
Religion, Nature and Culture: Theorizing the Field

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Abstract

The inaugural conference of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture demonstrated several tensions at play within the emerging field of 'religion, nature and culture'. Each of these three terms is a modern western folk construct, not a universal category. The place of 'culture' within this trinity is especially unclear, and its use risks essentializing a category that cultural anthropologists have themselves begun to question. With a nod to the burgeoning literature on 'social nature', this article thinks through the relationship between these three terms. It argues that their combination be thought of not as an object or field of study for the Society, but as an 'invocation' by which the Society can cultivate international and interdisciplinary discussion on a confluence of timely concerns.

One of the virtues of being trained as an interdisciplinarian is that rather than simply waking up one day and realizing I had fallen off the map of whatever discipline I had started in, interdisciplinary training required developing the skill of working with and understanding the limitations of maps. That is, it made it necessary, for survival's sake, to learn how to examine *disciplinary* maps closely, comparing them and working one's way between them, and exploring the disjunctions between one map and another and between the maps and the territories they ostensibly referred to.

To give some personal grounding to these comments, both of my graduate degrees came from an Environmental Studies program that had been formed by a quirky assemblage of geographers, urban planners, environmental philosophers, organizational managers, and natural scientists back in 1970, during the heyday of the first environmental revolution (at York University in Toronto). My master's and doctoral

defense committees included a cultural anthropologist, a human geographer, a sociologist and cultural studies scholar, a political scientist turned geographer, a biologist turned ecophilosopher, an Allende-era Chilean socialist politician turned political ecologist, and a filmmaker-naturalist. Working with such motley crews, and making sure the theories and methods I proposed held water in different ponds, as it were, led to my developing a heightened sensitivity to the construction of disciplinary boundaries, disciplinary objects, and scholarly methods and discourses.

As a result, when I find myself at conferences like the inaugural conference for the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, my tendency is to play the role of ethnographer and attempt to tease out the cognitive maps at work around me. In the following comments, I intend to raise some ethnographic questions about this new society and to make a few suggestions that might point a way toward answering them.

The Conference as Field Site

A good first question for a participant-observing ethnographer to ask of his or her field location is: who are the participants here and what are they doing? At the inaugural conference of the ISSRNC, I saw scholars of religion, philosophers and theologians, cultural anthropologists, literary and cultural critics, historians of ideas, environmental educators, social theorists, and a smattering of physical and life scientists. They, or we, were talking about objects that, as Kocku von Stuckrad argued in his plenary presentation, are poorly defined—they are modern western folk concepts. Raymond Williams has famously declared both ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ to be two of the most complex words in the English language.¹ ‘Religion’, as a spate of recent work has shown, is also a category that emerged out of a very specific history of Western colonization, the encounter between modern and/or Christian societies with non-modern and/or non-Christian ones, and the emergence of capitalist economic relations and of the modern state.²

Examining the session and paper titles listed in the conference program to see what it is we were all discussing, I found some sixty-seven references to religion and almost as many (about sixty-three) to nature. If

1. To be precise, Williams describes nature as the ‘most complex word’ and culture as ‘one of the two or three most complicated words’ in the English language. See Williams 1985: 87, 219.

2. See, e.g., Asad 1993; Fitzgerald 1997; McCutcheon 1997; Saler 1993; Schüssler Fiorenza 2000; Ivakhiv 2006.

to 'religion' we would add references to spirit/spiritual, sacred, belief, ritual, divinity, theology, worship, Bible or biblical, myth, faith, Christian, mystical, and related terms, the number went up to about 140. If to 'nature' we added environment(al), ecology (or eco-something or other), land, sustainability, earth, green, conservation, wilderness, animal, place, and landscape, these came to about 180. In marked contrast—enough to give us pause for thought—for our third term, 'culture', I found a mere twenty-one references. If to 'culture' we add social, politics, and human or humanity, the result was only about forty, still far short of the other two main categories. Adding 'science' to 'culture' (though there is no necessary reason to do this) would give us another eleven. A few other terms that might be located midway between the cultural and the religious—terms such as tradition and cosmology—would add a handful more. But the first overwhelming observation to be made is that religion and nature (or the environment) were topics of papers to a much greater degree—to a magnitude of at least three or four—than was that of culture.

The Disappearance of 'Culture'

So what happened to culture? Looking at the titles of the two plenary sessions—'Theorizing the Field I: Conundrums in the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture' and 'Theorizing the Field II: Religion and Environmentalism'—we see a similar slippage. 'Religion, nature and culture' becomes 'religion and environmentalism'. Nature, from the first to the second plenary, becomes the promotion of a certain idea and practice of the natural ('environmentalism'), while culture has seemingly dropped out of the picture. The most appropriate question to ask here might be not what happened to culture, but where it came from in the first place, and what might happen if we took it out? Let us consider that for a moment.

'Religion and ecology' is a familiar term to some or many of us. As defined and promoted by efforts like the Forum on Religion and Ecology and the ambitious Harvard University Press series on Religions of the World and Ecology, 'religion and ecology' has become a scholarly field that examines how different faith traditions are meeting, and are equipped to meet, the challenge of the ecological crisis. Within this discourse, questions emerge about the specific religiosities that are intrinsically or potentially 'environmental friendly' or that lend themselves toward an ecological consciousness and praxis. Substituting 'ecology' with 'environmentalism' has the effect of focusing in on the more specific task of religion's fitting with (or against) an existing movement, known

to modern Anglophone societies as *environmentalism*. (Ecology is a term used in other countries to denote the same movement, while in North America it tends to retain more of its meaning as a scientific field. But that is a topic for another discussion.)

'Religion and nature' on the other hand would seem to cast a broader net than either 'religion and ecology' or 'religion and environmentalism'. Its purview includes considering religion's status *as* natural, and therefore focusing on what religion is, and on such things as ritualization and other religious practices in the natural world, among nonhuman primates, and in the natural order, whatever that order may be. Questions of ideas of nature, the history of 'culture' and 'nature' as ideas and as cultural constructs, discourses, and practices, all figure into this larger frame. (For a more detailed discussion of some of these themes, and a clear indication that the society has already incorporated plentiful discussion about such definitional issues, see Bron Taylor's introduction to the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*.)

'Religion and culture' on the other hand is less easily conceptualized than 'religion and nature'. (Taylor's introduction to the encyclopedia does not get into it at all, as the term 'culture' is not in the title of that effort.) I would guess that it may not be obvious, to someone new to this society, what the place of culture *is* in the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture. There is a journal called *Culture and Religion*, and there are many anthropologists of religion who have thought about religion as a cultural category and cultural process. Judging by the evidence at the first ISSRNC conference, this broad definition of culture—culture as the realm of beliefs and values, institutions and social structures, practices and traditions, a broad category of which religion is a specific sub-set of phenomena or types of phenomena—has certainly been operative during the society's inaugural period. But there is a second idea of culture that seems equally at work, an idea that happens to be one of cultural anthropology's main contributions to contemporary thought: the idea that the world is made up of specific cultures, subsets of humanity that are coterminous with a certain territory and with certain beliefs and practices that historically connect that group to its territory. So, in the conference program, we see references to American, Amazonian, Hawaiian, Mesoamerican, and other 'cultures'. Despite the fact that many anthropologists still use this idea, however—and this was evident in the more anthropological sections of the conference—the idea of cultures as bounded systems has largely been abandoned in the field of anthropology. This leads us to the situation where an idea that our society appears to be promoting—the idea of culture as a reifiable, stable and delimitable *thing*—is at risk of being *demoted* by the very

people who are most responsible for putting it on the public agenda, that is, anthropologists.³ But since this particular idea of culture is not really consciously asserted—it functions more as a subtext or unspoken assumption—it may be best to simply register that this is an issue and leave it at that.

These, then, appeared to provide two of the maps in operation at the conference: one positions religion within a broader field called ‘culture’, with both terms counterposed against ‘nature’; the other sees culture as describing more or less bounded and definable subsets of humanity, with religion being one of the mediating forces between these subsets (cultures) and nature. What these maps share, generally, is a notion of culture and nature as different and, in some sense, opposite spheres. Yet this is an idea that is itself a Western intellectual construct, one that is not necessarily shared by other ‘cultures’ at all.⁴ Which should lead us to ask: Are there other ways to picture the relations between religion, culture, and nature?

Fortunately, there are. In the interstices between a set of disciplines, including anthropology, geography, sociology, environmental history (and historical ecology), as well as in interdisciplinary fields such as environmental studies, science studies, women’s studies, and human and political ecology, the rethinking of the dichotomy of nature-culture has become a richly productive site of theoretical investigation and deliberation. To a disciplinarian in any one of the disciplines just listed, these critical currents may well appear marginal if not invisible.⁵ But when added together and viewed from the outside of any disciplinary map, they make up a highly productive theoretical and empirical research terrain.⁶ While this set of conversations can hardly be reduced to a single message, I would like to draw out three lessons of this culture-nature rethinking that I think are relevant to our own conceptualization of what ‘religion, culture, and nature’ might be. These three lessons can be summarized in terms of relations, practices, and place/space.

3. For extensive discussion on this question, see Cristoph Brumann, ‘Writing for Culture: Why a Successful Concept Should not be Discarded’, and the numerous responses to it, in *Current Anthropology* 40 Supplement (1999): S1-S27.

4. See, e.g., Ellen and Fukui 1996; Descola and Pálsson 1996; Croll and Parkin 1992; Franklin 2002; Horigan 1988.

5. Increasingly, especially in geography, they are not. See, e.g., Castree 2005.

6. A sample of some of the dimensions of these discussions might include Latour 1993, 2005; Steiner and Nauser 1993; White 1995; Descola and Pálsson 1996; Goodman and Leatherman 1998; Ingold 2000; Braun and Castree 2001; Escobar 1999; Ivakhiv 2002; Whatmore 2002.

*Rethinking Culture/Nature as Relations,
Practices and Place/Space*

Humans, nonhuman organisms, and a variety of technical and artifactual entities, from hunting and farming tools to cars, roads, flags and mass media networks, are linked in complex sets of relations that develop and change over time, unfolding over a range of spaces and scales. These relations are *produced* and *performed* through the things that we do, that is, through material practices and engagements. (These latter terms are intended to connote activity, agency, relationality, and a sense of temporality, repetition, or rhythm.) Practice is, of course, never entirely separable from theory, that is, from idea, belief, discourse, ideology, or cosmology. But while scholars of religion have often and all too easily focused their attention on beliefs and values, the crucial point here is that these are always expressed and given shape in and through practices, forms of engagement and relationality in which socially constituted groups take up the world around themselves in different ways, shaping and reshaping it in the process. The emerging focus on performance, embodiment, 'lived religion', and 'religion in practice' (for instance, as evident in Princeton University Press's book series on religions in practice) shows that anthropology's growing concern with these topics has not eluded the study of religion.⁷

Recognizing the technical and technological mediation of social and human-natural relations is increasingly necessary in a world which is becoming ever more complexly interconnected and globalized, and ever more tightly woven within intricate, nonlinear and often unstable and unpredictable networks of communication, transportation, commerce, iconography, persuasion, politics, and ecology. These complex relations and practices occur in space and in place: they are embodied in local places but are also spread out over broader, global spaces, which link different human communities together alongside and intermingled with nonhuman organisms and processes. Place, then, is locational (it is located in space), relational (it consists of relations performed between agents and things), and nested, with local relations mutually interdependent on more global ones and vice versa.

Within this complex set of relational networks, so much of the world now consists, as Bruno Latour has put it, of 'imbroglios' of the social, the semiotic, the material, and the organic, 'simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society' (Latour 1993: 6).

7. E.g., Lopez 1995, 2004; Bowen 2004; Coleman and Eade 2004; MacDannell 1998; Arweck and Keenan 2006; Csordas 1997; and the journal *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief*.

Religion is each of these: as nature, it can be studied by cognitive psychologists as experiential and neurophysiological process, by geographers as spatial process, and by comparative behaviorists as primate social activity; as discourse and as society, it is of course studied by sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and others. Nature and culture may of course be 'real' as well, physical and biological, but each is also discursive, symbolically as well as technically mediated, collective and intersubjective. If anything, what is most real, according to this kind of ontology, is process, practice, and relationality. Seen through the lens of such a relational and processual understanding of the world, 'nature' and 'culture' do not exist as separate realms and so it makes little sense to claim that a society can study them. What can be studied is the relations between particular groups and their environments, as long as we remember that human social groups, especially today, are hardly singular, bounded entities, and that there is nothing that can be identified as '*the environment*'—the environment of one organism consists of other organisms, all interacting, changing, and ultimately (co-)evolving.⁸ But that sort of study is something that some anthropologists (specifically, environmental anthropologists) already claim to do. The study of religion, nature and culture, then, is not the announcement of a new field, but rather a constellation of interests and a gathering of disciplines and interdisciplinary practices around this particular ternary constellation.

Implications for the Society

Calling ourselves the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture should not be taken, then, as an indication of the things that we study, but rather of the scope and nexus of interests we are invoking as being of (immense) interest. That is, if 'nature' has something to do with the background of longer-term life processes against which human history unfolds—the 'real' world against which humans are (at best, or sometimes) a figure as opposed to a ground—and with 'environmental' issues more specifically; if 'culture' has something to do with the diversity of collectively organized human activities, beliefs, and so on; and if 'religion' has something to do with the prioritization, authorization, and sanctification of certain such beliefs and activities, then to form a society for the study of these three—and presumably for the study of their intersection—is to configure a field in which these are seen as importantly related.

8. For an encapsulation of this view, see Lewontin 1982; and for a more extended treatment, Oyama 2002.

As such, the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture is making a kind of claim which is very much of its time, and which affords us with certain opportunities. It is not the only effort of its kind, and it is crucially marked by its own historical conditions and path-dependencies—for instance, those connecting it to the process of producing the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, the institutional relationship between Professor Bron Taylor and the Religion Department at the University of Florida, the relations forged over several years between the Forum on Religion and Ecology, the Religion and Ecology Section of the American Academy of Religion, and a host of other groups and efforts, institutional and otherwise. The possibilities opened up by the Society, as I see it, are circumscribed by three significant conditions, each worthy of reflection.

The first is that this is a scholarly organization. Each of us may be informed by activist commitments, but the organization defines itself by, and gains its credibility from, the fact that it is academic. Inter-religious and ecumenical organizations devoted to environmental causes already exist; it is hardly the task of scholars to duplicate their work. In the same way, this society is more than a group of environmentalists organizing to affect change among religious communities toward a more enlightened environmental consciousness. The main contribution of this association should be to pool our knowledge in a way that would provide intellectual support—through disseminating information, facilitating collaboration, instigating organization and action, and hopefully being called on to inform decision-making—for larger social and activist efforts. The simple fact that such a scholarly society exists and that enough scholars feel that it should exist denotes that there is a need for its particular constellation of issues to be addressed.

The second condition revolves around a tension that is inherent to the organization. This is that it relies on folk understandings of religion, nature and culture—conceptual constructs which are vast, blurred, and very Western, and which are therefore cross-culturally non-obvious; and yet, that it is also an international and cross-cultural association. Judging by the attendance at the inaugural conference, the society is at best only embryonically cross-cultural (and what after all does it mean to be cross-cultural when ‘culture’ itself is in question?), but it is more so than many other scholarly societies in their fledgling stages. Furthermore, the *Encyclopedia* that serves in many ways as its foundation is impressively international in scope and at least somewhat cross- or pluri-cultural in perspective. (That said, it remains monolingual, and this will necessarily limit its cross-cultural potential.)

Finally, the society is interdisciplinary. This is perhaps its main strength and potential, yet was also not completely evident at the conference. We had successfully brought together a range of disciplinary practitioners and objects, and a genuinely interdisciplinary range of topics and panels, but in practice these often remained side by side, imbricated rather than fluidly commingled. In the future, we would benefit from throwing together our different maps and merging them into more hybrid and experimental formulas at the outset. For instance, this might mean organizing sessions, panels, and discussions that at the most microscopic level bring different approaches and perspectives to bear on each other. I have in mind something like the format that the journal *Current Anthropology* practices, with its substantial contributions all involving several respondents from different corners of the discipline weighing in on a paper by a single (or multiple) author, except that here it would be representatives from different disciplines and even from non-disciplines speaking with and toward each other in a heteroglossic stew that itself could generate new categories, new discourses, new maps, and new formats.

Ultimately, then, the name of the society is not a name for a field or territory—something ‘out there’ that we are to describe with our research efforts and deliberations. Instead, it might better be thought of as an invocation, intended to bring together those who speak on or about (and occasionally on behalf of) one or another of its terms (nature, religion, culture) alongside those who speak against them, critiquing them and showing their limitations. To speak of limitations is more than mere deconstruction. It is, rather, an admission that the territory being described by these terms—a territory in which humans, organized in ‘cultural’ groups and motivated by ‘religious’ beliefs and values, and so on, interact (naturally, culturally, religiously) with nonhumans in exceedingly discomfoting ways—is a much stranger territory than any of our categories and maps can encompass. This territory is becoming stranger every day, so it may be that our society is coming into existence at just the right time.

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