

Response to Timothy Fitzgerald

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In formal terms, Tim's response does two different things: it responds directly to points I made; and it reasserts his position more generally. This diffuses the dialogue between article and response, given that I explicitly agree with some aspects of his position and disagree with others. The mixed review of points of agreement and disagreement clouds the air, potentially and misleadingly overemphasizing the latter. So, for example, much of the first section of the response reiterates the view that naïve usages of 'religion' have ideological effects, a point upon which we both agree.

That said, Tim and I continue to disagree on the core issue. Basically, I suggested that ideological critique—not limited to the points raised in *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity* (DCB)—can inform a critical study of religion. I described this as a “middle ground between abandoning an apolitical conception of ‘religion’ and using the concept merely as a heuristic device” (Engler 2011: 4*). In his response, Tim characterizes this position of mine as a “middle third way between a properly critical agenda and leaving everything as it is” (2011: *). This distorts what I said, reproducing the false dichotomy that I critiqued. Negating a “middle way” leaves a black and white choice between “a properly critical agenda” (Tim's view) and “leaving everything as it is” (presumably mine). To the extent that I disagree with his position, I am said to propose “merely a useful adjustment to the already existing paradigm” (Ibid.: *). Tim's choice to characterize my argument as proposing a “third way” reinforces this false dichotomy. I did not use that term, which has a well-established meaning in a very different context: it describes a political hybrid of economic views from the right and social views from the left, e.g., Anthony Giddens' “utopian realism.” “Third way” is misleading for precisely that reason: I am not proposing *that sort* of middle ground, a hybrid of the view that Tim proposes and the one he rejects. I propose a broader critical view—one that I argue encompasses his position—and I reject the status quo just as he does. My position is in the middle only in the sense that I neither accept uncritical and under-theorized appropriations of 'religion' nor do I reject that concept as radically as Tim does. In no sense did I suggest that there is some unique third or middle position: I argued for “a host of middle-ground theoretical positions between naïve realism and radical constructionism,” “a broad range of middle-ground positions” that could inform “a broader range of studies” than Tim's narrow focus on relation between 'religion' and 'the secular.' (Engler 2011: 11, 14-15*) The same false dichotomy reappears in Tim's contrast between “non-ideological descriptive and analytical” uses of 'religion' and the task of unpacking its “ideological functions” (Fitzgerald 2011: *). The

implication seems to be that I support the former, when in fact I argue for a broader view of the latter, one including but not limited to Tim's perspective.

Tim responds that he does not take an essentialist approach himself. That is quite correct in general, but I argued that his methodology is potentially confusing on this issue. *DCB's* historical focus on dominant meanings is too linear, telling a single story of the meaning, for example, of medieval encompassing religion as Christian Truth. More generally, why does *DCB* spend so much time talking about historical uses of a concept when its subject is contemporary uses of that concept? This question is linked to what I described as the "genetic fallacy." The basic method of *DCB* is to explain a particular state of affairs (relations between 'religion' and 'the secular') by means of a historical analysis. As Tim notes, "it seemed important to find out where the binary did originate in order to help clarify current uses" (Fitzgerald 2011: *).

There are three issues regarding this issue of the genetic fallacy. First, to the extent that *DCB* offers a genetic explanation it would need to fill in the temporal sequence and the related set of causal relations in greater detail (hence, my discussion of *DCB's* historiography).

Second, the motive for *DCB's* emphasis on history seems ambivalent. The section on historiography, in Tim's response, reasserts points that I fully agree with: that 'religion' and its cognates should be looked at in their historical and social context, and that doing so reveals important degrees of discontinuity. For this very reason, I disagree with Tim's statement that "the overall effect of ... [the] arguments [of] ... historians such as Biller, Despland and Harrison ... may be to keep in play the assumption of significant linkages and continuities" (Ibid.: *); their implications are much more nuanced, hence my call for further engagement with such findings. However, paying attention to the range of available secondary sources is not enough. The reason that I called into question *DCB's* great reliance upon secondary sources is that—precisely because the latter are "moderns reconstructing the past" (Ibid.: *)—they serve the agenda of Tim's critical project rather than the separate historical project. *DCB* spends most of its time discussing historical uses of 'religion,' though its conclusions are about modern uses. On the assumption that *DCB's* historical project supports its critical one, that historical analysis has to be solid. If Tim is right that modern voices necessarily reflect the ideological distortions that he purports to find (though I think he overstates things here), then he faces a dilemma: he must either do the work of retrieving a less distorted history (based on work with primary sources), or he must admit that the secondary texts that he analyzes are just one more set of texts that reflect modern ideological uses of 'religion.' That is, if the secondary sources are just examples of modern ideological distortion, then there is no need to focus so much on history; but, if there is value in doing the history, then it is necessary to move past the secondary sources. More to the point, if there is value in doing the history, then—to avoid the genetic fallacy—a clearer account is needed of exactly how a story of origins clarifies modern uses.

Third, the emphasis on historical trajectories comes at the expense of a richer analysis of current developments. Spending so much time talking about historical uses—framing these as the origin of current uses—gives the impression that this is the most important part of the story. In its most common formulation,

“The genetic fallacy occurs if an account of how S came to be is confused with an account of the nature of S,” and the fallacy here consists in *overemphasizing* the issue of origins (Goudge 1961: 45-46). Tim rightly insists that the concepts we use are not transparent, that they are saturated with ideological relations; and his emphasize on the centrality of colonialism and capitalism here is very valuable (as is his underlining the importance of feminist analyses). However, because the basic mechanisms of ideology remain relatively constant, the value of historical accounts is less to inform genetic explanations than to offer heuristic examples. And, of course, where new ideological mechanisms arise, e.g., with new forms of social mediation associated with new media, history offers even more a stock of lessons than of causes. At the ends of the spectrum, when compared to the present, an alleged historical origin reflects either a radically distinct social and material context or homologous structures of power and stratification. At either extreme of the spectrum, the value of a historical analysis plays at best a supporting role to the core task of analyzing contemporary manifestations of those structures. Why talk history when things have changed radically? Why talk history when the core issues have not changed? The question centers on what it is that remains relatively constant, i.e., on the middle ground. To come at this a different way, my point about the ideological nature of medieval concepts of *religio* was not the one that Tim defends himself against. I suggested that certain conceptual oppositions—like ‘*religio/superstitio*’ then and ‘religious/secular’ today —have strictly comparable ideological effects in both historical periods. Historical narratives about the ideological roles of specific concepts in specific contexts are highly contingent. What is important is how relations between discourse and power play themselves out in similar ways in all these contexts.

The basic dilemma (and ambiguity) is this: either there is a story of continuity to be dug out through a historical analysis or not. *DCB*’s methodological commitment to basing its critical agenda on a historical analysis necessarily takes the first path here. At the same time, its emphasis on a radical rupture between pre-modern and modern meanings takes the second path. The core ambivalence is visible in Tim’s response that

it is difficult to discern a clear separation between the emergence of a new paradigm such as a written Constitution in the historical ‘past’ and its contemporary interpretation. This is partly because the claim that (for example) a new discourse on religious and secular domains began to appear in specific contexts in the 17th century is itself a contemporary claim. (Fitzgerald 2011: *)

If this relativizes and so undermines the task of doing history, as it seems to, then why is *DCB* framed as a historical project? If historical claims are just one more case of modern ideological distortions, then why privilege them in one’s analysis? What distinguishes *DCB*’s own analysis from other cases of “moderns reconstructing the past” (Ibid.: *)?

By way of summing up, consider the following statement from Tim’s response:

Medieval discourses on *religio* may be significant for us if it can be shown ... that they have a strong connection with modern discourses on 'religion' and 'religions'. But the modern category of religion is, I suggest, functioning differently in the total configuration of modern capitalist ideology than *religio* was in Latin medieval Christian ideology. (Ibid.: *)

This is a good measure of our contrasting positions, as I would hold much the opposite: the substantive contrasts in meaning are sharp, but the ideological functions are comparable. On the one hand, if *DCB's* historical project aims to show a "strong connection" between medieval and modern discourses on 'religion,' then my critical comments on historiography and the genetic fallacy have some bite. To the extent that a trajectory of historical contingencies is at issue, a richer study of primary sources is required. To the extent that some inherent trajectory is assumed, *DCB's* argument does indeed come close to essentialism. On the other hand, if *DCB's* critical project aims to show a radical difference between modern and pre-modern ideological functions of 'religion,' then the value of the historical project is greatly weakened. Tim states that *DCB's* method is not one of stating the facts about historical meanings but of exploring "the mismatch between ... modern classifications of that data and the very different classifications used by ... earlier authors" (Ibid.: *). Leaving aside the fact that *DCB* strays beyond this narrow task, such a mismatch is only significant if we read it over against a shared background context. I argued in my essay that the more general ideological role of discursive tensions performs this function, and that this can serve as the basis for a critical study of religion. That is, scholars of religion (like scholars in other disciplines) can and should pay attention to the fact that the categories that they use are structured by discursive tensions that reproduce social and material tensions in given social contexts. This applies to classical and medieval tensions between '*religio*' and '*superstitio*,' to modern tensions between 'religious' and 'secular,' and to a wide range of other concepts, e.g., between 'tradition' and 'modernity' (see Engler 2005a, 2005b, 2009). This is one important path in the middle ground between uncritically using 'religion' and focusing narrowly on the religion/secular pair.

Some final points. The additional clarification regarding relations between Tim's ideas of those of Louis Dumont is useful and welcome. His insistence on the value of feminist historiography and ethnography is also important. His suggestion that "the modern invention of religious and secular domains is associated in some way with what Marx described as primitive accumulation" (Fitzgerald 2011: *) is intriguing. At the same time, I would suggest that it is reminiscent of some of Gustavo Benavides' work on exchange and labour (e.g., 2005, 2006, 2010), adding that Benavides' work is a model of critical engagement with 'religion,' not of its abandonment to focus on the 'religious/secular' pair.

It is an honour and a pleasure to have this opportunity to discuss such issues in this journal. I am grateful to Francis Landy for making this dialogue possible and, of course, to Tim for his response. That response forced me to think more clearly about parts of my essay; I hope I have been able to return that favour. As Tim notes, it is important and yet unusual for scholars to engage in these sorts of discussions,

aimed at increasing our—and others’—critical awareness of the concepts we use. In the end, as I tried to make clear in my essay, I think the points of agreement between Tim and I are more important than the points of disagreement. Above all, we speak with one voice in arguing that naïve and uncritical uses of core concepts like ‘religion’ are not a viable basis for any discipline.

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