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THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education.

Misunderstood Concepts

The Chronicle of Higher Education. Washington: Nov 5, 2004. Vol. 51, Iss. 11; pg. B.4

Section: *THE CHRONICLE REVIEW*

Publication title: The Chronicle of Higher Education. Washington: Nov 5, 2004. Vol. 51, Iss. 11; pg. B.4

Source type: Periodical

ISSN/ISBN: 00095982

ProQuest document ID: 756195751

Text Word Count 657

Document URL: <http://libdata.lib.ua.edu:2048/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com/pqdlink?did=756195751&sid=3&Fmt=3&clientId=31537&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

Full Text (657 words)

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Defining Religion

Mark C. Taylor, a professor of humanities at Williams College, visiting professor of architecture and religion at Columbia University, and author of *Confidence Games: Money and Markets in a World Without Redemption* (University of Chicago Press, 2004):

The most misunderstood concept in the study of religion is religion. The field of religious studies -- if it is a field -- is in a perpetual state of crisis because it can neither define its object of study nor agree on distinctive methods or strategies of interpretation. This difficulty is, in part, the result of the long struggle to distinguish the study of religion from theology, which, in the American university, has until recently tended to be Christian and usually Protestant. As scholars and critics have attempted to differentiate religious studies from theology, the category of "religion" itself has become problematic.

Some scholars go so far as to argue that there is no such thing as religion but only religions. Religion, they insist, is not a "native category" but is imposed from without by analysts who attempt to establish an identity (religion) where there are only differences (religions). While claiming to be historically and empirically grounded, this line of analysis is naively nominalist (since such general terms can be mere interpretive devices that do not refer to anything actual or real) and finally self-defeating.

It is not only possible but necessary to define religion clearly and concisely, in a way that allows interpreters to discern similarities and differences both within and among traditions. Religion, I would argue, is a complex adaptive network of myths, symbols, rituals, and concepts that simultaneously figure patterns of feeling, thinking, and acting and disrupt stable structures of meaning and purpose. When understood in that way, religion not only involves ideas and practices that are manifestly religious but also includes a broad range of cultural phenomena not ordinarily associated with religion.

It has never been more important or more difficult to study religion critically than it is today. The resurgence of old orthodoxies and emergence of new fundamentalisms in multiple traditions pose both implicit and explicit threats that make critical reflection on religion imperative.

Not Identifying With Rigor

Judith Halberstam, a professor of literature at the University of California at San Diego and author of *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2004):

If I had a discipline (and most of my readers will tell you I lack both a discipline and discipline itself), I imagine that its most misunderstood concepts would be rigor and identity. As an advocate for the end of English as a discipline, I see rigor as a concept

best understood in relation to the term rigor mortis. As such disciplines as English and history, formed at least 100 years ago, begin to look like dinosaurs, administrators seem simultaneously to be pumping cash into them in the name of tradition and foundation and searching for the mind-numbing concepts of rigor and excellence.

In my experience, rigor nearly always means that a scholar has internalized the explicit and unwritten rules of his or her discipline and deployed them to produce a stunningly formulaic book that rehearses well-established arguments and comes to long-agreed-upon conclusions. Rigor also often comes into play to cast doubt on work associated with another misunderstood concept, "identity." Identity is bandied around by both right- and left-wing scholars to imply that a theory or piece of scholarship is too interested, too associated with a social role or position. In fact, identity is simply another name for invested, committed, and motivated scholarship.

We should look to the innovative work being done by scholars in interdisciplinary programs for some new rubrics for the organization of knowledge. If academics cannot come up with better formulations for studying culture, politics, and social change than the ones we live with, then, I fear, the most misunderstood concept in the discipline will quickly become "irrelevance."

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