of them and to win them for good, the world had to be de-spiritualized. (Murdoch, 1997)

A significant aspect of the history of modernity is the history of efforts to proscribe the power that religious institutions may exercise within the secular domain.

The impetus to *define* religion – literally, to draw the limits of religion – needs to be understood within this historical political context: the political need and desire to put things in their place – not just religion, but the concept of the religious as well. I think that historical political perspective is important even today. I don’t know if things are any different in a religious studies department, but in my school of media and cultural studies frequently find that when I seek to explore aspects of religiosity outside the bounds of very contained formal definitions of religion as religious traditions, I encounter often strong responses that reflect the desire to keep religion in its place, and part of that is to keep religion within its proper definition. This becomes a crunch in getting budget for teaching or in framing applications for research funding.

There have been numerous efforts made to provide comprehensive working definitions of religion for various purposes: philosophical, theological, social scientific, substantive, phenomenological and functional.

The problem is that none is sufficient in itself to capture the full reality of the phenomenon that is being addressed. Even where there is common agreement that definitions are to be based on observable characteristics that are held in common, there is no common agreement on what those phenomena are.

This is apparent even in that arena where greatest emphasis is placed on precision and lack of ambiguity, and that is in the legal system. Even here efforts to get a commonly agreed social understanding of religion have been fraught.

For example, the Australian High Court was required to provide a definition of what religion was in a 1983 decision involving the Church of Scientology. The Justices of the Court ended up with not one but three different opinions, with none of them forming a majority opinion. (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1998) There are a number of common elements in most legal opinions such as:

- Belief in a supernatural being or principle
- A set of ideas relating to the place of humanity within the universe
- A set of identifiable codes or practices linked to these theological and cosmological views
- A group of adherents to these beliefs and practices.
- A sense of religious self-identity.

However what these mean, whether all need to be present, and what the content of each of these should be is contested. In the High Court decision, Justice Murphy tended his opinion that any organisation which claims to be a religious organisation and which offers a way to find meaning and purpose in life is a religious organisation.

In the United States, where there is a constitutional prohibition on the government passing any law which infringes on people's free exercise of religion, what this means is still as contested notion. In fact, as Sullivan notes in her work *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (2005), this has created the paradoxical situation where, in order to avoid interfering in religion, the state has had to become involved by defining what religion is, in order to ensure it doesn't interfere in it.

In social science research, it is common to choose your definition and methodology depending on your intent. In one seminar I organized to discuss the question of what do we mean by religion in the study of media religion and culture, the significant number of anthropologists there said, "There's about 180 definitions – choose the one you like." They then went on to investigate and present a number of case studies which presumed there was no problem.

The reality is that there is now plenty going on in the established religions to keep us busy. A lot of new religious developments can be constructed through one of the established definitions to identify it as a "new religious movement" "new religion" new cults or sects, and thereby validate the study as legitimate.

But I'm interested also in the changes taking place in social "religiosity" that do not fit into those formal categories, or that should not be fitted in, and how we think about and investigate these as religious without making them religion. I guess what Linda Woodhead refers to as the "luxuriant undergrowth of religiosity" or Partridge identifies as "the significance of the gradual and uneven emergence of personally and socially consequential alternative spiritualities." (p.58)

As an example, I want to look at two areas that cross those definitional boundaries.

Religious significance ascribed by people in everyday practice

The definition of the religious to particular bounded experiences or situations becomes more and more difficult when one looks at the everyday practices of people. In practice, people ascribe their own religious significance to objects, experiences, bodily sensations and practices quite outside many of the formal definitions of religion.

This comes out well in the case study by Sullivan in her book *The impossibility of religious freedom*. Sullivan notes in that text
Ordinary religion, that is, the disestablished religion of ordinary people, fits uneasily into the spaces allowed for religion in the public square and in the courtroom.
(Sullivan, 2005, p. 138)

Sullivan explores this in a case study of a court case between a group of Florida residents and the city of Boca Raton about religious memorials in a lawn cemetery. The city was trying to force the removal of religious memorials people had placed on the graves of a lawn cemetery because they contravened the regulations of the cemetery that "limited the size and placement of memorials to small flat metal plaques, flush with the ground, giving only names and dates, and that can be easily mowed over." (p.2) The citizens objected and went to court on the grounds that the state could not make a law that limited their free exercise of religion.

A good deal of the court case, therefore, focused on what constituted religion. The problem was that what people found to be religiously significant in practice did not concord with formal definitions of what religion was. A good deal of this related to whether the grave itself was religiously significant and therefore needed to be protected, and also whether a religious symbol had the same significance if it was upright or lying down. This comes out clearly in part of the court transcript.

When Rogow asked Mr. Warner at his disposition the purpose of the grave covering, Mr. Warner answered:

A. To maintain the dignity and the – we believe that graves should not be walked upon.... It's a religious tradition. The first time I heard it was from my grandparents including my father and my mother, both...In our religion you don't walk on graves.

.....

Q. Let's break it down. . . Would you agree that the edging stones of themselves independently have no religious significance? Did you buy there, by the way at a garden shop?

A. Yeah.

Q. And so at the garden shop where you saw the edging stones in and of themselves they have no religious significance?

A. To you, perhaps, but to me they do.

Q. Purchased at a garden shop?

A. They have religious significance on my father's and my brother's graves.

Q. Well, you've got a Jewish star on the marker. There is a religious significance of the Jewish star, is there not?

A. Yes.

Q. What is the significance of the Jewish star?

A. Just a symbol of faith.

Q. By the way, does that star have to be upright or can it be engraved and equally a symbol?

A. I think you're trying to put – this is my personal feeling. You're trying to put value judgment, so to speak, on upright, lying flat. I think it is – to call it religious to me, what it is to me it may not be to you. To me it's all a religious symbol. No, I didn't buy this ground cover in a religious store, but that doesn't make it any less a religious symbol to me... To me the ground cover meant more to me than the Jewish star.”
(Sullivan, 2005, pp. 120-121)

Rogow also asked Ms. Payne the religious significance of each item on her son's grave, referring as he did so to a photograph of the grave.

Q. Does this bench have any religious significance?

A. No.

Q. Do the cement flower pots have any religious significance?

A. No.

Q. Do the edgings, edging stones and marble chips have any religious significance?

A. Yes... Their significance is that of ground cover for the grave so that nobody walks across the grave.

Q. So independently do edging stones have any religious significance?

A. They mark the area of the grave site.” (p.123)

These are simply examples from a particular case – numerous others could be given. But they illustrate well that while there may be a commonality ascribed to what constitutes something religious, individual practice indicates that people ascribe religious significance to a wide variety of practices, bodily experience and material objects that fall well outside these standard definitions. Religious significance is an ascribed quality, not a definable one.

It is interesting to note that when confronted by such a diversity or cacophony of individual opinion, the lawyer for the city constantly tries to dismiss its legitimacy by referring to an established religious authority or by interrogating whether the person is a “real religious person” within a specific religious tradition.

Religious significance was being assessed, not on any internal values or qualities, but on whether it had been “authorized” by appropriate indoctrination, textual support or a legitimised authority.

Q. Where is it written or said in the Jewish religion or tradition that the grave site had to be fully demarked?

A. I am not a religious scholar. I really don't know. It's part of my upbringing and belief. (p.124)

Q. So the decision that you had to place these statues was a personal decision made by you so you could accomplish religiously what you wanted to accomplish?

A. What I wanted from my heart, yes.

Q. From your heart?

A. From my heart, because my religion and my faith are like the core of an apple that's inside me. Everything I do is based on that.

Q. Okay, Mrs. Danciu, have you talked with any priests or other people knowledgeable in the area of religious symbolism regarding your placing the statues?

A. No.

Q. Did you seek advice from anyone?

A. No. (p.118)

The extensive work being done on materiality and religion in recent years is one area is exposing the extent to which individuals construct religious meaning in objects and artefacts in ways that fall outside the canons of any recognized religious tradition (see for example Arweck & Keenan, 2006; Freedberg, 1989; McDannell, 1995; Morgan, 2010a, 2010b).

The question then is, how do we formally handle the investigation and conceptualization of the diversity of individual “religious significance” – or what Linda Woodhead refers to as “a luxuriant undergrowth of religiosity” within an academic framework that requires definition?

Religion as mediation.

The other perspective that calls into question the adequacy of most of the social science definitions of religion is rethinking the nature of religion as mediation. Traditional approaches to the study of media and religion have followed the demarcated understanding and looked at how people and institutions identified as religious engage with or use different forms of media. Rethinking media not as instruments for communicating but as sites for the construction of social meaning, and religion not as a separately constructed domain but as a phenomenon that exists and is constructed in the processes of mediation, requires a rethinking of media and religion as separate phenomena that simply interact.

Because the media environment is the lived environment for most people living today, particularly in the Western world and global urban areas, analysing how “religious significance” occurs or is cultivated by people within their native environment requires a rethinking of how religion and popular culture as constructions of mediation are related to each other. So Gordon Lynch:

One of the achievements of the literature on religion, media and popular culture has been precisely to demonstrate that religious experience is not something that takes place prior to cultural practices and expressions, but that religious experience is constructed precisely through engagement with particular cultural practices and resources - whether through popular religious iconography, music, dance or other media. The sacred is encountered in and through culture, not in some privatized, mystical space that is separate from it. (Lynch, 2007)

Below the radar religious phenomena?

What I am interested in understanding and addressing, therefore, is not so much how we understand or define what readily fits into the social scientific category of religion, and the changes taking place in those religious entities or in the burgeoning of new religions – though they are very interesting. A lot of my current work focuses on the past and current transformations in Christianity under the impact of media.

My interest today is in how we understand those human phenomena that do not fit into any religious category but which have characteristics that resemble what we would normally call religious. This in my view is one of the more interesting things occurring in this period of late modernity: transformations in secularization through what Partridge calls “the gradual and uneven emergence of personally and socially consequential alternative spiritualities” (p.58).

Do we confuse or hinder the exploration of this phenomenon by continuing to use the term religious to describe these things? Should we do as a number of my cultural studies colleagues propose, and dissolve the study of religion into cultural studies and look at all phenomena simply in terms of their characteristics as cultural practices.

I’m not committed to the word religion. But I do want to argue for preservation of a focus on the phenomena within human existence that once were understood within the terms of religious, spiritual, transcendental, or metaphysical – for a couple of reasons.

One is historical. What is still commonly understood as religion, in all its breadth, has been, and still is, a major social, cultural and political phenomenon. As such, it stands as a significant historical marker (if nothing else) for the breadth of the phenomenon of humanity and for building comparative meaning in the present.

The PhD candidate I was referring to earlier is currently framing his study of religious dimensions of the iconography, mythos and gameplay of World of Warcraft, not by declaring them as substantially religious, nor by saying functionally they’re serving the purposes of religion, but by framing it as “activities and characteristics of game playing that were previously understood as religion,” and asking, What’s going on here?

The second reason is a humanistic one. I think there are aspects of everyday mundane human experience that are sufficiently distinct and important that we need to maintain a discourse that allows us to examine the significance of these and how we deal with them. These are situations or experiences where we experience a numinous aspect to life, a gestalt sense of unboundedness, or where we encounter an Otherness to life.

These have both a cognitive and an experiential dimension to them that doesn’t diminish our human agency but forces us to deal with aspects of who we are beyond that agency with a sense of imperative that compels us to deal with it.

Let me illustrate what I mean. A few years ago I was invited by an acquaintance to speak to a city Rotary Club lunch-time meeting. The invitation was to talk about media. I said to him, “I talk about media everywhere. You know what I’d love to talk

to a bunch of Rotarians about – I'd love to talk about being religious.” “He said, well, we're not a religious organization,” and I said. “Yeah. I know that and I respect that.” So he said okay, which was no small achievement in itself.

Come the day and I spoke on the topic, “I'm not religious, but...” I began by saying, One of the things you find when people find out you're interested in religion is they'll often respond by saying, “Well, I'm not religious, but...” and they'll then tell you about some “religious” experience they've had. So I outlined some unavoidable generic human experiences that religion commonly deals with and the way they might be experienced in different ways, even if you're not religious.

When I'd finished, about five blokes lined up to speak with me – there were only blokes in Rotary at that stage – and four out of the five began by saying, that was interesting. You know, I'm not religious, but...and away they went. The one I remember was merchant banker who was quite agitated, and told me of an experience he'd had when his kids gave him a parachute jump for his fortieth birthday. He said he jumped and the parachute opened and the plane disappeared and he found himself suspended all alone above the earth. And he had this overwhelming feeling of being extremely small but at the same very important.

And then he said to me, “I don't know what to do with it.”

I've thought about that comment for years. He had had a profound experience that had obviously impacted on him and obviously wouldn't let him go, but he had no language and no community by which to conceptualise its meaning or integrate it into his sense of identity or moral being.

Gordon Lynch seeks to rethink this de-institutionalised sense of the transcendent nature of life through a recovery of the social sense of the sacred, not in a Durkheimian dualism of sacred and profane, but in a sense of characteristics of certain aspects of life. He identifies the sacred within the context of object relations, distinguishing the sacred as an object “which exerts a gravitational pull on the feelings, motivations and behavior of individuals that goes beyond their sense of their own free, individual agency.” (Lynch, 2007, p. 138)

The sacred is an object defined by a particular quality of human thought, feeling and behavior in which it is regarded as a grounding or ultimate source of power, identity, meaning and truth. This quality of human attention to the sacred object is constructed and mediated through particular social relations and cultural practices and resources. Religions are social and cultural systems which are oriented towards sacred objects. (p.138)

There are aspects of Lynch's analysis which I find very helpful, particularly identifying this dimension of life as having “sticking, binding, compelling qualities” that are “significantly different from other sources of identity, meaning and community which are not experienced as binding with the same intensity.”

I like also his locating the sacred within everyday experience, not separate from it. “The sacred is encountered in and through culture, not in some privatized, mystical space that is separate from it.” (p.137). In these terms, popular culture becomes a significant site of religious experience, not something separate from it.

The difference I have with Lynch's proposition is with the strong object-based expression of it, and also with the associations of the term sacred with formal religion. There is a suggestion also that encounter with the sacred is an encounter with an ultimate reality, though I doubt Lynch would want to give it that association. I want to argue for the sacred or religious or spiritual as an integral and inseparable quality of mundane life, not as encounter with a separate reality.

I want to explore an alternative to this through the work of the Chicago philosopher, David Tracy. Tracy uses the concept of limit-situations or limit-experiences, to articulate "those human situations wherein a human being ineluctably finds manifest a certain ultimate limit or horizon to his or her existence." (Tracy, 1975) In limit situations we become existentially aware that these human limits are our own and are beyond the ability of our human agency to overcome them.

Tracy identifies two categories of limit-situations: negative and positive. Negative limit situations are such experiences as sickness, guilt, anxiety, confrontation with evil, and the recognition of death as one's own destiny. When negative limit situations are experienced intensely, we experience the everyday, the 'real' world as suddenly unreal: petty, strange, foreign or untrustworthy.

Positive limit-situations are such situations as love, joy, the creative act, a sense of awe, grace or profound reassurance. When they are intense, they are experienced as Maslow's 'peak experiences' or experiences of ecstasy and the rest of our lives appear as "somehow shadowy. The limit nature of them is that when experienced they are experienced not as something we have created ourselves but as something that has just "happened" or that has been given or gifted.

They exist as cognitive realities – we all know we're going to die, and most of us enjoy the experience of being freely loved. But at times the cognitive reality can be experienced in intense experiential ways. When they are, they can convey with them a sense of an Other reality beyond the everyday that can seem more "real" than the lives we are attempting to create for ourselves. As such, they can have an imperative quality of virtuality that can be a creative stimulus for new identity formation and behavior change.

It is this domain of the numinous dimension of everyday life that religions have colonized and sought to control for centuries. At their best, religions can provide communal expressive language and rituals by which the numinous can be productively engaged and encounter with the numinous facilitated.

But religions are also political institutions that exploit the human dimensions of the numinous for personal and institutional political and economic benefit. It is this exploitation that lies behind secularization's attempts to curb the wings of religion's social power.

What I fear in secularization, however, is that by rejecting the religious political colonization of the numinous, we can reject the numinous dimensions of life as well and lose the distinctive insights in human society and culture that such insights bring,

along with an appropriate language and rituals by which to affirm them. This part of what is intended in the concept of the disenchantment of secularization.

That I think is what was going on with the merchant banker I spoke of earlier, when he said, “I don’t know what to do with it.” There was no available social language or rituals through which he could express and engage with integrity.

In place of religion, therefore, do we need a secular alternative, that retains the benefits and rigour of the secular emphasis on empirical groundedness, while at the same time acknowledging that there are dimensions to the empirical that go beyond pure cause and effect, materialist explanations. Failure to provide a shared language of the numinous leaves people either impoverished or vulnerable.

In the past, as I’ve mentioned, religions as social and cultural systems have been major sites where people generated experiences of the numinous in life, engaged with them and built meaning out of them.

However religions are not the only cultural systems dealing with the numinous in life, nor may they be the most effective.

It is passé in a group such as this to acknowledge that mediated popular culture is the more significant site in which people engage with, explore, draw resources for exploring, or seek to experience the numinous dimensions of life. Religions or new religious movements may be of greater interest politically, because of the greater political power their collective populations may muster. But dramatic narratives, advertising, music, dance, networked communities, virtual realities are possibly the more widespread for a within which these limit dimensions of life are now engaged and explored. The religious experience may be understood as being reinstitutionalised out of the institutions of social religious systems into the institutions of popular media, as the culture of popular mediation offers opportunities for addressing the transcendent dimensions of everyday life through artist expression, meaning creation, community building and marketing and economic opportunity.

In place of studying religion, therefore, should we speak about a field of study that explores and analyses “those organized or individual practices of mediation through which human individuals and communities seek to engage with, build meaning out of, and generate experiences of the numinous in life”?

If “religion” is problematic, what could we call that exploration?

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