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CSBS Seminar

From Communities to Critical Analysis of Social Complexity, Including Religion

Positing communities as the social formations that created instances of early Christian literature and that are the unquestioned objects of historical research will not do, or so I have argued. Such assumptions are both uncritical and occlusive of other social formations in which the people in question participated. My perspective is that of one aspiring to be a historian who works in the study of religion.

This critique, I believe, finds harmony with much of the interest by scholars in the social history of early Christianity and the increasing use of various types of social theory. The latter are so diverse as to raise questions about the compatibility of theoretical resources from different and even contradictory intellectual traditions. This problem of theoretical contradiction forms one reason for situating theory formation in the broadest possible social ontology. One begins by asking, "of what does the social consist?" In addition to providing tools for evaluating social theory, social ontology generates the formation of social theory. In other words, instead of only selecting, adapting and applying elements of some existing social theory, (e. g., Foucault on discourse and power, ?, ) scholars gain the resources for developing new social theory. Before making some brief reflections on social ontology, it is worth pointing to some of the scholarship that has broken out of the communities mold.

I will very briefly note some recent contributions. Interestingly, a disproportionately large amount of this work has come from Canada. Prominent in this regard are Hellenistic and Roman associations of several types. The list would also include social networks, feasting/meals, institutions and practices regarding patrons and clients, rural and village scribes, colonial institutions, the social practices of philosophers, practices and other social formations regarding ethnicity, households and families. Richard Last has made some significant recent contributions that even include neighborhoods and social formations of literacy. Social formations touching on the ancient economy appear from time to time, but without much attention to its central features. Religion would be on the list, but what kind of social formation it is would be highly contested as would how one might conceive religion's relations to other social formations.

An notable feature characterizes this brief list. The categories of the social formations seem to be heterogeneous, e.g., associations, patronage, neighborhoods, village scribe, social networks, literacy, ethnicity and religion. How do I understand what these are, their relations, their roles in historical explanation and so on? How do I theorize them? The answer, I think, is to begin with a more general social ontology. So I would ask, "What are the objects of historiography and what is the ontology of those objects?" Reflective historians, I think, would usually say that the objects of historiography are events and social formations. We can for the purposes of this discussion bracket events because they do not possess "identity" or stability over time, unlike many social formations. I will also for now bracket the debate that has most characterized the history of social theory, that is, the division between theorists who say that individuals are ontologically most fundamental and those who say that social wholes such as society are most fundamental. It seems to me that positions on either extreme have not been able to justify themselves.

What types of social formations does that leave us with? A traditional list would typically include individuals, groups, organizations, institutions and structures. But such a list seems to leave out objects that I would characterize as more theoretical and less empirical. The exception in the list is structures which is highly theoretical. The list also leaves out more theoretical social formations such as racism, capital, gender, ethnicity, markets and religion. By more empirical, I mean that one can use the senses in ways that fairly easily match up with existing social concepts to identify and understand the social formation. So Bob, Sally, Fred and Sue are parents and children, readily identified as a family. More empirical does not mean that the pervasive social formation, families, cannot and should not be theorized including the question of whether there are sub-categories. But capital, racism and religion are not like family. You cannot see, taste or smell the properties of the social formation, capital. To encompass both the more and the less theoretical social formations, philosophers and social theorists have developed the theory of social kinds.

Social kinds are formations that possess clusters of properties or mechanisms that allow for a relative degree of stability and the ability to reproduce themselves. Such clusters of a limited number of primary properties then generate secondary properties that can be subject to endless historical and cultural variation. Social kinds usually consist of both causal and conventional features. The most important conventional features for kinds are symbolic, linguistic and conceptual. Social kinds like biological, geological and other types of kinds are historical, they change and often have blurry boundaries.

I have argued that religion is a social kind with two predominate historical types. Practices of exchange are central to both, but the first focuses on reciprocal gift giving that has traditionally been described as “material.” The second, often not excluding versions of the first incorporated into it or independently alongside, has its focus on such things as the gift of loyalty to a god, a morally good self, obedience to divine law, living so as to conform to the way things truly are and so on. In turn, God or the Dao or pneuma and logos or some other agent or anthropomorphized dimension of “reality” “rewards” the one who gives. Exchange has not disappeared, but has been transformed by the rationalizing of intellectuals. In East Asia, West Asia, South Asia, the Mediterranean and other places, religion # 1 was pervasive when literate experts rose in power to claim that religion # 1 had conceptions of gods and non-obvious beings that were too local or morally unworthy or too anthropomorphic or that the practices were too “material” or too economic and frequently that religion # 1 was done in ignorance of essential writings.

The kind is a structure of conventional and causal relations together with an environment that, according to the hypothesis, has generated much of the enormous cultural variety of religion # 1 and that forms a related structure for religion # 2 that literate experts modify. In both cases, the secondary characteristics generated by the kind of such things as myths, experts in lore and practices, architectural and iconic creations, festivals and numerous practices massively exceed the properties of the kinds. First are the properties of the cognitive propensities to have beliefs about gods/non-obvious beings (NOBS) that can be imagined to play roles in social practices. The propensities are partly causal of the beliefs about gods/NOBs participating, but the fundamental social practices of production, distribution/exchange and consumption of goods are causal of religion taking the form of exchange with gods/NOBS, of its ubiquity and relative stability. Without the interlocked pattern of exchange practices, individuals might have intuitions about such non-obvious agents in various circumstances, but such “perceptions” would not form a stable pattern, much less a pattern that is central to social life. The

imagined participation of the gods/NOBs in production, distribution/exchange, and consumption makes these agents socially and culturally central. Prayer or other means of “speaking “ to gods/NOBS and divinatory practices are an essential part of this network of properties because production, distribution/exchange and consumption are impossible without communication between the parties involved.

Although all sorts of other valued goods deemed to be given by the gods and given to the gods can characterize religion # 1, the overwhelmingly important goods are agricultural and food products. In 1800, after two centuries of unprecedented urbanization, 97 per cent of the world’s population still lived on farms. Until very recently almost everyone was closely involved in the production, distribution/exchange and, of course, consumption of food. The kind explains why practices of reciprocity and other forms of gift giving centered on food were endemic to ancient China, South Asia, West Asia, Europe, the ancient Mediterranean, Africa and the Americas. It also explains why even when highly modified by literate experts who changed the focus from agricultural practices to moral and intellectual practices, that gift giving to gods/NOBS such as saints, martyrs, ancestors, the beloved dead and on and on keeps appearing and reappearing. Only western modernity has changed this picture. Cohesiveness also derives from the interdependence of the basic practices. Consumption presupposes production and distribution or exchange. Either you produced it (with the aid of the gods) or someone else did and it was distributed to you or you got it by exchange.

If this theory of religion as a social kind has some plausibility, there are many important implications for historians of ancient Mediterranean religion. I will mention three. First, religion must not be confused with “a religion” or “religions” as in “Christianity and Buddhism are religions.” Scholars constantly slide back and forth from the concept “religion” to “a religion” or “religions.” Religions are typically extraordinarily complex claimed traditions, mangles of social formations with some guild of authoritative experts, characteristic social formations, institutions and amorphous populations that constantly change in their relations to what authorities deem to be the norms. “A religion” is a concept of Western cultures and a modern folk conception that might with great difficulty be theorized. “Religion,” analogous to other social kinds, should be some theorized category shaped by the most reliable practices regarding knowledge. The kind, religion, would be a cross cultural social entity theorized as a kind for its potential as an epistemic object based on empirical feedback. On this view, there was clearly religion throughout antiquity, but when religions arose is a more difficult question.

Second, the Hellenistic and Imperial eras would be times characterized by the rise of religious experts who attempted to “intellectualize” religion and struggled against religion # 1 with its central agriculturally based reciprocity with gods and other non-obvious beings. On this view, early Christianity did not come *sui generis*, from nowhere, but can be accounted for in terms of social formations.

Third, this theory makes it clear that ancient Mediterranean religion cannot be treated without great distortion unless religion’s implications in the economy and other social formations enter the account.