Referential Comparisons; A Comment on Martin Riesebrodt's essay

Author: Stephen Sharot (---.uchicago.edu)
Date: 12-02-03 09:54

Martin Riesebrodt provides a wide-ranging comparison of the effects of cultural interaction on the self-constitution, boundary-maintenance, accommodations, and syncretisms of religions. This kind of comparative study, focusing on both the constitution and softening of religious boundaries, is rare, and Riesebrodt provides us with a path-breaking analysis on which to build. However, in presenting his analysis, Riesebrodt's object is to propose a "referential" legitimation for the use of the term "religion," and I have not been convinced that the referential approach provides a way to by-pass the definitional problem in recognizing particular systems of beliefs and institutions as "religions."

In proposing the referential option, Riesebrodt has selected examples from pre-modern societies, and when, for example, he discusses polemics, academics will have no problem in agreeing that the particular actors and institutions who recognize each other for the purpose of the polemics are "religious." Riesebrodt writes that the conflictual relationship expresses underlying commonalities without which the conflict could not have arisen. But as we enter the modern age what are we to make of the polemics between, say, Christianity with what many academics would term secularist ideologies such as socialism, communism, and secular forms of nationalism. In accord with the referential perspective, these cases can also be said to have a commonality which provides a basis for the polemics, but unlike Riesebrodt's examples (Judaism, Buddhism etc.) academics disagree over whether it is meaningful to refer to such ideologies as "religions." Academics who favor functionalist definitions of religion have been disposed to consider such ideologies as "religions"; they have pointed to identical or similar functions that, for example, Christian and communist rituals and institutions have performed in societies. Academics who favor substantive definitions, which usually include references to the purported supernatural, have generally rejected the categorization of such systems as communism as "religions."

Can the referential approach admit that polemics can take place between a "religion" and ideology or organization which is not a religion despite possible commonalities between the two? If so, what is the observer's criterion or criteria for recognizing one side as religious and the other side as non-religious? If the observer depends on the actors own definitions, problems are likely to arise. The two sides of a polemic do not always agree on what is religious. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, a traditionalist Jew who was pro-Zionist at a time when most traditionalist Jews were anti-Zionist, wrote that the Zionists who proclaimed themselves anti-Zionist were religious in their true souls because they were instrumental in bringing the Redemption nearer. When actors representing official religious institutions have included in their polemics against folk forms of religion the accusation of "false religion" or "anti-religion," academics are unlikely to exclude the folk forms from the category of religion. Perhaps more to the point, we have the interesting instance of Theravada Buddhists who worship spirits and make a distinction between Buddhism, which they say is a religion, and the spirit-cults, which they say are not religions. For these Theravada Buddhists, the spirit-cults are not religions because the spirits only assist in mundane goals; unlike Buddhism, they do not deal with salvation. This is not a case of polemics but rather an accommodation along the lines of a division of labor where one might argue that underlying the emphasis on difference there is a recognition of competition based on some kind of commonality. Buddhism, after all, deals with this-worldly as well as other-worldly goals. Anthropologists, of
course, recognize the spirit cults as "religious" or at least "magico-religious."
I conclude that, far from enabling academics to put aside the problem of defining religion, the referential approach produces its own quandaries about how to recognize a phenomenon as religious. I would argue that the referential approach requires an implicit, taken-for-granted definition of religion, and that in choosing certain polemics and syncretisms rather than others Riesebrodt began with his own working definition of religion. Let me hasten to add that I do not think that this is a bad thing. My position is that we can apply a term universally even if that term or an equivalent is not found universally in all societies. Academics use a multitude of modern western constructions in their analyses and comparisons of societies which are not modern and/or western, but only rarely, as in the case of "religion," do they agonize over such applications.

Re: Referential Comparisons; A Comment on Martin Riesebrodt's essay

Author: Martin Riesebrodt (---.dsl.emhril.ameritech.net)
Date: 12-14-03 15:51

My goal was not to "by-pass" the definition of religion, but instead to first legitimize the use of a concept of religion beyond the modern West in order to later (but not in this essay) define religion. For the legitimation part I assembled examples illustrating how "religions" in the premodern West and non-western societies have constituted each other and have related to each other as similar in terms of polemics, syncretisms, and identifications, or as expressed in imperial edicts. Sharot is certainly right that polemics don’t prove that the underlying commonalities are always "religious"; and especially in the modern West we encounter many polemics between religious and secular groups. But since my goal was to show the applicability of the concept of religion in pre-Modern Western and non-Western societies these examples miss the main point.

But even with reference to modern cases I certainly do not assume that all polemics of all religious groups at all times must be exclusively aimed at other religious groups and must always refer to underlying religious commonalities. I only assume that polemics between groups refer to underlying commonalities. If I can show that there exist polemics between groups in the premodern West and non-Western societies referring to commonalities which could be adequately described with the term "religious", then I have exactly refuted the argument that there cannot be a definition of religion which is universally applicable without distorting its historically, politically, and socially specific constitution.

As I explicitly state at the end of my essay, the legitimation of the concept of religion does not solve our problem of defining religion. But my selection of examples has not been informed by such a definition, but rather has attempted to explore typical perspectives of typical groups in the engagement with the "other." The task now is to advance a definition of religion that is capable of including these different typical perspectives. Although the legitimation of a definition of religion and the actual definition are not unrelated, they are quite separate tasks.

Sharot is right that we use many Western terms universally without making such a fuss about it as I do in the case of religion. But since Asad has advanced an intelligent challenge of the concept of religion and since this challenge has become widely popular, especially among students of religion, I found it helpful and necessary to engage it in a serious debate. Moreover and apart from the challenge, I find it rather helpful to be able to justify at least the key concepts I am using in my own scholarship and to reflect on the question of whether or not they prevent us from adequately understanding and explaining social phenomena in other cultures and historical periods.
In his reply to my comment on his essay Riesebrodt writes that I am "certainly right that polemics don't prove that the underlying commonalities are always religious." However, my point was rather that whether the observer categorizes underlying commonalities as religious or not will depend on that observer's definition of religion. I was not arguing that Riesebrodt was suggesting that legitimation of the concept of religion solves the problem of defining religion. I was questioning whether the referential perspective could legitimize religion as an analytical concept prior to having at least an implicit or working definition of religion.

Legitimizing 'religion' as an analytical concept and the never-ending disputes over definitions of religion interest me far less than Riesebrodt's comparisons of boundary constitution, maintenance, and fusion in the interaction of religions. The referential approach directs Riesebrodt to emphasize similarities among religions of both west and east with respect to their polemics and syncretisms. An approach concerned with differences as well as similarities is more likely to emphasize the difference between the relatively high boundary maintenance of the "Abrahamic" religions with the relatively low boundary maintenance of the religions of the east, especially in China and Japan. As Riesebrodt shows, eastern as well as western religions constituted themselves in the process of contact and interaction with other religions, and there were instances of religious persecution in eastern societies. However, in very general terms, western (and middle eastern) religions have been insular and eastern religions have been permeable. Insular religions have been disposed to monopolism, to demand allegiance within a defined territory, while religions with permeable boundaries have been disposed to pluralism, to tolerate other religions alongside themselves. The instances of religious persecution in eastern societies add up to nothing like the scale of religious persecution in the west, both of other religions and of "heretics" within the religions. One might add that religious persecution in the east, such as the persecution of Buddhist sects in China, was motivated more by political than by doctrinal concerns.

Related to these differences, religious syncretism has been far more extensive and ongoing among the eastern religions than among the western religions. It is significant that all Riesebrodt's examples of incorporation and syncretism come from eastern societies. Riesebrodt clearly recognizes these differences when he notes that, although the Jesuits in China accommodated themselves at first to Buddhism and then to Confucianism, Christianity's doctrinal rigidity and claim to the monopoly of truth prevented its fusion into Chinese religion. In Riesebrodt's account the point about Christianity in China is an aside, but it indicates one direction for the comparative analysis of boundary insularity and permeability.
I please want you to kindly send some commonalities of religion especially the three world greatest religions ie. Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

I would like to know the similarities the Islam and Judaism beliefs which are different from Christianity.
Talal Asad’s deconstruction of the concept of religion, to which Prof Riesebrodt is responding, is an early expression of the fallout from the linguistic turn in the human disciplines. All around us, scholars are grappling with a methodological crisis that is not fully grasped. Analytical categories like “class”, “society” “culture” “history” “nation” and countless others that emerged as conceptual distillations of human actions no longer possess the stability that they possessed in a more positivistic age. Such categories are now seen to bear the definitional profile of a historical and political moment, and since we live in an accelerating historical time, these definitions are increasingly seen as having passed their moment and unable to capture many aspects of how “classes” and “religions” now behave. To be sure, as Prof. Riesebrodt points out, there have always been multiple definitions of religion as there have of class or nation. But within the interpretive communities of different scholarly circles, a consensus tended to prevail (for instance, Marx versus Pareto on class) and definitions were not problematized. This also allowed them to get their work done.

What should our response be to such a crisis? Most scholars do not confront it and sometimes put the analytical category in question within quotation marks while continuing to use it. Others have tried to loosen the definition by turning to ideas such as Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblances” or Bourdieu’s idea of a “field” with its historically conditioned and provisional set of laws, rationalities, and values, as in artistic field, scientific field, etc. I believe Riesebrodt is appealing to something like the field when he rejects a discursive deconstruction of the concept and opts for the perpectivistic approach to religion with the accompanying notion of “referential legitimation.” Through competition, borrowings, identifications, and syncretisms, those referred to as “religious” tend to recognize each other and be recognized by third parties as belonging to the same or comparable framework of classification.

In general, I think Riesebrodt has made his case for restoring the idea of religion by means of a new justification. Nonetheless, the deconstructive effort cannot be simply wished away and the _definitional effect_ that they have de-constructed has to be built into our understanding of the field. Let me draw on the Chinese case for this. Confucianism is, of course, notoriously difficult to define as a religion if we use metaphysical criteria since Confucius was a self-declared agnostic. But Riesebrodt’s method of referential legitimation works well here to show that Confucians did recognize a class of activities and ideas from Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, etc, that indicated that they were working with an idea of religion.

But what were the limits of this notion of religion? Even until the late nineteenth century, Western scientific knowledge, first brought in by the Jesuits, was seen to have its origins in classical China. In Chinese historiography, this tendency is known as the “Chinese origins of Western science.” Recently Minghui Hu has shown how Jesuit scientific cosmography was absorbed by neo-Confucians by framing it within Chinese cosmology. This was not simply a way of nationalizing science, but bringing it within the Chinese moral and religious purview and utilizing it often for ritual purposes (eg. modern astronomical knowledge to understand the will of heaven). While many Confucians were engaged in this way of appropriating science, others such as
anti-reformist Wo Ren warned that the spread of mathematical knowledge among Chinese literati youth in the later part of the 19th century would drive them into the arms of Christianity!

The point I am trying to make here is that religious actors “mis-referenced” science as religion. We could, of course, make the argument that the assumptions of science do occupy the same realm of categories as religion; that science does indeed make cosmological claims. But if so, the categorical separation of science from religion is not merely arbitrary, but tremendously consequential as a way religion will come to be understood by hiving off certain kinds of cosmological assumptions that it would once have regarded as a part of its own domain. As we know, this re-definition of the referential logic of religion had to be learnt—with mixed success—all over the world.

Re: Response

Author: Nelson Tebbe (---.dialup.mindspring.com)
Date: 12-11-03 09:52

In this punchy paper, Martin Riesebrodt rehabilitates the category of religion for social scientists, including presumably historians of religion, anthropologists, and social theorists. His foil is Talal Asad, who he reads as arguing that using the category religion at all implies that religion is meaningfully distinct from other aspects of culture in a way that necessarily implicates harmful modern-western assumptions about the differentiation of religion and power. As I read him, Riesebrodt argues that Asad has confused social action and social science. Although it is true that religion assumes a peculiarly differentiated form in the modern west, Riesebrodt seems to say, that does not mean that religion cannot be used as a category in social science.

Riesebrodt could simply have argued, a la Weber, that social science can employ the term religion as long as it does so self-consciously for the purpose of comparing an important aspect of the modern west with analogous cultural forms in societies that are remote in time and space. Religion on this theory is an occidental construction that has value for a reflexive social science not despite, but precisely because religion is of peculiar (un)importance to the west.

But Riesebrodt goes one step further. Not only is religion a western category that social scientists can, with sufficient self-consciousness, compare to other societies, but religion also is something that other societies recognize in each other and in themselves. This does not mean, Riesebrodt recognizes, that they have a term that could be translated as religion or, even if they do, that it signifies something similar to what religion means in the modern west. But contemporary social scientists can link up with indigenous cultural categories that can usefully (though not unproblematically) be compared to our notions of religion.

Compare religion to another category that arose rather recently in the modern west¾homosexuality. Surely the mere fact that the idea of homosexuality is inextricably implicated in the power politics of nineteenth-century Europe does not mean that social scientists should conclude that it is inherently impossible to study homosexuality in distant societies. Anthropologists and sociologists find empirical instances of same-sex love in societies outside the modern west, even though the social actors involved have not necessarily identified themselves (or even their acts) as homosexual. Nevertheless, those actors may well have compared their
sexual practices to others within their own culture or in other societies. To be sure, such study cannot and should not ignore the politics of sexuality that permeate even its own perception of homosexuality in other cultures. But this imperative of self-reflexivity need not mean that the comparative project itself is impossible.

Perhaps it would be helpful to conceptualize the category of religion from the perspective of social science as both interpretive and socio-practical. That is, social actors interpret the category of religion from the perspective of particular interests (material, political, institutional, ideal, etc.). This includes social scientists, who construct an understanding of religion that furthers their interest in, say, cross-cultural comparison. But social actors also use the term religion within interpretive limits, which constrain them within broad boundaries of mutual recognition, both among professional uses and with colloquial understanding. Constitutional lawyers, for instance, write the category religion into constitutions and statutes for the purpose of, say, legitimating the liberal state and its claim to neutrality. Power permeates interpretation here. But when jurists do this they must also always define religion so that others can recognize it. Interpretation therefore constrains social actors and social scientists to define religion in ways not too discontinuous with the fact that, as Riesebrodt puts it, "everyone 'sort of' know[] what is religious."

Re: Response

Author: Martin Riesebrodt  (--.dsl.emhril.ameritech.net)
Date: 12-16-03 11:54

I fully agree with Duara’s observation that the categorical separation between science and religion can be as difficult as it can be consequential. Since he takes his example from the modern era to bring the Asadian perspective back in, I like to conclude that he has no principled problem with my argument regarding the premodern West and the non-Western cultures before their encounter with the West. His example of „mis-referencing“ science as religion is an interesting and indeed illuminating one. We are often prone to read our modern understanding of science into past debates as if they were about science and religion as alternative or mutually exclusive worldviews. This, however, is even untrue for much of the Western Enlightenment. For many Enlightenment scientists scientific methods had replaced revelation as a means to know God but were not at all meant to replace religion. To the contrary, for many scientist the exitement of science exactly consisted in its potential to better understand the ways in which God’s mind works. Accordingly, their conflict with established Christianity was a conflict within a religious discourse among intellectuals. It was a clash between an orthodox insistence on revelation and traditional authority on the one hand and a heterodox insistence on reason and scientific methods on the other. It was not before the institutional differentiation between science and religion took place in the 19th century that science and religion were widely seen as opposites.
If the goal of Martin Riesenbrodt in writing this essay was to show conclusively that "religion" is not simply "just another modern Western construction," he has brilliantly succeeded. I do not believe, however, that in his _Genealogies of Religion_, Talal Asad was advancing such a simple proposition. In this respect the essay does not offer a serious critical engagement with Talal Asad's complex thesis, but rather uses it as a rhetorical device, as a convenient straw man, on the way to debunking persuasively the vulgar and naive "postmodern assumption that non-Western religions have been constituted as such only after they encountered the West and then began modeling themselves after the Western notion of religion."

Riesebrodt offers an ingenious and insightful way of bypassing the vexatious definitional question, what _is_ or what _constitutes_ "religion" in general?, by examining the self-referential way in which particular religions across time and space, indeed across all civilizations and world religions, either a) have defined and constituted themselves, negatively or positively, vis-à-vis other _similar_ phenomena, or b) have been so defined and constituted by "the powers that be", through edicts of toleration as well as through policies of selective persecution and proscription, in referential conjunction with other similar phenomena. If both, religious practitioners as well as interested observers and interlocutors, always and everywhere, have found it normal and justifiable to group or classify together, and to draw distinctions and boundaries between similar or comparable "religious" phenomena, there should be no reason why the social sciences or the discipline of religious studies could not do likewise, that is, offer comparative, relational and contextual analyses of religious phenomena. In this respect, the essay succeeds in its goal "to prove the legitimacy of the concept of religion for a hermeneutical social science."

Ironically, Riesebrodt reaches a position which might arguably be not so far apart from the positions he wanted to criticize. Since the publication of his path breaking essay, "An Anthropology of Islam," Asad has consistently argued that it should not be the task of anthropologists and scholarly "experts" to define what Islam or any other religion may be, but rather to examine the ways in which Muslims and other practitioners constitute Islam or any other religion in and through their practices, discursive and non-discursive. The common and valid idea one finds in the many versions of the thesis of globalization of the Western category of "religion" is that, with the global expansion of hegemonic Western "modernity" in its many colonial and post-colonial forms, all religions have been compelled to re-define and re-constitute themselves in relation to either expanding Western Christianity or expanding Western secular modernity. Central to Asad's version is the crucial role played by the disciplinary power of the secular state, of the secular sciences of religion, and of the epistemic regime of secularism in general in the modern constitution of 'religion' and of 'the religious,' a global condition to which all religions are compelled to respond seeking, positively or negatively, self-referential legitimation. All these propositions, it seems to me, are quite compatible with Riesebrodt's "referential" and "perspectivistic" approach.

Indirectly at least, through his exemplary essay, Riesebrodt suggests a promising research agenda for the
contemporary study of religion: How under global conditions all religions are simultaneously constituted and constitute themselves referentially by one another, by the constitutive power of the secular state, and by the disciplinary practices of the sciences of religion.

I am looking forward to see how Riesebrodt addresses the by far more difficult question, “how to define religion as a universally-applicable analytical concept.” Indeed such a task seems much less compatible with the kind of referential and perspectivist approach advanced in this essay.

Re: A Critical Commentary

Author: Martin Riesebrodt (---.dsl.emhril.ameritech.net)
Date: 12-14-03 15:46

1. My essay was not intended to be a critical engagement with Talal Asad’s whole oeuvre. If had intended that I would have certainly said so. I would also have needed much more space in order to carefully elaborate my argument. My only goal in this brief essay was to discuss the thesis that one cannot and should not even attempt to define religion. This thesis has been advanced by Asad and has spread since in epidemic ways and mindless versions. My intent was not to use Asad as a „convenient straw man“, but rather to take his claim seriously. I am less interested in who advanced the claim than in the claim itself and have always wondered why no one I am aware of has actually responded to this challenge. Any serious scholarship must be able to provide definitions of its key terms. If Asad were right we would have to dramatically change the ways in which we do what we still call sociology of religion or history of religions. Since Asad has claimed that any universal definition of religion would distort the ways in which „religion“ is historically constituted my goal was to inquire whether or not this is actually true by looking at the social relations between groups and institutions we would call religious and at their regulation through imperial edicts. My conclusion was that a definition of religion as an analytical concept is legitimate and compatible with a hermeneutic social science. This does not yet solve the problem of definition, but it does provide a foundation that makes attempts at definition worthwhile.

2. I agree that there are some positions where Asad and I are not far apart. For example, I certainly believe that social scientists should not define Islam, Christianity, or any other religion in ahistorical normative terms. And I find much of value in Asad’s attempt to examine the ways in which practitioners constitute their religions through their practices. Nevertheless, in order to do so, we have to define the criteria that make religious practices „Muslim“, „Christian“, or „other“. Moreover, I put more emphasis on the ways in which religions have constituted each other throughout history before the emergence of Western modernity. Nevertheless, I do not assume that Asad’s approach and mine are necessarily incompatible and I would be happy if my essay could be read as an attempt to constructively engage aspects of Asad’s approach, push it further, and solve some of its internal inconsistencies.
In this punchy paper, Martin Riesebrodt rehabilitates the category of religion for social scientists, including presumably historians of religion, anthropologists, and social theorists. His foil is Talal Asad, who he reads as arguing that using the category religion at all implies that religion is meaningfully distinct from other aspects of culture in a way that necessarily implicates harmful modern-western assumptions about the differentiation of religion and power. As I read him, Riesebrodt argues that Asad has confused social action and social science. Although it is true that religion assumes a peculiarly differentiated form in the modern west, Riesebrodt seems to say, that does not mean that religion cannot be used as a category in social science.

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