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4 THE CATEGORY “RELIGION” AND
5
6 THE POLITICS OF TOLERANCE
7
8

9
10 Russell T. McCutcheon
11

12
13 I don't know, you know? Monica said. I can understand that there's the issue of truth, you know.
14 We're all God's children, God is synonymous with good, truth, and kindness and happiness and
15 all sorts of things.

16 I don't care about all that right now, Linda Tripp said ([Eszterhas, 2000](#), p. 197).
17

18
19 **A HISTORY OF “RELIGION”**

20
21 If, in writing the history of our field, we place considerable importance on the
22 late 19th-century move from Christian missiological polemics concerning the
23 hierarchy of truths manifested in varied religions to increasingly “scientific”
24 and “objective” attempts to amass descriptions and comparisons of the varying
25 contents of religious beliefs, myths, and rituals worldwide, then one of the most
26 significant developments of the late 20th century is surely the shift in attention
27 from merely collecting and interpreting so-called objective, religious facts to
28 historicizing the very terms and categories by means of which we amass our
29 collections of exotica. This shift in attention away from old issues of theological
30 vs. scientific studies of religion, from the shouting match between theologians and
31 positivists, may well be characteristic of the “linguistic turn” found throughout
32 the human sciences over the past 20 years, or so – a turn that, for some people,
33 has made the largely descriptive world religions survey course a relic of the past.¹
34 Thus, despite the fact that the term “religion,” is used by many people to name
35 certain of their own beliefs, behaviors, and institutions, some time ago scholars

36
37 **Defining Religion: Investigating the Boundaries Between the Sacred and Secular**
38 **Religion and the Social Order, Volume 10, 139–162**

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ISSN: 1061-5210/doi:10.1016/S1061-5210(03)10009-6

1 began debating how best to turn this well-known folk or popular term into a
2 cross-cultural, analytic category. This re-tooling is necessary because popular
3 or folk definitions of religion, those that assume religion is about believing in
4 a God or simply being “good” – an assumption all too evident in this chapter’s
5 epigraph² – do not meet the standards of inter-subjectively available, cross-
6 cultural data. So it’s not that, to borrow Linda Tripp’s words, the scholars
7 discussed in this chapter “don’t care” about how so-called religious people
8 understand their own disclosures and behaviors; instead, they simply ask different
9 sorts of questions, making folk assumptions about religion having something
10 to do with being good rather unsatisfying and, given our scholarly interests,
11 utterly unproductive.

12 So, as phrased by the Brandeis University anthropologist, Benson Saler, the
13 general question that scholars of religion continue to face, is how they can
14 “transform a folk category into an analytic category” (1993). Despite a number
15 of heated debates, precisely this categorial retooling has successfully taken
16 place over the past 20 years in such areas as literary studies (e.g. “literature,”
17 “author,” “intention,” and “text”) as well as anthropology (e.g. “culture”), but,
18 as Donald Wiebe of the University of Toronto has remarked, “it is clear that
19 a generally accepted notion of “religion,” upon which an understanding of the
20 nature of the scientific study of religion can be based, and one that will be found
21 acceptable to the majority of scholars in the field today, has not yet emerged”
22 (1994). From among the ranks of these writers a small group now focuses its
23 attention not on arriving at a more scientifically or humanistically satisfying,
24 retooled conception of religion but, instead, on the very fact that some human
25 beings – scholars in the Euro-North American “scientific” tradition included –
26 distinguish belief from practice, private from public, and, most generally, sacred
27 from secular, and religion from irreligion.³ Recalling the work of [Durkheim and](#)
28 [Mauss from nearly a century ago \(1903, reprinted 1963\)](#), the social act of classi-
29 fication has itself become the object of study. Some term this a socio-rhetorical
30 approach.

31 In early attempts to historicize “religion,” scholars naturally looked to the
32 term’s etymology.⁴ For instance, we know that this common English term has
33 equivalents in such modern languages as French and German; for instance, when
34 practiced in Germany the study of religion is known as *Religionswissenschaft* (the
35 systematic study, or *Wissenschaft*, of religion) and when practiced in France the
36 field is known as *Sciences Religieuses* (e.g. Canada’s main, bi-lingual periodical is
37 entitled *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*). Even just a brief comparison of
38 these and other related languages helps us to see that modern languages that have
39 been impacted by Latin possess something equivalent to the term “religion.” This
40 means that, *for language families unaffected by Latin, there is no equivalent term to*

1 “religion” – unless, of course, we assert that this local word/concept captures
 2 something essential to the entire human species, thereby distinguishing the local
 3 word from the universal concept (i.e. although they do not call “it” religion,
 4 they still have it). This is an assertion made all the easier by the long history
 5 of European influence on non-Latin-based cultures/languages by means of
 6 trade, coercion, and conquest. For example, although neither “religion” nor
 7 “Hinduism” are traditional classifications in India, the long history of contact
 8 with Europe has ensured that modern, English-speaking people identified as
 9 Indians or Hindus have no difficulty conceiving of Hinduism as their religion –
 10 although, technically speaking, to a person we might call a Hindu, Hinduism is
 11 not a religion but is, rather, *sanatana dharma* (the eternal duty/obligation/order).
 12 As might be expected, despite its authoritative status in the history of textual
 13 studies, the Christian New Testament is not much help in settling these issues
 14 either, for its language of composition – Greek – naturally lacked the Latin
 15 root word/concept *religio*. Thus, English New Testaments will routinely use
 16 “religion” to translate such Greek terms as *eusebia* (e.g. Timothy 3:16; 2 Timothy
 17 3:5) and *thr skeia* (e.g. James 1:27), terms that are, in fact, much closer to the
 18 Sanskrit *dharma* (duty), the Chinese *li* (rules of propriety and social rank), or
 19 even the Latin *pietas* (practices that maintain proper social relations) than our
 20 term “religion.”

21 If we assume a socio-rhetorical approach and understand concepts as social tools
 22 that have meaning in contexts of practical use – instead of employing a referential
 23 theory whereby meaning is seen as the result of an essential relation between a
 24 sign (let’s say, “religion”) and some originary sense in which it was once used –
 25 then such appeals to etymology are not much help in sorting out our problem of
 26 taxonomy. After all, even in Latin our modern term “religion” has no equivalent – if,
 27 by “religion,” you align yourself with the epigraph’s popular wisdom. The closest
 28 we come when looking for Latin precursors to our modern term “religion” are
 29 words such as *religare* or *religere* which, in their original contexts, simply meant
 30 such things as “to bind something tightly together” or “to pay close or careful
 31 attention to something.” But this is hardly what we seem to mean by religion
 32 today.

33 So, where does this socio-rhetorical turn leave us? Well, it leaves us with a lot
 34 of questions in need of investigation: Just how is “religion” used by people? What
 35 social import does the category have? If a group of people do not have the concept,
 36 can we study “their religion” let alone “their culture?” Is there such a thing as “the
 37 Hindu religion” or “ancient Greek religion?” Is “religion” a supremely imperialistic
 38 concept that “we” use to name “them?” Is cross-cultural, comparative analysis of
 39 all such inevitably localized human meaning even possible? Is “religion” simply
 40 an arbitrary taxon some of us in the scholarly guild use to organize and talk about

1 aspects of the observable world that strike us as curious? Why did “religion” arise
2 in European public discourse and political theory when and where it did and why
3 do we continue to imagine it to be part of this thing some of us call “the Human
4 Experience” or “the Human Condition?” This linguistic or socio-rhetorical turn
5 thus leaves us with a rich area of investigation.

6 Before proceeding, an important point must be repeated. Unlike some other
7 writers who have recently tackled the problem of “religion,” this essay does
8 not assume that, once we have swept away what we take to be an outdated or
9 troublesome definition for “religion” then some more accurate concept of religion
10 will, like a phoenix, arise from the ashes of our current category. This was Cantwell
11 Smith’s hope when he replaced “religion” with “personal faith,” something he
12 took to be a universal aspect of Human Nature. More recently, although for [Jeremy](#)
13 [Carrette \(2000\)](#) religion is a taxonomic tool with a questionable history – on that
14 much we agree – in the conclusion to his study of Michel Foucault and religion,
15 we find him discussing the “traditional Western conception of religion” (p. 143),
16 as if there is some other way of conceiving of religion which is more accurate or,
17 simply put, better.⁵ In other words, it seems as if Carrette presumes that, behind
18 our contestable *term* “religion,” lays the unadulterated *concept* of religion. Much
19 the same presumption seems to drive Carrette’s one-time colleague, [Richard King](#)
20 [\(1999\)](#), when, in his postcolonial critique of “religion,” he attempts to avoid the
21 “erasure of indigenous perspectives” which comes from importing alien values and
22 concepts. Such a critique notwithstanding, King ends up talking about such things
23 as “religions,” as if “the indigenous perspective” somehow has naturally occurring
24 *religious* aspects. King’s critique prompts us to inquire how – if we take Foucault’s
25 critique of epistemology seriously and to its logical conclusion – any effort to
26 classify, know, understand, and act can escape such a criticism – King’s own efforts
27 included. After all, as Foucault persuaded some of us, discourse is an inevitable
28 violence that we do to things. If, then, discourses are, by definition, “violence we
29 do to things” – and if the generic, indistinguishable and value neutral “stuff” of the
30 world gets to count as “things” only in light of competing discourses of classifica-
31 tion and rank – then what criteria do we have to adjudicate these many violences we
32 routinely do?

33 My point is that this chapter is not looking for a more adequate or accurate defi-
34 nition of religion – a quest equally familiar in the work of theologians, humanists,
35 and even those scholars often known as logical positivists. Instead, *it examines just*
36 *what is entailed when any group thinks religion in the first place*, what is entailed
37 in presuming that any moment of human praxis somehow escapes the uncharted
38 ebb and flow of contingent history. My question, then, is: What goes into, and what
39 comes of, presuming the world is somehow naturally divided between sacred
40 and secular?

THE POLITICS OF EXPERIENCE

1
2
3 Although these sorts of questions are most often associated with the ground-
4 breaking work of the University of Chicago’s Jonathan Z. Smith – particularly
5 his widely read essay collection, *Imagining Religion* (1982),⁶ as well as his most
6 recent survey of the concept “religion” (1998) – I wish instead to focus on two
7 other examples of scholars attempting to answer these very questions: the often
8 cited work of the anthropologist, Talal Asad (1993, 2001), and the more recent
9 work of the scholar of Christian origins, William E. Arnal (2000, 2001). Taken
10 together, they provide an example of how members of this emergent tradition see
11 the very rhetoric of religion and religious experience as an historical datum that
12 can be studied without presupposing “things religious” to be deeply personal,
13 mysterious items of morality, belief, or deep conviction.

14 In a move that would more than likely baffle those whose studies of religion
15 are limited to describing and comparing the manifestations of deeply held per-
16 sonal beliefs in either this or that, both Asad and Arnal link the presumption that
17 “religion” connotes a disembodied, deeply personal experience to the advent of
18 the nation-state. As phrased by Asad:

19
20 Several times before the Reformation, the boundary between the religious and the secular
21 was redrawn, but always the formal authority of the Church remained pre-eminent. In later
22 centuries, with the triumphant rise of modern science, modern production, and the modern
23 state, the churches would also be clear about the need to distinguish the religious from the
24 secular, shifting, as they did so, the weight of religion more and more onto the moods and
25 motivations of the individual believer. Discipline (intellectual and social) would, in this period,
26 gradually abandon religious space, letting “belief,” “conscience,” and “sensibility” take its place
(1993, p. 39).

27 After citing this very passage in an essay on the problems of defining religion,
28 Arnal goes on to comment:

29
30 In other words, our definitions of religion, especially insofar as they assume a privatized
31 and cognitive character behind religion (as in religious *belief*), simply reflect (and assume as
32 normative) the West’s distinctive historical feature of the secularized state. Religion, precisely,
33 is *not* social, *not* coercive, *is* individual, *is* belief-oriented and so on, because in our day and age
34 there are certain apparently free-standing cultural institutions, such as the Church, which are
35 excluded from the political state. Thus, Asad notes, it is no coincidence that it is the period after
36 the “Wars of Religion” in the 17th century that saw the first universalist definitions of religion;
37 and those definitions of “Natural Religion,” of course, stressed the propositional – as opposed
38 to political or institutional – character of religion as a function of their historical context.

38 Arnal, then, concludes that

39 the very concept of religion as such – as an entity with any distinction whatsoever from other
40 human phenomena – is a function of these same processes and historical moments that generate

1 an individualistic concept of it The concept of religion is a way of demarcating a certain
 2 socio-political reality that is only problematised with the advent of modernity in which the state
 3 at least claims to eschew culture *per se* (2000, p. 31).

4 Or, as he most recently put it,

5
 6 there is no such thing as religion *in the world*. Of course this may be said of any taxon, but
 7 in the case of “religion,” the formulation of the category has more to do with the normative
 8 *interests* of modernity than with the intellectual or theoretical motives of students of religion.
 9 “Religion” is an artificial agglomeration of specific social behaviors, whose basis of distinction
 10 from other social behaviors is a function of the specific characteristics of modernity (2001).

11 It would appear that this seemingly well-meaning, benign, and all inclusive dis-
 12 course on “experience” and “belief” – the discourse that is working when, say, early
 13 Wesleyans conceived of the strange warming of their hearts – is more complex
 14 than it at first appears. Discourses on experience, belief, conscience, and privacy
 15 can now be studied as having observable political pre-conditions and effects.

16 The rhetoric of “religious experience” is therefore what Wayne Proudfoot, of
 17 Columbia University, once aptly called a “protective strategy” (1985). Ironically,
 18 the strategy both protects dissent (suggesting why the 18th-century Protestant
 19 theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher drew on this emotivist, experientialist
 20 rhetoric in his well-known rebuttal to religion’s Enlightened “despisers”) but,
 21 inasmuch as such dissent is internalized and not acted upon, the strategy simul-
 22 taneously ensures its marginalization from the centers of decision-making power,
 23 thereby protecting the status quo. This second function is what the late Marxist
 24 historian, E. P. Thompson, identified so well when he provocatively characterized
 25 the early Methodist revivals as “psychic masturbation”: their emphasis on
 26 other-worldly status and personal salvation “did not inspire men to effective
 27 social action, and scarcely engaged with the real world” (1991). Understandably,
 28 reviewers of his book who saw these revivals as centers of counter-revolutionary
 29 social organization – thus seeing religion to play the first protective strategy named
 30 above – were not pleased with his characterization of religion’s self-absorbing
 31 function. Surely, both views have some merit, though they each examine a different
 32 scale of analysis: one focuses on the participant’s own self-perception (i.e. revivals
 33 are liberating and counter-revolutionary) whereas the other examines the structural
 34 circumstances that enable such self-perception to exist and spread (i.e. revivals
 35 are mechanisms for safely venting anxiety without disturbing the status quo).

36 As phrased by the late Madan Sarup, “for members of many ethnic-minority
 37 groups, their religion is an aspect of their culture, a valuable support in a
 38 hostile environment” (1996, p. 3); so long as their self-identity is tied to
 39 some non-empirical characteristic – such as their ethnicity, their faith, or their
 40 culture – it can only be felt and periodically manifested in politically innocuous

1 displays of regional cuisines, singing styles, dancing, colorful clothing, etc., all
2 of which are no threat to the gatekeepers of the wider material and physical
3 environment. However, what happens when, for example, Indian Hindus cease
4 to have the good sense to submit to a "civil" rule and, as they did in early May
5 2001, actually act on their beliefs, organize, and riot against, say, beef fat being
6 used in making globalized McDonald's french fries?⁷ Or, to turn to a recent and
7 admittedly horrific example that an essay like this cannot help but to address, what
8 happens when so-called religious people hijack jets and fly them into buildings,
9 killing thousands of people with whom they apparently disagree on fundamental
10 matters? Are we to employ "religion" on a sliding scale, thus allowing us to
11 dismiss the hijackers as "extremists," "fanatics" and "zealots"? Or do we employ
12 "religion" as a tool for explaining away these seemingly aberrant behaviors, un-
13 derstanding them as the result of differing "belief systems," thus opening the way
14 to a theological interpretation of the events? Or do these actions have something
15 to do with the practical, mundane, material world of power and privilege, a world
16 effectively protected from analysis once our "religion" category enters the picture?
17 These are the tough cases of conflicting human action that a theory of "religion"
18 must be able to address. Although I am not ambitious (or deluded) enough to think
19 any theory can completely illuminate complex human actions, I will return to this
20 example below, in hopes of shedding some light on how we come to understand
21 our world – how we come to act out worlds of meaning – by deploying the
22 "religion" concept.

23
24
25 **RHETORIC AND THE MAKING OF CIVIL**
26 **COMMONWEALTHS: "RENDER**
27 **THEREFORE TO CAESAR . . ."**
28
29

30 In this alternative approach to "religion," talk of beliefs, experiences, and feelings
31 are seen as a trace of contestation, as a social engineering technique. As the
32 University of Michigan scholar of Buddhism, Robert Sharf, has phrased it in an
33 article on the category of experience, "the term [religious experience] is often
34 used rhetorically to thwart the authority of the 'objective' or the 'empirical,' and
35 to valorize instead the subjective, the personal, the private" (1998, p. 94). As
36 argued by Arnal, the philosophically idealist rhetoric of "experience" presumes
37 that pristine, pre-reflective moments of pure self-consciousness (or, thinking
38 back to Schleiermacher, we could call it "God-consciousness") float freely in the
39 background of the restrictive conventions of language and social custom. This is
40 what Jonathan Z. Smith, citing Nietzsche, once called "the myth of immaculate

1 perception.” It is a position comparable to that which once fueled literary studies,
 2 insomuch as “Literature” was thought by some to embody essentially transcendent
 3 themes and values that stirred the Human Heart and expressed the meaning and
 4 plight of the Human Condition.

5 Within the history of the study of religion – specifically, the study of early
 6 Christianities – Smith has traced this Romantic rhetoric of origins and private
 7 experience to what he terms “the regnant Protestant *topoi* in which the category of
 8 inspiration has been transposed from the text to the experience of the interpreter,
 9 the one who is being directly addressed *through* the text.” After identifying
 10 the anti-catholic polemic that lurks within quests for original moments (as in
 11 attempts to bypass the supposed tyranny of “popery” and “tradition” by means
 12 of appeals to “the biblical witness” and “the historical Jesus”), Smith concludes:
 13 “As employed by some scholars in religious studies, it must be judged a fantastic
 14 attempt to transform interpretation into revelation” (1990, p. 55). Although the
 15 example of Schleiermacher in the 18th century has already been cited, instances
 16 of this technique – instances that are directly relevant to private/public and
 17 church/state rhetorics as they have developed in the contemporary U.S. – can be
 18 found in the political writings of such men as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and
 19 Jean Jacques Rousseau. Despite some disagreements between these three, they
 20 all employ a highly individualist sociology – “man is born free; and everywhere
 21 he is in chains,” as Rousseau famously phrased it – which makes it possible for
 22 them to imagine a pure, individual zone of preference and opinion which is free
 23 from public intervention and control and thus no threat to the ruling sovereign’s
 24 practical interests. It is precisely this supposedly asocial zone which Robert
 25 Solomon has characterized as a “transcendental pretense” (1988, p. 3).

26 Take, for instance, Hobbes’s often studied book on “civil” society, *Leviathan*
 27 (1660), where we read:

28
 29 Fear of power invisible, feigned by the mind, or imagined from tales *publicly allowed*, religion;
 30 *not allowed*, superstition. And when the power imagined is truly such as we imagine, true
 31 religion (Part 1, Chap. 6 [1962, p. 51]; emphasis added).⁸

32 Although these words were written nearly 350 years ago, we see in them an
 33 elaborate taxonomy which accomplishes tangible political work. For Hobbes,
 34 religion is to be distinguished from mere superstition (what many today would
 35 rename as “cult”), not so much because one is true (though Hobbes does go on to
 36 distinguish religion from true religion, which he associates with Christianity), but
 37 because one is “publicly allowed” – that is to say, allowed to exist by (and therefore
 38 not a threat to) the sovereign. Long before Durkheim and Mauss, Hobbes rightly
 39 understood that classification is a social, political act; in this case, the right to
 40 name something as religion was possessed only by those in power. More than this,

1 the thing so identified as a religion was understood purely to be matter of personal
2 preference:

3
4 by reason of different fancies, judgments, and passions of several men, hath grown up into
5 ceremonies so different, that those which are used by one man, are for the most part ridiculous
6 to another (Part 1, Chap. 12 [p. 90]).

7 So religion – which, for Hobbes, had its origins in the belief in ghosts, our
8 ignorance of the actual causes of things, our devotion toward that which we do
9 not understand and thus fear, and our desire to know the future – is a matter of
10 private emotion, tastes, and judgements concerning an invisible world. Moreover,
11 a particular subset of these dispositions were sanctioned by the sovereign. As
12 suggested, then, by Asad and Arnal, at the dawn of modernity, “religion” played
13 a key role in efforts to name and thus control ways of acting and organizing.
14 “Religion” was thus linked with such notions as diversity and civility, public
15 interest and private opinion, and, of course, tolerance.

16 By the winter of 1685–1686, when Locke drafted the Latin text for his first
17 “Epistle de tolerantia” (“A letter concerning toleration” [published in 1689];
18 eventually three rejoinders were to appear, the last of which was published
19 posthumously) while hiding for two years in Holland from the Stuart royalists,
20 this Cartesian distinction between private sentiment and public order was
21 surprisingly well developed. For the purposes of this chapter, we must recall the
22 world at this time: Locke, having spent three and a half years in France, returned to
23 England in May of 1679. The previous August there was the fabricated revelation
24 of the “Popish Plot” in which a conspiracy to assassinate Charles II was aimed at
25 replacing him with his Catholic brother James. As a result, the Parliament had been
26 dissolved by Charles (on the details of Locke’s context see [Milton, 1994](#)). Locke’s
27 letter on tolerance thus communicates his concern over the practical effects of real
28 dissent, effects that occurred at the intersection of what he understood as private,
29 personal conscience and the collective interests represented by the sovereign’s
30 public authority.

31 Because of religion’s claims concerning an unseen world – “the establishment
32 of opinions, which for the most part are about nice and intricate matters that exceed
33 the capacity of ordinary understandings” ([Locke, 1955](#), p. 7) – Locke advised that,
34 while freedom of conscience ought to prevail, the government’s authority could
35 only be exercised to ensure the smooth public interactions of its citizens (i.e. as
36 he phrased it in *The Second Treatise of Government*, individuals unite in a society
37 “for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties, and estates, which I call by
38 the general name ‘property’”). Or, to rephrase it, although one is free to hold
39 and propose beliefs of all sorts, one is not free to impose them, inasmuch as,
40 mere beliefs – what he terms “the diversity of opinions” – are all too fallible and

1 unverifiable. “All the life and power of true religion,” he was then able to conclude,
 2 “consists in the inward and full persuasion of the mind; and faith is not faith without
 3 believing . . . [T]rue and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the
 4 mind” (p. 18). Once established, this private zone of belief makes civil society
 5 possible:

6
 7 I esteem it above all things necessary to distinguish exactly the business of civil government
 8 from that of religion, and to settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other. If this
 9 be not done, there can be no end put to the controversies that will be always arising between
 10 those that have, or at least pretend to have, on the one side, a concernment for the interests of
 11 men’s souls, and, on the other side, a care of the commonwealth (p. 17).

12 That Locke’s sense of the “commonwealth” is hardly common – after all, he has no
 13 trouble *not* tolerating those who undermine the State by means of their supposed
 14 intolerance, atheism, or service to foreign powers (p. 15) – should be more than
 15 obvious to us at this historic juncture. Given a social theory that starts with the
 16 premise that all social formations are the products of techniques that portray one
 17 particular set of local interests as if they were self-evidently corporate interests –
 18 to the exclusion of a host of competing local interests – it is hardly an indictment
 19 to recover the specific interests served by Locke’s rhetoric of tolerance, civility,
 20 and commonwealth. To put it another way, “Mahometans” are quite easily and
 21 naturally excluded from his State, for it would be “ridiculous for anyone to profess
 22 himself” to be one while also being “faithful to a Christian magistrate” (p. 15).
 23 What should attract our attention, then, is not only that all discourses on tolerance
 24 contain an inevitable element of intolerance but, moreover, how easily the latter
 25 is glossed over when like-minded – or, better phrased, like-interested and like-
 26 organized – people converse on the so-called common good of a supposedly civil
 27 society.

28 Skipping ahead a generation, Rousseau, writing in his *The Social Contract*
 29 (1762), employed the same highly effective rhetorical technique, phrasing it as
 30 follows:

31
 32 . . . Jesus came to establish a spiritual kingdom on earth; this kingdom, by separating the theo-
 33 logical system from the political, meant that the state ceased to be a unity, and it caused those
 34 intestine divisions which have never ceased to disturb Christian peoples. Now as the new idea of
 35 a kingdom of another world could never have entered the minds of pagans, they always regarded
 36 Christians as true rebels who, under the cloak of hypocritical submission, only awaited the mo-
 37 ment to make themselves independent and supreme, and cunningly to usurp that authority which
 38 they made a show of respecting while they were weak. Such was the cause of their persecutions.

39 What the pagans feared did indeed happen; then everything altered its countenance; the humble
 40 Christians changed their tune and soon the so-called kingdom of the other world was seen to
 become, under a visible ruler, the most violent despotism of this world.

1 However, since princes and civil laws have always existed, the consequence of this dual power
2 has been an endless conflict of jurisdiction, which has made any kind of good polity impossible
3 in Christian states, where men have never known whether they ought to obey the civil ruler or
4 the priest (Book IV, Chap. 8 [1982, pp. 178–179]).

5 Without sanctioning Rousseau's theory of the rise of Christianity (a theory shared
6 by more than a few scholars to this day), we can still find merit in his observation
7 concerning the practical work done by the Church/State split: without the
8 internalization of consciences, an unending conflict could very well exist between
9 these two masters. Members of marginal or emergent social formations would
10 therefore have little choice but to utilize this distinction so as to exist in the first
11 place – making Matthew 22:21, "Then he said to them, Render therefore to Caesar
12 the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are Gods," a fascinating
13 study in tactical, emergent social engineering. Rousseau's understanding of "the
14 spiritual kingdom" makes evident that the internalization of dissenting voices by
15 means of spiritualization is well under way in his day as well.⁹

16 "Of all Christian authors," Rousseau insightfully concludes, "the philosopher
17 Hobbes is the only one who saw clearly both the evil and the remedy, and who
18 dared to propose reuniting the two heads of the eagle and fully restoring the
19 political unity without which neither the state nor the government will ever be
20 well constituted" (p. 180). This remedy, as already demonstrated, was made
21 possible by a romanticized sense of early Christianity wedded to a thoroughly
22 individualist sociology where group membership was premised on unaccountable
23 personal choice, taste, and preference – as in Locke's atomistic view of a church
24 as "a voluntary society of men, joining themselves together of their own accord"
25 (p. 20) – something we still see today among U.S. rational choice theorists of
26 religion. Or, as Rousseau phrased it,

27
28 the religion of the private person, or Christianity, not the Christianity of today, but that of
29 the Gospel, which is altogether different. Under this holy, sublime and true religion, men, as
30 children of the same God, looks on all others as brothers, and the society which unites them is
31 not even dissolved in death.

32 But this religion, having no specific connexion [sic] with the body politic, leaves the law with
33 only the force the law itself possesses, adding nothing to it . . . (p. 182).

34
35 This "religion of the private person" or what he also names "true religion" in
36 distinction to the religion of the citizen and the religion of the priests, "has neither
37 temples, nor altars, nor rites, and is confined to the purely internal cult of the
38 supreme God and the eternal obligations of morality, is the religion of the Gospel
39 pure and simple, the true theism, what may be called natural divine right or law."
40 Making the private/public and spiritual/political binaries explicit, he concludes,

1 Christianity is a wholly spiritual religion, concerned solely with the things of heaven; the
 2 Christian's homeland is not of this world. The Christian does his duty, it is true, but he does
 3 it with profound indifference towards the good or ill success of his deeds. Provided that he
 4 has nothing to reproach himself for, it does not matter to him whether all goes well or badly
 5 here on earth. If the state prospers, he hardly dares to enjoy the public happiness; he fears lest
 6 he become proud of his country's glory; if the state perishes, he blesses the hand of God that
 7 weighs heavily on His people.

8 For such a society to be peaceful and for harmony to prevail, every citizen without exception
 9 would have to be an equally good Christian (p. 183).

10 His argument? Public peace and "civility" depend upon the privatization and
 11 spiritualization of dissent. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau thus all utilize the same
 12 social technique in their pursuit of a society wherein one group's interests are writ
 13 large in public; they each employ the private/public binary to ensure some sort
 14 of power sharing, a technology that avoids, for the most part, the sort of physical
 15 coercion often employed when competing groups' interests collide.

16 From England and France, we finally come back to the shores of North
 17 America. Just 20 or so years after Rousseau penned his *Social Contract*, a bill was
 18 introduced, into the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia, entitled
 19 a Bill Establishing a Provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion (1784).
 20 Proposing tax support of such teachers, the bill was contested in the following
 21 session of the Assembly by James Madison who had written and distributed his
 22 "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments." In his opening
 23 lines we find familiar words:

24 The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man;
 25 and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. This right is in its nature
 26 an unalienable right. It is unalienable; because the opinions of men, depending only on the
 27 evidence contemplated by their own minds, cannot follow the dictates of other men Before
 28 any man can be considered as a subject of Civil Society, he must be considered as a subject of
 29 the Governor of the Universe We maintain therefore that in matters of Religion, no man's
 30 right is abridged by the institution of Civil Society and that Religion is wholly exempt from its
 31 cognizance (Alley, 1988, pp. 18–19).

32 Prior to concluding that a spirit of extreme libertarianism was sweeping through
 33 Virginia, one must keep in mind that by "religion" Madison meant matters of
 34 private "conviction and conscience." This old distinction was again persuasive;
 35 the tax levy to support Christian teachers was defeated; and the following year
 36 Thomas Jefferson introduced yet a new bill in the Assembly, "for establishing
 37 religious freedom," and, predictably, it was passed. In that bill's preamble the
 38 rhetoric of opinion and principles reappears:

39 That to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion, and to restrain
 40 the profession or propagation of principles on supposition of their ill tendency, is a dangerous
 fallacy which at once destroys all liberty.

1 However, so-called civil society requires that this “liberty” not get out of hand –
2 or, better put, not get out of mind. Therefore, Jefferson proceeds:

3
4 that it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government for its officers to interfere
5 *when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order* (1988, p. 352; emphasis
6 added).

7 Or, as the U.S. Supreme Court has time and again argued, “even when the action
8 is in accord with one’s religious convictions [it] is not totally free from legislative
9 restrictions” (Alley, 1988, p. 416). “In these two sentences [of Jefferson’s],”
10 concluded a U.S. Supreme Court justice, “is found the true distinction between
11 what properly belongs to the Church and what to the State” (p. 355). Apparently
12 what belongs to the Church is an idealistic phantom devoid of all behavioral
13 content and what belongs to the State are all matters material, empirical, social,
14 economic, and political.

15 Although one could cite recent U.S. examples of Appalachian Pentecostals
16 denied the right to handle snakes or Rastafarians punished for using ganja, one
17 of the earliest examples of this rhetoric in use in a U.S. legal setting comes from
18 an 1879 Supreme Court case, *Reynolds v. United States*, 98 (U.S.) 145. This
19 case, brought against a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day
20 Saints (i.e. a Mormon), involved a charge of bigamy (Alley, 1988, pp. 349–356).
21 Despite demonstrating that “the members of the Church believed that the practice
22 of polygamy was directly enjoined upon the male members by the Almighty
23 God, in a revelation to Joseph Smith, the founder and prophet of said Church,”
24 Reynolds’ conviction by the lower court was upheld by the higher court. “The
25 only defense,” read the majority opinion, “of the accused in this case is his belief
26 that the law ought not to have been enacted [due to his action being prompted by
27 his religious convictions]. It matters not that his belief was a part of his professed
28 religion: it was still belief and belief only” (p. 355).

29 Once contextualized within the wider geo-politics that characterized the period
30 in which the modern concept of religion first rose to prominence in European
31 political theory, and was later deployed in U.S. Church/State rhetoric, Arnal argues
32 that

33
34 one of the current political *effects* of this separation – one of the political ends served currently
35 by it – is the evisceration of substance, i.e. collective aims, from the state. That is to say, the
36 simple positing of religion is a covert justification for the modern tendency of the state to frame
37 itself in increasingly negative terms: the secular state is the institutional apparatus by which
38 the social body *prevents* the incursion by others into the personal and various other goals of
39 individuals, rather than being the means of achievement for common projects and the collective
40 good.

40 Arnal concludes that “[t]his very definition of the modern democratic state in fact
creates religion as its alter-ego: religion, as such, is the space in which and by which

1 any substantive collective goals (salvation, righteousness, etc.) are individualized
 2 and made into a question of personal commitment or morality” (2000, p. 32).
 3 Religion is thus the ultimate “Other,” necessary in all acts of social formation,
 4 insomuch as it “is substantively empty – or infinitely fillable with aeolian qualities”
 5 (Braun, 2000, p. 8).

6 7 8 **THE POLITICS OF TOLERANCE: WHISPERING SWEET** 9 **NOTHINGS AND THE DIVERSITY QUILT**

10
11 As the preceding critique makes clear, to a small degree the rhetoric of privacy,
12 consciences, and experience has come under hard times in North America.
13 Although there still exists a thriving industry in recovering and expressing the
14 authenticity or immediacy of experience – an industry evident in popular culture
15 as well, as demonstrated by the popularity of not only Oprah Winfrey and Martha
16 Stewart among members of the middle classes but also such things as “Grunge”
17 or “teen angst” rock among middle class adolescents¹⁰ – some scholars now
18 understand experience to be a thoroughly socio-political, and therefore contestable,
19 construct. As counter-intuitive as it may at first sound, “privacy” – both the
20 presumption that it exists as well as its extent – is an item of public contestation and
21 claims that privacy has self-evident limits are evidence of a political debate. For
22 instance, consider the case of former U.S. President Bill Clinton, whose “private”
23 conduct while holding the “public” office made for some wonderful rhetorical
24 flourishes on both sides of the political divide. Like “privacy,” then, “experience”
25 does not come pre-packaged from the grocery store but is instead a commodity
26 groups value and trade in their ongoing efforts to reproduce themselves.

27 That two very different types of scholarship on religion develop, depending
28 on how you talk about “experiences,” should now be evident. If we see the
29 “private/public” distinction as a rhetorical technique crucial for making modern,
30 large-scale social identities (i.e. the nation-state) possible, then it may be a
31 foregone conclusion that in the modern research university – but one component
32 of what is often referred to as the military-industrial-educational complex –
33 an individualist sociology, coupled with a discourse on pristine, pre-social
34 experiences and disembodied believing minds, has the home field advantage. It
35 may then make some sense as to why a brand of explanatory – what is most often
36 referred to, with a sneer, as reductionistic or scientific – scholarship has not won
37 the day in North America. Instead, the modern day descendants of Hobbes, Locke,
38 and Rousseau, who engage in various forms of liberal, inter-religious dialogue,
39 understandably dominate the scene and set the agenda in the field’s professional
40 societies, the programs at its conferences, and providing the public face of the field

1 in the media.¹¹ Often, they go by the name of “public intellectuals,” a rather empty
2 but rhetorically fertile designation that has gained much popularity over the past
3 decade (see [McCutcheon, 1997a](#)). Due to the recent history of immigration that
4 has made much of North America an apparent cultural mosaic, we can easily see
5 the reason for the renewed concern among such intellectuals with using the study
6 of religion *qua* deeply personal, private beliefs and faith as a tool for resolving
7 the apparent problem of observable cultural difference (the Many), a resolution
8 made possible once again by essentializing, spiritualizing, and dehistoricizing
9 difference within the heart of some unseen yet universal religious identity (the
10 One) – a technique more than apparent in Locke’s essay on tolerance. It may
11 therefore not be a coincidence (though demonstrating a causal link must await
12 another time) that the triumphant rebirth of this personalized discourse on religion
13 in public universities throughout the U.S. roughly coincided with the Immigration
14 Act of 1965, which, in the words of the literary critic Stanley Fish, “shifted [U.S.]
15 immigration priorities from those Nordic European peoples who had furnished
16 America with its original stock to Asian and African peoples from Third World
17 countries” (1994, p. 83). The presence of a new and potentially uncontrollable
18 “them” required dusting off proven tools to re-make what had previously seemed
19 to be a seamless “us.” The public school system is precisely where this has
20 traditionally happened.

21 As but one example of this recent development, take Diana Eck’s much heralded
22 CD-ROM classroom resource, *On Common Ground* ([Eck, 1997](#)).¹² In one of the
23 web articles that states the goals of the project, Diana Eck writes: “Pluralism
24 requires the cultivation of public space where we all encounter one another.”¹³
25 On one level this all sounds well and good for, as one might ask, “Who could
26 ever be against a public space where we all *encounter* one another?” Despite the
27 fact that I can easily imagine a few groups who might not wish to be included
28 within such an encounter, for the time being I’ll grant to the proponents of this
29 kind of pluralism that they have well intentioned visions of some idealized, even
30 cosmogonic, public forum where citizen-equals once mounted the proverbial soap
31 box and freely “spoke their piece.” The infectiously quaint nationalistic paintings
32 of the U.S. illustrator, Norman Rockwell, come to mind, specifically, his “Freedom
33 of Speech,” a 1943 cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* magazine.¹⁴

34 But it’s not now – nor ever was – quite as simple as this. The case of “free speech”
35 zones come to mind: specific zones set aside on some U.S. university campuses,
36 even at the upcoming Salt Lake City Winter Olympics, where protests are officially
37 sanctioned; “free” speech only exists in these sites, making “freedom” somewhat
38 more structured and controlled than it first appears.¹⁵ So, to return to Eck, precisely
39 what does it mean to “encounter” each other? As in the case of free speech zones,
40 or the case where one must obtain a government permit to protest the government

1 (often disguised as a license to hold a “parade”), what undisclosed ground rules
 2 stipulate the nature and extent of this encounter? More than likely, the public square
 3 is not open to just anyone – e.g. it’s likely not a coincidence that males naturally are
 4 the dominant subject of Norman Rockwell’s painting, “Freedom of Speech.” To
 5 participate in any so-called public space, one must already be operating by a set of
 6 socio-political values and standards that make it possible, attractive, meaningful,
 7 and compelling to “encounter,” “understand” and “appreciate” the Other in just
 8 this manner, in just this context, for just this end. Simply put, without giving prior,
 9 implicit assent to such an unseen yet all too practical structure, one might, say,
 10 hold a revolution rather than a parade and an “Ethnic Day” barbeque.

11 So it seems legitimate to ask whether one gets to be part of the liberal, religious
 12 pluralist’s “we” and “public” if these generally unnamed values and rhetorics are
 13 not a priority? While one may personally find it commendable to work toward
 14 some sort of social inclusion – much like being in favor of “freedom” or “family
 15 values,” ill-defined inclusion is easy to be in favor of – one would be terribly remiss
 16 if one understood or portrayed the ground rules of such a supposedly inclusive,
 17 public forum as somehow being ahistorical, self-evidently meaningful, commonly
 18 shared, and utterly persuasive – as if free speech zones simply sprouted from
 19 the ground overnight, fences and all. Making such presumptions would be akin
 20 to understanding religion to be a matter of deep belief despite the persuasive
 21 historicizations offered by such scholars as Arnal, Asad, Sharf, and Smith. In
 22 presuming a disengaged “public” to which everyone automatically and equally
 23 belongs, and to which everyone wishes to belong, strikes me as already resolving
 24 in some “ours” favor the issue of “the Many” long before ever seriously entertaining
 25 the topic of diversity. The sort of idealization needed to bring about such resolution
 26 is but one instance of the technique identified by Arnal, whereby “religion, as
 27 such, is the space in which and by which any substantive collective goals . . . are
 28 individualized and made into a question of personal commitment or morality.”

29 To see the slippery nature of the logic that grounds the liberal dialogical
 30 position so popular in the current North American field – a position that bears
 31 striking similarities to the classic *Verstehen* tradition facilitated by Wilhelm
 32 Dilthey’s Cartesian split between *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*
 33 – consider the widely read book that preceded and, in many ways, is the basis for
 34 *On Common Ground*, Eck’s *Encountering God* (1993). There, Eck distinguished
 35 the pluralist option from what she calls exclusivism and inclusivism (p. 168)
 36 and argued that pluralism is more than the recognition of a plurality and is
 37 far more demanding than mere tolerance of difference: one must *participate*
 38 within (i.e. encounter, engage, etc.) a plurality to count as a pluralist, and the
 39 scholar of religion is in the forefront of those who have skills to bring about such
 40 participation and understanding. As rightly observed by Eck, tolerance is, after

1 all, an expression of privilege, and it therefore stands in the way of what she
2 considered to be true pluralism. As she argues,

3
4 If as a Christian I tolerate my Muslim neighbor, I am not therefore required to understand her,
5 to seek out what she has to say, to hear about her hopes and dreams, to hear what is meant to
6 her when the words, "In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate" were whispered
7 into the ear of her newborn child (1993, p. 192).

8 But there is a difficulty in seeing such a wide divide between, on the one hand,
9 exclusivism and pluralism, and on the other, between tolerance and pluralism,
10 a difficulty that liberal writers such as Eck and Martin Marty fail to recognize,
11 perhaps because their own hegemonic position blinds them to the contingent
12 basis of their common sense notions of engagement and understanding. What
13 they fail to recognize is that one cannot have it both ways: one cannot call for an
14 engaged pluralism among those committed to deep values while at the same time
15 arguing that this pluralism is more than mere tolerance, for the difference between
16 pluralism and tolerance is merely rhetorical. The only way to have such co-existing
17 differences is if "the Other" is already well on the way to playing one's own game,
18 making the leftover, minor differences merely decorative and something you can
19 easily "put up with." Case in point: Eck's dialogue partner in the above example –
20 the proverbial Oriental m/Other presented in what at first appears to be a fashion
21 far superior to Locke's use of the "Mahometan" as his proverbial Other – is
22 busy whispering sweet nothings into a baby's innocent ear, not commandeering
23 commuter airlines. Sharing much with Lewinsky's popular conception of religion
24 equaling goodness, morality, and innocence, Eck's Other is an idealized and safe
25 Other whose differing – perhaps contradictory or even incommensurable – beliefs
26 are so deeply held as to safe, inasmuch as they are never manifested in practice.

27 Much like Locke's atheists, traitors, and Mahometans, it is obvious that
28 there are many "deeply held" and "real commitments" with which so-called
29 encounter is downright unthinkable. As characterized by the well-known Chicago
30 historian of U.S. religion, Martin Marty in his meditation on how the U.S. is
31 able so productively to maintain its unified "One" amidst the contestable "Many,"
32 so-called tribal life is exclusive and dangerous:

33 the invention of modern weapons and the efficiency of communications now renders tribalism
34 potentially lethal. Groups need only a few dollars for supplies and a few recipes for how to
35 mix them to produce devastating explosives to advance their threats . . . Tribalism on the world
36 scene in its extremist forms takes a monstrous human toll (1997, p. 14).

37 For whatever reason (more than likely because they are attempting to reallocate
38 actual resources, material wealth, and the political power that comes from the
39 control allowed by ownership, rather than being content with believing such
40 reallocation ought to take place), some people have little interest in encountering

1 and understanding “us” (the ones who generally seem to do much of the owning).
 2 Such people want to change the rules of the game by – at times – violent means.
 3 The September 11, 2001, events in New York and Washington, DC are all too
 4 powerful and local examples. Someone has chosen not to “play nice” in the public
 5 square and this upsets liberal sentiments a great deal. That makes these so-called
 6 tribalists and extremists rather dangerous – not in some abstract sense but
 7 dangerous in a very practical way, dangerous to a very particular set of interests
 8 (interests, I fully admit, I happen to share, and hence my horror at the tragic events
 9 of September 11, 2001); but these interests are precisely mine and my group’s and
 10 they are not universal and therefore not neutral, and neither are the socio-economic
 11 relations that inspire these interests and nurture them. In the above passage it
 12 seems as if Marty’s conception of the world as propelled by differing belief
 13 systems conveniently forgets just who often sells the weapons, makes the profits,
 14 and designs the communication technologies that are being put to such dangerous
 15 uses. In other words, the critique of the extremist, dangerous “Other” all too easily
 16 avoids the kind of self-implication that comes with understanding that the perfor-
 17 mance of “our” mutual funds in part depend on a rather profitable worldwide trade
 18 in technologies.

19 After September 11, 2001, the examples of convenient forgetting in the U.S.
 20 media were far too numerous to mention. To take but two, consider articles from
 21 *The New Yorker*. Just two days after the attack, in a pre-scheduled interview with
 22 one of President Bush’s senior counselors, Karl Rove, reporter Nicholas Lemann
 23 recounts the administration’s oft-heard explanation for the events.

24
 25 I think what they’re trying to do is to cower our society, he [Rove] said. I think they’re attempting
 26 to undermine its openness and its freedom and its ability to dissent, to be different. I think they’re
 27 attempting to force America back into itself. To make America tepid and afraid of the world.
 28 To destroy our confidence and our society . . . were they trying to engender some specific policy
 29 change [asked Lemann]? I think more important than any specific policy is to undermine the
 30 fundamentals of the American system . . . I mean, if their object is to change a policy there
 31 are conventional ways of getting a change in policy . . . My sense is that these are people who
 32 fundamentally hate our society, hate the values we stand for, and are uncomfortable with the
 33 American presence in the world, and would like nothing better than to turn us into something
 34 that we’re not: a society that lacks vitality and confidence, that’s inward-looking and isolationist,
 35 not involved in the world, and that is not sure of itself, and that is not confident to express values
 36 that we think have a universal nature, like the value of freedom and the value of diversity and
 37 the value of freedom of religion and freedom of expression and a market economy. All of these
 things – on a certain level, they deeply resent it, or hate it. And they want to see a change in it
 (Lemann, 2001, p. 74).

38 In a second article, this time interviewing an unidentified, former CIA official, the
 39 elaborate rhetoric of freedom, diversity, and inclusion is dropped altogether, as
 40 might be imagined when interviewing someone other than a public servant on the

1 record. After recounting how, in the late-1980s, the Jordanian secret service seized
2 terrorists’ close family members to bring an end to Abu Nidal’s organization, we
3 read the following brutally frank comment:

4 We need to do this – knock them down one by one, he said. Are we serious about getting rid of
5 the problem – instead of sitting around making diversity quilts? (Hersh, 2001, p. 36).

6
7 According to Rove, the conflict, or what the other commentator simply calls
8 the problem, is over deep values not specific policy. In other words, it is over
9 timeless principles not historic practices. It is a conflict further complicated by
10 one party going outside the – or, better put, our – “conventional ways” of making
11 social change. So, in the days that followed the attacks we quickly distinguished
12 “mainline” and therefore civil and tolerant Islam from those fanatics and renegades
13 who have moved so far outside the so-called conventional avenues that the usually
14 sufficient rhetoric of diversity is no longer useful at all – a point painfully evident in
15 the quotation from ex-IA official, a quotation where the thin veneer of inclusion is
16 discarded. As made plain by the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, in his October
17 7, 2001, speech to the British people, calling the people who carried out these
18 attacks “Islamic terrorists” is an insult to Islam. Given this chapter’s analysis, it is
19 more than an insult, for it is actually a contradiction in terms inasmuch as “religion”
20 is a classification we, like those political theorists already surveyed, only extend to
21 “peaceful” and therefore “civil” social movements. That the prime suspect in organ-
22 izing these attacks, Osama bin Laden, has been quoted extensively by European
23 and U.S. media as having very specific policy disagreements (e.g. U.S. presence
24 in Saudi Arabia; private Saudi ownership of oil reserves; economic sanctions of
25 Iraq; U.S. support of Israeli actions against Palestinians; see Herman, 2001) is
26 irrelevant to our understanding of this Manichean battle between the forces of
27 Light and Darkness.

28 My point in using the preceding example is neither to diminish and thus argue
29 away the horrific nature of these attacks and counter-attacks, nor is it to take sides
30 regarding the grievances that motivated such actions and reactions. It is simply to
31 identify, in a painfully recent and therefore fresh episode in the history of social
32 formation, the intimate, intertwined, yet largely unrecognized relations between
33 the discourses on religion, freedom, belief, civility, economy, global interests, and
34 the use of coercive violence. Although some may argue that it is advisable to refrain
35 from criticism at certain times,¹⁶ it is *precisely* at times such as these when critical
36 commentary is necessary, for now it is particularly difficult to maintain the normal
37 operations of the popular myth of religion so evident in this chapter’s epigraph
38 and in much scholarship on religion. As Bruce Lincoln once argued (1994), the
39 mechanisms of authority are apparent only when their normally unseen operations
40 break down, when coercion is a last resort. Now that coercion has proved the only

1 option, we see in hindsight that we live within delicate webs spun by our myth of
 2 personal morality, belief, and opinion.

3
 4
 5 **CONCLUSION: “RELIGION” AND**
 6 **THE TOOTHLESS OTHER**
 7

8 If, as some assert, “in a world of religious pluralism, commitments are not checked
 9 at the door” (Eck, 1993, p. 193), then what do we do with those commitments
 10 which, for example, lead people to riot at world trade conferences? Are these
 11 commitments allowable in a pluralistic world, a world where we supposedly take
 12 seriously differences among competing core values? Or do such commitments so
 13 deeply offend against some obvious, standard of decency to which all humans –
 14 insomuch as they share some non-empirical Human Nature – automatically give
 15 assent? If so, then which commitments are to be left at the door? If *real* pluralism
 16 requires openness and commitment, as Eck argues, then, given the colorful
 17 ideological spectrum on today’s political map, it is more than obvious that only a
 18 rather narrow party line of commitments will gain admission to this public square
 19 of conventional, open engagement. Specifically, they will be those commitments
 20 which occupy people’s attitudes, their “hearts and minds,”¹⁷ but which are not
 21 manifested in organized and oppositional political action. In other words, by
 22 framing the question as follows, “how are we all to live with one another in a
 23 climate of mutuality and understanding?” Eck has significantly loaded the dice
 24 in her favor. As she goes on to say, “Those who live according to an exclusivist
 25 paradigm frankly do not wish to live closely with people of others faiths and would
 26 prefer to shut them out . . . or convert others to their own view of the world” (1993,
 27 p. 191). *Unless I am terribly mistaken, these so-called exclusivists, extremists,*
 28 *and tribalists – what Locke once named atheists, traitors, and Mohametans – are*
 29 *precisely the people who have the very real and yet different commitments; they are*
 30 *exactly the people whom Eck claims to be interested in living with on an engaged*
 31 *basis!* Apparently, though, these are just the wrong strongly held commitments
 32 insomuch as people act on them. As in the case of Marty’s *The One and the Many*
 33 (1997), only those who internalize their dissent and who accept the conventional
 34 ground rules of mere conversation and storytelling – as opposed to organized
 35 political action and contestation – are invited to mount the public square’s soap
 36 box and tell their toothless tale.

37 Anyone not in favor of these rules and the social world they make possible is, in
 38 suitably polemical fashion, branded as exclusivists, radicals, militants, extremists,
 39 tribalists, agitators, people with strident voices who are inspired by belligerent
 40 leaders (Marty, 1997, *passim*). They are the people who are not “good” – at least

1 they do not reproduce our supposedly common sense of public good – and, as
 2 such, are a threat to our civil order and can thus hardly be considered “religious.”
 3 As with Hobbes so long ago, a classification with very real political impact is
 4 being acted out by means of what Susan Sontag, in a sobering commentary on
 5 the politico-media-speak that quickly followed the air attacks, has most recently
 6 termed a “reality-concealing rhetoric” (2001), one that serves to eliminate from
 7 serious consideration the very groups whom liberals claim to include in their
 8 pluralist “big tent,” making the supposedly principled, dialogical basis of religious
 9 pluralism a self-interested monologue.¹⁸ In arguing for an ill-defined engagement
 10 and an encounter that recognizes the necessity for “real commitments” that can
 11 inform action only if they happen to fall within a rather narrow party line, liberal
 12 scholars use the time honored, politically loaded technology of “religion” to
 13 fabricate a toothless Other whose seeming differences – “They call God ‘Allah’
 14 and we call God ‘God’ ” – have already been resolved on “our” terms. There is,
 15 thus, a politics to the tolerance, civility, and commonwealth made possible by the
 16 rhetorics of privacy, subjectivity, and experience that goes by the name “religion.”
 17 It is a politics that makes our own social world in the so-called secular, privileged
 18 West possible, but that does not prevent us from seeing the mechanisms that are
 19 at work and the price that is paid when they are smoothly operating.¹⁹

NOTES

- 24 1. Indicative of this trend is the recent appearance of various wordbooks or handbooks
 25 on “key terms”; for example, see [Taylor \(1998\)](#) and [Braun and McCutcheon \(2000\)](#).
 26 2. The quotation is taken from the U.S. government transcripts of the infamous tape
 27 recorded Tripp/Lewinsky phone conversations.
 28 3. Given the set of questions informing this chapter, other chapters in this volume may
 29 very well constitute data for this chapter’s approach.
 30 4. Although he is theologically inclined (insomuch as he prioritizes an inner and
 31 unseen “faith in transcendence” over religion, which he understands merely to refer to
 32 the observable “cumulative tradition”), the early work of [Wilfred Cantwell Smith \(1963\)](#)
 33 cannot go unnoticed when discussing the history of the category “religion.”
 34 5. The very wording of this sentence ought to draw attention to the trouble with this
 35 way of thinking; in other words, such writers try to capture the religion behind “religion,”
 36 unaware that they are ironically reproducing and reinforcing the very taxonomy in their
 37 critique of “it.” This is what Steven Wasserstrom means in entitling his book, *Religion After*
 38 *Religion* (1999); his book’s three subjects, Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henri
 39 Corbin, assumed a deeper religious essence to reside being denominational religion which
 40 could be recovered once traditional religion was appropriately critiqued.
 6. Smith famously wrote in his introduction to this book that there is no data for religion.
 In other words, he argues that, apart from its various folk usages among members of
 Latin-based language families, the very category “religion” when used as a technical term

1 is a product of scholarly imagination, curiosity, and interests. The discourse on religious
 2 impulses and experiences found throughout the North American field may well, then,
 3 comprise an instance of the folk usage of the term, rather than a technical retooling of it.
 4 To this tradition of scholarship one can add [Fitzgerald \(1999\)](#) and [McCutcheon \(1997b\)](#),
 5 and [Saler \(1993\)](#).

6 7. See the story at the *India Tribune's* web site: [http://www.indiatribune.com/
 6 update.html#A1](http://www.indiatribune.com/update.html#A1). The story's opening paragraph reads: "Just like the beef tallow-greased
 7 cartridges triggered mass uprisings of Indian soldiers in the colonial British Indian Army,
 8 which eventually escalated to become India's first war of Independence, McDonald's beef-
 9 extracted additives in its popular French fries is likely to cause a considerable amount of
 10 consternation among the largely vegetarian Asian Indians in the United States."

11 8. My thanks to Pam Sailors, of the Department of Philosophy at Southwest Missouri
 12 State University, for her help in my research on Hobbes.

13 9. Despite asserting the existence of a spiritual kingdom, in footnote 44 in this same
 14 chapter Rousseau shows ample evidence that he was able to generate a social theory of
 15 seemingly religious offices – at least those offices with which he disagreed.

16 It should be noted that the clergy find their bond of union not so much in formal assemblies, as
 17 in the communion of Churches. Communion and excommunication are the social compact of
 18 the clergy, a compact which will always make them masters of peoples and kings. All priests
 19 who communicate together are fellow-citizens, even if they come from opposite ends of the
 20 earth. This invention is a masterpiece of statesmanship: there is nothing like it among pagan
 21 priests; who have therefore never formed a clerical corporate body.

22 Although employing the private/public distinction for his own ends, Rousseau has much in
 23 common with contemporary scholarly intent on historicizing so-called spiritual claims. In
 24 the above quotation he makes it clear that he can discuss communion and excommunication
 25 divorced from the theological manner in which devotees themselves discuss these rituals.

26 10. On the jargon of authenticity, see [McCutcheon \(2001b\)](#).

27 11. The dominance of this one group has been thoroughly documented by Donald
 28 Wiebe; most recently, see his important collection of essays (2000), whose title has directly
 29 influenced my own.

30 12. The resource was produced by Harvard University's Pluralism Project, under Eck's
 31 direction. In this day and age of web-based teaching initiatives and laptop computers, such
 32 CD-ROM resources may very well comprise the future of the world religions textbook
 33 genre.

34 13. The article entitled, "Challenge of Pluralism," originally appeared in 1993 in
 35 *Nieman Reports*, "God in the Newsroom," 47 (2), but can be found on the web at:
 36 <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism/html/article-cop.html>

37 14. This well-known piece of Americana shows a confident looking, flannel-shirted,
 38 working class man standing alone, posed to "speak his mind" at what appears to be a small
 39 town hall meeting. He is surrounded by seated people stretching their necks to watch and
 40 listen to him. Two of the prominent figures in the painting are men who seem to be of a
 higher class inasmuch as they are wearing jackets and ties.

15 Understandably, the existence of such sites has been contested, and contested
 successfully in some cases, prompting some university administrations to forgo the idea.

16 I have in mind the comedian, Bill Mahr, host of AB – 's late-night panel show,
 "Politically Incorrect." Within days of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, he

1 and his show came under seize after he commented that, whatever the attacks were, they
 2 certainly were not “cowardly.” He went on to comment that “cowardly” applied more to
 3 pressing buttons and launching cruise missiles from great distances than to piloting one’s
 4 own jet straight into a building. Mahr was responding to U.S. politicians as well as U.S.
 5 and world media, all of which quickly deployed a rhetoric of hero/coward in their attempt
 6 to understand these attacks. His point regarding the rhetoric deployed in our attempt to
 7 understand was lost, however, and he soon apologized for his comment.

8 17. In the phrasing of the U.S. Supreme Court, religion is a matter of “the citadel of
 9 individual heart and mind.”

10 18. I am indebted to Fish’s *The Trouble With Principle* (1999) for my analysis of Eck’s
 11 and Marty’s rhetoric, in particular Fish’s chapter, “Boutique Multiculturalism” (pp. 56–73).

12 19. Portions of this essay rely on and elaborate work published in McCutcheon (2001a,
 13 Chap. 10, forthcoming a).

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