

FORUM

Blaspheming Against Ourselves: Folk Categories in Religion and Theatre

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Prelude

In the summer of 2015, I was invited to sit on a religion and performance panel at a national conference. The panel was moderated by Megan Sanborn Jones of Brigham Young University, and, apart from myself, featured two equally distinguished panellists: Bill Doan of Pennsylvania State and John Fletcher of Louisiana State. The subject of the panel was blasphemy. Each panellist prepared papers and exchanged them with one another prior to arriving at the conference. Rather than present our papers during the session, we used them as jumping off points for a discussion of the topic.

None of this is unusual. The only thing mildly unusual about the panel was the difference between the papers. Professor Doan's paper was an excerpt from a solo piece he was working on. It was a text intended for cultural performance. Professor Fletcher's paper and my own were works of academic scholarship. I would trouble this distinction, but it's a rabbit hole I'd rather not plunge into at present.

Doan's solo performance was a biographical work, a reflection on his gritty, rural working class, "food insecure," Roman Catholic upbringing. His performance wore its folk character plainly (in both senses of the word), as a badge of honour, a tattoo, or a set of scars that communicated authenticity, a harrowing, and proletarian *bona fides*. Professor Fletcher and I, by contrast, wore our scholarly robes unabashedly (if metaphorically) in the assumption that we'd dressed appropriately for the occasion.

Of course, Fletcher's work and my own were *about* religion and performance. Doan was *doing* religion and performance. Fletcher's and my perspectives were *etic*, "outsider" analyses; we stood explicitly outside of and apart from our subject matter. Doan embodied his subject matter; he lived, with varying degrees of (dis)comfort, inside its skin. Fletcher and I cited Wendy Brown, Talal Asad, and Stanley Fish. Doan invoked Mary Poppins, the Gospel of John, and Little Debbie. The distinctions were not simply methodological. The differences traced—patently, performatively, through every moment of the panel—a never-acknowledged class divide. This divide was not simply the product of a set of specific cultural references and would have endured had Doan swapped out Little Debbie for Alice Waters. Rather, the implied class divide was a product of the ways in which binary divisions like scholar/artist and about/doing align with and are mapped onto a set of other value-laden labour- and class-related binaries: mental/physical, white-collar/blue-collar, elite/popular, and upper-class/working-class.

The Problem with Blasphemy

The program blurb for the panel posed the question, "What constitutes secular blasphemy?" The actual existence of something called "secular blasphemy," its coherence as a category or type, is

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assumed by the query. Though we never discussed it beforehand, the panel was predicated on the participants' agreement that secular blasphemy is a thing in the world. There are reasons to be suspicious, however, reasons that lead me to the question that will be the focus of this essay: *Is there such a thing as secular blasphemy, or is this even an appropriate question?*

That's two questions. I'm skeptical of the first. The second needs elaboration.

Are we, as academics, to concern ourselves with trying to identify what things fit comfortably within what some scholars would term a folk category?

By *folk category*, I mean a unit of vernacular or popular classification distinct from scientific or scholarly classification. Such categories are not always the province of an amorphous *volke*, but are also produced and sustained by institutions, religious and secular. The categories *infidel* or *spirit*, for instance, may have an important place in the documents, discourses, and actions of powerful religious bodies, immense bureaucracies commanding formidable state or state-like forces, but these terms are data for the scientist or scholar, not serious analytical taxons. Folk categories are units within folk taxonomies, popular classification systems that are themselves situated in contrast to scientific or scholarly taxonomies. But the passive voice in the previous sentence elides the fact that this situating is an act performed by and for the scientific/scholarly community, not the popular one.

William E. Arnal and Russell T. McCutcheon are two religious studies scholars who engage explicitly in such situating. They complicate the relatively straightforward definition of folk systems outlined above and identify the covert political work such systems perform. Folk taxonomies, they maintain, are “conceptual systems that members of social groups use to delimit and thereby manage their environment and, in so doing, determine their place within it” (Arnal and McCutcheon 2013, 2). Such systems, I would add, function like ideology. They determine, among other things, who we are, who they are, the bounds of our world, and of theirs.

The point to remember is this: Classification is not innocent. It is not simply jargon. It does not appear without purpose. It is evidence of prior political interests and desired future consequences. But classification does not just passively gesture to such interests; it actively carries the water for them. It operates within the present world, even as its operations draw the divisions and contours that produce and define that world. Classification is not simply the fingerprint left by ideology; it is the hand that does the work.

It has become a commonplace for scholars of religion, Arnal and McCutcheon among them, to note that religion is a folk category with a comparatively recent and specifically Western origin. Blasphemy, as a generic term (as in a genus or class) within the domain of religion, is thus itself a folk category. Because of the oppositions already noted between popular and scholarly communities, certain questions inevitably arise from these observations. In trying to identify what qualifies as blasphemy, secular or otherwise, do we, as scholars, ourselves authorize that folk category and the set of other folk categories and oppositions upon which it depends (sacred/profane, religious/secular, etc.)? Do we thereby tacitly cast our lot in with those who are the objects of our analysis? Shouldn't we instead be trying to identify the historical, social, and political conditions that made possible and plausible the deployment of these categories in the situations in question, as well as the pre-existing political commitments of those who deploy them? Are we uncritically adopting the terms and folk analytical matrices of our subjects? Are we, as Bruce Lincoln (1999) warns us

against in his “Theses on Method,” allowing our subjects “to define the terms in which they will be understood”? If so—and Lincoln’s judgment here is forbidding and unambiguous—we have “ceased to function as historian or scholar” (398). Given this grim warning, I fear we must answer all the above questions in the affirmative. This is a serious matter. It cuts to the heart of the scholarly enterprise itself. It is a matter not simply of values, but of identity.

An analogous example may help clarify the perspective I’m describing. In 2015, civil rights activist, instructor in Africana studies, and president of the NAACP chapter in Spokane, Washington, Rachel Dolezal became the centre of furious controversy when allegations surfaced that she was actually a white woman “passing” as black. Critics of Dolezal accused her, among other things, of cultural appropriation, a grave offence against the very groups whose interests she claimed to be personally and professionally committed to advancing. Just as serious, or more so, Dolezal was widely considered to have committed fraud by “masquerading” as black. Could such claims be settled by academic authorities? Or are scholars playing a folk game by even posing the question, “Is Rachel Dolezal black?”

Race is a local, generic folk category, a relatively recent taxon originally produced to protect and serve the political and economic interests of certain social groups. The sustaining of this fabricated folk category continues to do work in the world; it serves discursive and material purposes of power. The question, “Is Rachel Dolezal black?” and the various responses and arguments for or against are therefore not the purview of the scholar. They are the *data*. They are the objects of our analysis, not the queries we pursue. The task of the scholar is to analyze, among other things, what historical situations made possible and meaningful such a question, and what prior political interests and anticipated consequences are served by the deployment of the related categories. To seriously pursue an answer to the question, “Is Rachel Dolezal black?” is to actively sustain a folk category, to reinscribe a cultural fiction and the set of political interests it supports. This is importantly outside the role of the scholar. For though we may maintain that the work of the scholar is always in some sense political, we must also acknowledge that it is likewise the job of the scholar to avoid propagating acknowledged fictions, regardless of her prior political preferences.

In this sense, the scholar’s job is distinct from that of the state, which needn’t concern itself with fictions, acknowledged or no. It is the role of the liberal nation state to act as producer, sustainer, and arbiter of certain categories by means of, among other things, legal discourse and official actions. Through such means, it determines and produces distinctions like religious/secular, private/public, and performance/speech, and also, historically in the US, distinctions between racial categories. The state polices these distinctions through conventions that define some things as empty, meaningless, inconsequential, harmless, and tolerable, and therefore in less need of regulation on the one hand, *or* as full, meaningful, consequential, potentially harmful, or intolerable and therefore in need of regulation on the other. Such conventions are not absolute, for the terms do not innocently denote “things in the world.” They are therefore subject to constant negotiation to fit the ever-changing political scene, the needs of the moment, and the goals of the interested players. Scholars must therefore always query not simply how such categories—whether produced by folk or state—are utilized and in what contexts, but what prior political interests are served in doing so. This is the purpose of analysis.

There may be occasions when one can *profitably* (a term I will return to shortly) invoke distinctions between, say, performance and analysis—as I did at the beginning of this essay—or between the sacred and profane, or religious and secular. But there are likewise occasions when the utility of such

distinctions, and even the terms themselves (e.g., blasphemy), is so compromised that it makes little sense to continue to employ them as analytic tools. They become, rather, a part of the problem to be analyzed. In some situations (perhaps, for our purposes, in most), they are not properly the *tools* of analysis, but rather the proper *objects* of analysis (see Arnal and McCutcheon 2013, 2). My concern is that, for the scholar, the situation is always the latter rather than the former because the use of these distinctions and terms is always *for profit*, that is, always in the service of some previous ideological commitment and desired material outcome. I would submit that it is the political economics of this profit, not the ontological status of the currency, that is the most appropriate object of our attention and our critique. “Is there such a thing as secular blasphemy?” cannot be, insofar as blasphemy is a folk category, a legitimate question for scholars.

We Have Met the Problem, and It Is Us

But we must extend this analysis further to see where it gets us. For the observations and assumptions that lead me to reject the question posed in the panel have more far-reaching implications.

Theatre is older than religion. Religion, in the sense indicated by modern usage, emerged roughly around the time Shakespeare’s plays were premiering in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (see, for instance, Smith 1998, 270). Both theatre and religion are similarly local folk categories. The manufacture of religions—i.e., the production of *religion* as a generic category for something imagined to exist in every culture across the globe and across history—through both folk and academic discourses is analogous to the manufacture of *world theatre* in similar discourses. As part of its formation as an academic discipline, *theatre* became a generic term for a transcultural, transhistorical set of practices. Eventually, in the late twentieth century, this term ceased to be sufficiently generic and was partly displaced by a higher genus called *performance*, a term produced as more surely cutting across all boundaries of culture and history. As a generic category, it is far more recent and more local than the one it was intended to supersede and make quaint.

Long before I became a theatre scholar and began presenting on panels with people like Bill Doan, John Fletcher, and Megan Sanborn Jones, I grew up watching and occasionally making Western theatre. I developed an understanding of what theatre was prior to my formal studies, and this prior understanding informed and shaped those studies. Even prior to my acts of professional looking, I developed a sense for what to look for when looking for theatre in the world. If asked, I could have picked theatre out of a line-up. The folk preceded and inevitably formed the academic. My eventually professional efforts to describe theatre to others are therefore an effort to refine and deepen, to embed and reify, to question, qualify, shatter, and complicate the folk category I began to learn sitting in darkened auditoriums as a child. All of this, far from making me unique, makes me precisely like almost every other theatre scholar in the US.

It is much the same for religious studies scholars (see Saler 1999, ix). This is a problem, and not just for religious studies. The precession of the folk, its ineffaceable presence in the discourse of the scholar, must be papered over for the legitimacy of the folk/scholar distinction to hold.

Part of the challenge for scholars like Arnal and McCutcheon, for whom the situation described above is so troubling, and who trade in arguments of discursive formation, is to avoid being trapped in an ouroboros of reasoning, of tripping and falling on the sword of their own arguments.

Distinctions that generate something called *folk categories* are themselves local and recent. And if the folk category is used to produce, authorize, and maintain a given social group and its environment, that is, if it functions like ideology, then its opposite must involve the production of some Edenic, extra-historical, extra-locative, transparent discourse termed scholarly or scientific. But this is precisely how language does not work. There is no prophylactic that can protect a given discourse from history, from culture, or from politics. Language, scholarly or otherwise, is not transparent. That terms like *religion*, *secular*, *blasphemy*, or *theatre* or *performance* arose at a particular time and place, that their emergence was connected to power and to the political interests of groups or individuals, is not in the least surprising. Nor should it be to scholars who trade in historicization and discursive formations.

What Arnal and McCutcheon ask of those who trade uncritically in distinctions like *religion* and *secular* or *Catholic* and *Protestant*, we should ask of those who propose distinctions between *folk* and *non-folk*, between *artist* and *scholar*, or between *doing* and *about*. It may be helpful in this regard to read the following passage from Arnal and McCutcheon as though they were querying the artist/scholar distinction:

why do we as scholars continue to use it, as if it names two obviously different things in the world, rather than seeing this way of naming and dividing people as someone else's social strategy that itself deserves study rather than uncritical reproduction? Are we not as scholars free to move beyond participants' use of folk taxonomies and self-definitions? For, as suggested earlier, uncritically reproducing—instead of studying—local classification systems will lead us to normalizing and thus legitimizing participant distinctions and the interests that drive (or once drove) them. . . . Sadly, in most cases, we fail to ask, *different according to whose criteria and for what purposes?*—a question that, once posed, would allow us to examine, rather than uncritically reproduce, the mechanisms by which identities are created and contested. (2013, 12–13)

Perhaps referring to the sacred and the profane, the religious and secular, and blasphemy as folk categories involves not just an obvious elitism but a kind of scholarly legerdemain. It stipulates a “dirty” language and strives to keep it separate from the “pristine” language that is the proper speech of the scholar. In so doing, it denotes the scholar's endeavours and discourses as somehow “set apart and bounded by prohibitions,” that is, as sacred in Durkheim's definition. And if the scholar's discourse is sacred, then folk discourse, as its opposite, must be profane. But this leads to an odd situation. Scholarly discourse that trades in talk of folk categories in this sense *reproduces and becomes* the object of its critique. The sacred becomes the profane in an inevitable act of blasphemy. The scholar becomes the folk that she was all along.

The term *folk categories*, though it is produced by scholars to stand in contradistinction to their own categories, is itself a folk category. It is a term that has ideological work to do; it performs operations in the world and is itself evidence of prior commitments and desired social arrangements. *Folk* is a category produced by the scholar for her own purposes, which is to distinguish herself and her language from the objects under her investigation and their languages. Like all folk categories, it functions precisely to identify who “we” are, who “they” are, and what are the borders between groups. The category of *folk* (and its opposite) is a means by which a social group produces, maintains, authorizes, and contests its identity. *Folk category* denotes a local, historical, political distinction—the scholar's own. McCutcheon as much as acknowledges this when he notes that, “the

very efforts to privilege and protect any object of study, let alone the community of scholars that studies it, come with generally undetected social and political baggage” (2001, 10). What follows from this should be obvious: There is nothing outside the folk.

The class distinction I noted between Bill Doan, John Fletcher and I has little to do with anyone’s “actual” class history; the difference is wholly about performance in the ways so familiar to our field. It is produced by a set of historically situated, sedimentary signs (e.g., citations of Wendy Brown vs. Little Debbie) and the associated contexts that map an about/doing academic distinction onto class distinctions. This class divide is more commonly and comfortably described as a distinction between scholar and artist, but it likewise traces as one between the also classed categories of scholar and folk. The folk and the artist, of course, are both data for the scholar. The scholar is subject; the artist and folk are her objects. McCutcheon is not vague about the importance of this distinction, even as he vividly describes it in performance studies terms. It is a “distinction that lies at the base of all human sciences”; it is a distinction “between theoretically based *scholarship on* assorted aspects of human *behavior* and those very *behaviors themselves*” (2001, 17, emphasis added). These classed divisions—folk/scholar, artist/scholar, behaviour/scholarship-on-behaviour—are not simply built from the discourses of theatre and performance studies, but themselves built the material institutions and structures of those fields in the academy.

I seem to have fallen down the rabbit hole after all. By asserting and then troubling the distinctions between folk and scholar, disrupting the artist/scholar distinction I asserted at the opening of this essay inevitably followed.

Is there such a thing as secular blasphemy? Or is it better to ask why such a question is being posed at all, what its appearance tells us, and what interests the category of blasphemy serves? The distinctions we draw between these questions produce, authorize, and maintain social groups. They do work in the world. They function like religions, like ideologies, like performances. To draw distinctions, of this or other sorts, is an explicitly creative act; it is creation, for all practical purposes, *ex nihilo*. Such creation is the work of gods, philosophers, and artists. And whatever their differences, few of them are well paid.

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