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THE DARK SIDE OF POST-STRUCTURALISM: ACADEMIC
RELATIVISM AND THE RISE OF RELIGIOUS TERRORISM

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
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in Religion

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Preface

For the generation that has grown up with images of the September 11th attacks imprinted firmly on its memory, and can remember with even more clarity the resulting re-evaluations of both personal and institutional faith in the aftermath of the attacks, questions as to the legitimate interplay between religious belief and violent action are of paramount importance. Might terrorist actions such as September 11th or other suicide attacks be legitimated on the basis of religious justification? It is terrifying to imagine that the answer to such a question might possibly be in the affirmative. Even as most observers are quick to label such actions as not being religious, or at the very least perversions of legitimate religious interpretations, such claims as to the non-religious character of terrorist actions remain difficult to maintain. It is clear then, why, even given the overwhelming dismissal of the religiosity of terrorist activities, a variety of terrorist organizations still clothe their actions in the name of religion. The difficulty in pushing back against claims of religious legitimacy makes their employment useful to the terrorist. In turn, the ease of making such claims is economical. The fact of the matter is that religious appeals are still powerful despite, or even because of, individuals denying that they are legitimate.

There are many reasons for the present difficulty in denying terrorist organizations religious legitimacy. One reason that has not been fully investigated is the link between the scholarly inability to define and categorize religious activities and the practical inability to deny terrorist organizations the legitimacy that the category of religion provides. This latter practical effect is undeniably due in part to the fact that the category of religion has been systematically eroded within scholarly discourse to the point where it is filled on a relativist basis. Individual scholars or observers do not have a clear conception of what the category of religion does and does not contain, allowing them to fill it on the basis of their own individual volition or beliefs. Terrorists, therefore can, because of this relativism, easily claim that their actions are in fact religious. Due to the effects of academic relativism, this subjective judgment cannot be easily challenged.

One major reason for this influx of relativism is the adoption by a wide variety of academic disciplines of a series of ideological and methodological considerations that can be grouped under the heading of “post-structuralism.” As initially advanced by a variety of French philosophers and thinkers, among them Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, post-structuralism is marked by a general suspicion of positivist academic narratives constructed on the basis of continuities or similarities. Focusing their efforts on exposing the inherent individual and institutional biases at play in constructing these continuities, as well as the pejorative effects that such continuities have because of their normative character, post-structuralists substitute a variety of methodologies that profess to construct continuities on the basis of discontinuity. This claim should rightly be seen as disingenuous. How can some continuities be acceptable solely on the basis of their construction if they are in fact just as selective as all other continuities? Given these realities, later iterations of post-structural thinking moved even further away from constructing their own continuities, and instead focused primarily on “deconstructing” the biases inherent within other continuities.

The failure of post-structuralism to substitute new continuities or, in a larger sense new categories on which these continuities depend, has undeniably opened the door to subjective interpretations and relativism. This relativism makes it difficult to make normative judgments about what actions might or might be legitimately contained within a category. This problem oftentimes goes unrecognized within an academic environment because the negative effects appear minimal. Take for instance a hypothetical post-structuralist attack on the category of “dance” as an aesthetic performance. One can ask under what historical circumstances did a category of “dance” become separated from a more general category of “movement?” What ethnocentric conceptions of aesthetic beauty might be present in conceiving of some forms of dance as more beautiful than others? How have institutional hierarchies on the basis of power and knowledge construed acceptable forms of movement as “dance” as opposed to other, less acceptable

forms? In such a hypothetical there are few practical consequences for allowing for more subjective or relativist interpretation of the category.

Clearly, however, when post-structuralism becomes applied to a category such as that of religion or religious behavior, then there are much more dangerous consequences. Namely opening up the category to relativist interpretations allows for many actions to be claimed as religious, and therefore legitimated under a different set of criteria than other public actions. Even as religion has been systematically compartmentalized in modern secular western society it remains a privileged form of legitimacy. That this legitimacy could be transferred to terrorist actions is deplorable, especially if one of the primary causal mechanisms is self-inflicted. The systematic deconstruction of categories such as that of religion within scholarly discourse has left scholars with little real ability to push back against the irreligiosity of religious terrorism.

What, then, might be done to provide firstly scholars, and then the general public, with tools to speak about the non-religious nature of terrorist actions? In the first place it must be recognized that it will be very difficult to influence terrorists and terrorist organizations themselves. To imagine that such a project would be successful or worthwhile is hopelessly naïve. Focusing on spectator populations such as scholars or the general public is a much more practical enterprise. Selectively targeting these populations will lead to an undeniable shift in counter-terrorism discourse towards a greater emphasis on what might be termed a counter-insurgent form of counter-terrorism. By limiting the legitimacy of terrorist organizations amongst spectator populations it is possible to cut off their resources and support networks, thus in turn limiting their effectiveness.

Through proposing new forms of scholarship that embrace, rather than criticize as post-structuralism does, the normative aspects of categorization, it will become possible for scholars to assert with greater certainty whether terrorist actions are in fact religious or not. The difficulty with conceptualizing new theoretical foundations on which to hang these recovered forms of categorical scholarship make it prudent to look towards past forms of scholarship that might be able to provide a good starting base for reformulating new categorical

methodologies. Namely two historical strains of thought within the social sciences, the theories of Gestalt psychology on the one hand, and Structural Functionalism on the other, might prove useful in delimiting the necessary or natural role of categorization in academic discourse. These methodologies and theories have fallen out of fashion in part because of post-structuralist criticisms leveled against them, meaning that they cannot be recovered absolutely. Still, their reintroduction and re-evaluation potentially possesses great promise for the study of not only religious terrorism, but also scholarship in general. With many decades having passed since the inception of post-structuralist ideologies, it is time to start looking beyond post-structuralism to see with clarity firstly its own flaws and secondarily to chart a new path going forward.

Chapter 1: What is Religious Terrorism?

What is religious terrorism? For a question that seems so simple at the outset there is no easy answer. Invariably the response to such a direct question will be muddled and unclear. While most individuals believe that they have a good knowledge of what constitutes a “religious action” or “act of terrorism,” in popular parlance these conceptions are most likely analogical, not definitional. They therefore possess none of the strength that a rigorously examined and constructed category can provide. Pressing the issue of the omnipresent definitional inconsistencies in an analogical answer will itself inevitably yield a frustrated response along the lines of Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s definition of pornography: “I know it when I see it.”¹ Why are such violent actions, which the majority of individuals acknowledge occur with surprising frequency in the modern world, so difficult to define? The answer lies in the fact that the problematic category of religious terrorism is itself the synthesis of two even more problematic categories: that of “religion” and “terrorism.” The academic struggle to create definitions for the all encompassing terms “religion” and “terrorism” has been long and arduous, spanning the greater part of the 19th and 20th centuries. The outcome of these definitional debates has not brought any greater clarity. Rather, the result has been the progressive degeneration of the categories to the point where it is impossible to clearly label an action as being “religious” or “terrorism” much less an act of “religious terrorism.”

The colossal irony is that the cause of this muddling, at least at the academic level, is actually quite clear. The wholesale embrace by the humanities and social sciences of the ideological dictates of what might be termed “post-structuralism” has contributed to the decline of authoritative and rigorous definitions and categories in academic discourse.² This shift cannot be viewed as

¹ Stewart’s remarks came in the concurring opinion of the U.S. Supreme Court case *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964)

² Throughout this work I will consistently use the term ‘post-structuralism’ as a unitary term to describe various methodological and ideological considerations, stemming mainly out of the work of 20th century French philosophers and thinkers including Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, and Jean François Lyotard, that have been raised regarding the scholarly process. Certainly the use of the term, and indeed its applicability or existence, can be

anything less than a progressive move towards relativism.³ Through the dismemberment and destruction of concrete definitions and categories, undertaken by revealing the assumptions and issues of personal motivation contained within the taxonomical process, post-structuralism has introduced a deep-seated aversion to the project of definite categorization. The ideological assumptions contained within post-structuralism: a suspicion of the transcendent nature or “essence” contained within definitions and categories, along with a proclivity for pointing out the ways in which definitions are created based on the normative exercise of power or authority, have made the process of creating robust definitions difficult to the point of near impossibility.

As initially advanced by such thinkers as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, the practice of “deconstruction” and the substitution of “genealogies” for the smoothly contoured writing of history has mutated into a powerful form of criticism that stymies the constructive definitional/categorical

critiqued, although it is important to realize that such criticisms are generally only valid through the application of the same post-structuralist methodologies that are being held to not form a unitary phenomenon in the first place. In other words post-structuralism only appears as a false unity when analyzed using post-structuralist methodologies. Since one of the objects of this analysis is to expose the absurdity of this circular, and in many senses tautological, process using the unitary term seems appropriate here.

Poststructuralism in many ways attacks what it terms a false absolutism in the realm of epistemological inquiry, yet at the same time falls prey to the very absolutist tendencies that it criticizes. Even if absolutism can be guarded against within individual strains of post-structuralist thinking, it still remains flawed through the very supposition that it can provide a “better,” “more truthful,” or at the very least “less flawed” account of events or concepts as they actually occur. In this way post-structuralism remains trapped by the problems of epistemological access that all modes of inquiry contain within them, and provides just as much a positivist account of ways to circumvent these flaws as the techniques that it criticizes. In a simpler light the term is helpful and necessary to provide an easy way to refer to the ideological beliefs of a group of intellectuals who, while perhaps not explicitly forming a movement, have enough similarities in their methodologies and beliefs to be read as belonging to the same category.

A final note worth making regarding the term ‘post-structuralism’ is its relation to the related term ‘post-modernism.’ Many of the thinkers which I classify as post-structuralist are also often analyzed as being post-modernists. The terms, however, are not interchangeable. I am using the former term, post-structuralism, because I am specifically responding to these thinker’s interactions with the structuralist project of classification, as first exemplified by Ferdinand Saussure, and later expanded by, among others Claude Levi-Strauss.

³ Here relativism is defined as the opening up of previously agreed upon definitions and meanings to individualized interpretation. This interpretation is justified because of the anti-normative arguments of post-structuralism that champion individualized interactions above and beyond hierarchical notions of meaning. Under post-structuralist reasoning there is no normative check to regulate individual interpretations, meaning the fact that an interpretation is individualized in and of itself means that it is upheld as valid. The lack of clear normative or hierarchical foundations for definitions is a hallmark of this form of post-structuralist relativism.

process of analysis even as it fails to provide an alternative mode of construction on its own.⁴ Only through investigating the evolutionary rise and fall of post-structuralist thought, particularly as it pertains to the definitions of “religion” and “terrorism,” will allow for a successful reclamation of definitional clarity regarding the phenomenon of “religious terrorism.”

That is not to say that post-structuralism, and its attendant derivative forms, is of no benefit to academic study. Post-structuralism provides a useful mode of thinking about categories that brings to light their inner workings in new and important manners. Its failure to provide an adequate substitution for such categories, however, means that it cannot be seen as a sufficiently complete academic enterprise in and of itself.⁵ Neither, however, is a reversion to a previous mode of thinking possible. The introduction of the tenets of post-structuralism cannot be reversed, only their effects can be controlled.

A deep critical investigation into the meaning of so-called “religious terrorism” surely will appear to many as unnecessary. Certainly in the aftermath of seminal events such as September 11th, 2001 and July 7th, 2005, as well as countless examples of suicide bombing and other apparently religiously motivated atrocities, the existence of such a category would seem beyond reproach. Still in

⁴ Another tension to keep in mind within this work is the unresolved discrepancy between interpretations of thinkers such as Foucault, Barthes and Derrida and the thinkers themselves. In many senses ‘post-structuralism’ as an entity is the creation of American academics who read in individual philosophers or thinkers the roots of a new school of thought. This phenomenon has been analyzed by among others François Cusset in French Theory : How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2008. In an effort to guard against the derivative effects of this cycle of interpretation (in essence reinforcing the misappropriation of post-structuralism by U.S. academics) wherever possible references to post-structuralist arguments are located in the works of the individual theorists themselves. Cusset’s criticisms of the American appropriation of French philosophy can in some respects be applied to this analysis, although since the goal of this analysis is to criticize the same American academics that Cusset sees as misappropriating post-structuralist thinking such criticisms are not that valid.

⁵By “complete academic enterprise” I mean a self-supporting and fully fleshed out means of interpreting the world as postulated by academic scholarship, either an individual thinker or a group of thinkers. Such an enterprise, though, need not reach the level of a ‘meta-narrative,’ a loaded term for, among other post-structuralists, Lyotard,. It can be argued the goal of post-structuralism is not the creation of an over-arching system for the categorization of human knowledge and thought, as is the goal of structuralism, making this critique irrelevant. This argument, however, should be rightly seen as tautological. Just because post-structuralism claims that it needs no resolution does not mean that the lack of a resolution can be used as evidence for its veracity.

many respects it is precisely because the category of religious terrorism appears so self-evident that makes it a pertinent site for study. Borrowing from the language of Michel Foucault, it is all the more essential to “question those ready-made syntheses, those groupings that we normally accept before any examination, those links whose validity is recognized from the outset” because they seem so clear and obvious.⁶ While this analysis is not properly Foucauldian in either its ideological orientation or methodological approach, it does take inspiration from the more general idea that a nuanced and focused investigation of supposedly universal phenomena such as “religion” and “terrorism” can yield valuable insight into the ways in which such phenomena gain and maintain the power to influence world events and individual actions.⁷

It is easy to dismiss such investigations as idle academic fancies that have no real world applicability. The fact of the matter is that it is precisely a failure to adequately understand the underlying mechanisms at play in the way in which all individuals define concepts such as religious terrorism that makes their combating so difficult. This difficulty often arises first in the academic realm before being transmitted to the popular realm, although this progression is neither absolute nor always bounded in such a clearly bifurcated manner. Rather academic and popular discourses surrounding religious terrorism are related fields that play off one another in complex and interesting ways.⁸ The path towards constructing effective ways to combat the undeniably negative effects of religious terrorism lies in an

⁶ Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Vintage Books, 2010. Page 22.

⁷ Even a passing reference to the work of Foucault will inevitably have a detrimental effect on the validity that some readers ascribe to the following analysis. Foucault is included here not only because of the pertinence of his thought to the issue at hand but also to challenge those readers who fundamentally disagree with his views to once again question those immediate negative associations. The ideological trigger which causes many academics and lay followers of academic issues alike to shut down when confronted with distasteful ideological arguments, such as those proposed by post-structuralism, is itself a question worthy of a far lengthier analysis than can be provided here. Suffice to say, however, that while in many ways this analysis seeks to trip that trigger, it does so intentionally in order to demonstrate how that trigger in many ways is counter-productive to an open intellectual debate.

⁸ It is far too simplistic, for instance, to say that popular discourse represents a distillation or, more pejoratively, a corruption, of academic discourse. Furthermore it is unclear if one influences the other in an absolute sense, such as the postulation that academic discourse precedes popular discourse or vice versa.

uncompromising adherence to understanding first and foremost the way in which all persons involved in such actions play a role in their definition.⁹

The need to investigate both popular and academic discourses surrounding terrorism is due to the specific characteristics of the object of study itself. Unlike other forms of violence, terrorism plays out in a quite unique fashion by depending in large part for its power on the ability to intimidate and coerce, in short terrorize, a spectator population. The unfortunate and often unrecognized fact of terrorism's power therefore, which is magnified by the addition of the modifier "religious" to such actions, is that the blame lies as much with the victims, the terrorized, as it does the perpetrator, or terrorist. While terror may in many ways serve as an unrestrained physiological and psychological reflex to a threat, that does not serve as an excuse for the abject failure of spectator populations to push back against terrorists. These populations include all persons directly or indirectly involved in a terrorist action. Although they do not perpetrate or actively assist such an action, spectator populations' inaction allows the terrorist to gain and use power in a way that terrorizes. At a basic level this failure manifests itself in the inability or unwillingness of spectator populations to clearly define terrorist actions in a way that denudes the terrorist of power and legitimacy. Nowhere is this failure more pronounced than in a scholarly academic environment that is the object of this analysis.

These problems of definition are not purely semantic ones, but rather have real world consequences in allowing for the continuation of unchecked terrorist actions. If spectator populations do not take the first step of denying terrorists the use of legitimizing rhetoric, then any other structured form of counter-terrorism, including but not limited to organizational decapitation, will be generally

⁹ Embedded within this argument is a further more complicated argument regarding the interplay between academic inquiry and its implementation in practical enterprises. Certainly this interplay is not fluid nor inevitable. Certain characteristics in modern society, especially the anti-intellectual attitudes of many Americans, serve to make this interchange difficult if not impossible. The hope, though, is that if there are demonstrable practical benefits that can be derived from more theoretical academic arguments, that these latter arguments will be held in higher esteem. Inquiry can furthermore have effects, even if not practically implemented.

unsuccessful.¹⁰ This is due to the fact that at its core terrorism, particularly religious terrorism, is a battle of legitimacy, waged in symbolic conflict that has as its ultimate goal the reshaping of the balance of authority and power within society. The failure to clearly define acts of terrorism grants the terrorist the ability to use rhetoric and language as a weapon of legitimacy in a way that provides untold benefits to their cause. Furthermore, once this advantage is ceded, it becomes very difficult to undo. The lines between a “terrorist” and “freedom fighter,” between a “religious” individual and a “fanatic,” become at best unclear and at worst warped in a way that very clearly benefits the terrorist in continuing their campaign of terror.

The particular brand of legitimacy that religion continues to confer upon actions, even in modern times, is especially ripe for exploitation in this regard by terrorists. It is extremely difficult for individuals in modern societies to discuss issues of religiosity.¹¹ Ironically, this difficulty is especially great in those societies that profess tolerance and openness to all viewpoints. This issue is further exasperated when the tricky issue of linking religion to violence is raised.¹²

¹⁰ This conclusion is made all the more important given current counterterrorism policies, such as the U.S. led campaign of drone strikes against Al-Qaeda targets, which emphasize killing terrorists through a campaign of leadership decapitation. The evidence for the success of leadership decapitation as a counterinsurgency or counterterrorism tool is mixed at best. Recent research by Patrick Johnson (“Does Decapitation Work?” *International Security*. Vol. 36, No. 4 (Spring 2012), pp. 47–79) suggests that it does. Other arguments, however, are made to the contrary, stating that decapitation is ineffective. For instance, see the work of Bryan Pryce (“Targeting Top Terrorists: How Leadership Decapitation Contributes to Counterterrorism.” *International Security*. Spring 2012, Vol. 36, No. 4, Pages 9-46) and Jenna Jordan (“When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation.” *Security Studies*. Vol. 18, No. 4, 2009, Pages 719-755). My argument, however, is that these later issues of effectiveness are rendered in many senses moot if a lack of basic understanding of the definitional issues at play is also present.

¹¹ The rise in political correctness in modern western society coupled with a rise of unexamined ecumenicalism would appear to make these discussions easily, but in fact they structure debate over religion according to new sets of rules which serve to move the conversation in specific ways that often restrict speech rather than expanding it.

¹² Take for instance the controversy created on October 14, 2010 by conservative talk show host Bill O’Reilly. The incident began when O’Reilly, during a discussion of the construction of an Islamic community center and mosque two blocks from the site of the September 11th terrorist attacks, bluntly stated that “Muslims killed us on 9/11.” (For video footage see http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-31749_162-20019660-10391698.html) The comment caused two hosts of the show, ABC’s “The View,” to storm off the set. Host Whoopi Goldberg was particularly incensed, yelling “that is such bullshit” before walking out alongside co-host Joy Behar. O’Reilly quickly apologized for the statement, noting that he should have used qualified his statement by calling the 9/11 hijackers “Muslim extremists” or “Muslim fanatics,” and Goldberg and Behar returned to the set.

Individuals are loath to link religion and violence for the fear of appearing bigoted or racist. Words such as “Islamophobia” and “Islamophobic,” for instance, which have been created to deal with an apparent rise of discriminatory sentiment, serve a dual purpose. They both describe the very real acts of discrimination against Muslims that appeared after the September 11th attacks and are an aggressive label to cow individual commentators or researchers seeking to investigate the linkages between radical Islam and terrorism.¹³ The power of words to influence and combat actions cannot be underestimated, even when it comes to dealing with issues such as the understanding and prevention of terrorism. It might seem absurd to imagine that language, such as rigorously constructed categories and definitions, in and of itself could stop a terrorist attack. Indeed if such attacks are undertaken by “true believers” who are unchangeably committed to their cause, then such an assumption is justified. Language, however, does not seek only to influence the perpetrator directly, but also has a profound effect on those affected by the actions

What this incident clearly shows is that adjudicating the interplay between religion and violence is clearly fraught with tension and danger. O’Reilly thought that he was making a factual statement regarding the identity of the hijackers. On a subsequent edition of O’Reilly’s show, “The O’Reilly Factor,” conservative radio commentator Laura Ingraham noted that “We’re at a point in our country that you cannot actually say something that is true without getting jumped, without people getting up, saying inane things, walking off the stage, and then demanding an apology.” (<http://www.thenewamerican.com/culture/faith-and-morals/item/891-the-view-co-hosts-walk-out-on-bill-oreilly>) Goldberg and Behar, however, saw things differently; believing that in his comment O’Reilly was unfairly labeling a whole religion as violent based on the actions of a few individuals. On Monday, October 18 “The View” co-hosts revisited the walkout on the show, with Behar defending her actions by stating “On this show, we always speak about standing up to bigotry, so I stood up.” (Ibid) While the controversy would soon die out, replaced by other stories in the modern 24-hour news cycle, the issues it brought to light have not gone away. The controversy speaks to the great difficulty with which modern individuals, in this case particularly Americans, have in discussing the correlation between religion, violence, and terrorism. Indeed to even suggest that there might be a correlation, as O’Reilly did in his albeit blustering and somewhat crass way, runs the risk of an individual being labeled at best unformed, and at worst a bigot.

While the interchange between O’Reilly, Goldberg and Behar quickly degenerated into a nearly farcical quarrel only suitable for daytime television, it does show how the issues at stake regarding religious terrorism are not very well understood in the public imagination.

¹³ This latter use of the term “Islamophobia” often goes unnoticed or uncriticized, precisely because of the pejorative way in which it is used to tarnish the reputations of otherwise well intentioned individuals. See for instance Bruckner, Pascal. “L’invention De L’«Islamophobie».” *Libération* (2010). English translation by *Sign and Sight*. <http://www.signandsight.com/features/2123.html> . Various intellectual figures who have faced this issue include Steven Emerson, Robert Spencer and Andrew Bostom among others. There are certainly intellectual figures who are racist, xenophobic, or otherwise hateful, but rarely are terms such as “islamophobia” employed in a nuanced manner, especially by advocacy organizations who see their position in society as unquestioningly defending a system of beliefs such as Islam.

of a perpetrator; in the case of terrorism the victims. If, as stated earlier, the victims of terrorism should not be viewed as victims, but rather as complicit, if unwilling, participants in the spreading of terror, then it stands to reason that language directed at them that undermines the rhetoric of terrorism as legitimate resistance will be successful at helping to curb the effectiveness of terrorist actions.

The problem is that this dilemma regarding the use of language to both understand and combat terrorism, specifically religious terrorism, is not very well understood by the general populace. While individuals want to argue that certain actions were the work of “fanatics” or “not religiously motivated” they do not have the sophisticated vocabulary or modes of analysis to make such charges stick. Even more troubling, neither are these issues very well understood in the academic community. The study of religious terrorism lacks definitional clarity, which obscures the most pressing issue surrounding its study: is religious terrorism actually religious? Most academic studies of religious terrorism are either historical surveys of various religious terrorist organizations¹⁴ or ideologically motivated attempts to narrowly prove that particular religions are either predisposed to violence and terrorism or peaceful religions hijacked in the name of violence.¹⁵ Another subset of work tries to read religious terrorism through the lens of previously established notions of religious violence such as sacrifice.¹⁶ What these examinations fail to do is adequately explain what religious terrorism is and analyze the important question of why acts of terrorism might be considered “religious” in the first place. Religious terrorism is a multifaceted and complex term that is rarely unpacked in a way that reveals its nuanced structure.

Given the clear tensions between linking religion and terrorism the term “religious terrorism” should rightly be seen as an appropriate site for an investigation of the various ways in which definitions and language play into the

¹⁴ Juergensmeyer, Mark. Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000; Stern, Jessica. Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill. New York: Ecco, 2003.

¹⁵ Esposito, John L. Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; Spencer, Robert. Religion of Peace?: Why Christianity is and Islam Isn't. Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2007.

¹⁶ Eagleton, Terry. Holy Terror. New York : Oxford University Press, 2005.

understanding, and eventual combating, of terrorist actions. The category of religious terrorism has become tacitly accepted in popular parlance even as many individuals would deny that most, if not all, terrorist actions that appear to be religiously motivated are in fact motivated by religion at all. The simultaneous necessity for a definition of religious terrorism that encapsulates the varied and nuanced interactions between religion and violence both historically and in modern times, as evidenced by the apparent inability to do so clearly, should give one more pause than it usually does. There are obvious violent terrorist actions that are either labeled as, or appear to actually be, religiously motivated, yet there is not a stronger system of classification that might provide a better way to categorize such actions in a way that limits the misappropriation or misuse of religious legitimacy in undesirable ways.

While it might seem preposterous, therefore, to suggest that what society needs at this point is another academic analysis of the phenomenon of religious terrorism, especially one such as this which explicitly will seek to move beyond, and in many cases ignore, the conventional wisdom on terrorism as contained within the hopelessly excessive scholarship on the subject, the fact of the matter is that the issue is worth revisiting, even if only to reemphasize the importance of combating terrorism in the modern world.¹⁷ What this work seeks to do is rearticulate the issues at play in the most basic formulation of the category of religious terrorism through investigating the more general issue of category formation within academic discourse. The failure to extensively analyze the term ‘religious terrorism’ in a critical manner is a grave oversight in the descriptive study of religious terrorist organizations and actions. Through proposing a radical departure from traditional ways of analyzing both terrorism in general and specifically acts of religious terrorism, it will seek to demonstrate that foundational

¹⁷ The choice to not rely on canonical interpretations and analyses of terrorism is an intentional one. If, as I propose, the definitional problems found within current conceptions of religious terrorism are rooted within an academic environment hopelessly infected with post-structuralist and other competing ideologies, then it is necessary to try to move beyond these analyses to make progress. This is true even of those disciplines such as political science that explicitly or implicitly disavow any relation to post-structuralism. Oftentimes these disciplines are the most open to the criticisms of post-structuralism because of their unwillingness to engage with such criticisms in the first place.

issues such as definitions and their attached meanings actually do matter, both for academic study and in practical applications.

The stance of this work can correctly be labeled as structuralist, with all the attendant complications and controversy that such a label contains. Taking its inspiration from, among other principles, Roland Barthes' description of the structuralist process as involving "two typical operations: dissection and articulation" it will seek to both break down the assumed categories of "religion" and "terrorism" that permeate scholarly and lay discourse on the issue of religious terrorism and demonstrate why a reformulation of the category of religious terrorism is essential for the limiting of terrorist actions.¹⁸ This two-fold process of dissection and articulation will not, however, have as its ultimate goal a reconstituted categorical definition of religious terrorism. This lack of a clear solution might seem misplaced and disingenuous in a study that seeks to rearticulate the necessity of definitions even as it is devoted to breaking those same definitions down. What is the purpose of critically calling for a new categorical approach to evaluating religious terrorism if a new category cannot be formulated? The fact of the matter is that there is much work that needs to be done before a new categorical definition, or even a less strenuously formulated categorical understanding of what a definition of religious terrorism might provide, can be expanded upon.

Any new definitional project that is embarked upon, whether its object is religious terrorism or another phenomenon, is doomed to fail if the tenets of post-structuralism are not sufficiently destabilized to allow a new space for categories and definitions to inhabit. It is this first process: to shake the foundations of post-structuralism through a clear demonstration of the unintended practical consequences of its attempts to strip categorical definitions of their power, which is the main object of the following analysis. Breaking the current stranglehold that post-structuralism has on large portions of modern scholarship is the more difficult task of the two. Once it is possible to move beyond the stifling effects of post-

¹⁸ Barthes, Roland. "The Structuralist Activity." In Critical Essays. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972. Pages 213-220. Page 216.

structuralist thinking then formulating new categorical approaches will be much simpler. Until such a time as the first task is completed, it seems prudent to refrain from embarking upon the second.

What form of criticism, though, should this attack on post-structuralism take? It is in many senses ironically clichéd to utilize post-structuralist methodologies to attack the field of post-structuralism. This is despite the prophetic contention by Roland Barthes that every science “contain[s] the seeds of its own death.”¹⁹ Rather, what is more simply required is a close involvement with post-structuralist writings on their own terms, to reveal the assumptions and self-contradictory elements that they contain. Through this analysis of post-structuralist texts it becomes clear that post-structuralism inevitably leads to either profound relativism, with its attendant major consequences such as religious terrorism, or worse, nihilism.

The major problem that the study of religious terrorism has is an inability to clearly articulate the terms of debate regarding the apparent religiosity or lack of religiosity of specific acts of terrorism. Stylistically, arguing against this academic issue through criticizing post-structuralism is intended to be jarring. That intent, however, is not gratuitous. While the linkages between post-structuralist thought in various academic disciplines and modern increases in religious terrorism might not seem clear or straightforward, they do exist and are of paramount importance for combating religious terrorism, not just on an academic level but also on a practical level. The interplay between structuralism and post-structuralism, as seen through religious terrorism, is furthermore not just an idiosyncratic academic argument. Evaluating the concept of religious terrorism through criticizing post-structuralism should bring clarity to the definitional problems surrounding the category of religious terrorism. Even if that clarity occurs only in a negative sense, through demonstrating how unclear the term “religious terrorism” is and how little can be understood through investigating it, then the goal of this work will be accomplished. Being articulated as a challenge to the field of Terrorism Studies, if in a Foucauldian sense such a field can be thought to exist, the success of the

¹⁹ Barthes, Roland. Elements of Semiology. New York: Hill and Wang, 1968. Page 93.

following analysis should be measured in how much critical thought it provokes even if its findings are dismissed or conclusions ignored for being too radical or out of touch with the practicality of dealing with the issue of terrorism as it manifests itself in the world.

Why though, generally, is an interrogation of the term “religious terrorism” necessary if the field that it is thought to contain is already well regarded as existing and a definition, albeit a fuzzy and not well thought out one, exists as well? The fact of the matter is that the understanding of what constitutes “religious terrorism” is not nearly as clearly understood as some might suppose. The search for a comprehensive definition of the term “terrorism” has proven elusive for academics, specialists, and government officials alike.²⁰ Amongst the general public the confusion is even more widespread. As Bruce Hoffman notes, “most people have a vague idea of what terrorism is but lack a more precise, concrete, and truly explanatory definition of the word.”²¹ While Hoffman places the blame for this imprecision on modern media, which in its quest for a good story throws the label of terrorism about fairly indiscriminately, the fact that academics have also struggled to come up with an airtight definition proves that the role of the media is not the whole story. Scholar Alex Schmid, in an attempt to comprehensively analyze what the constituent elements of a general definition of terrorism might contain has recorded fully 250 different historical definitions.²² Such a number is intended to stagger the reader of Schmid’s work, and provide evidence for the comprehensive nature of his new constructed “academic consensus definition” of the term.²³ Such a blunt use of evidence, however, is

²⁰ Some of this difficulty, it is clear, is due to non-post-structuralist influences, although, as will be elaborated in chapter 4, post-structuralism does deserve a large part of the blame. Namely, the issue of non-unified state definitions of terrorism and their sometimes hypocritical application, clear parts of an implicit, if not explicit, post-structuralist critique, make defining terrorism very difficult.

²¹ Hoffman, Bruce. *Inside Terrorism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. Page 1.

²² Schmid, Alex P. "The Definition of Terrorism." In *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, edited by Alex P. Schmid: Routledge, 2011. Page 99.

²³ This analysis clearly rejects Schmid’s methodology as being flawed. While he obviously is seeking to avoid many of the problems of personal bias present in the definitional process by relying upon the opinions of many “experts,” this approach actually heightens the attendant definitional issues through the arbitrary designation of what constitutes an “expert” as well as serving to just reclothe the flawed academic assumptions surrounding what constitutes “religious terrorism” rather than injecting new modes of inquiry into the debate. Academic consensus

unwarranted. Simply put, while there are many definitions of what constitutes terrorism, different definitions have enough common elements between them to give a scholar a good idea of what phenomena the term encapsulates. Perhaps more importantly, the plethora of definitions of terrorism should not be interpreted in a way that allows for the introduction of relativism. Just because there are many definitions does not mean that any definition has validity. Rather the obsession with finding a clear definition of terrorism proves how important an issue it is.

There are furthermore great benefits to the definitional process outside of its final output. In constructing his far reaching definition of what constitutes a “religion” Clifford Geertz made the following insight into the role of definitions: “although it is notorious that definitions establish nothing, in themselves they do, if they are carefully enough constructed, provide a useful orientation, or reorientation of thought, such that an extended unpacking of them can be an effective way of developing and controlling a novel line of inquiry.”²⁴ Geertz’s conclusion that definitions in themselves “establish nothing” appears in many senses quite hyperbolic. It is only through definitions that individuals can hope to gain a firm grasp of what a term or concept actually means. While definitions can be interpreted in different ways, and exploited by those in power to serve their various desires, they retain validity only in so far as they either 1) relate to their constituent parts or 2) are accepted by the general populace as being valid. In the realm of religious terrorism it is the latter understanding of definitions that has become accepted as being of primary importance, whereas in truth it is the former that should be emphasized. Geertz recognizes the way in which definitions, especially if fully explored, can serve a very valuable purpose towards the end of manipulating discourse. The next logical step is to explore the ways in which definitions of the sort that Geertz is interested in can be used, through a sustained effort to shape discourse, to further influence the actions of individuals in specific ways.

definitions are in general flawed because of their reliance on in many cases self-appointed academic “experts,” who, because of their sitting within the academic field already cannot transcend the boundaries and limitations of that field.

²⁴ Geertz, Clifford. “Religion as a Cultural System.” In The Interpretation of Cultures. N.d.: Basic Books, 1973. Pages 87-125. Page 90.

The way in which words are used matters, both for the scholar and lay person alike. While the power to shape language and definitions has been wielded so often to negative ends as to make individuals inherently suspect of categorization and the fixed nature of the meanings of terms, that does not mean that no meaning lies behind the formulation of concepts and ideas. This inherent suspicion of language can be traced back to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure.²⁵ Saussure is rightly seen as the father of what would become structuralism, with its emphasis on the categorical nature of a world made up of shared and easily identifiable elements. In another sense, however, through his work on the arbitrariness of signs, Saussure is also undeniably linked to the antithesis of structuralism, post-structuralism. Though these later thinkers have primarily criticized Saussure on the basis of the assumptions contained within his methods, in doing so they have radically shifted the original nuanced conclusions of Saussure's work to serve their own ends.

Saussure's conclusion that the sign, or word as a signifying object, is an arbitrary designation, initiated the field of comparative linguistics by emphasizing a common element to all languages. Reinterpreted by later thinkers, predominantly the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, this emphasis on commonality would yield the theory of structuralism: that all aspects of human life can be analyzed in their relation to a succession of shared structures of language or the mind. Through the work of Levi-Strauss and others the linguistic character of Saussure's analysis would be abstracted and applied in a more general sense to virtually all aspects of human life. Levi-Strauss, tracing the foundation of structural linguistics not to Saussure but Nikolai Troubetzkoy, a rough contemporary, notes that "a transformation of this magnitude [the revolution of structural linguistics] is not limited to a single discipline. Structural linguistics will certainly play the same renovating role with respect to the social sciences that nuclear physics, for example, has played for the physical sciences."²⁶ While in many ways useful as a

²⁵ A detailed analysis of the main portions of Saussure's master work, the Course in General Linguistics, will form the starting point of the following chapter

²⁶ Levi-Strauss, Claude. Structural Anthropology: Volume One. New York: Basic Books, 1963. Page 33.

way of thinking through the interrelated aspects of human life, and providing a mode of categorization that flattens out and simplifies complex social systems and activities, Structuralism is not above reproach.

The post-structuralist movement sought, therefore, to break down these simplifications through a tacit appeal to the Saussurean concept of the arbitrariness of signs. Inspired by thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, post-structuralists emphasize that the categories and designations made by structuralists are, in all senses of the word, arbitrary. They are modern categories that are applied in an anachronistic manner to past events and in a profoundly negative cross-cultural manner that imposes predominantly western conceptions of culture and society on indigenous practices in circumstances that are not analogous. The emphasis on the use of power in shaping the meaning of concepts yields to an extension of post-structuralist logic that is not only suspicious of definitions because of the manner of their construction but contains an implicit argument that the meaning of words is in all actuality nearly as arbitrary as the sign.²⁷ While not necessarily acknowledged in post-structuralist thought, this move has profound consequences, not just as an unjustified expansion of Saussurean linguistics, but also in the practical realm of understanding human activities.

The destabilizing nature of post-structuralism, through its emphasis on the use of power in defining categories, in turn causing an inherent suspicion of such categories, transforms the process of definition into a relativist project in which the meaning of words and concepts becomes lost. Because the operation of power in definitions is given a negative valence within the theories of post-structuralism, the validity of definitions is given over to individuals in an unorganized manner. Rather than relying on hierarchical institutions or the weight of history or tradition, concepts which post-structuralism is committed to breaking down, the process of definition is left in the hands of anyone who desires it, with little recourse to push back against definitions without returning to the hierarchical nature of power that post-structuralists sought to do away with in the first place.

²⁷ See chapter two, where the shift in notions of “arbitrariness” is further evaluated in the work of Saussure, Barthes and Louis Hjelmslev.

This then is the dilemma that the study of religious terrorism faces. The whole-hearted embrace by the humanities of the ideology of post-structuralism and, to a lesser extent, its adoption by the social sciences, has yielded an academic world in which it is extremely difficult to peg down definitions. The process of breaking down categories such as “religion” and “terrorism” has been completed in a wholeheartedly successful manner even as it has proven difficult to reconcile these conclusions with a world that still clamors for categories and definitions. Categorization, it would appear, is a fundamental human activity. Indeed it is tempting to define it as a psychological need due to its prevalence.²⁸ The problem is that this disconnect, between academic disciplines that emphasize a suspicion of definitions, thus yielding the power of definition to all individuals in a relativistic manner, has profound practical consequences. In returning to the problem of defining religious terrorism, it is clear that relativistic impulses towards definition, due undeniably to the prevalence of post-structuralist thought, allow terrorists to claim the legitimacy of religious language for their actions through re-defining both their religious traditions and the more general definition of what constitutes religious action.

It would be absurd to suggest that this exploitation of post-structuralism represents a conscious choice on the part of the terrorist. The idea that terrorists are poring over Foucault and Derrida and deriving a means for attacking targets is laughable. Still, solely because it is an unconscious action does not diminish its effects. The fault lies with the far greater number of individuals, more of whom have an active engagement with the ideology, who are handcuffed definitionally, and thus allow terrorists and terrorist organizations the latitude to use religious legitimacy in such a way.²⁹ Terrorist organizations are adaptable institutions. Faced with the constant threat of destruction by counter-terrorist groups those terrorist organizations that fail to adapt their tactics and methodologies to exploit new weakness in their targets will steadily be destroyed. The most adaptive and

²⁸ See chapter five, for a discussion of the potential application of gestalt psychology to the study of categorization as a psychological need.

²⁹ These individuals include not only academics, my main concern, but also policy makers, counter-terrorist professionals and the general public at large.

creative will survive the longest, and thus the world is faced with an increasing number of groups who through intuition, luck, or perhaps divine providence have latched onto the weakness of the rest of the world in combating claims to religious legitimacy as a mode to attack it. The inability of outside observers to clearly push back against these claims of religious legitimacy, a direct result of the permeation of post-structuralist thought within modern society, allows for terrorist actions to continue to be successful around the world.

The way out of this dilemma, however, by this point should be quite clear. If the inability to combat the appropriation of religious legitimacy by terrorists is due to the paralyzing characteristics of post-structuralism, then the logical next move is to do away with those aspects of post-structuralism that are causing that paralysis. Namely, a re-emphasis on the non-arbitrary characteristics of definitions: their readily identifiable characteristics and fixed nature that is less open to interpretation, will allow for more effective ways at limiting the effectiveness of terrorist organizations in appropriating religious legitimacy. This move towards a form of anti-post-structuralism does not inevitably yield a return to structuralism, or the creation of a new form of ideology, it may serve only as a reevaluation of post-structuralism that emphasizes moderation in deconstruction and the emphasis on the arbitrariness of meaning; in short more of a Foucauldian rather than a Derridean approach.

If the majority of this work is therefore given over to an abstract analysis of various academic methodologies and their intricacies and self contradictory natures, it is important to also keep in mind the practical considerations that such an analysis yields. The goal of this paired analysis of post-structuralism and religious terrorism is not to reveal the impracticability of analyzing or studying religious terrorism at its most basic definitional level. Rather it is argued that an intense dissection or interrogation of the most basic terms within the study of religious terrorism, most notably the term “religious terrorism” itself will begin a process whereby it is possible to see how much remains unknown or undefined regarding this phenomenon. If, as has been supposed, the definitional problems confronted by academic study have carried over, even if subconsciously, into the

lay realm of popular parlance then this issue is of even more paramount importance. Untangling the Gordian knot created by the over-application of post-structuralism to the study of religion and terrorism, both individually and as a field will not be easy, but it is necessary to chart a clear path forward. What this way forward might consist of represents an open question. There are many different ways in which the issue might resolve itself. For instance at an academic level the turn away from post-structuralism might take the form of a re-emphasis on the cognitive elements of categorization that make it a natural process and therefore less suspect than post-structuralists would have us believe. At a more practical level, perhaps the way forward consists of recasting the global war on religious terrorism in more nuanced terms as a fight against a globalized insurgency seeking to exploit spectator populations and the religious legitimacy their tacit support engenders. This idea has already been proposed by insurgency theorist David Kilcullen, and shows great promise given a newly reconstituted knowledge of what violent actions might legitimately be thought of as religious and which cannot be.³⁰

However unsatisfying it might seem, though, this analysis in and of itself cannot provide a clear path forward because much of the ground work for such a project remains undone. Only through first recognizing the sheer size of the definitional mess that the field of religious terrorism confronts, and its roots within an academic environment attuned to a post-structuralist ideology, can the process of undoing this long slide towards relativism, both in general and as specifically applied to the field of religious terrorism, be halted. This analysis hopefully provides a speed bump in this slide, but it is only the first of many that will be needed to arrest the negative progression that remains an incomparable stumbling block to the serious study of religious terrorism. Despite the academic nature of this argument it is also important to retain perspective regarding the issues at play. The problem of religious terrorism affects all of humanity, both religious individuals through its challenge to their system of beliefs, non-religious

³⁰ Kilcullen, David J. "Countering Global Insurgency." *Journal of Strategic Studies*. Vol. 28. No. 4. 2005. Pages 597-617.

individuals through the potentiality for their being affected by acts of terrorism and scholars, who must struggle to reconcile the actions of the terrorist with their previously constructed modes of analysis and thought. All of these effects are of the utmost concern and their importance should never be written off or dismissed out of hand. It is not an overstatement to say that the problem of religious terrorism is one of the most important confronting the modern world, and that it is such a difficult topic should be a spur to action not a cause for despair. Only through confronting the issue head on, and with a broad array of methodological approaches can religious terrorism be attacked on all fronts. Then, even if its causes cannot be removed, its effects can be limited and controlled.

Chapter 2

Saussure, Barthes, Hjelmslev: Notions of “Arbitrary” and “Motivation” in Linguistics

The assertion that current failures to adequately understand the category of religious terrorism can be traced in large part to the failure of scholars to define the category requires some serious elaboration. Specifically it must be clarified that current modes of scholarship in and of themselves cannot be seen as causing the easily observable rise in religious terrorism in a simplistic sense.³¹ The rise of relativism within scholarship does not directly lead to acts of religious terrorism. Rather, relativism within academic discourse leads to an inability to stop or limit the effects of religious terrorism. If scholars are unable to provide clear definitions and categories that allow for the labeling of terrorist acts as illegitimate and non-religious, then terrorists are allowed space to claim various forms of religious legitimacy.³² Terrorists and terrorist organizations must be highly adaptable in order to survive, and whether consciously or subconsciously they are able to fill this void.³³ While there are many possible reasons for the rise in terrorists claiming religious motivations, one of the primary ones, at least from an analytic perspective, is the ease with which such claims can be made.³⁴ As well, the

³¹ Rather than relying on a purely empirical or statistical justification to argue that religious terrorism is more prevalent in modern times, it is possible to argue that seminal events, such as 9/11, the 7/7 bombings, the utilization of suicide bombing, etc. have created a culture that is primed to respond to acts of religious terrorism. The horror and magnitude of these events, due mainly to their scale and apparently religious nature, have imprinted themselves on society in a way that far exceeds any simple number of attacks.

³² It can be argued that here introducing the idea of “legitimacy” into scholarly acts of definition is misplaced because it shifts the focus from a descriptive account to a normative one. Nothing, however, could be further from the case. There is an inherent normativity at play in the definitional process that cannot be replaced. Saying something “is” in a category contains within it the implicit supposition that something “should” be in a category or “belongs” in a category. The goal of reasserting the categorical process within scholarship cannot be a denial of normativity, but rather a shift in focus that de-emphasizes normativity, seeing it as not the essential character of categorization. Furthermore, the labeling of normative judgments in a pejorative light is one of the hallmarks of post-structuralist ideologies, serving a limiting, rather than an enlightening purpose. The paradox here is that even the simple act of labeling normativity as “unacceptable” or “flawed” represents in and of itself a normative judgment.

³³ Here I am less concerned with whether or not religious terrorists actually are or are not “religious” on a personal level but rather in analyzing the ways in which they are able to adopt this label regardless of the level of their personal belief or religiosity.

³⁴ The simplest explanation for terrorist groups adopting religious legitimacy is of course that they are religious individuals to begin with. It is possible to argue against the apparent piety of

legitimacy that religious claims provide makes it very beneficial for groups to adopt a religious orientation. There are similarly many possible reasons for the void within society that allows terrorists the latitude to make claims of religious terrorism. One of the most pernicious, if under-analyzed, reasons for this void is the rise of post-structuralist ideologies and methodologies within, among other fields, religious studies, which has led to the untenable relativism which terrorists can exploit.³⁵

Embedded within the supposition that religious terrorism is a rhetorical battle for the legitimacy that religious symbols, language, and communities possess is the argument that words and ideas, the modes through which the rhetorical battle is waged, do not in and of themselves currently possess a solid base of meaning. Were words and their accompanying ideas to possess clear meanings then there would be no rhetorical place on which the religious terrorist could stand to exploit ambiguity. This argument regarding the instability of meaning is not usually articulated or investigated because of the infiltration of modern discourse by among other ideologies, that of post-structuralism. The idea that words can have multiple meanings, gradations of meaning, or no meaning whatsoever has become such a part of modern academic and popular discourse as to seem beyond reproach. The implications of these assumptions, though, have a much farther reach than is oftentimes considered. The supposition that the instability of meaning is a simple fact of life ironically proves its complex origins. No argument, ideology or idea becomes so widely accepted without a long and

individual terrorists and organizations, although these normative judgments are difficult to make and, in the case of “true believers” will most likely have little efficacy.

³⁵ There are many other potential explanations for the historical move to religious terrorism, including the failure of other ideologies that previously supported terrorist actions (such as Marxist/leftist ideologies after the fall of the Soviet Union), or simply the rise of religious belief in general as a backlash to increasing globalization and the rise of modernity. Another counter-narrative is that religious terrorism has always existed, and that what appears to be an explosion of religiously motivated violence is simply an increased awareness on the part of “the west” or more highly industrialized nations to the threat that religious violence can have to their ways of life. All these explanations have some validity, but the current inability of scholars to push back against the relativist tendencies within academic discourse that allows terrorists to appropriate legitimacy represents not only one of the greatest challenges, but also one that has some hope of being corrected.

tortured past. They do not spring out of thin air or appear fully formed in academic discourse.

If the goal of this analysis is to clearly demonstrate that the interpretations propagated by religious terrorists should be rejected, and their religious legitimacy revoked, it is necessary to first investigate the more general stability or instability of words and meanings. Only by being able to clearly define some religious interpretations as legitimate or illegitimate can the power of individual interpretations be revoked. This adjudication can only be achieved through a comparative process between clearly delineated fields of what constitutes “religious” versus “non-religious” actions. Terrorist actions can then be appropriately slotted in as a subset of actions within these larger categories.³⁶ The necessity for these categorical fields is made all the more important if, as has been proposed, the inability of religious individuals and observers alike to effectively combat the appropriation of religious legitimacy by terrorist organizations is due to a long erosion of the stability of previously accepted definitions and categories within the scholarly tradition. Only by investigating the long roots of this erosion can a way forward be charted, both specifically as it pertains to the combating of religious terrorism and more generally as applicable to the furthering of other taxonomical modes of scholarship.

The following descriptive account of an intellectual history or evolution of categorical relativism in academic discourse possesses specific relevance for the study of religious terrorism because of the manner in which its acceptance first degrades the ability of scholars and lay individuals alike to categorize acts as religious or non-religious. The terrorist can then exploit this failure of categorization to great effect. While starting with linguistics as a path of inquiry into understanding religious terrorism might appear strained, it is a necessary first

³⁶ Therefore there would be a grouping of actions that could be slotted into either the category of “religious” or “non-religious,” and then slotted into the category of “terrorism” or “non-terrorism.” The contention here is that it is doubtful if any action can be appropriately slotted into both the categories of “religious actions” and “terrorist actions.” The binary nature of these categories is in many senses unavoidable, even as it is open to critique. Even if individual actions are to be measured along some gradated definition there must at some point be a tipping point at which these gradated definitions become binaries (ie the relationship between an object and one category becomes clearly stronger than its relationship to another category).

step towards understanding the academic move towards categorical relativism. Linguistics represents a fair starting point because it seeks to categorize words and meaning at the most basic foundational level. Slippages in relationship between words and meanings must, ultimately, be traceable back to linguistics. The fact of the matter remains that the failure of other observers to rigorously investigate the roots of the rhetorical debate at issue in determining the legitimacy of acts of religious terrorism, particularly in a scholarly sense, has hamstrung attempts to combat terrorism. A study of the move toward relativism within the linguistics provides one avenue of attack or lens through which it is possible to see the more general move towards relativism that has occurred in nearly all forms of scholarship.

The rise of the modern science of linguistics, which is primarily concerned with the study of language from a structural perspective, can be traced to a variety of fathers, chief among them the early 20th century Swiss professor Ferdinand de Saussure.³⁷ The contribution that Saussure made to the study of not only language but also to the more general study of the history of thought and various other fields cannot be overestimated. Saussure has been adopted by a variety of other scholarly fields, chief among them anthropology, sociology and various forms of philosophy. Especially important for this study is the way in which Saussure can be seen as providing the intellectual foundation for the key academic split of the 20th and 21st centuries, the ongoing struggle between the postulates of structuralism and post-structuralism. An understanding of Saussure, therefore, is essential to understanding a wide variety of phenomena and ideas in circulation surrounding the stability and instability of meaning. It is this derivative concept that bears much more direct relevance to the study of religious terrorism.

Taken in the broadest sense Saussurean linguistics can be seen as pushing back against the tenets of phenomenology, the mode of inquiry to define intrinsic

³⁷ There are numerous internal debates within the field of linguistics surrounding its origin and the relative importance of Saussure's contribution. They have little relevance here, however. Saussure's privileged position here has as much to do with the content of his contribution as it does with his actual or imagined uniqueness.

‘essences’ which words, ideas, and thoughts possess.³⁸ From a methodological standpoint Saussure is also the undisputed father of the field of semiology, which he defines as “a science that studies the life of signs within society.”³⁹ Saussure’s most oft-cited insight, however, is that of the arbitrary nature of the specifically linguistic sign. The Saussurean ‘sign’ (drastically simplified as a word, its formulation in speech and its attendant thought concept) is based on a rejection of the notion that there is a direct relationship between a word and its accompanying concept. Saussure writes that most individuals see language as “a naming-process only—a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names.”⁴⁰ As Saussure explains, this supposition is open to a variety of criticisms, namely “it assumes that ready-made ideas exist before words...[and] it lets us assume that the linking of a name and a thing is a very simple operation—an assumption that is anything but true.”⁴¹ Rather, as Saussure demonstrates a sign, by which he means the combination of a “concept” or psychological idea/thought and a “sound-image” or the combination of a written and spoken word, is made up of multiple constituent elements. Saussure uses the term *sign* to denote the whole element, and substitutes *signified* for the concept that a word seeks to enunciate and *signifier* for the sound-image in his technical terminology.

For Saussure the idea that the relationship between the signified and the signifier is arbitrary is obvious. As he notes, “If words stood for pre-existing concepts [note: in short if words were related to concepts through some shared essence], they would all have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next; but this is not true.”⁴² This insight is of paramount importance because of the way in which it introduces a form of relativism into the previously supposed simple act of definition. If the linkage between words (the signifier) and thoughts (the signified) are based on an arbitrary association, then that seemingly weakens

³⁸ It can be rightly argued that this represents a profound over-simplification or caricature of Saussure’s work, although it is an important concept to introduce primarily because of its relationship to later post-structuralist writers who are responding not only to Saussure but also phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl.

³⁹ Saussure, Ferdinand de. Course in General Linguistics. New York: McGraw Hill, 1966. Page 16.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 116.

the stability of definitions and categories based on those words. Saussure himself is careful to guard against such a conclusion. He writes in regard to the term “arbitrary” that “the term should not imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker...I mean that it is unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified.”⁴³ Similarly he states that “the signifier, though to all appearances freely chosen with the respect to the idea that it represents, is fixed, not free, with respect to the linguistic community that uses it. The masses have no voice in the matter, and the signifier chosen by language could be replaced by no other.”⁴⁴ Signifiers, therefore, should be read as partially a social mechanism defined by its collective acceptance and usage.

Even as Saussure argues that the arbitrary nature of the sign should not be read as “meaningless” he also recognizes that the relationship between the sign and signifier is not static. He writes “In a certain sense, therefore, we can speak of both the immutability and the mutability of the sign...One might think that it deals especially with phonetic changes undergone by the signifier, or perhaps changes in meaning which affect the signified and concept.”⁴⁵ Even these differing changes give an incomplete view of the whole issue. Rather, “regardless of what the forces of change are, whether in isolation or in combination, they always result in a shift in the relationship between the signified and the signifier.”⁴⁶ It is one of these shifts that has partially caused the current problem in defining what clearly constitutes religious terrorism as opposed to legitimate religious practice or belief. There has been a shift between the signifier of “religion” or “religious” and the signified concept that these signifiers refer to. Recognizing that a shift has taken place, however, is only the first step in either reversing it or controlling its effects. To do so it is important to look at what Saussure sees as the causal mechanism behind the shifting relationship between the signified and the signifier.

Saussure sees language, because of its nature as a social fact, as guarded against radical change brought about by individuals. Similarly, the fact that the

⁴³ Ibid., 68-9.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 74-5.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 75.

development of language occurs over time, not in a single instant, makes it difficult to change. He writes “the thing which keeps language from being a simple convention that can be modified at the whim of interested parties is not its social nature but rather the action of time combined with the social force. If time is left out, the linguistic facts are incomplete and no conclusion is possible.”⁴⁷ Even if the individual facts of a language are susceptible to some change, however, its overarching rules stay the same. In articulating this principle Saussure relies upon an extended metaphor of a chessboard:

A state of the set of chessmen corresponds closely to a state of language. The respective value of the pieces depends on the position on the chessboard just as each linguistic term derives its value from its opposition to all the other terms. In the second place, the system is always momentary; it varies from one position to the next. It is also true that values depend above all else on an unchangeable convention, the set of rules that exists before a game begins and persists after each move. Rules that are agreed upon once and for all exist in language too; they are the constant principles of semiology.⁴⁸

Saussure’s use of the term ‘value’ here can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly it does serve to describe the relational position of individual terms or signs within a larger linguistic system. At the same time, though, it also refers to the more substantive meaning that each term possesses. While not an essence, this meaning is the definitional characterization that each sign possesses. It is this meaning that can be shifted, along with the relative importance, by actors within the social landscape of a language. For Saussure all identities are relational, not substantive or essential (based off of essences). The systems that Saussure describes are delineated on the basis of difference, but only within the rules of the game.

Saussure, therefore, is quick to push back against the notion of the arbitrariness of the sign giving rise to a form of relativism regarding meaning. For instance, he explicates the flaw of the metaphor of a chess game as applied to linguistics through what he sees as a lack of intentionality in linguistics. While it is possible to speak of intentionality in regards to individual speech acts, it is impossible to speak of intentionality in regards to the overarching rules of the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 88.

system.⁴⁹ He notes, “at only one point is the comparison weak: the chess player *intends* to bring about a shift and thereby to exert an action on the system, whereas language premeditates nothing. The pieces of language are shifted—or rather modified—spontaneously and fortuitously.”⁵⁰ Despite this qualification, however, Saussure seems to be extremely aware that in emphasizing the arbitrary nature of the sign and the idea of language as a social fact he has in actuality allowed too much room for relativism (in his system individualized or collective shifts in meaning) to take hold. He earlier writes quite poignantly that “Language is radically powerless to defend itself against the forces which from one moment to the next are shifting the relationship between the signified and the signifier. This is one of the consequences of the arbitrary nature of the sign.”⁵¹ What is crucial for Saussure, however is the nature of these specific forces. For him they are at their core unmotivated and arbitrary in the same way that he sees signs themselves as being arbitrary: there is no intent behind the shift. Furthermore, these shifts are not made on the basis of individual action. Rather they are “spontaneous and fortuitous” and caused by larger social or historical forces. Similarly Saussure sees them as being checks against motivated shifts of meaning between the signified and signifier. Namely, “Language is checked not only by the weight of collectivity but also by time.”⁵² Another important distinction under Saussure’s analysis is that between synchrony and diachrony. He writes that “everything that relates to the static side of our science is synchronic; everything that has to do with evolution is diachronic.”⁵³ Saussure recognizes that linguistic facts, or individual meanings/associations, can change over time in a diachronic manner. At the same time, however, such meanings are also static in a synchronic sense when viewed in an individual moment.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Post-structuralists would later expand Saussure’s argument to contain the supposition that at a structural level systems contain intentionality as well as the intentionality that individual actors within the system possess.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵⁴ While undeniably an oversimplification in part, it is useful to think of post-structuralism as focusing on the diachronic elements of language, thoughts, and ideas, whereas structuralism emphasizes the stability of synchronic elements. There may be a certain irreconcilability between

As a linguist Saussure is not primarily concerned with the issue of collective accountability or group psychology, so he considers the issue of collective social shifts causing shifts in language at this point to be put to rest. Certainly in regards to his specific conception of the sign in a linguistic sense his analysis is correct: there is little motivation behind the primarily linguistic associations between phonemes as they form signs, which in turn make up language. When Saussure's theories, however, are expanded and investigated on the basis of their social nature it is on this point, the supposed unmotivated shifts between signifier and signified, that Saussure is most open to attack.

Roland Barthes, in his attempts to elaborate on a more complicated semiological form of analysis derived from Saussure, hits upon just this conundrum. He ultimately concludes that following Saussure "it was therefore suggested to say that in linguistics the signification is *unmotivated*," introducing that term specifically instead of arbitrary.⁵⁵ Barthes is not convinced that this lack of motivation, however, is absolute. Rather he writes "this lack of motivation is, by the way, only partial...from signified to signifier, there is a certain motivation in the (restricted) case of onomatopoeia, as we shall see shortly, and also every time a series of signs is created by the tongue through the imitation of a certain prototype of composition or derivation."⁵⁶ Therefore, "in general terms...in the language the link between signifier and signified is contractual in its principle, but that this contract is collective, inscribed in a long temporality...and that consequently it is, as it were, *naturalized*."⁵⁷ This line of reasoning represents a jump, not only for the specific application to the field of linguistics but also, more importantly, for the greater field of semiology. What Barthes is suggesting is that in the greater relationship of signs with society there are motivated shifts of meaning and definition. His emphasis on the "contractual" nature of the relationship between the signifier and the signified denotes a new focus on

these emphases, especially if a diachronic progression can be read as nothing more than a series of synchronic instances. Equally important is the realization that it might be impossible to "freeze" a concept in a perfect synchronic moment as there always will be some play/slippage in individual moments. Still, this issue should not preclude the analysis of synchronic moments.

⁵⁵ Barthes, Roland. *Elements of Semiology*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1968. Page 50.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 50-1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

collectivity within the definition of meaning that Saussure does not feel required to deal with.

Barthes himself is not primarily concerned with the social consequences of these motivated shifts. He, for instance, clearly points to their limited appearance within a linguistic system as being contained within, among other things, onomatopoeia. Furthermore, he picks up upon a particularly dangerous misreading of Saussure that sees the conception of the signified as a matter of epistemological inquiry. He notes that “In linguistics, the nature of the signified has given rise to discussions which have centered chiefly on its degree of ‘reality’; all agree, however, on emphasizing the fact that the signified is not ‘a thing’ but a mental representation of the ‘thing’.”⁵⁸ Barthes’ discussion of this distinction in regards to Greek stoic philosophy might be amended to include the Kantian distinction between *noumena* and *phenomena*.⁵⁹ This distinction is extremely important for working through the issues surrounding the general goals of scholarship. All scholarship has as its goal the recreation of a representation of “events as they occurred” or in another sense an analysis of “things as they are.” In doing so the scholar seeks to break through the epistemological boundaries of the differentiation between noumena and phenomena proposed by Kant.⁶⁰

For Kant it is impossible to know a thing “in itself,” because of the limits of human reason. He writes that “If, then, we find that, under the supposition that our empirical knowledge conforms to objects as things in themselves, the unconditioned cannot be thought without contradiction, while under the supposition that our representation of things as they are given to us does not conform to them as things in themselves, but on the contrary, that these objects as appearances conform to our mode of representation, then the contradiction vanishes.”⁶¹ Expanding upon this distinction Kant notes “That the understanding cannot make any but an empirical, and never a transcendental, use of all its *a*

⁵⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 43.

⁶⁰ In essence scholarship seeks to recover a noumena that Kant insists is not available to the mind. This argument, especially regarding post-structuralists’ implicit normative claims of methodological superiority, will be elaborated upon in Chapter 4.

⁶¹ Kant, Immanuel. Critique of Pure Reason. New York: Penguin, 2007. Page 20.

priori principles, indeed, of all its concepts, is a proposition that, if thoroughly understood, leads to most important consequences.”⁶² It is this representation that Kant labels as a *phenomenon*, as opposed to a *noumenon*, defined in the negative sense as “a thing insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition,” and in a positive sense as an “object of a non-sensible intuition.”⁶³ It is important to realize that for Kant it is possible to conceive of *noumena* even as it is impossible to understand or know them.

A similar issue arises with his concept of “things in themselves.” They can never be fully understood because they exist outside the realm of human understanding, even as human experience and understanding gives rise to their hypothetical existence. These distinctions are important for understanding the theories of language posited by Saussure and Barthes, among others, because these latter thinkers are concerned only with *phenomena* in the most general sense. Words and language are only representations, which seek to elaborate on concepts (signifieds) that are similarly only representations of some idea of “the concept in itself.” It is only this final piece, which could be seen as a stand in for the *noumenon* in a linguistic sense, and no sensible theory of language or linguistic approaches it. Even Edmund Husserl, a phenomenologist whose relation between the signifier and the signified is in many ways radically different from Saussure, Barthes, and others doesn’t confuse the signified with a true *noumenon*.⁶⁴

Where Barthes deviates most greatly from Saussure is his positing of a new form of methodological analysis, the field of semiology, which is derived from the Saussurean distinction between language and speech. While Saussure, as stated earlier, hypothesized the potential application of semiology to other fields, Barthes actually undertakes this work in a practical manner. Through looking at, among other fields, fashion and food, he determines many of the key considerations

⁶² Ibid., 253.

⁶³ Ibid., 258-9. Kant’s language here is rather obscure. By “negative definition” he means defining *noumenon* as what it is not, and “positive definition” what it actually is.

⁶⁴ For instance, he writes: “Every sign is a sign for something, but not every sign has ‘meaning,’ a ‘sense’ that the sign ‘expresses’. In many cases it is not even true that a sign ‘stands for’ that of which we may say it is a sign. And even where this can be said, one has to observe that ‘standing for’ will not count as the ‘meaning’ which characterizes the expression.” (Husserl, Edmund. Logical Investigations. New York: Humanities Press, 1970. Page 269).

essential for a semiological analysis. Specifically, the concepts of arbitrariness and motivation gain new weight when removed from their linguistic framework. As Barthes explains, “in linguistics, motivation is limited to the partial plane of derivation or composition; in semiology, on the contrary, it will put to us more general problems.”⁶⁵ Barthes sees these issues primarily in light of the relationship between the signifier and the signified, but his later analysis of metalanguages clearly demonstrates how motivation plays a large role in the structuring of more general fields of discourse.⁶⁶

For instance, Barthes notes that there are arbitrary decisions that occur in all forms of critical analysis, including semiology. The clearest example of this is when a critic must limit the scope of study through the creation of a *corpus* or body/field of study. Barthes defines the corpus as “a finite collection of materials, which is determined in advance by the analyst, with some (inevitable) arbitrariness, and on which he is going to work.”⁶⁷ In the specific work of the linguist this arbitrariness is not that worrisome, because the corpus is already clearly limited. In general “it is decided to describe the facts which have been gathered from one point of view only, and consequently to keep, from the heterogeneous mass of these facts, only the features associated with this point of view, to the exclusion of any others.”⁶⁸ For the phonologist they need only “examine sounds only from the point of view of the meaning which they produce without concerning himself with their physical, articulated nature.”⁶⁹ In contrast, in more general semiological research “relevance...centers by definition round the signification of the objects analyzed.”⁷⁰ It is clear that at this point Barthes is slowly becoming aware that it is in these choices that the semiologist inevitably inserts themselves into the system, providing, in another sense of the word, “motivation” or “intention” to the associations being analyzed.

⁶⁵ Barthes *Elements*, 51.

⁶⁶ Here can be seen the inklings of a later important post-structuralist distinction of definitions and categories as being motivated by the individuals involved with the act of definition/categorization.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

Such a conclusion might seem like a leap in reasoning, being sustained only on the narrow connections between the Barthes' conceptions of "arbitrary" as they occur both in a linguistic and semiological sense. Furthermore, implying that the "motivation" Barthes sees as occurring in linguistic systems is analogous to any sort of "motivation" that the semiologist provides through, for instance, defining a *corpus*, might also seem a stretch. Still, Barthes himself provides the mode for understanding these interpolations through his discussion of metalanguages. Barthes' descriptive account of metalanguages is built off of Louis Hjelmslev's graphical representation of the relationship between signifier and signified.⁷¹ Hjelmslev complicates the relationship between *expression* and *content* (analogous to Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified) through the mediation of a third factor termed the *relation*.⁷² Utilizing this graphical representation of a sign as a stand-in for complicated systems of signs such as language allows Barthes to demonstrate that the more complex semiological systems that he is interested in are in fact layered in a derivative manner from other systems. He offers that we "suppose that such a system E R C [*expression, relation, content*] becomes in its turn a mere element of a second system, which thus is more extensive than the first: we then deal with two systems of signification which are imbricated but are out of joint with each other, or staggered."⁷³ In Hjelmslev's terminology, if the synthesis of ERC becomes, in a second plane a new expression, then we are dealing with the field of *connotative semiotics*. For Barthes "the first system [synthesis of ERC] is then the plane of *denotation* and the second system (wider than the first) the plane of *connotation*."⁷⁴ In contrast, a metalanguage is when "the first system (ERC) becomes, not the plane of expression, as in connotation, but the plane of content, or signified of the second

⁷¹ Hjelmslev, a Danish linguist (1899-1965), is part of the scholarly generation that directly followed that of, among others, Saussure (1857-1913).

⁷² Barthes provides a brief summary of this on pages 39-41 as well as page 49. Hjelmslev's much longer original analysis is presented in Hjelmslev, Louis. *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961. Pages 47-60. In Hjelmslev's collaborative work with Hans Jørgen Uldall, *Outline of Glossematics*. Copenhagen: Nordisk Sprog- og Kulturforlag, 1967., there is a much briefer discussion of Expression and Form as they are themselves mediated by two further strata, *form* and *substance* (26).

⁷³ Barthes *Elements*, 89.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

system.”⁷⁵ In regards to religious terrorism, terrorist actions form the second plane of a field of connotative semiotics to the initial field of religious actions. Acts of religious terrorism are the expressions of the content of a larger category of religious actions. This religious content is itself the expression of a system of more general content. In contrast, when analyzing post-structuralism it is clear that this new ideology represents a meta-language in regards to any broader attempt to define a continuous ideology of intellectual epistemology.

What is most significant about these second order systems is not the constituent elements of either *expression* or *content*, but rather the third element, the *relation*. It is the *relation* between the two other elements that in Saussurean linguistics, and in turn Barthes’ system, is primarily unmotivated. When moving up to a second order system, however, the constituent elements of *expression* and *content* in Hjelmslev’s technical terms, or *signifier* and *signified* in Saussurean terms are no longer the same as they were in the exemplary field of linguistics. Rather, these new elements are different signs, which, although ultimately derived from words and linguistic properties, function quite differently. The motivation which occurs in the *relation* between elements of a system of connotative semiotics or metalanguage, therefore, can be rightly seen in the proposed manner as the interjection of meaning to the relationship that previously did not exist. What this realization brings about is the conclusion that in higher order systems of the type proposed by Barthes the assumed relationship between *expression* and *content* becomes destabilized because the *relation* that mediates their interaction is neither constant nor un-motivated. The language with which Barthes describes the interactions within these second order systems is much harsher than that with which explained the interaction within the linguistic realm. For instance he notes that with the “signified of connotation” it is a “fragment of ideology,” with which “the environmental world invades the system.”⁷⁶ Barthes further writes that:

each new science [in the realm of the social sciences] would then appear as a new language which would have as its object the metalanguage which precedes it, while being

⁷⁵ Ibid., 90.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 92.

directed towards the reality-object which is at the root of these ‘descriptions’; the history of the social sciences would thus be, in a sense, a diachrony of metalanguages, and each science, including of course semiology, would contain the seeds of its own death, in the shape of the language destined to speak it.⁷⁷

The “death” with which Barthes is concerned with should also be seen as the death of attempts to recover the “reality object,” in a Kantian sense the *noumenon*. Unlike Kant, however, who acknowledges the importance of studies that approach the *noumenon*, Barthes seems much more pessimistic, indicative perhaps of his eventual disillusionment with structuralism and semiology in general.⁷⁸

While as noted earlier Ferdinand Saussure represents in many ways the intellectual foundation for both structuralism and post-structuralism, the figure of Barthes provides an even better example for the ways in which the intellectual questions brought up by the opposition between these two modes of thought can play out on an individual level. Barthes is one of a number of intellectuals that are alternatively labeled as being either structuralist or post-structuralist, depending both on ideological position of the labeler, or which of Barthes’ academic pieces is being examined.⁷⁹ In *Elements of Semiology*, for instance, Barthes writes that “the aim of semiological research is to reconstitute the functioning of the systems of significations other than language in accordance with the process typical of any structuralist activity, which is to build a *simulacrum* of the objects under observation.”⁸⁰ This definition is expanded upon in another essay by Barthes, “The Structuralist Activity,” to emphasize the artificiality of the *simulacrum*, or created

⁷⁷ Ibid., 93.

⁷⁸ In many senses the goals of Kant and Barthes are so different as to be practically incommensurable, although their shared focus on descriptive accounts of the world cannot be ignored.

⁷⁹ Barthes’ focus on semiology, for instance, makes it easy to label him as a structuralist, although as the preceding analysis makes clear, Barthes himself appears to have understood the contradictions contained within semiology. At the same time John Sturrock emphasizes that Barthes had an “abhorrence of essentialism” and “professe[d] a philosophy of disintegration, whereby the presumed unity of any individual is dissolved into a plurality.” (Sturrock, John. *Structuralism and Since*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. Page 53). These insights make Barthes seem much more like a post-structuralist. Other intellectual figures, most notably Michel Foucault, have run into similar issues of categorization, ironically helping to prove the post-structuralist point about the difficulties and ineptitude of the process of categorization in general.

⁸⁰ Barthes, *Elements*, 95.

object at play.⁸¹ Barthes notes “We see, then, why we must speak of a structuralist *activity*: creation or reflection are not, here, an original ‘impression’ of the world, but a veritable fabrication of a world which resembles the primary one, not in order to copy it but to render it intelligible.”⁸² Barthes, in another essay, comments on the relationship between signs in a way that emphasizes the inevitable analytic choices that must be made in their interpretation, an insight most often attributed to, and possessing special relevance for, the post-structuralists. “Every sign includes or implies three relations. To start with, an interior relation which unites its signifier to its signified; then two exterior relations: a virtual one that unites the sign to a specific reservoir of other signs it may be drawn from in order to be inserted in discourse; and an actual one that unites the sign to other signs in the discourse preceding or succeeding it.”⁸³ For post-structuralists such as Michel Foucault the exterior relations, especially the inner workings of “discourse,” would be of paramount importance.⁸⁴

⁸¹ The term *simulacrum* has, in a post-structuralist context, been successfully loaded with a pejorative connotation, most notably by Jean Baudrillard

⁸² Barthes, Roland. “The Structuralist Activity.” In Critical Essays. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972. Pages 213-220. Page 215. This essay, originally published in 1963, predates Elements of Semiology, originally published in French in 1964.

⁸³ Barthes, Roland. “The Imagination of the Sign.” In Critical Essays. Pages 205-211. Page 205.

⁸⁴ Barthes, as a literary critic, commented on many of the works of his contemporaries, including Foucault, in a variety of essays. For instance, see “Taking Sides” in Critical Essays. Pages 163-170.

Chapter 3

Derrida and Foucault: Deconstruction, Genealogies, and the Death of Categorization

Barthes' upholding of semiological forms of analysis despite its artificiality and inconsistencies mirrors an apparent "need" for structure in scholarly forms of analysis. The process of categorization is simultaneously upheld, because of the way in which it seemingly accurately points to the make-up of human experience, and yet is also made open to criticism. While structuralism aims to clarify, it also obscures, yielding ground for critics to attack it. Structuralism, therefore, while seeking to posit strong categories contains within it, to borrow Barthes' language, "the seeds of its own death." The allure of attacking the artificial nature of structuralism was too much for a new generation of intellectuals to resist. That post-structuralists such as Jacques Derrida grounded their attacks in part upon a reversion to the same intellectual foundations, namely Saussurean linguistics, made their critiques all the more appealing and devastating for the process of categorization.

In one sense it is ironic to view Jacques Derrida as comprising one of the fundamental instigators of the post-structuralist slide towards relativism in language and definitions. In expressing the field of grammatology, a "science of writing," he writes of "the devaluation of the word 'language' itself, and how, in the very hold it has upon us, it betrays a loose vocabulary, the temptation of a cheap seduction, the passive yielding to fashion, the consciousness of the avant-garde, in other words—ignorance—are evidence of this effect."⁸⁵ If Derrida appears at first glance to be bemoaning the degradation of language into "loose vocabularies," however, he must also be rightly seen as one of the responsible parties for causing this issue. Derrida points out a slippage in academic discourse regarding the differentiation between language and writing. He argues that writing "no longer indicat[es] a particular, derivative, auxiliary form of language in

⁸⁵ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. Page 6.

general,” but rather has “ceased to designate the signifier of the signifier.”⁸⁶ He continues: “that ‘signifier of the signifier’ [(writing)] no longer defines accidental doubling and fallen secondarity. ‘Signifier of the signifier’ describes on the contrary the movement of language: in its origin to be sure, but one can already suspect that an origin whose structure can be expressed as ‘signifier of the signifier’ conceals and erases itself in its own production. Thus the signified always already functions as a signifier.”⁸⁷

Muddling through Derrida’s complex use of language is a tiresome process, serving perhaps as an embedded argument regarding the fallibility of the written word at communicating ideas in a clear manner.⁸⁸ What he clearly is attacking, however, even if not explicitly in this instance, is Saussure’s characterization of the signifier and signified. Derrida notes that, in the case of writing and language, the former (a signifier) and a latter (also a signifier in reference to common mental images) have become conflated. Language becomes a signified in relation to a signifier (writing) rather than being seen as the signifier that it truly is.⁸⁹ This move causes, for Derrida, writing to “erase itself in its own production,” by linking it in a false way to language. Derrida’s criticism of writing as an accurate signifier of language goes far deeper than this simple insight, however. The specific nature of writing, namely its affront to claim the perfect transmission of thoughts and ideas, is even more disturbing for Derrida. Rather than representing a structural approximation of modes of human communication based in an identifiable empirical manner, Derrida sees linguistic formations such as Saussure’s differentiation between language and speech as “the guise or disguise of a primary writing” which “are not historical contingencies that one might admire or regret.” Whereas Saussure’s differentiation is presented ahistorically, Derrida sees the privileged position of specific linguistic terms

⁸⁶ Ibid., 6-7.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 6-7.

⁸⁸ Or it could simply be the result of Derrida being a complicated writer, or the attendant difficulty of translating his complex thoughts from French into English.

⁸⁹ There are similarities here between Barthes’ discussion of meta-languages and the layering of signifiers and signifieds which Derrida does not engage with.

(Derrida uses the example of *phoné*) as responding to “a moment of *economy*.”⁹⁰ Even if Derrida states that this transition to linguistics “does not depend upon a choice that could be avoided” and thus was in many senses inevitable, and furthermore “with a necessity that cannot be judged by a tribunal” it is clear through his loaded word choices that this is precisely the project that he is embarking on.⁹¹ Of Grammatology serves in a large sense as a tribunal for the idea that writing as a concept deserves a privileged place in both metaphysical and academic discourse.

Derrida’s larger point in Of Grammatology is not a linguistic one, but rather a philosophical one regarding the process of signification. For Derrida signification never works, but rather is built upon a fiction that it attempts to disguise through the strident argument that meaning can in fact be uncovered. He frames his project as an investigation of “the *ethnocentrism* which, everywhere and always, ha[s] controlled the concept of writing” as well as “what I shall call *logocentrism*: the metaphysics of phonetic writing (for example, of the alphabet) which was fundamentally—for enigmatic yet essential reasons that are inaccessible to a simple historical relativism—nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism, in the process of imposing itself upon the world, controlling in one and the same *order*.”⁹² This critique takes the form of an attack on the smoothly contoured narratives of metaphysics which, for Derrida, are in a large sense the backbone of all historical Western academic discourse, specifically philosophy. Derrida recognizes that the origin of the problem of logocentrism within metaphysics is immeasurable and unattainable.⁹³ Instead it is “more or less covertly yet always, determined by an historico-metaphysical epoch of which we merely glimpse the *closure*. I do not say the *end*. The idea of science and the idea of writing—therefore also of the science of writing—is meaningful for us only in terms of an origin and within a world to which a certain concept of the sign (later I

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹³ This realization is of similarly great importance to the thought of Michel Foucault, whose disbarment of the quest for the “origin” of ideas is presented in rigorous detail in The Archaeology of Knowledge. This work will be analyzed in greater depth later on in this chapter.

shall call it *the* concept of the sign) and a certain concept of the relationships between speech and writing, have *already* been assigned.”⁹⁴ That the relationships have “already been assigned” are the chief point that Derrida takes issue with, because once again it presupposes that there is some form of finality of analysis that can be presented as an ahistorical absolute.

His pejorative note regarding a “certain concept of the sign” is an implicit reference to the work of Saussure and other linguists who Derrida sees as providing the framework for maintaining modern forms of logocentrism. It is clear why Derrida feels the need to interact quite strongly with Saussure, because Saussure in many respects tried to work through many of the issues that Derrida is grappling with regarding writing and language in his General Course in Linguistics. Derrida’s positing of a new form of analysis, with its resulting new conclusions requires him to at the very least amend, or as turns out being the case, rejecting Saussure’s conclusions. According to Saussure “language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first.”⁹⁵ Saussure even provides what can be seen as a proto-evaluation of Derrida’s logocentrism, noting that that the overemphasis on writing can be explained by the supposed permanency of graphic forms of words, the fact that visual impressions are “sharper and more lasting than aural impressions” and that the code of language is itself “a written set of strict rules of usage [and] orthography.”⁹⁶ Saussure is certainly open to criticism on these points. Specifically his emphasis on the supposed stability of writing and written forms, such as the alphabet, is demonstrably weak. Alphabets, for instance, change, as do different graphic representations for phonetic elements of language (words, utterances, etc.). Derrida definitely, therefore, represents a critical expansion of Saussure’s work, although its polemical bent, as exemplified through its pejorative characterization of the historical process that yielded logocentrism, is what makes it untenable.

Derrida locates Saussure’s formulation of the distinction between the signifier and signified as representing part of an epoch that has its roots in

⁹⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁹⁵ Saussure, 23.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 25.

phenomenology. He writes “the difference between signified and signifier belongs in a profound and implicit way to the totality of the great epoch covered by the history of metaphysics, and in a more explicit and more systematically articulated way to the narrower epoch of Christian creationism and infinitism when these appropriate the resources of Greek conceptuality.”⁹⁷ The reasoning for tracing this history, however, lies, for Derrida, in a larger issue of deconstruction.

Deconstruction would form the hallmark of Derridean analyses, representing a powerful tool to expose the assumptions and contradictions within other scholarly accounts and systems. Describing it generally he states that “it is necessary to surround the critical concepts [(that which are being examined)] with a careful and thorough discourse—to mark the conditions, the medium, and the limits of their effectiveness and to designate rigorously their intimate relationship to the machine whose deconstruction they permit.”⁹⁸ In regards to the example of the sign:

we know, however, that the thematics of the sign have been for about a century the agonized labor of a tradition that professed to withdraw meaning, truth, presence, being, etc., from the movement of signification. Treating as suspect, as I just have, the difference between signified and signifier, or the idea of the sign in general, I must state explicitly that it is not a question of doing so in terms of the instance of the present truth, anterior, exterior or superior of the sign, or in terms of the place of the effaced difference. Quite the contrary, we are disturbed by that which, in the concept of the sign—which has never existed or functioned outside the history of (the) philosophy (of presence)—remains systematically and genealogically determined by that history. It is there that the concept and above all the work of deconstruction, its ‘style,’ remain by nature exposed to misunderstanding and nonrecognition.⁹⁹

It is worth quoting from Derrida at length in order to demonstrate the tortured twists of logic that he employs as his mode of argumentation. Here Derrida hits on all the key notes of a post-structuralist justification for deconstruction. He notes that he is suspicious of the claims that the study of signs is not an epistemological

⁹⁷ Derrida, *Grammatology*, 13.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

quest for the truth. In doing so he simultaneously is not introducing his own theory regarding the “truth” or “essence” of signs. Instead he seeks to only demonstrate that modern linguistic interpretations of signs are historically rooted, and therefore are in many senses arbitrary.

Derrida’s attack on metaphysics for relying on the false conflation of signifiers and signified, and subsequent upholding of Nietzschean philosophy, are well in line with this criticism.¹⁰⁰ What he neglects, however, is the fact that Saussurean linguistics had already moved beyond these oversimplifications. Derrida asks “does a modern linguistics, a science of signification breaking the unity of the word and breaking with its alleged irreducibility, still have anything to do with ‘language?’”¹⁰¹ He does not believe this to be the case. Similarly, he proposes that “linguistics, whether spontaneous or systematic, has always had to share the presuppositions of metaphysics. The two operate on the same grounds,” a further jab at the supposed scientific break between signifiers, signifieds, and some epistemological “truth.”¹⁰²

The unshakeable suspicion that Derrida has regarding linguistics carries over into his explicit treatment of the work of Saussure. He writes that “the intention that institutes general linguistics as a science remains in this respect within a contradiction. Its declared purpose indeed confirms...the subordination of grammatology, the historico-metaphysical reduction of writing to the rank of an instrument enslaved to a full and originarily spoken language.”¹⁰³ Derrida’s word choice here is not neutral, utilizing terms such as “subordination” and “enslavement” to characterize what he sees as the failings of linguistics rather than using more nuanced terms for his critique. Responding to Saussure’s previously examined differentiation between language and writing, and his granting of primacy to writing as being expressive of language, Derrida is similarly dismissive, noting that “this factum of phonetic writing is massive; it commands our entire culture and our entire science, and it is certainly not just one face among

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 21.

¹⁰² Ibid., 21.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 29.

others. Nevertheless it does not respond to any necessity of an absolute and universal essence.”¹⁰⁴ This criticism is easily dismissed if one considers that Saussure has already dispensed with the phenomenological fascination with essences.¹⁰⁵ Derrida ironically labels Saussure’s analysis as a form of protection: “it is less a question of outlining than of protecting, and even of restoring the internal system of the language in the purity of its concept against the gravest, most perfidious, most permanent contamination which has not ceased to menace, even to corrupt that system, in the course of what Saussure strongly wishes, in spite of all opposition, to consider as an external history, as a series of accidents affecting the language and befalling it *from without*, at the moment of ‘notation’.”¹⁰⁶ Derrida’s derisive tone is self-evident, as he labels Saussure’s arguments as being “in the accents of the moralist or preacher.”¹⁰⁷

It is primarily through this use of pejorative language that Derrida is able to subtly, or in all reality not so subtly, warp Saussure’s conclusions to demonstrate the manner in which the relationships between signifieds and signifiers are motivated by the arbitrary usages of personal bias and institutional power.¹⁰⁸ He states “Has it ever been doubted that writing was the clothing of speech? For Saussure it is even a garment of perversion and debauchery a dress of corruption and disguise, a festival mask that must be exorcised, that is to say warded off, but the good word.”¹⁰⁹ Derrida’s disingenuousness is here clearly revealed, as nowhere in Saussure are the stakes regarding the separation of the signifier and signified referred to in this language. The only line which Derrida cites as evidence is one in which Saussure notes that “writing veils the appearance of language; it is not a guise for language but a disguise.”¹¹⁰ While it is true that Saussure does make

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 30-31.

¹⁰⁵ This seems like a fair conclusion from Saussure’s work, especially given his suspicion of “ready-made ideas exist[ing] before words.” See note 5.

¹⁰⁶ Derrida, *Grammatology*, 34

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 34. The same criticism might be leveled against Derrida, an irony which he may or may not be aware of.

¹⁰⁸ Derrida does not explicitly utilize the terms signified and signifier here, preferring instead to speak of writing’s “artificial exteriority” and function of “clothing,” metaphors which can only be read as pointing to this fundamental distinction within Saussure.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 35.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 35.

offhand comments to, among other things, the “tyranny of writing,” as a whole his use of rhetoric is much less inflammatory than Derrida’s.¹¹¹ In contrast, Derrida ties Saussure to “the tradition that has always associated writing with the fatal violence of the political institution.”¹¹² In drawing these conclusions Derrida clearly reveals the polemical, or perhaps more properly political, bent of his analysis.

Whereas as previously noted Saussure disavowed the investigation of the social implications of the arbitrary association of signifier with signified, stating only generally that “Language is checked not only by the weight of collectivity but also by time,” Derrida is much more concerned with these effects.¹¹³ The post-structuralist obsession with power is clearly at work here, which is even more evident in the work of Michel Foucault.¹¹⁴ As a final point of transition it is important to realize that Derrida’s criticism of Saussure takes the form of a clarion call for relativistic interpretations. In regards to the “tyranny of writing,” in so far as there are societal defined rules surrounding the use of language, Derrida asks “where is the evil?” He continues:

What has been invested in the ‘living word,’ that makes such ‘aggressions’ of writing intolerable? What investment begins by determining the constant action of writing as a deformation and an aggression? What prohibition has thus been transgressed? Where is the sacrilege? Why should the mother tongue be protected from the operation of writing? Why determine that operation as a violence, and why should the transformation be only a deformation? Why should the mother tongue not have a history, or, what comes to the same thing, produce its own history in a perfectly natural, autistic, and domestic way, without ever being affected by any outside?¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Saussure, General Course, 31.

¹¹² Derrida, Grammatology, 36.

¹¹³ Saussure, General Course, 74.

¹¹⁴ In post-structuralist conceptions “power” is oftentimes used in conjunction with a pejorative reading of normativity. Power is the manner through which individuals, or more often institutions, impress upon others their arbitrary judgments. While some post-structuralists might try and argue that Power, as an analytic concept, is not labeled in a pejorative light, but rather is a simple observable fact, this is just not the case. There is no genuine manner in which power under post-structuralist analyses is not given a negative valence. See for instance Foucault’s work Power/Knowledge (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

¹¹⁵ Derrida, Grammatology, 41.

These strident criticisms, while directed specifically against the regulation of writing and therefore language, cannot be read as anything less than a general upholding of individual relativistic interpretations of language and thought. Derrida's attack on linguistics takes the form of a more general attack on grammar. In general, structural rules attempt to describe the generation of difference, which can be strongly contrasted with the policing element that is inherent within grammar. Saussure is uninterested in this secondary set of rules, while for Derrida these secondary elements are much more important. This is because of the more explicit normative judgments present in Grammar, as opposed to the less motivated structural analyses with which Saussure was concerned.

If individuals are free to break social conventions surrounding language, however, then the inevitable consequence, perhaps foreseen by Derrida even if it is not explicitly referenced, is the destruction of robust definitions and categories. If there are no rules to govern the operation of language then there are no stable meanings on which to hang definitional clarity. For Derrida there seems to be no problem with this lack of rules, although as has been seen in the case of religious terrorism, the opening up of the category of religion allows many actions, relating only tangentially to religious practice or belief, to clothe themselves in the guise of religious legitimacy and gain its attendant benefits. These benefits are therefore wielded in destructive ways, even if the original actions quite clearly have no real relation to the majoritarian practice of religion.

Derrida's criticisms of structuralism are made much more explicit in his other writings. For instance, in the opening essay of Writing and Difference, "Force and Signification," he states that "If it recedes one day, leaving behind its works and signs on the shores of our civilization, the structuralist invasion might become a question for the historian of ideas, or perhaps even an object."¹¹⁶ Portraying structuralism as an invasion clearly reveals Derrida's ideological bias against its tenets. In regards to the structural analysis of literature Derrida reserves even more pejorative language. Once content, "the living energy of meaning, is

¹¹⁶ Derrida, Jacques. "Force and Signification." In Writing and Difference. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. Pages 3-30. Page 3.

neutralized,” this structure becomes “somewhat like the architecture of an uninhabited or deserted city, reduced to its skeleton by some catastrophe of nature or art. A city no longer inhabited, not simply left behind, but haunted by meaning and culture.”¹¹⁷ Whether intentional or not, the post-structuralist consequence of eroding layers of meaning, is quite explicit here. Derrida similarly continues the attack, which he began in *Of Grammatology*, of language having as its object a derivative of a Kantian *noumenon* or “thing in itself.” He writes, “the thought of the thing as what it is has already been confused with the experience of pure speech; and this experience has been confused with the experience itself.”¹¹⁸ This criticism is an expansion of Heidegger’s work regarding the inappropriateness of “pure speech.”¹¹⁹

Derrida coins the term “ultrastructuralism” to define the manner in which the false assumptions of the overarching applicability of structures has become accepted within academic discourse. “Here, structure, the framework of construction, morphological correlation, comes *in fact and despite his theoretical intention* the critic’s sole preoccupation....No longer a method within the *ordo cognoscendi*, no longer a relationship in the *ordo essendi*, but the very being of the work.”¹²⁰ The problems with this form of structuralism should be clear. Its overemphasis on form yields a spatial model of not only literature (Derrida’s primary target in the essay) but also all forms of abstract thought. Derrida’s goal in going after not only ultrastructuralism but also structuralism is quite radical. He explains:

Our intention here is not, through the simple motions of balancing, equilibration or overturning, to oppose duration to space, quality to quantity, force to form, the depth of meaning or value to the surface of figures. Quite to the contrary. To counter this simple alternative (**Not the content but the idea that we think in binaries**), to counter the simple choice of one of the terms or one of the series against the other, we maintain that it is necessary to seek new concepts and models, an *economy* escaping this system

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 9.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 15.

of metaphysical oppositions. **Rejection of the usefulness of making distinctions (inherent character to create hard boundaries); wants to seek new concepts (must be liberatory, “escaping”); these new concepts must be generalizable (“economy”).**¹²¹

While the attendant benefits of such a methodology would seem to be great, Derrida is unable to provide clear guidelines or dictates for such a form of analysis. While Derrida coined the term “deconstruction” as a new methodology, and explicitly claimed to be using it, unlike other writers such as Foucault Derrida never produced a work specifically dedicated to deconstruction as a methodology. In contrast, Foucault’s genealogical work in The Archaeology of Knowledge is spelled out in much greater depth and with much more clarity.

While Derrida references the potential of “deconstruction” in a number of works, it is systematized and expanded upon by many other writers as well. Derrida for instance, notes generally that “to ‘deconstruct’ philosophy, thus, would be to think—in the most faithful, interior way—the structured genealogy of philosophy’s concepts, but at the same time to determine—from a certain exterior that is unqualifiable or unnameable by philosophy—what this history has been able to dissimulate or forbid, making itself into a history by means of this somewhere motivated repression.”¹²² Here he points to the manner in which he sees philosophy as not a universal but rather as having a history. The purpose of deconstruction is to bring to light this element of “repression,” although outside of this general plea there remains no clear methodological dictates. It is up to interpreters of Derrida, including his most widely cited translator, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, to provide an explicit linkage between the term “deconstruction” and the similar projects of Nietzsche and Heidegger.¹²³ Later

¹²¹ Ibid., 19. Emphasis in the original text.

¹²² Derrida, Jacques. Positions. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972. Page 6.

¹²³ This analysis is presented in Spivak’s translator’s preface to Of Grammatology, pages ix-xc. Specifically Spivak writes of Derrida’s goal to “locate the promising marginal text, to disclose the undecidable moment, to pry it loose with the positive lever of the signifier; to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it; to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is always already inscribed. Deconstruction in a nutshell” (lxxvii). Even this description, however, fails to provide much in the way of specifics for understanding how one might exactly go about deconstructive criticism, revealing it to be more of an ideological orientation than a serious methodological enterprise.

attempts by Jonathan Culler similarly fall short of a concrete systematization, noting that “Deconstruction has been variously presented as a philosophical position, a political or intellectual strategy, and a mode of reading.”¹²⁴ In his formulation “to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies, by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of argument, the key concept or premise.”¹²⁵ Even with these considerations in hand Culler is only able to demonstrate deconstruction in practice, through the exemplary case of the “Nietzschean deconstruction of causality.”¹²⁶ Setting aside the quite clearly anachronistic application of the label of “deconstruction” to Nietzsche’s work, the failure to define deconstruction except through analogical evidence is equally, if not more, troubling. This inability is due to the flaw within deconstruction: its failure to produce a tangible positivity or product of its analysis. There can be no resulting synthesis from the deconstructive process that itself is not subject to another deconstruction. It is this aspect of deconstruction which, if accepted in an absolutist sense yields radical relativism at best or nihilism at worse. If deconstruction is not accepted as a required action or absolute (what might be pejoratively termed ultra-deconstruction) then it is able to be criticized as not deconstructive enough, and therefore similarly flawed to those ideologies that it is supposed to be deconstructing.¹²⁷

This exact criticism would be leveled against the most explicitly methodological thinker to be placed under the post-structuralist heading: Michel Foucault. It is especially important to understand Foucault in terms of linking post-structuralism to the study of religious terrorism because it is the specific application of Foucauldian methodologies to the field of religious studies which has most contributed to the lack of clear categories and definitions that has as its

¹²⁴ Culler, Jonathan. On Deconstruction. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982. Page 85.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 86.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 86-89.

¹²⁷ Herein lies one of the main criticisms that can be leveled against post-structuralism in general: It explicitly criticizes absolutist tendencies within other forms of scholarship such as structuralism, yet disingenuously refuses to engage with the fact that without a form of absolutism within its own practices the post-structuralist project can never be seen as complete.

unintended consequence the opening up of religious language and actions to exploitation by terrorist organizations. Foucault's adherence to a rigorous methodology, however, also had as one of its unintended consequences the labeling of his arguments as structuralist. This claim was serious enough that Foucault felt compelled to respond to it in the conclusion to his most explicit work on methodology, The Archaeology of Knowledge. Foucault sets up his rebuttal in the form of a dialogue, with an unnamed accuser charging that:

would you [Foucault] have invented so many oddities [in your methodology] if you had not tried to apply, in a domain that was irreducible to them, some of the fundamental themes of structuralism—and those very themes that constitute its most debatable and philosophically dubious postulates? It is as if you had used not the empirical, serious work of structural analysis, but two or three themes that are really extrapolations rather than necessary principles.¹²⁸

How serious these charges are is a matter of perspective. If one requires out of Foucault's work a clearly delimited methodology that is in no way related to, or to use more serious language, tainted by, the dictates of structuralism, then this admission by Foucault that such a claim has even a limited applicability is decidedly troubling. Foucault's response is ambiguous enough in its claims that, rather than putting to rest the controversy, it inflames it further. He writes, "You are quite right: I misunderstood the transcendence of discourse; in describing it, I refused to refer it to a subjectivity; I did not give primary consideration, as if it ought to be its general form, to its diachronic character."¹²⁹ Here Foucault admits that his positing of 'discourse' hews very closely to being a structural element that itself should be analyzed in terms of its diachronic character. Backtracking, he states, however, that "my aim was to show what the differences consisted of, how it was possible for men, within the same discursive practice, to speak of different objects, to have contrary opinions, and to make contradictory choices."¹³⁰ The degradation of his methodology to a search for difference, however, does not serve

¹²⁸ Foucault, Michel. The Archaeology of Knowledge. New York: Vintage Books, 2010. Page 199.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 200.

to strengthen Foucault's argument. It decreases the power which his unique methodology professes to contain. These arguments about the uniqueness of Foucauldian methodologies, though, are of secondary importance to a clear understanding of both what they consist of and how they have been interpreted.

Even in those works in which Foucault appears most like a structuralist he explicitly critiques many of the primary tenets of structuralism. In The Order of Things, for instance, he takes on the issue of general grammar. He notes that "General grammar is the study of verbal order in its relation to the simultaneity that it is its task to represent."¹³¹ This crucial aspect of linguistics, however, is untenable for Foucault because of its constructed nature. He writes, "this sequence is artificial in relation to the simultaneity of representations, and in so far as this is so language must be in opposition to thought, as what is reflected upon what is immediate."¹³² Outside of just a simple restatement of Saussurean linguistics, Foucault picks up much more strongly on notions, similar to Derrida's, of the impossibility of words to adequately convey either thought or meaning. Predating the publication of The Archaeology of Knowledge, The Order of Things lacks much of the methodological rigor of Foucault's later work, although both share a deep-seated suspicion of artificially created structures that are supposed to have universal or ahistorical applicability.

Foucault's methodological work is generally devoted to the breaking down of what he terms "false unities," those historically constructed universals that appear trans-historical but are actually themselves the product of historical circumstances. He states that, "we must question those ready-made syntheses, those groupings that we normally accept before any examination, those links whose validity is recognized from the outset."¹³³ Foucault similarly comes down strongly against reading the apparent progression of events or concepts in terms of an evolution. He writes negatively about "The notions of development and evolution: they make it possible to group a succession of dispersed events, to link them to one and the same organizing principle, to subject them to the exemplary

¹³¹ Foucault, Michel. The Order of Things. New York: Vintage Books, 1994. Page 83.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 83.

¹³³ Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, Page 22.

power of life...to discover, already at work in each beginning, a principle of coherence and the outline of a future unity.”¹³⁴ If one is to try and see a continuity in events, however, Foucault believes that it should not be through their coherence but rather through their discontinuity: “perhaps one might discover a discursive unity if one sought it not in the coherence of concepts, but in their simultaneous or successive emergence, in the distance that separates them and even in their incompatibility.”¹³⁵ This apparent paradox might seem in a large part disingenuous, through its positing that continuity can be formed on the basis of non-coherence and that some unities are acceptable while others are not, but it forms the basis of Foucault’s methodology. It allows for the deconstruction of false unities through a genealogical investigation while acknowledging that once that process is completed it is possible to retain some unities. In this way Foucauldian methodologies do not ultimately yield a form of nihilism and allow for the existence of some unities.

In a series of lectures delivered at the Collège de France in 1976 Foucault elaborated upon his genealogical method:

You can see that this activity which we can describe as genealogical, is certainly not a matter of contrasting the abstract unity of theory with the concrete multiplicity of the facts. It is certainly not a matter of some form or other of scientism that disqualifies speculation by contrasting it with the rigor of well-established bodies of knowledge. It is therefore not an empiricism that runs through the genealogical project, nor does it lead to a positivism, in the normal sense of the word. It is a way of playing local, discontinuous, disqualified, or nonlegitimized knowledges off against the unitary theoretical instance that claims to be able to filter them, organize them into a hierarchy, organize them in the name of a true body of knowledge.¹³⁶

Here Foucault nicely summarizes the key contents of his genealogical method: 1) its divergence from previously supposed “scientific” methods, 2) its failure to lead to a reconstructed unity or “positivism,” and 3) its location within a field of

¹³⁴ Ibid., 22.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 35.

¹³⁶ Foucault, Michel. “Society Must Be Defended”: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76. New York: Picador, 2003. Page 9.

“discontinuities” rather than hierarchical or organized structures. While these features do not make up the totality of Foucault’s method, they represent some of its most important characteristics.

One of the main differences between applying a Foucauldian genealogical critique to supposed universals as opposed to a Derridan approach is that Foucault’s work does not inevitably lead to the destruction of those universals, or worse, a form of nihilism or extreme relativism in which all arguments and theses are equally valid.¹³⁷ If a unity does possess some validity, a genealogical critique will uphold its validity. Foucault himself is aware of this apparently contradictory fact that genealogical investigations may lead back to universals. He asks what purpose is ultimately served by this suspension of accepted unities, if, in the end, “we return to the unities that we pretended to question at the outset.”¹³⁸ The rhetorical answer that Foucault doesn’t explicitly provide, but seems apt, is that the investigative process possesses some inherent merit in and of itself. As well, Foucault acknowledges the impossibility of a world without any unities. Rather, it is important to disturb the unities so that they can be more properly understood, paradoxically strengthening them if they are upheld. He writes, “these pre-existing forms of continuity, all these syntheses that are accepted without question, must remain in suspense. They must not be rejected definitively of course, but the tranquility with which they are accepted must be disturbed; we must show that they do not come about of themselves, but are always the result of a construction of the rules of which must be known, and the justifications of which must be scrutinized.”¹³⁹ Thus it is possible to recover some form of categorization or definition upon the culmination of a genealogical critique even if these definitions must be rigorously interrogated.

Following this lengthy constructed continuity of the evolution of post-structuralist ideologies within academic discourse, a legitimate question to ask is what relevance does this intellectual history have for the practical issue of

¹³⁷ Equally important to realize is that Foucault and Derrida were investigating different phenomena, although their shared ideological characteristics cannot go unrecognized.

¹³⁸ Foucault *Archaeology*, 28.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

combating religious terrorism? What this history of post-structuralism shows is a progressive move within academic discourse that has as its end point a general inability to sustain robust categories and definitions. It is this post-structuralist moment, devoid of traditional categories and definitions, that terrorists are able to exploit to claim religious legitimacy for their actions. Without clearly understanding how this move towards relativism has occurred within academic discourse it is impossible to control its effects.

Chapter 4: The Problem at Hand

It is certainly easy to criticize the previously constructed account of the evolution of post-structuralism. Particularly the charge that post-structuralism leads to relativism can be seen as an open contention, and not a closed conclusion. Not only could this continuity be described as a caricature of post-structuralism rather than a true representation, the sheer fact that the descriptive account seeks to posit a continuous evolution makes it open to a meta-critical post-structuralist evaluation. What is more difficult to argue with, however, is the current permeation of post-structuralist ideologies within academic discourse. Through analyzing the impact of these ideologies in current scholarship it is possible to see that the issues regarding post-structuralism that were hypothesized in theory in the previous two chapters are quite real. Namely it becomes obvious that post-structuralism in practice leads to a profound relativism marked by an inability to truly pin down categorical definitions. The decoupling of definitions from their attendant meanings becomes equally obvious.

This issue bears specific relevance to the study of religious terrorism because this later term contains within it two sub-terms that are important categories in and of themselves: religion and terrorism. An action can only be labeled as being an act of religious terrorism if it fits into the overlapping set of these two sets. On the back of post-structuralist critiques of the category of religion it has become extremely difficult to label actions as being religious or not. A less explored, though no less important, phenomenon is the inability to label actions as clearly being terrorism or not. While in regards to the category of religion there is a clear causal link to post-structuralism, the link to relativist interpretations of the category of terrorism is less obvious. What has occurred is a form of deconstruction without deconstruction, the dismissal of the category without a proper post-structuralist investigation. This is due to a variety of reasons, among them the fact that terrorism, being primarily defined by state or government actors, fits perfectly post-structuralist formulations of the linkage between power and knowledge. This assumption, however, is rarely formulated, expressed, or explored. Through investigating the rise of relativism in scholarship regarding both

the category of religion and the category of terrorism it is possible to see why there is a fundamental inability to clearly categorize acts of religious terrorism within modern society.

The sheer volume of post-structuralist analyses present in academic circles is quite overwhelming. Nowhere is this more evidenced than in the field of religious studies, where a whole cottage-industry has sprung up involving interpreting the study of religion through post-structuralist lenses. One branch of this industry has focused on utilizing Foucauldian genealogies to examine the roots of the category of religion in general, as well as its application in individual historical and cultural circumstances. This trend can be traced back initially to the work of Talal Asad, who first demonstrated a clear link between the imposition of the category of religion and the project of colonialism.¹⁴⁰ Asad's theories can be easily read as stemming from a larger post-structuralist foray into the study of colonialism, particularly Edward Said's classificatory system of "orientalism."¹⁴¹ In regards to individual religious traditions, numerous books have been published that seek to complicate foundational assumptions through either explicit or implicit appeals to Foucauldian methodologies. Amongst what might be termed "world religions," works in this genealogical field have been written about Buddhism¹⁴², Judaism¹⁴³, Islam¹⁴⁴, and Hinduism.¹⁴⁵ Even belief systems that might not be

¹⁴⁰ Asad, Talal. Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. Asad is not necessarily the first to adopt a critical approach to the category of religion, but he remains one of the most influential. Works by Jonathan Z. Smith (Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. And "Religion, religions, religious." In M. Taylor (ed.), Critical Terms for Religious Studies. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Pages 269-84.) also helped spark early interest in these methodologies. A later discussion of William Cantwell Smith's The Meaning and End of Religion will investigate another early contribution to this field, although it cannot properly be termed as post-structuralist.

¹⁴¹ Said, Edward. Orientalism. New York : Vintage Books, 1994. Said would expand Foucauldian arguments about power and its impact on colonialism in his later work Culture and Imperialism. New York: Knopf, 1993. The relationship between colonialism and the imposition of power makes it ripe for a post-structuralist critique, although Said's work goes much further in positing acceptable and unacceptable forms of scholarship through the relation of colonialism and other forms of imperial bias to both academic and popular writing.

¹⁴² Almond, Philip C. The British Discovery of Buddhism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

¹⁴³ Batnitzky, Leora. How Judaism Became a Religion. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

captured under the heading of “world religions” are susceptible to genealogical critiques, including various African religions,¹⁴⁶ Native American religions,¹⁴⁷ religion in Japan,¹⁴⁸ and Confucianism.¹⁴⁹ Genealogical critiques have even been applied to such specific sects as Wicca in Finland.¹⁵⁰ This is in addition to the genealogical critiques of related concepts such as secularism¹⁵¹ and the term “world religions” in general.¹⁵² While not universally upheld in the discipline of religious studies, the preponderance of these genealogical works is important to note.¹⁵³

A second branch in religious studies is more explicitly Derridean in nature, and is perhaps best exemplified by the work of scholar John Caputo. Buying into what he himself terms the “messianic tone of deconstruction,” Caputo has published vigorously on the application of Derridean methodologies to the field of religious studies.¹⁵⁴ Caputo goes so far as to see deconstruction as not only a methodology

¹⁴⁴ Almond, Philip C. Heretic and Hero : Muhammad and the Victorians. Wiesbaden : O. Harrassowitz, 1989.

¹⁴⁵ Multiple examples abound, including Oddie, Geoffrey A. Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793 – 1900. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006; Inden, Ronald. Imagining India. London: Hurst & Company, 1990. and King, Richard. Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and the Mystic East. London: Routledge, 1999.

¹⁴⁶ Chidester, David. Savage Systems. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996.

¹⁴⁷ Wenger, Tisa. We Have a Religion. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

¹⁴⁸ Josephson, Jason Ananda. The Invention of Religion in Japan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

¹⁴⁹ Jensen, Lionel M. Manufacturing Confucianism : Chinese traditions & universal civilization. Durham : Duke University Press, 1997.

¹⁵⁰ Taira, Teemu. “Religion as a Discursive Technique: The Politics of Classifying Wicca.” *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Volume 25, Issue 3, 2010. Pages 379-394.

¹⁵¹ Asad, Talal. Formations of the Secular. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

¹⁵² Masuzawa, Tomoko. The Invention of World Religions. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

¹⁵³ While the bibliographical listings presented here are not complete, their present volume in and of itself should speak to the importance of post-structuralist thought within the field of religious studies. Other important works within this sub-field include those by Russell McCutcheon (Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse of Sui Generis and the Politics of Nostalgia. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Tim Fitzgerald (The Ideology of Religious Studies. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), Derek Peterson and Darren Walhof (The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History. Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2002), and Daniel Dubuisson (L’Occident et la religion. Mythes science, et idéologie, Brussels: Complexe, English translation, 2003, The Western Construction of Religion, John Hopkins University Press, 1998).

¹⁵⁴ Caputo, John D. The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. Page 1.

that can be applied to religion but as a religious object in its own right.¹⁵⁵ He writes:

Deconstruction regularly, rhythmically repeats this religiousness *sans* the concrete, historical religions; it repeats nondogmatically the religious structure of experience, the category of the religious. It repeats the passion for the messianic promise and messianic expectation, *sans* the concrete messianisms of the positive religions that wage endless war and spill the blood of the other.¹⁵⁶

This passion for deconstruction worked its way through the entirety of his academic career. Works such as On Religion¹⁵⁷, Deconstruction in a Nutshell (a co-authored account of a series of conversations with Derrida himself)¹⁵⁸, and the delightfully named What would Jesus Deconstruct?¹⁵⁹ All make the same argument over and over again: the category of religion should be subjected to deconstructive techniques and therefore dispensed with.¹⁶⁰ Caputo's work has been so influential as to spawn numerous books that explicitly honor his contributions to the study of religion.¹⁶¹ Many other authors, among them Mark Taylor, seek to understand more broadly the implications for the study of religion contained within postmodernism/post-structuralism even if they are not as explicitly linked

¹⁵⁵ There are certainly reasons for these different approaches. For instance the first grouping of genealogical approaches follows more clearly a branch of religious studies that focuses on history of religions whereas Caputo's is more closely related to a form of constructive theology.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, xxi.

¹⁵⁷ Caputo, John D. On Religion. London: Routledge, 2001.

¹⁵⁸ Caputo, John D. Deconstruction in a Nutshell. New York: Fordham University Press, 1997.

¹⁵⁹ Caputo, John D. What Would Jesus Deconstruct?. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.

¹⁶⁰ Take for instance the opening lines of On Religion. Caputo writes: "Any book entitled *On Religion* must begin by breaking the bad news to the reader that its subject matter does not exist. "Religion," in the singular, as just one thing is nowhere to be found" (On Religion 1). Caputo's position here, though is decidedly complicated by his theological background. In follow-up he notes that the category of religion is "too maddeningly polyvalent and too uncomfortably diverse to fit under one roof" (*Ibid.*, 1), indicating the potential continuation of the category in a more nuanced manner. Caputo appears to want to take the disingenuous and quite hypocritical position of upholding the essential characteristics of religions while dispensing with the definitional category.

¹⁶¹ Snider, Phil. Preaching After God: Derrida, Caputo, and the Language of Postmodern Homiletics. N.d.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012. Cross and Khora: Deconstruction and Christianity in the Work of John D. Caputo, eds. Neal Deroo and Marko Zlomsic. N.d.: Wipf and Stock Press, 2010. Simpson, Christopher Ben. Religion, Metaphysics and the Postmodern: William Desmond and John D. Caputo. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus. ed. Mark Dooley. N.d.: SUNY Press, 2002. And Religion With/Out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo, ed. James Olthuis. London: Routledge Press, 2002.

with a particular poststructuralist thinker.¹⁶² There is even a long running book series published by the University of Chicago Press on the topic of “Religion and Postmodernism” that currently has over thirty titles under its auspices.¹⁶³

What these countless works applying post-structuralist methodologies to the study of religion represent in aggregate is nothing less than a successful reformatting of the field of religious studies along post-structuralist lines. While such works may not yet make up a majority of scholarship, their explosion in popularity in recent decades cannot be ignored. While this shift in the field of religious studies towards the adoption of post-structuralist ideologies may not be complete, but rather represent only part of larger cyclical shifts in intellectual ideologies and scholarship, its current strength is undeniable. While it is difficult in many senses to empirically prove that post-structuralist ideologies have saturated the field of religious studies, a rigorous form of evidence is not necessary. The power contained within genealogical critiques is such that once expounded upon they are very difficult to disprove. Specifically, the self-referential nature of post-structuralist critiques, which re-labels any attempt to disprove their applicability as being indicative of the inherent power/knowledge dynamics that post-structuralism seeks to undo, makes them hard to break down. The influence of these critiques, therefore, spreads quickly and pervasively, requiring an intellectual response even if they make up only a small proportion of the actual scholarship. In other words, the threshold for declaring that post-structuralist ideologies have permeated the field of religious studies should be seen as much lower than might be popularly assumed.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Taylor, Mark C. *After God*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

¹⁶³ For a full listing of these titles see “Religion and Postmodernism” at <http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/series/RP.html>

¹⁶⁴ Here I am arguing that one does not need to demonstrate for instance, that some certain percentage of all published scholarship need be labeled as “post-structuralist” or that there need be no courses on “world religions” or some other metric to definitively state that the field of religious studies should be defined as “post-structuralist” in any general sense. Rather I am arguing that even slight introductions of post-structuralist thinking to the field of religious studies has a profoundly destabilizing effect on the categories and definitions contained within the field. The inability to solve, or in a lesser sense move beyond, the post-structuralist challenge to the field of religious studies has paralyzed certain aspects of scholarship and allowed for negative practical consequences, such as the appropriation of religious language and legitimacy by terrorists and terrorist organizations.

The negative characteristics of post-structuralism as they permeate through the field of religious studies can perhaps best be seen through a close investigation of the results of such inquiries. When the central term of 'religion' becomes overly deconstructed it yields a space where the field of religious studies becomes in many senses untenable. The inability to postulate a category of religion means that either the category does not exist, rendering the field impotent and, in essence studying nothing, or requires the recapturing of a category without a category, a somewhat duplicitous move.¹⁶⁵ It is the latter class of action that has most often occurred. Once the category of religion has been genealogically investigated or otherwise deconstructed it is recovered as a 1) a "flawed" or "imperfect" category, 2) an empty category that allows for individuals to place whatever they want in it, a relativist move, or 3) willfully ignored, neither emphatically sustaining it nor dispensing with it entirely. Each of these outcomes has their own attendant problems and calls into question the post-structuralist project in general. These charges are not necessarily that damning if one is content to live with the practical consequences of the failure of post-structuralism to construct rigorous categories and definitions. If, however, terrorist actions and other violent consequences can be seen as deriving their power and effectiveness in part from this failure, then it is important to reassess whether the consequences are firstly worth living with and secondly possible to be controlled.

The retention of religion as a "flawed" category in a certain sense invalidates post-structuralist methodologies in line with Foucault's question as to what benefit there is if "we return to the unities that we pretended to question at the outset."¹⁶⁶ This in and of itself may not be that undesirable because, as noted earlier, the act of investigation might in and of itself possess some validity. Still, the weakening of the category leads to an initial form of relativism which, if unchecked, leads to the second alternative, the empty category of religion that individuals are free to fill on the basis of their own volition. This relativism allows

¹⁶⁵ This involves reformatting the field of religious studies along the lines of a tacit category of religion that nevertheless contains all the characteristics of the previous category even as its categorical nature is denied, or at the very least ignored.

¹⁶⁶ Foucault *Archaeology*, 28.

for most of the negative consequences, namely the appropriation of religious language by terrorists and other individuals, to occur. In truth, what most likely occurs is a mix of all three. The final consequence, ignorance of the created problems, though, lies at the forefront.

Perhaps the best way to clearly illustrate the issues associated with the deconstruction of the category of religion within the field of religious studies is to closely examine a single work that demonstrates both the benefits and drawbacks of the deconstructive process. While predating the first wave of post-structuralist thought in the late 1960s, Wilfred Cantwell Smith's work The Meaning and End of Religion was one of the first within the field of religious studies to openly question the appropriateness and necessity of the category of "religion."¹⁶⁷ Indeed many more contemporary academics who seek to deconstruct the category of religion, most notably Talal Asad, have explicitly referenced Cantwell Smith as an inspiration for their later work.¹⁶⁸ In The Meaning and End of Religion Cantwell Smith makes his displeasure with the category of religion immediately clear. He writes, "Neither religion in general nor any one of the religions, I will contend, is in itself an intelligible entity, a valid object of concern whether for the scholar or for the man of faith."¹⁶⁹ Cantwell Smith marshals a variety of evidence to support this undeniably provocative statement. Namely he points to the difference between the term "religion" for the scholar and the believer. A scholar, for instance, has not:

understood religion if one's interpretation does justice only to some abstraction of religiousness in general but not to the fact that for most men of faith, loyalty and concern are not

¹⁶⁷ Cantwell Smith, William. The Meaning and End of Religion. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991. Despite predating the work of, among others, Foucault, Cantwell Smith possesses many clear ideological and methodological similarities. For instance, regarding the discontinuous nature of history, an extremely important point for Foucault, he notes that "If one rejects the fixity and neatness of formulated patterns because they presuppose some definite upper limit to men's faith, one rejects them also because they presuppose definiteness all around, whereas every historian now knows that in fact there is flux" (141). Continuing, he argues that "It is the richness, the radical diversity, the unceasing shift and change, the ramification and complex involvement, of the historical phenomena of 'religion' or of any one 'religion' that create the difficulty" of their categorization and study (144-5).

¹⁶⁸ Asad, Talal. "Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith's 'The Meaning and End of Religion'". *History of Religions*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Feb., 2001), pp. 205-222.

¹⁶⁹ Cantwell Smith, 12.

for any such abstraction but quite specifically and perhaps even exclusively for their own unique tradition—or even for one section within that.¹⁷⁰

The oftentimes exclusive nature of individual belief means that the overarching category of “religion” has little meaning for the adherent of an individual religion. To call for a form of ecumenicalism that allows for multiple traditions to come under the umbrella category of “religion,” for Cantwell Smith, is untenable for a true believer due to the flattening effect it has on their own faith.¹⁷¹

At the same time as Cantwell Smith raises a clarion call against the broader category of religion, he finds himself substituting for it the paired categories of “historical tradition” and “individual faith.” He states that “what men have tended to conceive as religion and especially as a religion, can be more rewardingly, more truly, be conceived in terms of two factors, different in kind, both dynamic: an historical ‘cumulative tradition’, and the personal faith of men and women.”¹⁷² Cantwell Smith has dispensed with the single category of religion, but in doing so has recovered much of what that category previously contained through doubling the category under more nuanced headings. This move is undeniably disingenuous towards Cantwell Smith’s ultimate goal, if his goal is to actually firmly dispense with the category of religion. Not only are his new categories clearly drawn out of his own historical circumstances and beliefs, the emphasis on faith and tradition reflecting the theological split between these two entities in Protestant Christianity, but they clearly are intended to contain all those entities previously contained within the category of religion.¹⁷³ Rather than a single category, there are now two

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹⁷¹ This is only one of Cantwell Smith’s criticisms of the category. For others see specifically Pages 2-3 and 48-9.

¹⁷² Ibid., 194.

¹⁷³ Smith’s conception of individual faith can be seen as rooted in Protestant notions of an individual connection to the divine irrespective of some form of intercessionary institution. At the same time his emphasis on historical tradition reflects the continued importance of such institutions within Protestantism. This bifurcation of religious experience into the personal and institutional is certainly reflected across other religious traditions, although should not be seen, as Smith wants to argue, as forming an essential part of the category of religion. See for instance the attacks of Asad and others against the imposition of Protestant Christian notions of religion on indigenous populations leading to, among, other consequences the mirroring of this tradition/belief split in these other religions.

supposedly separate categories that are linked, but, according to Cantwell Smith, do not necessarily form in conjunction a recovered category of religion.

This delicate scholarly dance with the category of religion, which many scholars wish to dispense with because of its historically loaded roots in a western Protestant worldview, has been repeated in a number of instances.¹⁷⁴ Invariably it is impossible for the scholar to fully dispense with the term for three main reasons. Firstly, it has gained such widespread popular acceptance as to be impossible to fully remove from public vocabulary. Secondly, it would fundamentally remove the foundation of religious scholarship, calling into question the existence of their object of study. What would these scholars then be studying? Even if they profess to study individual traditions and not the broad category, these other unities are open to many of the same criticisms as the overarching category.¹⁷⁵ Finally, to dispense with the category questions the veracity of individual belief in a pejorative manner. Questioning whether or not the category of religion is a justifiable unity can be interpreted as casting doubt on the truthfulness of individual religious experiences.

Cantwell Smith is clearly aware of these dilemmas surrounding the deconstructive process. Perhaps most pressing for him, due to his identification as a Protestant Christian, is the way in which deconstruction can serve to question the credibility of individual beliefs. To resolve this issue Cantwell Smith is forced to uphold the category of ‘the religious’ even as he seeks to dispense with the category of religion. He writes, “the phenomena that we call religious undoubtedly exist,” as well as noting that “Man is everywhere and has always been what we today call ‘religious’.”¹⁷⁶ He qualifies these statements, however, by suggesting that “perhaps the notion that they [religious phenomena] constitute in themselves some distinctive entity is an unwarranted analysis.”¹⁷⁷ It is quite clear that Cantwell Smith is caught in the believer-scholar dilemmas that he has

¹⁷⁴ Smith provides a classic account of the origins of the term ‘religion’ as being derived from the previous term ‘religio’ (19-43), which has also been latched onto by other scholars such as Jonathan Z. Smith in his article “Religion, religions, religious.”

¹⁷⁵ See many of the individual genealogies cited at the outset of this chapter, which deconstruct the unities of Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 17, 18.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

characterized and, as a believer, cannot even unilaterally argue for the veracity of his own scholarly conclusions without qualifying it through upholding the category of ‘the religious.’ In other words, he is forced to argue for the truthfulness of individual religious experiences in a vague sense even if he feels that he cannot group these experiences together in a categorical manner.

Later generations of scholars have not had much greater success in resolving the issue of analyzing religions without the category of religion. Even as they seek to dispense with the category of religion they cannot help but utilize and analyze it. John D. Caputo, for instance, writes regarding the category that “‘Religion,’ in the singular, as just one thing is nowhere to be found.”¹⁷⁸ In the same section, however, he redefines religion in a general sense as “something simple, open-ended, and old-fashioned, namely, the love of God.”¹⁷⁹ Even more scholars ignore or sidestep the issue when it comes up. Others acknowledge the flaws contained within the category of religion and use it anyways. A further way to get around this issue is to only analyze religion or religions in specific synchronic instances, accepting the categories in a historical moment even if such scholars are unwilling to explicitly acknowledge the diachronic failures of the category. This move actually does nothing to improve upon the promise of poststructuralist methodologies such as genealogies, which have as their goal to unmask the assumption that objects can be analyzed synchronically without reference to their diachronic histories.¹⁸⁰

Clearly, therefore, the deconstruction of the category of religion has been imperfectly performed in academic circles, leading in many senses to more confusion than clarity. Even those scholars who wish to dispense with the category

¹⁷⁸ Caputo, *On Religion*, 1. This definition is clearly open to criticism, coming as it is from a monotheistic, specifically Western Christian world view. Even Caputo acknowledges its flaws, writing “my definition of religion...sounds slightly smarmy and pietistic” (3) although uses it as a foundational element none the less.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁸⁰ The idea that localized histories and analyses can be created that circumvent many of the negative assumptions contained within larger overarching historical projections based on categorical unities is difficult to sustain given a strong commitment to poststructuralist ideologies. It introduces the idea that the pejorative nature of unities is in many senses relative to the circumstances in which they are employed. Whether or not this is acceptable depends on how absolutist the dictates of post-structuralism should be viewed as. An unwillingness to adopt a rigorous absolutism in many senses weakens post-structuralism.

are unable to do so fully. This inability can, in many senses, be read as upholding the necessity, if not the veracity, of the category itself. Its usefulness and general acceptance outweigh its other pejorative connotations. This confusion regarding definitions of what is contained within the category of religion, and related debates as to what constitutes an individual religion or individual religious action, would not be of much concern did it not also have profound practical consequences. If the definition of what constituted religious action were limited solely to the academic realm than there would be little problem with the academic ability to clearly define the category or its constituent elements. Religious activities and actions, however, take place among a community of believers and spectators, which academics can observe and influence, but in many senses not truly inhabit.¹⁸¹

The confusion regarding the definition and category of religion has been transmitted into these practical aspects of religion through the inability of academic discourse to clearly delineate, in a categorical manner, the limits of religious activity. This delineation takes the form of observation and reporting on the manner and practice of religious communities from a detached scholarly perspective. Scholarship seeks to inform primarily spectator populations, but also individual traditions themselves, about the richness and variability of religious belief and practice. One of the chief roles of the scholar in this regard is to clearly define what constitutes “religious” actions as opposed to non-religious actions. Under post-structuralist criticism, however, scholars have been unable to fulfill this function.

The necessity for this classificatory project to be a scholarly one, as opposed to being rooted within individual traditions, should be clear. As elaborated upon by scholars such as William Cantwell Smith, the location of an individual within a community of believers in many senses blinds them to the larger category of actions that might be termed “religious.” The actions of an

¹⁸¹ This assertion as to the irreconcilable divide between scholars and believers is unresolved within the field of religious studies. The fact of the matter is that it is oftentimes strong personal belief in religious phenomena that lead individuals to want to study such phenomena in an academic sense. Still, any form of personal religious belief will invariably cast some doubt on the ability of the scholar to remove their own prejudices from the study of either their own tradition or traditions distant from their own.

individual community form, for that community, a unified whole, outside of which it is difficult to recognize analogous forms of action. It is up to the scholar, outside of these systems of belief, to provide cross-system analyses.¹⁸² Certainly the inclusion or exclusion of certain beliefs and practices within a religious organization or community rests with the members of that community. But the relation of those individual practices to a larger category of religion, or even to the larger category of a specific religious tradition such as Christianity or Islam, must rest with the scholar.

The abdication of this scholarly duty has become definitively pronounced within modern society. On the back of post-structuralist attacks on the supposed neutrality of the scholar, similar injunctions made against the impartial nature of scholarship by liberally oriented ideologies such as post-colonialism, have yielded a relativist space in which it is difficult to clearly define actions or practices, to say nothing of the more complicated category of beliefs, as being clearly “religious,” or “not-religious.” Furthermore, a more general emphasis on diversity and political correctness within modern liberal societies has heightened the stakes of making normative claims about the actions of others, whether religious or otherwise.¹⁸³ There are many causes of these symptoms, among which must be recognized, in the scholarly if not necessarily the public sphere, post-structuralist ideologies.

Post-structuralist attacks on normativity lead to the assumption that matters of definition, especially regarding group identity, should be left up to the individuals contained within that group. At the same time, however, there are clear problems with this strategy. Some are specific to the definition of religious actions while others are more generally applicable to all forms of categorization. Firstly, as noted earlier, the divide between the scholar and believer means that, ecumenical claims to the contrary, individuals within a particular religious tradition are often horribly placed to comment on other traditions. Secondly, these problems of a fundamental lack of perspective are equally applicable to the case of

¹⁸² I would not go so far as to say that believers cannot be scholars, or that the two fields are mutually exclusive, but rather that they require fundamentally different viewpoints and orientations that are, in many senses, difficult to reconcile.

¹⁸³ Many conservative, or right-wing thinkers have accurately diagnosed this phenomena, among them James Kalb ([The Tyranny of Liberalism](#). Wilmington, DE : ISI Books, 2008).

individual believers in relation to their individual traditions. The fact of the matter is that religious belief is oftentimes limited to a relatively narrow circle of individuals with similar beliefs: a small religious community within an aggregated larger community. The relationship of these micro-religious communities to a macro-level tradition are varied and can often be described as tenuous at best. What, for instance, are the common elements of the faith that all individuals that might self-label themselves as “Christian” believe in? Furthermore, macro-level traditions have often done a poor job of self-regulating the practices and beliefs of their individually constituent elements.¹⁸⁴

Where then should the locus of categorization regarding religious actions be located? Currently it rests with governments, who play an important role, through among other actions the granting of tax exemptions, which implicitly sanction certain religious beliefs and organizations over others.¹⁸⁵ The problems associated with government definition of religious action should be obvious, especially in modern liberal societies that explicitly disavow the legitimacy of government intrusions into the religious realm.¹⁸⁶ Government definitions of religious activity can easily be described as the suppression of religious freedom, or worse persecution of certain religious movements. This is a clearly an unacceptable role for the government to play. Of the potential alternatives it is obvious that the role of defining religious activity is tailor-made for scholars. The only other feasible option would be to allow for the continuation of the status quo, a shifting morass of relativist individual interpretations, which, as has been demonstrated, is untenable. The problem with advocating for scholars to lead the

¹⁸⁴ See, for instance, the rise of the Westboro Baptist Church in the United States, a purportedly Christian group which has served as a lightning rod for the controversy of what necessarily makes a religious group actually deserve the label of “religious.” Interestingly, however, these debates have been focused mainly on the governmental recognition of religious status through tax exemptions.

¹⁸⁵ While this example is clearly based off of a U.S. model, government definition of religion is a paradigm of modern liberal democracies, and is enacted with even more ruthlessness by European governments. See, for instance, the brutal suppression of religion to the private sphere by the French Government. This suppression, however, implicitly recognizes some practices as religious and others as not.

¹⁸⁶ “Freedom of Religion” is a foundational characteristic of modern liberal societies, and is enshrined in the constitutions of many of these states. Even states that have explicit state religions (limited currently mainly to Islamic theocracies in the Middle East and Africa and Vatican City) are looked down upon internationally for intrusions into the private religious practices of their citizens.

way in defining religious actions, invariably in conjunction with, not in opposition to, the religious organizations and movements that they study, is the current inability to undertake such categorical investigations due to the dictates of post-structuralism currently permeating academic discourse. If scholars are unable to break free of post-structuralism then they must accept the practical consequences of that failure: relativism and its further consequence, terrorism.

If the category of religion has been deconstructed too far, yielding a relativist space in which it is nearly impossible to define individual actions as “religious” or not, a similar relativist problem faces the category of “terrorism.” In fact, there is no definition that either scholars, practitioners, or the public can agree upon. As Susan Tiefenbrun notes, this is somewhat surprising giving the stakes at play: “It is hard to believe that a word like ‘terrorism,’ which is used so frequently these days in different contexts and in casual, colloquial, political, and legal discourses, does not have a universally-accepted definition.”¹⁸⁷ While scholars studying terrorism have a propensity to bemoan the lack of a clear definition of what constitutes terrorism, this cannot be traced to the field being overly deconstructed. There have been very few attempts to explicitly apply post-structuralist methodologies to the field of terrorism, much less religious terrorism.¹⁸⁸ The closest work, by William T. Cavanaugh, applies Foucauldian genealogies to the attempts by secular governments and other entities to create a specter of “religious” violence distinct from and in opposition to the secular state.¹⁸⁹ In the legal field Susan Tiefenbrun and Geoffrey Skoll have applied semiotic legal theory to the study of terrorism with mixed results.¹⁹⁰ More recent, and interesting, debates have been raised by historians concerned with the apparent

¹⁸⁷ Tiefenbrun, Susan. "Semiotic Approach to a Legal Definition of Terrorism, A." *ILSA J. Int'l & Comp. L.* 9 (2002): 357.

¹⁸⁸ Much of this work, where it exists, remains in unpublished, although publically available, undergraduate and graduate theses

¹⁸⁹ Cavanaugh, William T. *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. New York : Oxford University Press, 2009.

¹⁹⁰ Skoll, Geoffrey R. "Meanings of terrorism." *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 20, no. 2 (2007): 107-127.

lack of a clear historiography of the term, although these investigations have not occurred in a post-structuralist sense.¹⁹¹

That does not mean, however, that the abstract category of terrorism has escaped many of the relativistic problems associated with, for instance, the category of religion. Rather, the utilization of the category to label some acts of violence as terrorism and others as legitimate acts of war, normally undertaken by states or smaller government agencies, is so marked by the hallmarks of post-structuralist criticisms that in many senses such criticisms didn't seem necessary to be raised in the first place.¹⁹² In common parlance the phrase "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" is used to designate a sort of pop-culture relativism that nevertheless points to the very real political implications of categorizing acts of terrorism.¹⁹³ The fact of the matter is that the category of terrorism carries with it pejorative and delegitimizing connotations, making its employment a matter of serious concern. If an action can be labeled as "terrorism" as opposed to legitimate oppositional conflict, and, more importantly if that label is upheld, then the entity that is able to enforce the label gains much more legitimacy in their attempts to control terrorism. The asymmetrical nature of terrorist actions means that terrorist organizations generally are already at a disadvantage in terms of physical strength from their opposition (usually an

¹⁹¹ Gage, Beverly. "Terrorism and the American Experience: A State of the Field." *Journal of American History* 98, no. 1 (2011): 73-94.; Mulloy, D. J. "Is There a "Field"? And if There Isn't, Should We Be Worried about It?." *Journal of American History* 98, no. 1 (2011): 111-114.; Larabee, Ann. "Why Historians Should Exercise Caution When Using the Word "Terrorism"." *Journal of American History* 98, no. 1 (2011): 106-110.

¹⁹² Among the obvious post-structuralist criticisms of the category of terrorism are its propagation by state apparatuses, in line with Foucault's analysis of power dynamics in both Discipline and Punish. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) and Power/Knowledge. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), as well as the clear hypocritical nature in which labels of terrorism are applied (state actions, for instance are generally not considered terrorism while non-state actions leveled against the state invariably are).

¹⁹³ The adoption of this tag line by numerous academics, including Robert Kennedy ("Is one person's terrorist another's freedom fighter? Western and Islamic approaches to 'just war' compared." *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Volume 11, Issue 1, 1999. Pages 1-21) and Boaz Ganor ("Defining Terrorism: Is One Man's Terrorist another Man's Freedom Fighter?") *Police Practice and Research: An International Journal*, Volume 3, Issue 4, 2002. Pages 287-304) give undeserved credibility to this argument, that the definition of terrorist activities is solely a matter of perspective. This is a gross over-simplification over the implications of relativism in the process of categorization/definition. The question of "Terrorist or Freedom Fighter?" holds little relevance for the study of the deeper underlying issue of relativism in terrorism discourse.

already emplaced government). This means that they depend in large part upon their perceived legitimacy to gather support and earn success.

The assumption, though, that the category of “terrorism” can be dismissed as only an object of political instrumentation or discourse outright without further investigation does miss the benefits that a finely nuanced genealogical investigation or deconstruction of the category of “terrorism” can provide. It would in many senses be hypocritical to embark upon such a genealogical project within this analysis that comes out quite strongly against post-structuralist methodologies in general, but in this specific case a genealogical investigation may in fact help to halt the already downward slide towards relativism regarding defining terrorism. A genealogical investigation of the roots of terrorism will inevitably reveal both its classic diachronic inconsistencies as well as the inconsistency with the way in which the category of terrorism is both flawed but also necessary for analytical purposes.¹⁹⁴ In many senses the category of terrorism has been deconstructed without an explicit deconstruction. The assumption that such an analysis is unnecessary is in and of itself makes it ripe for investigation.

It is important to acknowledge that the category of terrorism, like any other category, possesses a varied history in which there have been shifts in meaning regarding what is included in the category or not. This admission is oftentimes ignored in even high-level scholarship. For instance David C. Rapoport’s iconic article “Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions,” one of the first to specifically treat the category of “religious terrorism” as a cross-tradition and historical phenomenon, clearly applies the category of “terrorism” in an anachronistic fashion to groups such as the Jewish Zealots, who have little in common with modern religious terrorism.¹⁹⁵ Even if a unitarily consistent and diachronically constant definition of terrorism is impossible to construct, that does not mean that a sufficiently synchronic definition cannot be created. There are

¹⁹⁴ This second inconsistency closely mirrors the slippage between the post-structuralist desires to dispense with the category of “religion” yet the need to retain it as an object of study or analysis. Furthermore, there is the even more simplistic fact at the popular level, that the category of religion cannot be easily dispensed with, and neither can the category of terrorism.

¹⁹⁵ Rapoport, David C. “Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions.” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (Sep., 1984), 658-677.

many clear characteristics of “terrorism” in the current fuzzy popularly accepted definition of the term, such as its political character, its asymmetric nature, and reliance on spectacle that can easily be leveraged towards a clearer synchronic understanding of terrorism. Even if individual points, such as the entirely political nature of terrorism remain somewhat up for debate, there are enough characteristics that can be aggregated to form a concrete definition of terrorist actions that can help clarify the relativistic ways in which the term is utilized once more.

This new categorical process will most likely yield a similar result to current conceptions of terrorism that exist in both scholarly and popular imaginations. Nevertheless the investigative process that culminates in a new taxonomical crystallization is important to embark upon because it will reveal many of the assumptions that scholars hold regarding terrorism and will allow for individual characteristics to be evaluated on their own merits. It is very possible that post-structuralism could play a valuable role in this investigative process, although in many senses this would appear to be unlikely. Firstly, there is little overlap between scholars studying terrorism, particularly its political aspects, and scholars who have interacted with post-structuralist ideas. Furthermore, the unresolved contradiction of post-structuralism: its inability to fully dispense with categories, instead only the labeling some categories in a pejorative sense and allowing others to stand unchallenged or virtually ignored, makes it impossible to pursue an absolutist post-structuralist investigation of any unity or category, including terrorism.

The issue of whether or not post-structuralism, or even any of the individualized philosophies/methodologies that make up post-structuralism, can be pursued in an absolutist sense, is an important one.¹⁹⁶ Certainly the post-

¹⁹⁶ Post-structuralism generally has hewed away from absolutist tendencies, in line with other philosophical ideas of the time. Take for instance, as evidence against the practical nature of absolutism Theodor Adorno’s exhortation that “the only responsible philosophy is one that no longer imagines it had the absolute at its command; indeed philosophy must forbid the thought of it in order not to betray that thought, and at the same time it must not bargain away anything of the emphatic concept of truth. This contradiction is philosophy’s element.” (Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. Page 7.) Adorno repeats this charge against absolutist interpretations in Negative Dialectics. New York: Continuum,

structuralist suspicion of meta-narratives, present most strongly within the work of Jean-François Lyotard, is of paramount importance in adjudicating this issue.¹⁹⁷ Still, the criticism of post-structuralism as forming a meta-narrative in and of itself cannot be wholly undone solely by post-structuralist reasoning. In other words, just because post-structuralism self-labels as a non-meta-narrative, that does not mean that such a label is applicable or apt. If post-structuralism can be applied to all fields and intellectual exercises, then there is no ground on which to stand to argue that it does not serve as a meta-narrative. The failure to pursue post-structuralism in an absolutist sense, therefore, lies with individual actors who disingenuously claim that it is unnecessary or impossible to do so. The fact of the matter is that post-structuralist ideologies contain within them the seeds of universalism, or at the very least should be applicable to all categories and definitions. To say that they cannot be applied in certain instances sets up a hierarchical nature within academic discourse that is untenable under the dictates of post-structuralism.¹⁹⁸

The implicit claim contained within post-structuralism is that it can avoid many of the pitfalls of other forms of scholarship.¹⁹⁹ It therefore seeks to come closer to some form of epistemological truth through the supposition that it provides a “better” product, or at the very least a more “useful” process of inquiry. The failure of post-structuralism to confront these issues head on has as another of its direct consequences a form of centrifugality within scholarship that spins academic inquiry towards the periphery away from meta-narratives or other central

1973. He writes that “the conceptual shells that were to house the whole, according to philosophical custom, have in view of the immense expansion of society and of the strides made by positive natural science come to seem like relics of a simple barter economy amidst the late stage of industrial capitalism” (3).

¹⁹⁷ Lyotard, Jean-François. The Postmodern Condition : a Report on Knowledge. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

¹⁹⁸ In colloquial language it means that there is some “good” scholarship that is not open to post-structuralist critiques while other forms of “bad” scholarship are untenable and should be criticized. ¹⁹⁹ This can be easily demonstrated. If post-structuralism does not somehow yield “better” results, than there is no reason for its usage by any scholar. If there is no reason for its recommendation then it lacks any power. It is important to caution against the temptation to say that this fact is unimportant, that there should be no normativity present in scholarship to the extent that an individual methodology cannot be termed “better” or “worse” or in another sense more or less “useful.” Should this argument be explored to its conclusion it is clear that it leads once again towards relativism within scholarship (individual choice is all that matters) or worse nihilism (no scholarship can be labeled as “better” or “worse” and therefore has no purpose whatsoever).

macro-level arguments.²⁰⁰ Specialized forms of scholarship become the norm because it is harder to challenge these specific claims as opposed to larger grand meta-narratives. Furthermore the real consequences of having one's work criticized in a post-structuralist manner cannot be ignored.²⁰¹ In a perhaps more positive light academic specialization has occurred on the periphery because of a well-intentioned desire to work on the localized, decentralized narratives that are lauded as acceptable by post-structuralism. This dark side of post-structuralism, the way it shapes academic discourse in a limiting manner, closing certain doors in favor of others, is not often acknowledged. Perhaps the greatest irony of post-structuralism is that it possesses clear normative tendencies even as it criticizes normativity in virtually all disciplines.

In many senses, therefore, post-structuralism is built on a tautology. Because it seeks to break down the assumptions and biases inherent within scholarship, any attempt to push back against it are indicative of those same biases and power imbalances seeking to reassert themselves. Through this form of self-legitimation post-structuralism becomes very difficult to criticize. That is not to say that there is no benefit from post-structuralist methodologies, but rather these benefits are obscured by either an absolutist focus on post-structuralism that makes it the only form of possible scholarship or the disingenuous claim that post-structuralism represents only one of many paths, albeit a superior one, that still cannot be superimposed in the form of a meta-narrative. The unwillingness of post-structuralism to clearly deal with these issues even as they have taken over large swathes of academic discourse is startling. While post-structuralism has obviously evolved since the early writings of Foucault and Derrida among others, its self-contained drive towards the periphery makes it difficult to even

²⁰⁰ Jackall, Robert. "Re-Enchanting the World: Some Reflections on Postmodernism." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Autumn, 1994), Pages 183-192. Jackall is more concerned with the debilitating effects of this centrifugality on modern society in general, although he does reference its presence in the intellectual sphere as well. He notes, "our age seems best characterized as one of social and intellectual centrifugality, even while the structural contours of our world become ever more rationalized and bureaucratized" (185).

²⁰¹ The competitive nature of the academic hiring process, as well as the equally difficult tenure process, serves to suppress, or at the very least definitely shapes, modes of academic inquiry. It rewards certain types of scholarship at the same time as it punishes other forms.

conceptualize or theorize about these larger issues contained within the post-structuralist project itself. This makes critiques of post-structuralism all the more important because it would appear that even if post-structuralists are open to self-criticism, such criticisms go unrealized. Pointing out the manner in which post-structuralism serves to limit academic inquiry is an important first critical step. The following chapter will seek to provide various strategies that will allow scholarship to move beyond the confusion and relativism caused by post-structuralism in the hope of re-invigorating categorical forms of scholarship.

Chapter 5: The Way Forward

The preceding chapters have sought to provide a primarily descriptive account of how the application of post-structuralist methodologies to the field of religious studies has yielded a relativist space where it is very difficult to convincingly argue for what constitutes both religious activities in general as well as the apparent religiosity of specific individual actions. One practical consequence of this relativism in scholarship is the ceding of religious legitimacy to terrorist organizations to exploit. A constant, if generally unacknowledged, tension within this descriptive account has been the relation of the mostly academic struggle regarding definitional meaning and its attendant practical consequences. There are many reasons for first focusing on the theoretical roots of the definitional problems regarding religious terrorism without clearly exploring the practical manner in which the effects are transmitted. While effects may be more easily observable, the analysis of effects does not necessarily lead to clear solutions to those effects if the causes are not adequately addressed.

How, though, can these effects be controlled, given the manner in which their causes, at least the academic level, are far removed from practical realities? In the first place it must be recognized that the general supposition that the permeation of post-structuralist ideologies within academic circles is important to the study of religious terrorism should rightly be seen as contentious. While the linkages between the two phenomena appear to be present, they are extremely nuanced, making them difficult to pick out. Articulating this controversial formula for the transfer of academic discourse to the policy and popular realm, even if lacking specificity, is necessary, though, to spark a debate to not only re-evaluate the study of religious terrorism, but also criticize post-structuralism in general. Once these criticisms are allowed to take hold and run their course it will be possible to halt the appropriation of religious legitimacy by terrorists and terrorist organizations. Through re-emphasizing the importance of categorization within scholarship it is possible to clearly delineate actions as religious or non-religious, (and terrorism or not terrorism), removing religious legitimacy from the hold of terrorist organizations.

This latter transfer of a reinvigorated form of academic categorization back onto popular discourse will not be as difficult as it might seem. In the first place, it is falsely assumed that the goal of what amounts in some sense to counter-terrorist propaganda will inevitably fail because of the apparent fanaticism of religious terrorists. The fact of the matter, though, is that it is not these true believers against whom the re-assertion of the category of religion will be targeted. As a percentage of all religious believers, terrorists form a miniscule portion. Even if the effects of their actions may greatly outweigh their actual numbers, the relatively small proportion of terrorists, coupled with the difficulty of targeting true believers, means that the object of any practical strategy to deny religious legitimacy to terrorist organizations should target the much larger spectator populations, both within and without of religious communities.

Such a strategy, adopting a counter-insurgency approach to counter-terrorism, is not new. It was first proposed by David Kilcullen, an Australian counter-insurgency expert known for serving as a high-level advisor to the United States in both Iraq and Afghanistan.²⁰² Kilcullen's thesis, however, remains fairly simplistic, and does not take into account the profound difficulties with arguing against the religious legitimacy of terrorist actions in a normative sense. Viewing religious terrorism as a form of insurgency within an otherwise neutral religious community allows for the focus to shift from terrorists themselves to the spectator populations. These latter populations will not only be more responsive to claims regarding the legitimacy or illegitimacy of religious actions, but are also easier to target for the simple reason that they are not actively engaged in terrorist activities. They are therefore not attempting to conceal their movements and actions or otherwise resisting contact with the outside world. Looking towards spectator populations also allows for a shift in focus away from the piety or lack of piety of religious terrorists, except in so far as such claims are leveled not against terrorists themselves but against spectator populations. Claims regarding the religious piety of the terrorists will not in and of themselves accomplish anything unless they are

²⁰² Kilcullen, David J. "Countering Global Insurgency." *Journal of Strategic Studies*. Vol. 28. No. 4. 2005. Pages 597-617.

clearly evidenced as part of a well-thought out campaign to deny religious legitimacy to terrorist organizations. These campaigns will most likely not be planned and enacted at the level of the scholar, but it is only through scholarly research that government agencies, social organizations, or even individual citizens will be able to have the tools necessary to make claims about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of specific actions that are apparently religious.

The next step, therefore, must be to provide scholars with the tools that they require to reassert these normative categorizations regarding religious actions. Critical responses to post-structuralism have not yet crystallized in a clear manner despite nearly 40 years since the publication of the first major set of works in the field by Derrida and Foucault. The reason for this failure is due to the difficulty associated with proposing new forms of scholarship given the critiques of previous forms of scholarship contained within post-structuralism.²⁰³ It is obviously impossible to try and theorize new ideologies or methodologies in a post-post-structuralist era without in some way responding to the criticisms of previous modes of scholarship that post-structuralism still provides. Complicating the picture is the fact that while it is certainly possible to criticize post-structuralist methodologies on their own grounds, there are also attendant benefits that can be gained by employing these methodologies. At the same time, however, as this analysis has demonstrated, these benefits are outweighed by the drawbacks and unintended consequences of post-structuralism.

There are two main courses of action regarding the creation of new scholarly strategies to deal with the negative consequences of post-structuralism.²⁰⁴ The first would require an entirely novel formulation of

²⁰³ Similarly, there is an element of suppression that is generational, as post-structuralists who currently hold positions of power in academic settings, as well as in the publishing field, restrict access in part to those academics whom the agree with ideologically.

²⁰⁴ A third strategy would be attempting to revitalize or reshape post-structuralism in a way that limits its negative unintended consequences. This path should be rejected primarily on the basis of post-structuralism's unwillingness to confront these consequences or drawbacks in the first place. Secondly, the unresolved issue of post-structuralism's inability to be embraced in absolutist terms, coupled with its longevity without much adaptation, means that this does not seem to be a feasible strategy. Given the clear flaws of post-structuralist ideologies it is difficult to propose how it could be amended in ways that would not fatally compromise its commitment to opposing normativity. Another, even worse strategy would be to do nothing, accepting post-structuralism as flawed and

categorical scholarship along new ideological or philosophical lines that bears little to no relation to post-structuralism at all. While obviously a desirable solution, the difficulty of such a project precludes its advancement. The simpler solution, and one that can be achieved more easily, is to partially recapture previous categorical methodologies in ways that limit the previously founded post-structuralist critiques. While obviously not a pure reversion to previous methodologies and scholarly ideologies, these new uses of historical techniques will serve to recognize the reasons that such methodologies were formulated in the first place: both their usefulness and their apparent truthfulness in describing the reality of the observed world.²⁰⁵ Here two potential avenues of attack towards reformulating categorical methods of scholarship will be presented, even if their development requires a much more detailed analysis than can be provided here. What both paths represent, however, is a refocusing on the naturalness and necessity of categorization, both specifically within scholarship and more generally in society. They deny the post-structuralist assumption that normative claims and the categorical process are inherently flawed. Emphasizing on the practical reality of categorization represents a good way to push back against the post-structuralist emphasis on the artificiality of categorization. If categorization can be seen as natural, or at the very least less artificial, then the negative valence associated with normativity and the categorical process becomes diminished, if not dispensed with entirely.

The first potential alternative is a re-emphasis on the psychological aspects of the categorical process. In many senses categorization seems to be a natural psychological offshoot of the human quest to provide order to observed life. While post-structuralism contains within it a profound critique of “natural” processes,

the negative consequences it carries with it. At this point the drawbacks contained within this path should also be self-evident. The negative consequences associated with post-structuralism are too great to be ignored.

²⁰⁵ In describing the “apparent truthfulness” of these methodologies I am pointing to the ways in which these forms of scholarship were often, in their primary conceptions, wrongly interpreted as breaching the epistemological boundaries inherent within scholarship by discovering some essential underlying order to the phenomenon they analyzed and defined. These historical claims cannot be accepted with any seriousness in a modern academic environment. Setting aside their absolutist and phenomenological claims, these methodologies/ideologies have, as demonstrated, many benefits to provide modern scholarship.

new biological advances, especially a greater understanding of the chemical roots of human cognitive processes, mean that critiques of “natural” are less pointed as they might have been in the past. When all processes of the human body are broken down, to the systemic, cellular, and ultimately chemical level, there is little to deny that the function of the body is “natural,” even if that “naturalness” is rooted in a different sense than it has been historically.²⁰⁶ Rooting concepts of “natural” processes in biology or chemistry inevitably upholds rational empirical science as a form of epistemological inquiry. This assertion is also open to critique, but such criticisms have not gained much credence in either scholarly or popular conceptions of science.

A once popular, although now less investigated, sub-field of psychology, gestalt psychology, has specific interest for the reassertion of categorization within scholarship because of its emphasis on the “naturalness” of categorization. At its most basic level gestalt psychology deals with the interaction between conceptions of “the whole” and “the part,” or, rephrased, categories and their constituent elements.²⁰⁷ Kurt Koffka’s much mis-quoted summation is that “our reality is not a mere collocation of elemental facts, but consists in units in which no part exists by itself, where each part points beyond itself and implies a larger whole...the whole is more than the sum of its parts.”²⁰⁸ Koffka is an unabashed positivist and sees science, as a positivist venture, as holding great promise for the advancement of

²⁰⁶ Specifically, historical attempts to define a process as “natural” were often based on notions of inexplicability or the sublime. In Christian thought the “natural” was conflated with the “religious.” These accounts of “nature and “the natural” have been criticized through post-structuralist and post-modernist lenses. The reassertion of a synchronic definition of “natural,” however, seems much less controversial, especially if it is backed up by scientific evidence and research.

²⁰⁷ There are numerous thinkers associated with Gestalt psychology that have relevance here. Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler will be the primary treatments here, but also important to the field’s developments are Max Wertheimer (*Drei Abhandlungen Zur Gestalttheorie*, Erlangen: Philosophische Akademie, 1925. and *Productive Thinking*, New York: Harper & Row, 1959.), Harry Helson (*The Psychology of Gestalt*, N.d.: *The American Journal of Psychology*, 1926.) and George Hartmann (*Gestalt Psychology*, New York: Ronald Press Company, 1935.). A helpful anthology on the subject is *Documents of Gestalt Psychology*, Mary Henle, ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961.

²⁰⁸ Koffka, Kurt. *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935. Page 176. Koffka is often misquoted as saying “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts,” although this misattributes a hierarchical nature to the category, setting it above the individual elements which it contains. Koffka himself is aware of this danger, writing “It is more correct to say that the whole is something else than the sum of its parts, because summing is a meaningless procedure, whereas the whole-part relationship is meaningful” (176).

society. He notes “the acquisition of true knowledge should help us reintegrate our world which has fallen to pieces; it should teach us the cogency of objective relations, independent of our wishes and prejudices, and it should indicate to us our true position in our world and give us respect and reverence for the things animate and inanimate around us.”²⁰⁹ Such a goal is admirable, if clearly containing poorly conceived notions of objectivity and “true knowledge.” These concepts are wide open to criticism not only through post-structuralist lenses, but a variety of philosophical modes, including Kantian epistemology.²¹⁰ As his way of approaching this dilemma Koffka rejects what he terms “vitalism,” the supposition that “in inorganic nature you find nothing but the interplay of blind mechanical forces, but when you come to life you find order, and that means a new agency that directs the workings of inorganic nature, giving aim and direction and thereby order to its blind impulses.”²¹¹ Continuing, he concludes that “Should it be possible to demonstrate order as a characteristic of *natural* events and therefore within the domain of physics, then we could accept it in the science of life without introducing a special vital force responsible for the creation of order.”²¹² Koffka sees psychology, specifically its relation to the investigation of *gestalt*, or segregated objective whole entities (in short categories), as providing this natural characteristic. It is a matter of psychological inquiry to attempt to demonstrate how and why the mind orders diverse events or elements into categories or *gestalt*.²¹³

Koffka derives the terminology of *gestalt* from another thinker, Wolfgang Köhler, whose theories he develops and expands upon. For Köhler “the word ‘gestalt’ means any segregated whole” deriving from the dual meanings of the term *gestalt* in German: “the connotation of ‘shape’ or ‘form’ as a *property* of

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 9-10.

²¹⁰ Once more the epistemological issues of the scholarly project in general become of paramount importance here.

²¹¹ Ibid., 16.

²¹² Ibid., 17. Emphasis in original.

²¹³ This is the goal, even if the answer to the latter question of why is unanswerable without reference to a “new agency that directs the workings of inorganic nature” which Koffka spent the previous section critiquing. The supposition here, albeit unproven and hypothetical, is that new insights into the chemical composition of cognition can replace this “new agency” in a rationally consistent and acceptable manner.

things...and *having* a shape or form as one of its attributes.”²¹⁴ For both Koffka and Köhler the theories surrounding *gestalt* (*gestalttheorie*) have a greater applicability outside of the narrow limits of psychology. As Köhler notes, “wherever a process dynamically distributes and regulates itself, determined by the actual situation in a whole field, this process is said to follow principles of *gestalttheorie*. In all cases of this type the process will have some characteristic which exists in an extended area only, so that a consideration of local points or local factors as such will not give us full insight into the nature of the process.”²¹⁵ The hallmarks of *gestalttheorie* are a focus on the regulation of individualized parts in relation to a larger category or process. Köhler believes that “the concept of *gestalt* may be applied far beyond the limits of sensory fields.”²¹⁶ Similarly Koffka asks, “Do we then claim that all facts are contained in such interconnected groups or units that each quantification is a description of true quality, each complex and sequence of events orderly and meaningful? In short, do we claim that the universe and all events in it form one big *gestalt*?”²¹⁷ This supposition of *gestalt* as forming, in essence, a comprehensive meta-narrative is thought-provoking, even if it is unconvincing.²¹⁸ Koffka himself is aware of this danger, writing “if we did [conceive of *gestalttheorie* in this way] we should be as dogmatic as the positivists who claim that no event is orderly or meaningful, and those who assert that quality is essentially different from quantity.”²¹⁹ Absolutist tendencies aside, it is clear that many of these early theorists of *gestalt* psychology saw that their work had a more general applicability.

If upheld, even if only in part, the ideas of *gestalt* psychology have a profound relevance for thinking about categorization in general because of the way in which they suggest a psychological foundation for the ordering of things. While

²¹⁴ Köhler, Wolfgang. *Gestalt Psychology*. New York: Horace Liveright, 1929. Page 192.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

²¹⁷ Koffka, 22.

²¹⁸ Here the concept of meta-narrative is introduced mainly in the sense that Jean-François Lyotard critiques it, as an overarching way of explaining observed phenomena. Given post-structuralist critiques of meta-narratives it is difficult to reassert that *gestalttheorie* is in a fact an acceptable meta-narrative that cannot be criticized in just the same ways as other meta-narratives have.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

claims to unlock a foundational “human nature” are in many senses rightly suspect, should categorization be demonstrated to be sufficiently rooted in human psychology, and potentially be the product of bio-chemical processes, than it becomes more difficult to argue against both categorization and normativity more generally as being somehow flawed or unacceptable. Whether *gestalt* psychology can provide this evidence remains up in the air. Certainly it has been marginalized within the field of psychology in modern times in favor of more robust models of human cognition. Nevertheless, in light of the potential benefits it offers to understanding categorization in general, especially as pertains to scholarship, a critical re-evaluation of *gestalt* psychology seems apt.

A second course of action that might prove helpful for understanding categorical forms of scholarship also comes from historically marginalized ideologies, namely classical notions of functionalism within sociological research. According to A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, one of the main developers of the theory of Structural Functionalism, “The function of any recurrent activity, such as the punishment of a crime, or a funeral ceremony, is the part it plays in the social life as a whole and therefore the contribution it makes to the maintenance of the structural continuity.”²²⁰ Radcliffe-Brown relies upon the analogy of a living organism to describe the necessity of these social institutions, writing that “the function of a recurrent physiological process is thus a correspondence between it and the needs (i.e., necessary conditions of existence) of the organism.”²²¹ The difficulty of pinning down this conception of fulfilling a social “need” was immediately clear within a generation. Robert Merton, for instance, writing less than two decades after Radcliffe-Brown noted that “the large assembly of terms used indifferently and almost synonymously with ‘function’ presently includes use, utility, purpose, motive, intention, aim, consequences...the fact is that the undisciplined use of these terms, with their ostensibly similar conceptual reference, leads to successively greater departures from tight-knit and rigorous

²²⁰Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. “On the Concept of Function in Social Science.” *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 37, No. 3, Part 1 (Jul. - Sep., 1935), pp. 394-402. Page 396.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 395.

functional analysis.”²²² The fluidity with which the term “function” became utilized within the field of sociology, to say nothing of its adoption by other fields and transfer into popular discourse, is just one of the many criticisms that can be raised against functionalism.

A perhaps more devastating critique is the manner in which “function” as an object of analysis is transmitted from the mind of the observer of social activity, thus becoming overlaid on the indigenous practices which that observer is tasked with analyzing. The concept of “function,” an analytical construction, is imputed into practices and can be easily pursued as an end in and of itself in a reified sense in ways that have little to no relation to the individual practices themselves. Even this criticism, however, can be critiqued for the way it reinforces the notion that there is an objective viewpoint from which an observer can analyze events and practices, whether they are a participant or not. While important considerations to keep in mind, these criticisms fail to dilute the important underlying theme behind structural functionalism: providing a general explanation for why individual social practices and institutions persist.

Functionalism actually avoids some of the pitfalls of other explanatory ideologies, such as *gestalt* psychology, which must rely on some account of human nature or similar justification for their claims. Functionalism remains an analytical concept, purely theoretical, which is difficult if not impossible to conflate with some conception of “the real” in an abstract sense. In its specific sociological definition functionalism has direct relevance to the study of religious terrorism through providing an explanation for the continued relevance of religion in modern society. While classical functionalist accounts of religion have fallen by the wayside, there remains usefulness in seeing the adoption of religious legitimacy by terrorist organizations as following under a functionalist framework.²²³ It can be argued that this represents a slippage in the use of the term “function,” but the application seems justified. The grafting of religious language and symbolism to

²²² Merton, Robert. Social Theory and Social Structure. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957. Page 23.

²²³ See for instance Merton’s pointed critique of the movement from the study of religion in non-literate societies to that in literate societies (28-30), which although dated (For instance Merton’s bifurcation of religion in literate vs. non-literate societies is less useful from a modern analytic perspective) still accurately points to the problems with the project.

acts of terrorism serves not only the needs of the terrorist but also in a functional sense allows for the analogical classification of these grotesque acts of violence by modern spectator populations. Religious action becomes a lens through which these acts become classified as their magnitude otherwise defies the limits of modern imagination.

In another sense functionalism, if somewhat generalized and removed from its specific analysis of social phenomena, can be applied to the categorical process in the abstract. Categories and definitions, and their creation by populations, can be seen as occurring because they fulfill the function of simplifying what remains a seemingly infinitely complicated world. The categorical process serves a practical purpose in society that can be analyzed in a functionalist way like any other social practice. Seen in this light the post-structuralist criticisms of categorization become quite strained. Although labeling categorization as a social practice makes it in some way conditioned by human interaction (and therefore is not “natural”), rooting it in a theoretical abstraction of “function,” rather than a poorly conceived notion that what is being analyzed is not an abstraction but some “real” reflection of human experience, is certainly as a worthwhile trade-off.²²⁴

Whether or not *gestalt* psychology or functionalism in a revitalized sense are accepted as potential alternatives or amendments to post-structuralist thinking remains less important than the clear admission that post-structuralist ideologies must be reshaped in ways to limit the negative consequences of its employment. Chief among these negative consequences is the adoption of religious forms of legitimacy by terrorist organizations, although certainly other consequences occur. If nothing else, the introduction of post-structuralist ideologies has eroded the foundations of traditional categories that held real power, and in many instances neglected to fill the void caused by this erosion. While to some this lack of categories and foundation may be acceptable, to wide stretches of the population it is not. Even if functionalist explanations for categorization are not to be upheld,

²²⁴ In other words, the concept of “function” is not seen as real experience but as a derivative analytical concept that helps explain these real experiences. Clearly setting this distinction, and guarding against slippages between the

the observable phenomena of continued categorization within modern society points at the very least to their durability, if not a reflection of their necessity.

The previous chapters have sought to trace the winding interactions between two very diverse subjects, post-structuralist methodologies and religious terrorism. While the causal links between the two have previously not been examined, that does not mean that they are not strong. There would appear to be clear connections, for instance, between the scholarly inability to define religious activities and the inability of the general population to classify apparent acts of religious terrorism. Scholarship is not conducted in a vacuum and the ideas and theories propagated within an academic environment both are affected by popular discourse and affect this discourse in a variety of ways. Even if academic ideologies remain concentrated within scholarly circles then this paralyzes these scholars from impacting public discourse and, as has been seen with religious terrorism, this absence in many instances is just as detrimental. Regardless of one's own ideological orientation, or agreement with post-structuralism, it is clear that it must be re-evaluated in order to either better explain or, an even more desirable outcome, help to curb, the social ills such as religious terrorism that have increased in its wake.

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