

## **Climbing Out of (Inter)Disciplinary Silos: Cultural Studies and Religious Studies**

Randi R. Warne  
Mount St. Vincent University

Some years ago I published an article entitled “Further Reflections on the Unacknowledged Quarantine: Feminism and Religious Studies.”<sup>1</sup> The “unacknowledged quarantine” to which I referred was the phenomenon, explored by Deborah Valenze, of the tacit sectioning off of religion from feminist analysis. This is not to suggest that “religion” (whatever that might be, a subject of considerable scholarly debate) was not pointed to by feminists, of course – but the pointing was inevitably denunciatory, monolithic, and closed. “Religion is bad” was the theme – or as one woman in a class in which I was guest lecturing took pains to shout at me, “Don’t you know that religion is damaging to women and children?!” I was tempted to slap myself in the forehead and reply “Jeez, I’ve been studying this stuff for 25 years, and that never occurred to me,” but I realized I was encountering an all-too-familiar pit of quicksand, or put differently, a hot button which, once pushed, rendered meaningful conversation virtually impossible. While thankfully there are some exceptions, it appears to remain the case that, within the halls of feminist scholarship “religion” remains taboo. Religious Studies scholars who do feminist work take up these labours, work in marginally better conditions than perhaps existed a decade or two ago, but we are hardly in the mainstream. The “quarantine” remains pretty much in place.

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<sup>1</sup> Randi R. Warne, “Further Reflections on the ‘Unacknowledged Quarantine’: Feminism and Religious Studies,” *Changing Methods: Feminists Transforming Practice*, ed. Sandra Burt and Lorraine Code (Toronto: Broadview, 1995), pp. 75-103.

I raise this issue here because I come with a query. Does a similar quarantine exist within Cultural Studies? That is, are “religion” as a category, and “religious studies” as an academic discipline, engaged as fully and seriously as, say, literature and English studies, visual culture and what used to be called the Fine Arts, advertising and Communication Studies, and so on? And if not, why not? I ask because, in my experience, the signs are indeed mixed. Allow me to elaborate.

Currently I serve as the Coordinator of Cultural Studies at Mount St. Vincent University. As you may know, the Mount is a small undergraduate institution “dedicated primarily to the education of women,” located in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The road to this point has been both winding and rocky. Last year Ingrid Jenkner and I provided a somewhat sanitized version of the establishment of the Cultural Studies program at the Mount. While not entirely fictional, that rendition of the process underplayed some of the dynamics key to the question I am posing here. I won’t rehearse the tale further here, but I would note that institutional dynamics affect in no small measure the undertaking of Cultural Studies in academic institutions.

In addition to its stated focus on the education of women, the Mount is also distinguished by being a formerly Catholic institution, with all the cultural conflict that implies. While the ranks of those who are nostalgic for the days of wimples and certainty may be diminishing, the weight of the past has by no means been entirely lifted. It persists in two ways – in the assumptions and attitudes of those named above, and in the overt (and at times quite hostile) rejection of anything that might smack of tolerance for the

institution's religious past. Religious Studies, as a department and a discipline, has been caught in the middle, with (in my view) rather distressing results. For 25 years the exclusive precinct of two ex-priests and a nun, Religious Studies at the Mount underwent a dramatic upheaval when the administration overturned the department's decision to reproduce itself through the hiring of yet another ex-priest, and instead chose a non-Christian, non-religious academic (me) with a doctoral degree in Religion and Culture instead. The last remaining member of the old department soon took early retirement, and I was left with the task of defining the curriculum in relation to a very different agenda. These developments were concurrent with the multi-year project of establishing a program in Cultural Studies, something that had been attempted, without success, at least twice before at the Mount in the mid-1980s and in the early 1990s. Here, Religious Studies courses were incorporated as key elements of the Cultural Studies curriculum, along with requisite courses in visual culture, literature, history, art, modern languages and the like. Yet tensions remained. At the university committee level, attempts to reconfigure the religious studies curriculum along cultural studies lines were repeatedly stonewalled. A proposed course in "Women, Culture and Food" was deemed illegitimate, because "religion has nothing to do with women, or culture, or food." Keeping kosher and sacred cows aside, I found this a rather astonishing response from an institution in which the ritual consumption of their god used to be a regular practice. A course on Evil was similarly rejected, on the grounds that Evil belongs in sociology. Now, I am not indisposed to think that a fair bit of evil might in fact be housed in the social sciences, but that was not their point. A traditional course on theodicy would have met with no objection, nor would "Evil in Christian doctrine." What was being objected

to was a course defined along Cultural Studies lines, as follows: “An exploration of sites, conceptions, and representations of evil, in eastern and western perspectives. Drawing examples from religion, myth, folklore, literature, film, visual culture, and popular culture, attention will be paid to evil as a culturally constructed phenomenon, requiring critical engagement, analysis, and response.” A parallel course on Good was offered to sweeten the pot, but there were no takers.

Eventually, all three courses did make it into the curriculum, but not without considerable effort. From the perspective of someone in religious studies (indeed, perhaps, any thinking person) to say that food, or evil, or good, or culture, or women have nothing to do with religion and its proper study seems absolutely bizarre, but it makes a kind of sense against a backdrop wherein personal growth and pastoral care marked the institutional exercise of the field in the past.

A somewhat different dilemma emerged within the Cultural Studies program itself. Courses in religion and culture were fairly easily accepted as part of the curriculum overall (though some of this may be due to the need to establish a robust roster of courses at the outset rather than signal any open-armed acceptance of the field). However, when religion and culture was proposed as the focus for one of the core courses for the program (the second year course, Critical Debates in Cultural Studies), more than one eyebrow was raised. To be fair, the committee accepted the course without extended further comment, and I will be teaching it again next year, but the fact remains that the comfort level with the material engaged in the course is not high in some quarters. A good deal of

the problem is, I suspect, quite simply a lack of familiarity with religious studies as a discipline, and with the growing place of Cultural Studies within it. However, suspicion about “religion” remains, despite (or perhaps because of!) its ubiquity in contemporary culture, including its presence in current global politics. (As an aside: a new journal, *Culture and Religion*, is being published by Routledge. Contributors include names that are I am sure familiar to you, like Talal Asad and Anne Pellegrini – but also others, like Russell McCutcheon and David Chidester, who are equally well known to religious studies scholars as Asad and Pellegrini. The point here is that even interdisciplinarity does not prevent the construction and maintenance of intellectual “silos” – it really depends on which disciplines are invited in to the interdisciplinary conversation.)

“Myth America,” the course I am teaching under Critical Debates, is “an exploration of America’s self-creation as a sacred entity, both internally, and as it deploys itself within the larger global community. The sacralization of America in popular culture, the “myth of redemptive violence,” and “the burden of the American hero” [are] analyzed in relation to music, television, film, food, and political action, with special emphasis given to the impact of September 11. The course builds on [the intro course’s] emphasis on visual culture, commodification, and representation, adding to the conceptual roster identity creation, nationalism, cultural imperialism, postcolonialism, and the legitimating (and disruptive) discourse(s) of religion.” An explosion of new texts in American religion and culture over the last several years provided a wealth of resources, from which we have chosen Mazur and McCarthy’s edited *God in the Details: Religion and Popular Culture in America*, Sardar and Wyn Davies’ *Why do People Hate America?*

and University of Chicago theorist Bruce Lincoln's *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*. What is exciting for me as a religious studies scholar is the presence, in text, notes, and bibliographies, of so many sources from my own field. What is troubling (though probably at some level inevitable) is the unproblematic use of sources now widely discredited within the academic study of religion as such.

This brings me back to my title about (inter)disciplinary silos, and my unstated sub-theme of margins and centres and how they are defined and by whom. Much as feminist scholars two decades ago were obliged to be current in malestream/mainstream discourses as well, religious studies scholars (at least as I read this part of the field) have had to be similarly "bilingual," conversant in cultural studies, within which the study of religion may or may not be undertaken or understood. I think – I hope! – this is an observation that will soon be inaccurate, if it is not already. However, I suspect that it is not entirely unfounded. This is particularly interesting in the context of current method and theory debates in religious studies, in which the subject matter "religion" has become so unhitched from any kind of material reality that scholars like Timothy Fitzgerald argue that it does not exist at all. "Religious Studies" in his view is just a cover for Cultural Studies, and the two should just be merged under the rubric of the latter and be done with it. Personally, as a political strategy in my current institutional home, that would serve me just fine, but I suspect that the subject is more fraught than that.

Such is my reflection on Cultural Studies in my small corner of the Atlantic region. The program at the Mount is booming. We are in our third year, and our enrolments continue

to increase. The Art Gallery plays a vital part in our courses, with this past fall's exhibition of General Idea, and next year's Godless at the Workbench (an exhibit of Soviet Socialist art). We draw students not just from the predictable disciplines within the Arts, but also from the sciences and from professional programs like Business. As new, interested faculty are hired, they are brought into the program, and our relationship with the Cultural Studies Research Group is both solid and enriching. There is a centre of energy that is vibrant and stimulating, and it is great to be part of it.

This being said (and I apologize for what might be seen to be an excessive self-referentiality in making this point) it seems to me that "religion" as an appropriate locus of inquiry and analysis is underrepresented and underdeveloped in the field of Cultural Studies in Canada. This is a serious lack, in my view, and I invite your response as to why this might be the case, and how it ought be remedied.