

Underdefined Definitions

Chidester's key claim is that "religious fakes still do authentic religious work in and through the play of American popular culture." (p. vii.) He satisfactorily proves this claim through numerous examples. However his implicit purpose is to posit that the line between religion and culture has been blurred in the US and through the forces of globalization throughout the world. I intend to show that he reaches this conclusion by using definitions for both concepts that are overtly and unnecessarily inclusive. The more we widen the meanings of concepts the more generalized statements will be true using them. He has widened both concepts involved so extremely that his claims became axiomatic, not even needing proof.

He uses two working definitions for religion. On one hand he refers to it as "ways of being a human person in a human place." (p. vii.) Taking this as the starting point he seems to position himself in the camp that defines religion based on its function. Religion's purpose, based on this statement, is to make us humans. In the next sentence however, he speaks of religion as "discourses and practices that negotiate what it is to be a human person both in relations to the superhuman and in relation to whatever might be treated as subhuman." (p. vii.) This qualifier clarifies that he is striving for an understanding of religion that combines the two schools of definitions: functional and substantive. The latter focuses on the content of the religion such as beliefs, rituals, devotions, and emotion.

By combining the two classic understanding of the term he creates a notion that extends its realm to all spheres of life. As, by definition, we are always humans, we always follow ways of being humans. And as we live in society we always live in a human place. I believe he rendered his definition meaningless as any and all human activity is covered by it. Under these conditions religion is not separate from anything else humans do, but swallowed up all of our doings.

The quoted explanation he added to the bold definition clarifies slightly his thinking as we learn that he intends to focus on the quest for meaning. This is one of the two standard answers sociologists give for the question why people believe. Interestingly though Chidester's book plays up the second answer at least to the same extent, according to which people want to have a sense of belonging. Example after example, he shows how pop culture phenomena create a sense of community amongst their adherents. By explicitly mentioning the first reason and implicitly covering areas of the second he creates an imbalance in his usage. Yes, the examples he uses illustrate both religious aspects of pop culture, but why single out one of the two, when in reality he uses the support of both to prove his claim. The answer lays in the interpretation for the quest of meaning suggesting that to be human is to be a culture creating animal. As culture is the theme of the book it is natural that this is the explicit focal point of his investigation. He acknowledges that our culture is not as individualistic as it seems. Thus he takes into account the social, communal aspect of the issue, but attempts to do it implicitly, relatively speaking driving away the attention from it.

I also contest his definition of popular culture. On the surface there is nothing wrong with his inclusive understanding, "popular culture ... encompasses the ordinary—the pleasures of our

lives, which we may even take for granted." (p.1.) What is missing is the historical context, the differentiation (or relation) between culture and popular culture, and finally taking a stand on the nature of popular culture itself.

By historical context I refer to the fact that Chidester does not take into account the development of popular culture. I understand that in a book examining the relationship between 20th century phenomena one cannot discuss extensively their history. However it is a mistake to disregard them to the extent he does. Virtually all his examples rely on products, activities that were made possible by 20th century technological developments. Some sociologists limit the term popular culture as the product of modern society. They equate its beginnings with the mass manufacturing of cultural products that enabled the mass consumption. For them the primary characteristic of popular culture is its populous nature. Others however extend its range to include the Middle Ages. For them the prevailing culture of a society is the popular culture, no matter what proportion of the population is engaged with it. Chidester does not take a position on this issue, does not even mention it. By taking a neutral view he creates an ahistorical concept that is detached from development. By not arguing for either side he seems to be correct. But avoiding the issue does not prove his related points, just makes them fuzzy. (One may notice that I do not take side on this issue either. My point is however that to understand popular culture one has to face its development. My aim here is not to analyze popular culture itself, but Chidester's interpretation. We do not have the same goal; therefore I do not have to express an opinion on the matter.)

Chidester does not pay enough attention to the differences between culture and popular culture. We do not really learn whether they mean the same thing for him. No matter which

definition of culture we take we would find his lack of differentiation at best confusing at worst divertive. The Nietzsche-ian definition is talking about the "unity of style of group", addressing it on the micro level. Clifford Geertz on the other hand attempts to seek a definition on the macro level. For him culture is "a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied symbols, a system of inherited inception expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes of life." (Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 89.) Chidester alternates between the micro and macro level throughout the book without a clear distinction, thus making the concept fuzzy.

Chidester can get away with this lack of clarity precisely because he is undecided about the populous or prevalent nature of popular culture. The two omissions relate to each other. Had he decided that popular culture is first and foremost populous he would have needed to go with the systematic explanation for culture. Similarly accepting Nietzsche's view on culture, popular culture could refer to smaller subgroups' culture.

In some regard, his whole book is an exploration of what authenticity is. That is why it is surprising that he leaves the question hanging whether popular culture is or can be authentic. To some extent he follows the Frankfurt School that equates popular culture with mass culture and in the process demotes it. This elitist view is reflected in the fact that he poses the question at all. One can create a sense of illegitimacy by questioning what was not questioned earlier. On the other hand he also sides with the view that popular culture is authentic because it creative. He writes, "authentic fakes can generate power and creativity in American religion." (p. ix.) By "fakes" he refers to those people who engage religion from a cultural angle and make claims that from a purely religious point of view would be considered fraudulent.

Overall it seems intentional that Chidester does not want to decide for us, give us a triumphing argument for declaring popular culture and the "authentic fake" people more fake or more authentic. I have to agree with him that this is a question that can be answered only on very specific contexts and only on the individual level. Ultimately one has to decide for herself or himself what is fake and what is authentic. This decision requires more than analytical mental tools, it requires the individual to place trust into someone. As such it is a religious question of faith. The same way a science cannot prove or disprove religious claims, personal conviction of authenticity does not have to rely only on logic.

The list of titles of the chapters gives a precise overview of his focus. He is concerned with religion as it is popular, plastic, embodied, sacrificial, monetary, global, transatlantic, shamanic, and virtual. With the exception of two (sacrificial and shamanic) these terms can and do directly refer to culture as well. By attaching them to religion he intended to blur the lines between them. His arguments leave no doubt that they are strongly related. But he managed to do this by making oblique both terms in the process. By making the definitions less inclusive he could have made a stronger statement. This way all he can say besides that popular culture is represented in religion and vica versa, is that sometimes they are in tension. But these conclusions do not require a full volume to posit.

The Prompt:

Write a critical review of Chidester's book. Assess his argument about Authentic Flakes, or as he says "HS" in the Preface. You can agree or disagree with his argument, but make your own argument in support of your position. DUE: Nov. 3 at class time.

5Pp.