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What We Do, How We Do It

Categories and Interpretation

Many of our conversations hinge on well-known organizing principles: gender, race, class, tradition, institutions, centuries, etc. How well do these categories serve us today? Are there new frontiers that transcend these categories, or are changes primarily aimed at doing these things “more and better”?

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This is a hard question. If I am not careful you will think I think I know answer to it; that I know the state of the scholarship on “gender, race class, tradition, institutions and centuries.” I don’t.

I am, rather like you I assume, overwhelmed and always feeling behind the curve of what is being said and done in religious studies and allied fields. So, let me admit frankly that I know my view is partial and my job here is to offer that partiality to you in a way that makes you want to contribute your part.

Also, I admit to resisting the concept of “transcendence” in all things human. Clearly, none of these categories can be “transcended.” Indeed, the first three categories carry with them a moral imperative to better understand the etiology and effects of religiously inflected sexism, racism and classism. Taking the spirit of the question, however, I believe we are being invited to consider “how can we grow these categories” and “what kind of correctives are needed for growth.”

In sum, my answer is “yes” to all aspects of this question. Yes, these six categories remain productive ways of interrogating and illuminating the human condition. And, yes, “more” is possible. But, “yes,” there is something else we could be doing that is “better.” My intent is not to complain. In fact, as you will see, I think the tone of our writing tends to complain too much. I want to draw you into a discussion of whether there is a better way to present our research, even on moral grounds, that is more than a complaint and, hence, has a better chance better heard by a wider audience that is in need of it.

First, let me say, these categories are better, even best used when they are not put in service to describing merely bad actors and failed aspirations, but to teaching us something. Ideally that something gestures toward a future possibility for a solution, whether theoretical or political. Let me give you one model of such writing. It is a remarkably brief treatment, but nevertheless manages to integrate these six categories in a manner which acknowledges moral imperatives without shaming its subjects or excusing their injustices.

The most recent issue of *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* hosted a forum commenting on the recent presidential election. Bob Orsi undertook to parse what is meant by the oft-referenced, but little defined category “white middle class voter.” After establishing that

a key demographic in this category was Catholic and male, he states without equivocation, “they are making a racial comment,” when they exult that Trump’s election allows them to speak more freely. With historical detail, Orsi stresses it is “right to deplore the redlining of neighborhoods to keep out African Americans; the complicity of parish priests in pressuring their parishioners not to sell their homes to black people under pain of sin; and the street violence against black families who dared to move into white Catholic neighborhoods.” But, he cautions, it is not only racism that motivates these voters and possibly not even primarily racism, but “diverse intersubjective and communal divisions and tensions . . . arising from many different areas of experience, including religion.”

Orsi analyzes these divisions and tensions, revealing “hidden injuries” and “grief that inchoately mixed with the rage and racism, the desolate feeling of having lost a world,” a world where men’s work, worldly knowledge, and salaries had been superior to women’s. Later, these rage-inducing losses were, he adds, compounded by “the closing down of parishes based on the decisions, once again, made by an absent and unaccountable elite, an elite, moreover, that had just been revealed as caring so little for the children in ‘white working class’ communities as to put among them [sexually exploitive and abusive clerics].” In sum, race matters but it is—like gender, class, religious tradition, institution, and centuries—insufficient of itself to explain those labeled “white working class” whose “injuries of class are as much matter of memory as they are of contemporary experience.”

Orsi concludes: “It is not enough to say that “the white working class” and its descendants are wrong to blame people of color for the woes that befell them in the past decades; it is necessary instead to piece out where that idea comes from, what else it articulates, how it has endured, and what it may teach us about how to rebuild a civil society that includes this ‘white working class’ that has felt so long excluded.” Such making sense—intellectually and empathically—is the labor, and possibly even a little bit of the love, that constitutes good scholarship. A number of other examples could be and have been mentioned throughout our conversation these last two days—examples that are better because they do more. By combining interpretive categories, attending to all injuries, and placing these injuries in a larger context, such scholarship gives us a way forward, “teach[es] us about how to rebuild a civil society that includes” us all because it speaks to all.

Let me add a second question. Even if we research and

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write inclusively, the challenge remains of how to reach “civil society” outside our elite academies. Recently a poem of Berthold Brecht’s has received considerable attention but typically for his assessment of Germany in the 1930s:

Truly, I live in dark times
An artless word is foolish. A smooth forehead.
Points to insensitivity. He who laughs
Has not yet received
The terrible news.

When I question, as I am about to do, how we bring the terrible news about racism, sexism, and classism in American religious institutions, traditions, and throughout its centuries, it is not because I laugh, having not yet received the news. I have heard and found it terrifying that it must be stated—much less demanded—that “Black Lives Matter.” That a sexual predator is the chief executor of our nation’s laws and public mediator of its values. That it is no exaggeration to say wealth care is replacing health and every other kind of social care. I do not have a “smooth forehead” about such things.

The chief burden of Brecht’s lament was not, however, over the terrible injustices of his time. The poem is titled “To Those Who Follow in Our Wake” and explicitly addresses “You, who shall resurface following the flood/ In which we have perished.” Thus, the poem is Brecht’s assessment of his generation’s failure to be believed because it was:

Through the class warfare, despairing
That there was only injustice and no outrage.”

And yet we knew:
Even the hatred of squalor
Distorts one’s features.
Even anger against injustice
Makes the voice grow hoarse. We
Who wished to lay the foundation for gentleness
Could not ourselves be gentle.

About this, too, I believe we should not have a “smooth forehead.”

So, I invite you to consider whether these last several decades of deconstruction and critical theorizing has prepared us to construct a story of American religion that is hopeful, not just despairing. As we have witnessed in the call to “Make American Great Again,” metanarratives don’t cease just because we have properly learned to suspect

them. Maybe it is time for us to try again to write a publicly persuasive history; a history that is no less theoretically rigorous for its empathy and no less uncompromising in its criticism than in its affirmation that the United States, like the moral universe of which it is a part, still “bends toward justice.”