Book Reviews

Serving the Word: Literalism in America from the Pulpit to the Bench. By Vincent Crapanzano. New York: The New Press, 2000. Pp. xxvi + 406.

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Vincent Crapanzano assumes an anthropological perspective to describe literalism—a form of interpretation that uncritically reaffirms knowledge—as being unique to American culture. He takes as his project a critical ethnographic examination of systems of interpretation drawing parallels between evangelical Fundamentalists—literalists—who hold to a literal reading of the Bible and United States jurists—originalists—who seek the original intent of the Framers of the Constitution. For Crapanzano, these seemingly divergent groups share a 'faith' in the meaning of the 'word' that results in a decontextualization of the document; the text becomes ahistorical and privileged as either the "God-breathed" or the "self-evident" truth. This book is, in actuality, two separate works brought together by the reflexive conclusion wherein we are cautioned to be wary of the tyrannical interpretive regimes that are antithetical to creative thought and a threat to true democracy.

Crapanzano does not intend to suggest that evangelical Fundamentalists and those within the legal system share a method of interpretation, only that in regard to their respective interpretations each group is constrained in their understanding of the (real) world. For the literalists, the Bible *is* the word of God as composed at the hand of man (p. 28). Acceptance of this "fact" comes in the form of election, or salvation, wherein the truth of all past and future history can be experienced. While the literalist can cite chapter and verse of the Scripture, often as suasion to those who have not seen the "truth", there is no debate regarding the discontinuities found in the Bible;

those who have not accepted His truth simply do not understand. Originalists are more receptive to debate as the making and the repeal of law hinges on what rights the Framers intended when drafting the Constitution. While both conservative and liberal jurists may be originalists, and each may extensively argue their position by citing precedent, there begins to form a repetition among the arguments that can ultimately be reduced to interpretations regarding original intent. The worldview of the originalist becomes constrained as his reading of what truths are, or are not, "self-evident" prove his position as being correct and all others being wrong.

Literal readings are neither innocent nor objective. As Crapanzano suggests, unyielding interpretations that lay claim to the truth are merely a pretense for advancing a moral agenda. Much like the insular interpretation of the literalist, the originalist seeks a singular understanding of the law whereby her personal values are reaffirmed through her reading of the Constitution. For Crapanzano, the adherence to morality and the sacralizing of historical texts that come to be associated with literalism cannot be explained as a rejection of modernity. Literalists and originalists often embrace modernity and expend considerable amounts of energy bridging the disjunctures between their worldview and the actual (postmodern) world. Moral continuity is maintained by disregarding competing viewpoints.

It is here where Crapanzano begins to pull together the threads that tie literalism to American culture. Unfortunately, culture is painted in broad strokes and we are left to assume that the idiom of rugged-individualism, leaving Americans "isolated, separated from one another in ambition" (p. 341), fosters a sense of moral superiority rather than promoting open discourse for developing a true political idiom. Crapanzano sees American political views expressed not so much as "talking politics" but as "preaching politics." Taken literally, the ethos of American democracy assumes a singular vision wherein all competing forms of government are dismissed as misguided; talk of socializing medicine is an anathema. The practice of stringently holding to literal interpretations—of religion, of politics, of science,

of art—leads to even greater separations within American society as individuals and groups, never fully engaged in the dialectical process, simply talk past one another. Such interpretation finds comfort in continuity and therefore must stifle creative thought; the very foundation of American opportunity. This growing separatism is antithetical to Crapanzano's vision of American democracy.

Students of culture may be drawn to this book to gain a richer understanding of the processes by which literalism has come to define American thought, however, Crapanzano insists that it is not his purpose to provide explanation but rather offer a disquieted description of modes of interpretation. In favoring anthropological description to the often tautological explanations of sociology and psychology, Crapanzano implies an autonomy to culture that is just as deterministic as the literalism it is said to produce. Sociologists of culture can assist in this project by identifying the tenets of American culture and by offering comparisons that do explain some of this phenomenon.