



“They Licked the Platter Clean”: On the Co-Dependency of the Religious and The Secular¹

Russell T. McCutcheon

Department of Religious Studies, 212 Manly Hall, University of Alabama

Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0264

E-mail: russell.mccutcheon@ua.edu

Abstract

This paper argues that a methodological puzzle that stands in the way of those who critique the adequacy of a secularist perspective for studying religion is that the modern invention that goes by the name of secularism is the only means for imagining religion to exist as an item of discourse. Drawing on a variety of efforts to move beyond the limits of binary thinking—efforts that invariably function to reaffirm one or the other pole by imagining it to predate its partner—the paper concludes that, for those interested in talking about such things as religion, faith, spirit, belief, experience, etc., there is no beyond to secularism, for it constitutes the discursive conditions by means of which we in the modern world think religion into existence. Thus, the now common effort to critique the adequacy of secularism for studying religion not only presuppose the idea of the nation-state but reinforce and extend it as well.

Keywords

secularism, authenticity, classification, binaries, nation-state

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A good part of the human predicament is always to be unaware of the mind's own generative powers and to be limited by concepts of the mind's own fashioning. (Douglas 1999: xv)

I

The day after he was fired in early November 2006, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, had the following to say about the Iraq war:

I will say this—it is very clear that the major combat operations were an enormous success. . . . It's clear that in Phase 2 of this, it has not been going well enough or fast enough (MSNBC 2006).

What caught my attention in this quotation was the manner in which Rumsfeld took what some think of simply as a war and divided it between major and minor operations, thereby distinguishing between phase one and two. By means of this division, he made the war into two separate things, that, once conceived as distinct, could be treated differently from each other—in his case, one a victory and the other a nagging problem. As another example of this strategy, consider Dov Zakheim—a former chief financial officer who once worked for Rumsfeld at the Pentagon—who had the following to say about the war:

People will debate the second part, *the second phase* of what happened in Iraq. Very few are arguing that the military victory in *the first phase* was anything but an outright success. (Danner 2006: 82; emphasis added)²

Despite criticisms that it was overly optimistic to hang that “mission accomplished” banner behind President Bush during his speech from the deck of an aircraft carrier four years ago, this handy distinction proclaims that the mission was indeed accomplished—and that it was done so within only a few weeks and with very few U.S. deaths. All that's left, as they might say, is the mopping up. Of course, the fact that phase two's clean up has so far taken over four years apparently does not detract from the unequivocal success of phase one.

My point? Classification matters. Or, to put it a little more bluntly, we might say *Divide et impera*, for “divide and rule” aptly names the manner in which the designators “phase one” and “phase two” enable those on the politi-

² For a transcript of the original, which aired on November 9, 2006, on Public Television's *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, see http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/military/july-dec06/rumsfeld_11-09.html (accessed March 8, 2007).

cal right, commonly known in the U.S. as foreign policy hawks, to set the terms of the debate by silencing those who oppose their plans. To claims that the U.S. is losing the war they might reply, "What do you mean? We won it four years ago!" But before we rush to criticize those on the right, we likely ought to recognize that this strategic differentiation has uses all along the spectrum of practical interests, for even those on the left (i.e., the so-called doves) make use of this same handy device: "Yes, we won the war," they might say, "but through mismanagement and lack of planning we lost the peace" (e.g., Allawi 2007). This we could characterize as the friendly face of U.S. nationalism, for distinguishing between the war's various phases allows the doves to, as the old saying goes, have their cake and eat it too: they can now criticize the Bush administration while yet agreeing with it on the unquestionable right of the U.S. to use pre-emptive, coercive violence to universalize its local interests—it's just that hawks and doves differ on when, where, and how to do it.

With a deferential nod to Michel Foucault's thoughts on the interconnected nature of knowledge and power we might therefore say that, instead of being a neutral act of passive recognition, practical interests attend the act of distinguishing a "this" from a "that." To illustrate this point further, consider another timely example: as part of their effort to oppose President George W. Bush's early 2007 "troop surge" in Iraq, Democrats quickly renamed it an "escalation"—a term that, for many Americans, still carries with it a powerful anti-war connotation that was acquired during debates over the Vietnam War, suggesting the waste of sending fresh, young lives after those already so tragically lost. And, as might be expected, the White House was quick to reply, for the U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, soon re-named it yet again. During her January 11, 2007, testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Rice said: "Now, as to the question of escalation, I think that I don't see it, and the President doesn't see it, as an escalation. What he sees..." At this point, Sen. Chuck Hagel (Republican, Nebraska) interrupted and asked: "Putting 22,000 new troops, more troops in, is not an escalation?" "I would call it, senator, an augmentation," Rice replied. Though perhaps subtle, these distinctions are important; for ask any plastic surgeon and you will see that an augmentation suggests merely enhancing what one already has; putting your best foot—or any other body part—forward, as they say. Phase one and phase two; surge, escalation, and augmentation—social interests are encoded in these terms, their use helping to make it possible to conceive, promote, or even contest different attachments and arrangements, all depending the manner in which one wishes to name, divide up, and thereby organize the generic world of human doings.

If these politically charged opening examples leave the impression that all we're dealing with is mere jargon, then consider the work of the anthropologist, Brian Spooner (1986), who, in an article on the authenticity of Oriental carpets, argued that *ad hoc* criteria, fueled by the social and material interests of carpet dealers (and not weavers), were invented and applied to regulate a rug's exchange value. But perhaps the most important part of his argument is that such regulatory mechanisms as criteria for authenticity and the so-called experts to implement them were devised *only after* the Industrial Revolution made possible the mass-production of carpets. Spooner therefore concludes that, prior to that time, there was no such thing in the natural world as an "authentic Oriental carpet." That is, prior to the development and use of criteria driven by newly emergent practical interests there was no reason, and thus no way, to distinguish the supposedly genuine article from a cheap imitation. Instead, a wide variety of locally woven floor coverings, traced to a part of the world once known as Persia, were used by those who made them or were considered family heirlooms destined either for a dowry or saved for that rainy day when they could be traded locally for other goods.

Spooner's analysis nicely demonstrates that distinctions—in this case between authentic and fake, pristine original and degraded copy—are elements of economies of signification. In the case of Oriental carpets, it is an economy with a dramatic increase in supply that was made possible by technological innovation. Criteria of authenticity, we see, therefore function like a trade tariff, helping to protect investments (i.e., by regulating such things as value, authority, or prestige) by governing an otherwise competitive system of exchange; after all, should I be dealing in such carpets, I would undoubtedly have a stake in not any old rug being equally valued to those that I had brought to market. We also see that, if there is no such thing in the realm of empirical objects as an authentic Oriental carpet, then all we have to study are people putting their contestable preferences into practice by means of classification systems that, when policed with sufficient muscle, turn a mere rug into something you wouldn't dare walk on.

Classification, then, is hardly mere jargon. Neither is it simply the passive recognition of already existing values and identities. Instead, it is evidence of both prior interests and upcoming consequences.

Moving from carpets to people, from managing value to managing identity, we arrive at one of the premises of the social theory that I am suggesting we bring to the study of religion's relation to the political as well as the sacred's relation to the secular: it is only in response to previously unknown difference, and by means of the conventions that we concoct and which suit our pur-

poses, that people attempt to exert some control over the unwieldy economies of social affinity and estrangement in which they happen to find themselves. Prior to some unanticipated social change, such systems of management (e.g., criteria for group membership) were therefore unimagined because they were not required. And the concocted convention that ought to attract our attention is the very pairing of religion with political, the sacred with the secular.

As an initial example of this, consider the case of what Bruce Lincoln refers to as a “minor skirmish,” in 1930s Swaziland, between local leaders and British colonial administrators. Quoting the account by the Africanist, Hilda Kuper (1947: 103-4), Lincoln describes how the British plan to build an airstrip on Swazi territory was thwarted by Sobhuza II, the Swazi King (1899-1982). As phrased by Kuper, the Swazi people resented the idea of sacrificing some of their own land for such a landing strip: “Why Native Areas and not a European farm? [they asked]. Who would benefit from a ‘fly-machine’? Why do white people always speak of generosity and yet take everything and give nothing?” (Lincoln 1989: 27). Whether or not the location identified for the airfield had already been noteworthy to the locals, at least on this occasion it became significant that, on the site where the strip was to be built, a royal village had once existed, where a prior Swazi King had, under the shade of a tree, apparently once “met in debate.” As observed by Lincoln, whatever its prior significance, this story of the tree was on this occasion useful, for

[t]o prepare the ground the tree would have to be removed. On their [i.e., his counselors’] advice the King said that the ground could be used if the tree were not touched. There have since been negotiations to buy land from a European (Lincoln 1989: 271 quoting Kuper).

In a setting where two sets of interests were vying for control over one generic *space*, each seeking to signify it in a novel manner and thereby make it into a different *place* (using these two locative terms somewhat differently from de Certeau),³ a tale of origins, which set the space apart, became a tactical tool used by one side to prevent the other from realizing its competing interests. Or, as Lincoln concludes: “Here, under the pressure of events, actors sought

³ For Michel de Certeau (1988: 117), “space” (*espace*) signifies a system of order as it is put into practice by creative agents with varied interests, as opposed to “place” (*lieu*), which signifies the system of order in its static or ideal sense—its pre-use phase. Instead, I am using “space” somewhat like Mary Douglas uses “matter”—to name a domain prior to its signification. Of course, that such a naming is itself an act of signification goes without saying; “space” is therefore used merely to draw attention to the fact that various senses of “place” are not natural or necessary.

and found a story from the past that could serve interests in the present” (27). Without the “pressure of events”—i.e., an unexpected competing group seeking to make alternative use of this land, much like a competing dealer seeking to maximize the value of a rug woven elsewhere—it seems unlikely that the tree, because of the tale of the royal meeting, would have stood out as self-evidently significant to the locals. Therefore inquiring whether or not the tree actually ought to have been classed as unique, distinctive, and significant—in a word, sacred—entirely misses the point of its social utility on this occasion.

The Iraq war’s two phases, the difference between an escalation and an augmentation, the authenticity of a carpet, as well as the Swazi origins tale of the shady tree, all have direct bearing on the question that prompted this essay: “whether secularism as political doctrine provides an adequate perspective for approaching the contemporary challenges of religion in politics.”⁴ Because I was invited to speak as part of an opening panel on the theoretical, analytical, and methodological puzzles that are involved in, as the conference’s title put it, going “beyond secularism,” I would like to try to make explicit and thereby problematize the assumptions contained not in secularism but, instead, in the very question that was posed to us.

Much as it would be a mistake to become preoccupied with determining whether the shady tree really was sacred, the issue is not whether secularism is or is not an adequate perspective for approaching the topic of religion and politics. Instead, I propose that the modernist invention that goes by the name of secularism is in fact religion’s alter-ego (see Arnal 2000, 2001), that it is the *only* means for imagining religion even to exist, because “the religious” and “the secular” are, as my friend Willi Braun has phrased it, co-dependent categories. To put it another way, for those interested in talking about this thing that goes by the name of religion, that is somehow presumed to be distinguishable from that other thing that we commonly know as politics—the one premised on private experience and the other on public action—then *there is no beyond to secularism*. For just as the discourse on the shady tree was possible only in the midst of a paired set of interests—one local, the other colonial—so too the conceptual pairing of the secular with the category religion provides the intellectual and social conditions in the midst of which, as phrased by Talal Asad, “modern living is required to take place” (2003: 14). Moreover, in keeping with my opening example of hawks and doves differing over the war’s

⁴ Quoting from the conference website, http://www.ku.dk/satsning/Religion/sekularism_and_beyond/index.asp (April 16, 2007).

phases yet still agreeing on the universal nature of their shared local interests, attempts to assess the adequacy of secularism for studying religion not only presupposes the existence of the secular, but also effectively reproduce that location where this act of assessment—an act constitutive of our modern living—is taking place, the site made possible by these categories' use: the liberal democratic nation-state.

II

In entertaining this thesis we need to keep in mind Emile Durkheim's basic, though crucial, insight (nicely exemplified in Lincoln's tale of the airstrip and shady tree) that sacredness is a contingent attribute that results from actors *choosing* to implement sets of negotiable social rules; after all, as he famously defined it, people, places, actions, and things are sacred *not* because of some inner quality expressed or manifested in the world but, instead, because they can all be "set apart and forbidden"—highlighting both *placement* and *regulation*, activities that beg us to inquire just who did this setting apart, for what reason, and apart from what or whom. Asking such questions is therefore premised on our post-Durkheimian ability to entertain that, just as with early anthropological studies of other peoples' use of such designators as "clean" and "unclean," our "religious" and "secular," our "sacred" and "profane," do not name substantive or stable qualities in the empirical world, one predating the other or one superior to the other.⁵ Instead, much as with "hawks" and "doves" or "authentic" and "fake," they are mutually defining terms that come into existence together—what we might as well call a binary pair—the use of which makes a historically specific social world possible to imagine and move within; a world in which we can judge some actions as safe or dangerous, some items as pure or polluted, some knowledge as private or public, and some people as friend or foe. For only in the midst of the contest over the local Swazi and colonial British interests did the otherwise unremarkable tree become an item of discourse, thereby providing a basis for judging the airfield's construction as allowable or not.

⁵ Keeping in mind Mary Douglas's biting critique of Durkheim exempting his own society's cherished truths (i.e., science, mathematics, etc.) from his own social analysis (see the Preface to the first edition in Douglas 1999), we could say that the fact of our being able to look upon the familiar with the same Durkheimian eyes that we use to see the strange is evidence of the limitations of his original work as well as its profound influence on subsequent theorists.

A point that we should take away from these opening examples is that social groups use a variety of local devices to navigate decisions over which of the many items of the empirical world get to count as significant and thus memorable. We would therefore be wise to avoid either universalizing or concretizing these devices, as if an “authentic Oriental carpet” were an actual empirical item that we could hold, making “authenticity” a cross-cultural criterion of universal applicability. Instead, as already identified, for those who trade in such carpets, “authenticity” is an insider discursive term, shorthand for a set of interests (or, as Claude Lévi-Strauss might have put it, a bundle of relations) within which they move—it is not a scholarly, analytic category.

To make this point, consider the now widely used, and thus taken for granted, conceptual pairing of citizen/foreign national. Although it may be correct to assume that “[s]ocial classification is a cultural universal, and categorical differences are coeval with human history” (Lie 2004: 13), as John Lie immediately goes on to observe, we would be doing rather sloppy history if we assumed that the means by which we do this in the modern nation-state were representative of all such social techniques. We therefore cannot elevate our local “citizen/foreign national” distinction to the status of an analytic category quite so easily. For, as he phrases it, despite the “impulse to classify and categorize people” being in evidence in as early a work as Herodotus’s *History*, this does not mean that this ancient conception of social identity was the same as our sense of identity being “involuntary and inclusionary . . . based on descent and commonality.”⁶ So, although we may offhandedly talk about “citizens of ancient Rome,” as scholars we likely ought to be careful to clarify that, when using it as an cross-cultural analytic tool, we are *not* employing “citizen” in the same fashion that we do when making claims about our own social identity today (e.g., “I am a Canadian citizen”).⁷ Whether “citizen” is malleable enough to be retooled in this fashion is, of course, an entirely separate question—after all, not all local terms of self/other-classification can equally be elevated to the status of cross-culturally useful analytic term.

Returning from citizen/foreigner to binaries of more direct relevance to our field, we can say that if we are willing to take Mary Douglas’s advice—“anyone who would follow Durkheim must give up the comfort of stable anchorage for his [own] cognitive efforts” (1999: xvii)—then we must be prepared to enter-

⁶ I am grateful to Mark Juergensmeyer for pointing out Lie’s interesting book.

⁷ A similar point is often made when teachers prompt their students to be careful and not simply assume that the south Asian term “caste” can be completely described in terms of the economic designator “class.”

tain that our own “religious” and “secular” are, for our purposes as scholars, folk or phenomenological categories. No doubt, they will continue to be useful in our scholarly description of some people’s world-making activities—activities taking place in the very groups that we in the modern liberal democratic world inhabit, as well as those elsewhere who, for whatever reason, have adopted (or, possibly, been forced to adopt) these social techniques. However, without careful retooling, they are *not* analytic categories helpful in accounting for the creation, the successful reproduction, and the export of the worlds that their use has made possible. This very point is nicely made by John Bowen in his new book, *Why The French Don’t Like Headscarves* (2007). Referring to the French term “laïcité,” only roughly translated as “secularism,” he observes that, although French politicians may speak of laïcité as a causal agent or explanatory principle, “[it] does not . . . serve as a useful analytical tool. It makes no sense for a social scientist or historian to ask, ‘Does this policy reinforce laïcité?’” (2007: 2). Why? Because, as he points out, “there is no historical actor called ‘laïcité’: only a series of debates, laws, and multiple efforts [on the part of various social participants with differing interests] to assert claims over public space” (33).

One might respond to this line of thought by suggesting that I have obviously not done my history well enough, since, as it was phrased to me at the conference where this paper was first presented, the Achaemenids had the church/state, or religious/political, distinctions long before the turn of the era. However, I would reply that my historical critic was guilty of not doing *his own* history nearly well enough! For this ancient empire predated the invention not only of the category religion’s linguistic precursors (which, notably, themselves did not *mean* religion as we know it) but also the modern (i.e., post-seventeenth century) word/concept, making it historically inaccurate to project our local term backward in time so as to conclude that whatever social divisions they may have employed can adequately be described as a “separation of church and state.” Whether or not the divisions of authority, labor, and resources within this ancient empire had points of similarity to our own system of division is, of course, an entirely separate question. Such a question can, of course, be answered, but only by devising a theoretically-based comparative framework in terms of which the divisions of social space in their society that attract our interests can be juxtaposed to our own—a framework that must be something other than an imperial elevation of either their or our local as if it is necessarily universal. After all, despite the old saying, apples and oranges are indeed comparable, just not in terms of their appleness or their orangeness. Instead, they can be placed alongside each other in terms of their

both being instances of some higher order concept that regulates and organizes some of their similarities and differences, such as the classifier “fruit” (a point that I recall William Paden making during his oral presentation at the IAHR Mexico City meeting in 1995).⁸

So, regardless of particular claims about the Achaemenids, perhaps my thesis concerning the co-dependency of the sacred and the profane is not nearly as controversial as I think; if so, then I’d like to press this point even further by asking readers to entertain that the same can be said about those other pairings commonly found in our field, such as belief/practice, experience/expression, essence/manifestation, and faith/institution. Sadly, too many scholars fail to take this additional step and, instead, subscribe to a position long associated with the American psychologist, William James: while agreeing that our Latin-derived term “religion” is an historical invention, they nonetheless presume that it points to pre-social and thus universal sentiments that go by such names as belief, faith, and experience. As an example of this common position, consider an article on African religions in Blackwell’s *A Company to Philosophy of Religion*.⁹ There, we read the following:

Not only is the word “religion” not an African word...—but also... it is doubtful whether there is a single-word or even periphrastic translation of the word in any African language. This does not mean, of course, that the phenomenon itself does not exist among Africans. One might have something without being given to talking about it (Wiredu 1997: 34).

There may be no more succinct example of the widespread failure of historical consciousness among scholars of religion. For as we see here, while acknowledging that the word “religion” is a contingent element introduced into a social world from outside, the concept or the phenomenon to which it points has no such history, for it somehow pre-dates language and culture. Only by assuming the existence of such an extra-discursive, Platonic realm, could this author acknowledge the historicity of the term “religion” while yet concluding that Africans, who do not traditionally possess the word, nonetheless “are pre-eminently religious, not even knowing how to live without religion.”

⁸ For example, consider Fasolt’s fascinating paper (2004b), in which he uses the scholarly categories of sacred/profane (understood as devices humans employ cross-culturally to address the inevitable gap between knowledge of self and knowledge of other/Reality [17-19]) as the organizing rubric to compare the social role of the modern church/state separation to the medieval clerics/laity division of authority.

⁹ Portions of the following two paragraphs are reproduced in McCutcheon forthcoming.

So, having been initially encouraged by this author's recognition of the historical nature of our categories, I was rather disappointed when his philosophical idealism made its appearance—not only in his claims about some religious object that predates language but also in his use of the descriptor “Africa” as if it pertained to an essential trait shared by all (or at least some) who happen to call this continent their home. I likely do not have to persuade readers that there is something at stake when scholars too quickly homogenize the many Africas that can otherwise be classified as different—a point that was nicely made in a public lecture at my own university not long ago. Despite its apparent continuity in geographic space, we were reminded by the lecturer that the many different languages, ethnic groups, and cultures quickly confound any attempt to discuss sensibly what a previous generation might have generalized as “the African mentality” or “the African mind.” But having been persuaded by this caution not to overlook matters of difference, I was struck by how quickly our lecturer then began describing the traits of this thing she called “the cosmos of African traditional religions.” What happened, I wondered, to the caution about the perils of essentialism? How did matters of empirical difference so quickly give way to cosmic similarity? Or, as one of my Department's students asked following the talk, how was she able to use such terms as “myth” and “ritual,” not to mention “religion”—terms that were first applied to Africa by colonialist outsiders—to describe what our lecturer understood to be Africa's authentic, pre-colonial patterns of living?¹⁰

The answer that my student received from our lecturer was informed by much the same stance as that which was adopted by the previously quoted scholar of African religions: he was told that we had no choice but to use such Greek and Latin-based English terms because, were we to call such things as religion by the local names, well, none of us attending the lecture would understand it. It strikes me that—much as in the case of the scholar citing the Achaemenids—such an answer improperly ontologizes our nomenclature. Appealing to George and Ira Gershwin's onetime popular song (“Let's Call the Whole Thing Off” [1936]), one could say that this amounts to the old “you say tomato; I say tomahto” view of classification. Apparently, or so our lecturer told us, based on common sense we know that, regardless what we call its contents, and even if we do not have names for it all, we somehow

¹⁰ The student remarked later that among the things said by the speaker that struck him as curious was her use of the notion of “checks and balances”—which he understood as a particularly modern, American way of talking about governmental process and regulation—to describe the workings of authority within pre-colonial African traditional society.

know that the garden not only contains a variety of distinguishable items but that we can all agree on what to pluck as weeds and what to eat in our mixed greens.

However, when it comes to scholarship, this common sense view of classification is problematic, for it overlooks what we learned from Oriental carpets and the tale of the shady tree. Names and identities are not neutral and thus inter-changeable descriptors of stable items in the natural world. Instead, they are devices that we use and argue over while making a world that suits our differing purposes. Given that I was just talking about tomatoes, allow me to press this point by considering the 1893 U.S. Supreme Court case of *Nix v. Hedden* (149 U.S. 304) in which Mr. Edward Hedden, tax collector for the port of New York, was sued to recover taxes paid, under protest, on tomatoes that several gentlemen named Nix (presumably family members) had imported from the West Indies in the Spring of 1886. Because the U.S.'s Tariff Act of 1883 imposed a duty on importing "vegetables in their natural state, or in salt or brine," there was obvious advantage to defining tomatoes as a fruit, especially given that the act stated that "[f]ruits, green, ripe, or dried . . . [are] not especially enumerated or provided for in this act." The outcome of the case? Regardless the well-known botanical classification of tomatoes as a fruit (given that they contain a plant's seeds and are not themselves the edible seeds, roots, stems, or leaves of plants), for the purposes of trade and commerce their identity in "the common language of the people" won the day. For, as Supreme Court Justice Horace Gray explained succinctly, we don't eat them for desert.¹¹

What lesson do we learn from this episode in the exercise of judicial choice? Well, there are several, some of which are likely well-known to anyone with even a passing familiarity with how we study meaning-making in light of structuralism and post-structuralism. First, because I have no idea how to determine whether there is some real thing out there to which the English term "tomato" naturally applies, we can at least say that we are able to conceptualize and then exchange an item in the natural world *as* a tomato only once it is named as such. Second, naming some item as a this and not a that,

¹¹ Of course, such debates are neither limited to North America nor the nineteenth century. For example, consider the European Union's Council Directive 2001/113/EC (December 20, 2001), involving the sale and export of fruit jams, jellies, marmalades, and purées. Under this agreement, carrots (not to mention rhubarb and sweet potatoes) can be defined as a fruit—why? Apparently because carrot jam is a Portuguese delicacy! See Annex 3.A.1 of the *Official Journal of the European Communities* for the full text (which can be found at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/oj/2002/l_010/l_01020020112en00670072.pdf [accessed on June 4, 2007]).

(i.e., as a vegetable and not a fruit), requires a set of criteria to be used in simultaneously conceptualizing the item being identified as well as that which it is not (i.e., classification entails the establishment of relationships of similarity and difference). Third, practical interests (in this case, economic) drive this classification process (i.e., without the economic advantage to be had by re-classifying tomatoes as fruits I doubt that the Nixes would have pressed their case through the judicial system for seven years). Fourth, as evidenced by the fact that the tomato can be both vegetable *and* fruit, competing classification systems exist simultaneously; acts of classification therefore require additional sets of rules to determine which criteria to apply and when. For neither the common usage of tomatoes as a vegetable nor their technical, botanical definition as fruit are useful in determining *when* to classify tomatoes *as* vegetables and *when* to classify them *as* fruits. The important point, here, is that such determinations cannot be settled at the level of data but only at the level of interests, such as the criterion of economic interest that was introduced by the Court when it stated that its ruling was “for purposes of trade and commerce.” From this we derive our fifth and final lesson: although seemingly concerned with deciding the fate of tomatoes, this court case (as with all such cases) was actually an exercise in the state’s right to determine its own jurisdiction. That is to say, the case not only exemplified the right of the state to unilaterally determine its citizen’s relationships to each other (through its levying of taxes to regulate their economic relations) but it also exemplified the state’s unrivaled authority to settle any dispute that results from these forced relations. Deciding the fate of tomatoes (i.e., determining the relations of the Nixes to the state) therefore constituted one among many sites where the self-policing power of the state was exercised and—inasmuch as the plaintiff’s lived with its verdict—legitimized.

III

Apparently, then, classification is a lot more complicated than common sense tells us. Taking this into account, our work on the religious and the secular will have to keep in mind the historical nature and practical utility of our terms, no longer treating them as natural kinds. Instead, we must be open to scrutinizing the socio-political worlds and practical interests that the very existence of such a term as “religion” helps to make possible and persuasive. As well, our scholarship will no longer be able to spin nostalgic yarns, as did that lecturer on African religions, about a simpler, pre-colonial time comprised of

undisturbed religious identities. Instead, it will have to be open to entertaining, that, as phrased by the French scholar, Jean-François Bayart, “the crystallization of particular identities... took place *in the colonial period*, under the combined (but possibly conflictual) action of the foreign occupiers, their autochthonous collaborators, and their adversaries” (2005: 88; emphasis added). As he then concludes: “Far from pre-existing the state, primordial groups, whether religious or ethnic... are the more or less poisonous fruit of the state itself” (emphasis added). Much as a discourse is but the sum total of a series of practices, Bayart argues that there are no authentic, pristine social identities that move through time or which can be violated by alien naming conventions. Instead, there are only a series of historically discrete strategies, always developed and deployed in situations of difference (possibly contest), for specific reasons and with practical effects, that work to establish and normalize this or that thing that we come to call an identity—strategies working in concert with, or against, those practiced in other locales.

The question for scholars is whether we will take all of this into account when studying not only distant and unfamiliar social practices but local and familiar ones as well, prompting us to be more methodologically self-conscious in our labors, studying how and for whom such strategies work, or whether we will simply adopt those that suit us—or at least the “us” that we each wish to be perceived as—thereby adopting the illusory but nevertheless useful identities that they make possible.

Now, I recognize that I have used the term “methodologically self-conscious” but without elaborating on it. When using this phrase, I have in mind the work of Jonathan Z. Smith: “The student of religion,” he writes, “must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study” (1982: xi). Why? Because, as he memorably stated in the lines immediately preceding those that I have just quoted, “Religion is solely a creation of the scholar’s study... Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.”

Some have criticized Smith for apparently missing the fact that people other than scholars routinely talk about religion and act in ways that they themselves understand as religious—indicating to such critics that, despite his usual rigor, Smith overlooked that scholars are not alone in thinking that they have a monopoly when it comes to this term. But I think that such critics have missed his point entirely. On my reading, Smith is arguing that when used as a name for a universal, experiential trait which, due to the varying sites of its public expression, comes in a relatively small number of more or less stable forms

(known today as “the world’s religions”), then we have little choice but to conclude that the modern concept “religion”—complete with its emphasis on belief over behavior and experience over expression—was developed in that research laboratory we call the modern academy; it is an academy whose history parallels the movement from the so-called “the Age of Discovery” and “the Enlightenment,” through the colonial era, and past the rise of the nation-state. For it is during this period that reconnaissance reports from abroad prompted European intellectuals and administrators to confront human novelty of a magnitude previously unknown. The category “religion,” for those reworking their society’s epistemological and socio-political grids in light of these new Others, became a handy indicator of intangible likeness in the face of what seemed to be overwhelming empirical difference. For, much like authenticity’s link to the challenges created by mass-produced Oriental rugs flooding the market, “[t]he question of the ‘religions’ arose in response to an explosion in data” (Smith 1998: 275). In fact, it was this explosion of data that led to what Tomoko Masuzawa (2005: 147-178) has characterized as the fissure in the once taken-for-granted European sense of its direct link to the ancient Greeks and Hebrews—a gap resulting from such novel developments as the philological studies of Sanskrit made possible by colonial contact. For, as Smith goes on to write: “Increased mastery of non-European languages led by the latter part of the eighteenth-century to a series of translations and editions of religious texts. Missionaries, colonial officials, and travelers contributed ethnographic descriptions. Encyclopedias of religions, lexica, and handbooks (the latter, frequently bearing the title ‘History of Religions’) were produced to organize these materials” (1998: 275).

As evidence of Europeans grappling with this newfound variety of human practice, we find in this era numerous debates, somewhat akin to debating the authenticity of rugs, but now on whether this or that newly discovered practice was civilized or not, was religious or not. Think no further than Durkheim’s well known distinction of religion from magic: “Il n’existe pas d’Église magique” he famously wrote—“There is no Church of magic” (1995: 42). This example from Durkheim is particularly useful for us, since his distinction reinforces an earlier point concerning criteria of demarcation—in his case, the presence of an institution—being a product of preferences and *not* the result of mere generalization following disinterested observation of actual states of affairs. Demarcating religion from magic, much like distinguishing tomato-as vegetable from tomato-as fruit, is therefore not an innocent description; instead, it is another example of classification arranging the world to suit prior

preferences. For without Durkheim's interest in the social, much as the U.S. Supreme Court's interest in "the purposes of trade and commerce" directs its gaze, there would be no reason to use this criterion to distinguish one set of practices from the other (i.e., the religious from magical)—at least not in the way, and for the reason, that he does.

Throughout the period that we know as modernity, then, the category "religion" became a shorthand designation for the degree to which "they" were or were not like "us." If they were, then the question was just how much; but if they were not, then a number of designators was at hand for naming the new found alien peoples' beliefs, behaviors, and institutions: along with the already mentioned term "magic," such classifiers as apostasy, pagan, heathen, native, savage, uncivilized, and superstition come to mind.¹² Today, we might add cult, fundamentalism, and extremism to this list, not to mention terrorist (as opposed to freedom fighter) and regime (as opposed to government).

The category "religion," then, used as a designator of an intangible likeness shared across cultures is therefore just as Smith says: solely a creation of the modern scholar's study (read as both our methods as well as the space in which we carry them out), one situated in a world where—thanks to such innovations as cartography, sailing ships, trade routes, armies, and printing presses—the prior, taken-for-granted economy of social affinity and estrangement was being shaken in a rather dramatic manner. That people around the world eventually adopted this category (as a result of explorers, missionaries, and soldiers who used this category arriving unannounced on their shores), such that now people worldwide routinely conceive of themselves as having an active, inner religious life that is distinguishable from their outer political activities, does not undermine Smith's point. Rather, it provides compelling evidence of the transportable utility of a distinction originally developed several centuries ago to address challenges to a specific set of identity claims. For if, as Douglas famously suggested, "our colonisation [sic] of each other's

¹² This point is nicely made by Chidester in his historical study of comparative religion in colonial era southern Africa (1996). Unfortunately, much like some authors already cited, he recognizes the historical nature of our terminology while yet universalizing that to which it supposedly points, as in when he faults early colonialists' failure to "recognize the existence of indigenous religions in southern Africa" (xv). If "religion"—both word *and* concept—is part of a bundle of conceptual and social relations that we trace to early modern Europe, then "indigenous religions" is no longer a neutral descriptor, as it is often used by such scholars. Instead, it is an imperial move to project backward in time not only our local taxon but also the social interests that drive it and the social relations that it helps to make possible.

minds is the price we pay for thought" (1999: ix), then the spread of this term, and the bundle of conceptual and social relations that comes with it, may turn out to be the price that we pay for the ability to think ourselves into a modern "we."

Unfortunately, the fact that the distinction between religion and politics, between private faith and public action, has been so useful for creating a certain type of social order in Europe and North America world over the past several centuries seems to have been forgotten. In using these distinctions in our scholarship as if they were neutral descriptors of universal states of affairs, found in the wild, we are therefore overlooking the fact that these concepts are social devices, driven by interests and attended by consequences; as the historian Constantin Fasolt has reminded us in his book, *The Limits of History*, peace in early modern Europe was "built on the distinction between public and private affairs." As he goes on to argue:

Conscience had fought with pope and emperor for control of the world. Both claimed universal rights. When both realized that victory was out of reach, they agreed to divide the spoils. And in so doing, they transformed themselves into the shape in which we have known them ever since: a conscience that makes no claims on politics and a politics that makes no claims on conscience. Conscience was recognized, but only as a private voice that had no right to public force, except indirectly, through peaceful debate. Augsburg's abstention from settling questions of religion by force was thus kept intact. But it was also made legitimate by a new distinction between politics and religion that had lain beyond the imagination of the sixteenth century (2004a: 137-8).

Instead of keeping in mind "that our current practice is haunted by moral compromises made centuries ago" (Spiegel 2005: 12), and thereby recognizing that the faith/practice, belief/institution, and religious/political distinctions, from the seventeenth-century on, have been strategic contrasts—though their consequences were further reaching than the distinction between tomato-as-fruit and tomato-as-vegetable—our historical amnesia allows us to ontologize these tactical distinctions. The result is that we have turned them into commodities that can be exported to distant shores and distant times, as if all groups naturally manage issues of social affinity as we do. Much like the current young generation's inability to imagine a world without computers, scholars who see religion lurking around every cultural corner fail to imagine the category as our historical invention, helping us to satisfy our intellectual interests and to achieve our practical goals, thereby making it a crucial building block in our social world.

IV

But how, specifically, does this conceptual pairing accomplish all this?¹³ Well, consider once again the lecturer's thoughts on what she termed "authentic, pre-colonial African traditional religions." To begin with, we must recognize that her category was in unstated opposition to what we might term "inauthentic colonial importations." Now, if pressed, this lecturer would surely have to agree that she could provide no actual empirical evidence of either of these. That is to say, both are generalizations—ideal types, if you will—that exist only in discourse. To create these two things, she had little choice but to select (based on what criteria, we might ask?) from a variety of widely dispersed local practices to arrive at her list of, for example, the essential traits of the cosmos of traditional African religions. But, this is a cosmos not inhabited by any actual human beings, since no group of people engage in all those things judged to be essential to this cosmos.

Having created these binary types, they can now be used to mark a discursive boundary of a structure that manages the various items that constitute actual historical existence. That is, the distinction between original and subsequent, between pre-colonial and post-colonial, establishes the limits of a grid, much like the white lines that re-constitute a generic and limitless space as an ordered and delimited domain that we call "tennis court." Within these mutually agreed upon, yet arbitrary, limits a game can therefore be played, inasmuch as a series of relationships of "more or less" can now be established, allowing us to argue over whether the ball was fair or foul. Borrowing a page from Wittgenstein, we could easily move not only from games to language (after all, my own meaning is nothing but the result of our playing within the arbitrary yet agreed upon rules that we know as grammar and vocabulary) but also to social groups, whether small, such as the family, or large, such as the nation-state. Once the arbitrary limits are established—either by persuasion or coercion—discourse can then take place, identities conceived, comparisons entertained, and judgments made.

Which brings me back to the category "religion:" recalling Fasolt's comments on the crucial social management role played by this designator a few hundred years ago—when long established distributions of power and iden-

¹³ See the Preface, Introduction, and last chapter of McCutcheon 2003 on the manner in which the invention of privacy—whether architectural, as in a private room, or psychological, as in the private self—can be understood as a strategic political device for managing dissent while simultaneously projecting the image of social harmony. These themes are then elaborated in McCutcheon 2005.

tity, along with the conventions that authorized them, were up for grabs all across Europe,—I suspect that the modern invention of “belief” and “practice” and “the sacred” and “the secular,” continue to play a central role in regulating that high stakes game that we call modern identity. For the concept “religion,” in naming that which is understood to be both universal and ineffable, when paired with the concept “politics,” identifying that which is particular and tangible, establishes an always useful structure capable of regulating the many social differences that jockey for any group’s attention, energy, and resources—especially those large scale groups we call nation-states, in which common identities are presumed to unite their millions of citizens, all of whom also identify themselves with a variety of differing (often competing, sometimes contradictory) sub-groups.

I say that this discursive pairing is always useful—and thus is easy to keep on our minds—because the goal posts of this particular game are, as already stated, ideal types that inhabit discourse and can thus be applied in virtually any situation. For the historical world of public particularity that goes by the name of “the secular” is populated by far too many discrete items for the concept secular ever to be useful in any act of signification—for secular names a cacophony of unregulated stimuli, somewhat akin to white noise. And as for the term “religion”? Well, ask anyone who has tried to define it and you’ll learn that its utility is linked to its inability to be defined—much like someone telling you, “I can’t quite put it into words”—making it applicable to virtually any situation yet meaningless, because it has no agreed upon limits. So, when juxtaposed to the infinite particularity of what we classify as the political world, that which goes by the name of religion turns out to be our version of the utterly empty—and, because of that, the immensely useful—French phrase, “Je ne sais quoi.” In the midst of saying nothing, it seems to say everything.

So, whereas “the secular” says far too much (i.e., is over-determined), “the sacred” says far too little (i.e., is under-determined). Whereas one category is too full the other, as termed by Ernesto Laclau (1996), is an empty signifier.¹⁴ On their own, they are therefore useless concepts; but, when used as a binary pair, they set malleable limits that make almost anything possible to say. Religion and politics, sacred and secular, therefore function in much the same fashion as that old nursery rhyme which illustrates co-dependency so well:

¹⁴ For example, as phrased by Sullivan, “[t]here is no accepted legal way of talking in the United States about the vast array of religious beliefs and practices that are represented” (2005: 100). While for some this may seem to be a shortcoming of U.S. law, according to this paper this is necessarily the case.

Jack Spratt could eat no fat,
 His wife could eat no lean.
 And so, between the two of them
 They licked the platter clean

On their own, the under-determined husband and over-determined wife would each be destined for tragedy, but when working in concert, “they licked the platter clean.” As for our pairing of the sacred and the secular, what lies between their coordinated use? None other than the idea of the largest social formation we’ve yet come up with: the nation-state, with its regulating conventions (e.g., the police, the courts) that are used to negotiate the ever changeable limits of novelty and tradition, affinity and estrangement. They do so not only by defining certain items as more vegetable than fruit, but also as more allowable than prohibited, more private than public, more religious than secular—simply put, more empty, more inconsequential, more tolerable, and therefore in less need of governance, or more full, more consequential, more intolerable, and thus in greater need of regulation.¹⁵

V

If we wish to take all of this seriously, focusing our studies on the role of such techniques in making specific types of meaning and identity possible, how can we rethink our field and the issues that catch our attention? To take but one historical example, consider how we might go about studying Thomas More and William Tyndale’s famous debate, in the early 1530s, over the significance of the “Lord’s Day.” For those familiar with this episode, More strongly disagreed with the reformist Tyndale’s complete dismissal of the notion of sacred

¹⁵ This helps us to understand why the liberal democratic nation-state so easily grants freedom of belief, or conscience, to its citizens; for despite the common sense view that ideas and beliefs are substantive items in the real world, they are immaterial, ineffective, and thus freely entertained. After all, ideas do not think themselves into existence (as phrased in Braun [forthcoming]); for this reason they can largely be exchanged without regulation, which is more than we can say for the bodies and associations needed to think such ideas into existence and put them into practice. As evidence, consider the U.S. Supreme Court decision from 1878, *Reynolds v. U.S.* (98 U.S. 145), in which Mr. Reynolds’s belief in polygamy was not at issue; rather, it was his practice of it—despite being a sincere Mormon—that was outlawed. Making reference to this earlier decision, Justice Antonin Scalia, in a decision against the religious use of peyote (a prohibited hallucinogenic), wrote: “we have never held that an individual’s *beliefs* excuse him from compliance with an otherwise valid law prohibiting *conduct* that the state is free to regulate” (*Employment Division v. Smith* 494 U.S. 872 [1990], 878-9; emphasis added).

time as possessing an intrinsic quality. In the controversy that originally arose over Tyndale's 1525-6 English translation of the New Testament, "the Protestant Tyndale [much as with such other reformers as Calvin, Zwingli, and Luther,] went so far as to say that any day of the week could serve as the 'Lord's Day'" (Sommerville 1992: 34; see also Walsh 1980: 80). Of course, these and other such reformist views were not looked upon favorably by many who were still in authority; after eventually being captured in Antwerp, where he was then residing after fleeing Britain, and then convicted of heresy, Tyndale was strangled and burnt at the stake, near Brussels, in October of 1536.

What do we, as scholars, make of this debate over the calendar? Although it might strike some as a minor episode among far more influential historical events, the question is worth posing, for the early sixteenth-century More/Tyndale controversy provides an early and discrete example of the sort of institutional differentiation that we eventually come to know as modernity.¹⁶ So the question is whether we have here an example of a formerly homogenous religious worldview being split asunder by the newly creeping vines of secularism, or whether there is a more productive way to study this episode. If scholars adopt the former, then they will concern themselves with determining what really ought to constitute the political versus the religions, combing through archives to figure out if the shady tree really was the locale of the Swazi King's debate, intent on determining whether St. Mark's day (April 25) really ought to be an occasion for a fast rather than a feast (a switch to the latter happened in Britain by proclamation on July 22, 1541 [Sommerville 1992: 35]). That is, in studying the More/Tyndale debate, many will undoubtedly adopt one of the two opposing viewpoints on the sanctity of the Lord's Day (whether pro or con) and, using it, examine the adequacy of the other.¹⁷

I suggest that we can do better. Recalling Bruce Lincoln's wise advice in his "Theses on Method" to avoid allowing subjects "to define the terms in which they will be understood" (1996: 227), we should instead see this contest over the calendar as but one local skirmish in a far larger contest that eventually marked the rise of one social formation and the simultaneous decline another

¹⁶ I borrow the phrase "institutional differentiation" from Sommerville (1992: 5).

¹⁷ This same comment could also be made concerning the recent bestselling English publications that adopt an atheistic stance in the study of religion (e.g., books by such authors as Richard Dawkins [2006], Daniel Dennett [2006], Sam Harris [2004, 2006], and Hitchens [2007]). Failing to see "religion" as nothing but a name representative of a bundle of relations that sets apart certain social practices, such authors mistake it for a substantive item in the real world that is to be contested on logical or evidentiary grounds.

in early modern Europe. If this is how we proceed, then, recalling both Lincoln and Durkheim, we will note that, regardless what the participants may have (quite sincerely, no doubt) believed about the inherent value of this or that day—this or that place, this or that person, this or that text or practice—in this episode we find social actors tactically using rhetorics of sanctity and autonomy to distinguish self from other and, in the process, to contest social interests and attachments, thereby policing the limits (i.e., “set apart and forbidden”) of otherwise dynamic identity. Adopting this alternative approach, we will no longer reproduce, and thereby authorize, those rhetorics and self-understandings, and we will no longer understand Protestantism and Catholicism as religions that were somehow separate from the practical world in which power and privilege were being re-negotiated. Rather, we will redescribe them, both then and now, as being nothing more or less than rival mass movements, each vying for influence by appealing to a delimited set of strategies—foremost among which being their member’s self-classification *as* above the political fray (i.e., religious, pious, holy, faithful, etc.).¹⁸

Such a shift in theoretical orientation will have wide ramifications. For example, we will cease referring to the often cited pre-modern split between Pope and Prince as if the one was holy whereas the other worldly. Instead, the two are now understood as inescapably worldly, though naming two distinguishable systems of order, driven by different sets of social interests and attachments, each seeking control over the same generic domain. What’s more, a term such as “Church” will now merely name some of the sites of governance in the early modern period—one among a number of institutional arrangements—which all sought to extend a set of socio-political interests by means of identifiable rhetorics and specific types of regulation. And what we commonly refer to as the sixteenth-century “Wars of Religion” will now be seen as a phenomenological category used by historic actors (and uncritically adopted by subsequent generations) to name a conflict over competing systems of order that realized different practical attachments in pre-modern Europe. Naming

¹⁸ Sullivan signifies this difference by using the lower case—protestant and catholic—to name “a set of political ideas and cultural practices that emerged in early modern Europe and after the Reformation,” as opposed to the upper case version of each term to refer to the more “narrow churchy sense” (2005: 8). While this distinction may appear handy, from the point of view of this paper these two versions of the terminology are distinguishable inasmuch as the lower case constitutes the analytic level of classification whereas the uppercase is the phenomenological. That is to say, if, instead of occupying its own unique (i.e., *sui generis*) domain, religion is simply a name given to certain social practices, then a term that identifies the “political ideas and cultural practices” needs no supplement (i.e., one that names a supposedly religious dimension).

them wars over “religion” was (and continues to be) a handy way of packaging and thereby managing the conflict. Only by self-consciously making such changes will we ensure that our scholarship steers clear of unreflectively reproducing participant interests and self-understandings; after all, for scholars of the social, there’s nothing religious about religion.

As a final example of what scholarship on religion—or, better put, scholarship on the manner in which the relationship between “sacred” and “secular” are used to negotiate the limits of group identity—might look like, I return to the work of Smith. Specifically, I have in mind his analysis of two separate U.S. Supreme Court judgments in his essay, “God Save This Honourable Court: Religion and Civic Discourse” (2004: 375-390)—decisions concerned with determining whether practices were religious or secular, i.e., allowable or disallowable.

The first case, dating from 1993, was *The Church of Lakumi Babalu Aye, Inc., and Enesto Pichado v. City of Hialeah* (508 US 520), and revolved around the Florida city’s attempt to outlaw the Santeria practice of animal sacrifice. The second, from 1984, was *Lynch v. Donnelly* (465 US 668), which focused on whether a nativity scene, erected outside a shopping center by the city of Pawtucket, RI, constituted a religious display (if so, it would violate the US Constitution’s ban on the government “respecting the establishment of religion”). Smith focuses not on the content of the practices to assess the Court’s judgment but, instead, examines the logic used by the Court to navigate the allowable, thereby making plain how strategies of familiarization (in the former case) and defamiliarization (in the latter) were employed to police the limits of the group (i.e., the behaviors allowable within the U.S. nation-state). In the case of the initially outlawed Santeria practices, what struck the Hialeah town council as dangerous and unlawful instead struck the Court as sufficiently *alike* those practices and beliefs already acknowledged in the US to be safe and allowable (e.g., those known as Roman Catholic). In the case of city’s nativity display outside the shopping center, the fact that it was erected using public funds but as part of a shopping district and during the busiest time of the shopping year, and that it included a variety of so-called traditional and non-traditional elements (e.g., a talking wishing well), prompted the Court to see it as sufficiently *unlike* those practices it normally regulates as “religious” and which it usually sets apart from the public realm, thereby enabling the Court to—as Smith phrases it—agree with a native informant (i.e., a professor of Philosophy from the University of Rhode Island) who described the display as merely “engender[ing] a friendly community of goodwill in keeping with the season” (Smith 2004: 385; quoting the Court’s expert witness who was cited in the decision).

Thus, from a point where the boundary of the group (i.e., of the normal, the safe and the acceptable) is under contest, the Justices in the two cases were able to extend free exercise rights already enjoyed by some group members to a new sub-group (so long as their practices were classed as “religious” and thereby carried out in private, of course), while they allowed the particular beliefs, practices, and institutions of the culture’s dominant group to be further established. (To rephrase, although one Court decision deemed them allowable, it seems unlikely that a Santeria ritual display could be prominently erected, with city funds, outside a shopping mall at the height of one of their holidays.) In these two decisions we see that—much as in a carpet dealer relying on authentic/fake to exert some control over a busy economy of value—the Court strategically used both the private/public and the religious/socio-economic distinctions to control the obviously hectic economy of identity.¹⁹ For classifying a marginal sub-group’s behaviors as religious and therefore private enabled the majority to tolerate (because it could isolate and control) what it understood to be foreign practices, while classifying a central sub-group’s no less local, interest-driven behaviors as social and economic allowed its members to continue to put their own identity into practice in a relatively unhindered and widely distributed manner. The result is that a particular type of nation is made possible, one that normalizes some interests and identities while bracketing and thereby tolerating others. It is in precisely this manner that “[t]olerance discourse masks the role of the state in reproducing the dominance of certain groups and norms” (Brown 2006: 84).²⁰

The point? Religion, like tomatoes being defined “for the purposes of trade or commerce,” is, in this case, what the Justices make of it. The interesting thing to study, then, is not what religion is or is not, but the “making of it” process itself—whether that manufacturing activity takes place in a courtroom or is a claim made by a group about their own behaviors and institutions. What therefore makes Smith’s redescriptive work stand out is how he avoids adopting the terms in which people understand themselves—terms which

¹⁹ Bowen (2007: 43-8) offers a compelling example of how local French government worked with the concepts of private and public to allow so-called religious (i.e., Muslim) symbolism in seemingly public cemeteries (where such symbolism is apparently outlawed). Whether this solution to the issue of competing social interests and identities is pleasing to all is, of course, not the point of interest for the scholar of classification. Rather, the artful use of categories and definitions that might otherwise strike users as static and stable is the topic of interest.

²⁰ Concerning the political role of using the study of religion to promote inter-religious dialogue and mutual understanding, see McCutcheon 2001.

they use to negotiate the limits of self and other, us and them. Instead, he studies their choices, and the manner in which they attempt to regulate the limits of identity and social significance. Therefore, instead of studying identity, value, or truth—topics dear to many who think of themselves as scholars of religion—Smith shifts the ground and, in doing so, does just as Douglas recommended: “studying the classifications by which people decide if an action has been done well or badly, whether it is right or wrong” (1999: vii), which amounts to what Bower characterizes as an anthropology of public reasoning (2007: 3).²¹

VI

So what’s the moral of this tale? As a scholar of social classification, I see no reason to assume, as do many of the people that I happen to read, that the categories “religion” and “politics,” or “sacred” and “secular,” refer to actual qualities in the real world. Instead, they are nothing more or less than co-dependent, portable discursive markers whose relationship we can date to a specific period in early modern Europe, and whose utility continues to this day—for evidence, look no further than ongoing debates on which form of Islam is authentic and religious versus derivative and political (see McCutcheon 2005). Developing just such a self-consciousness in our use of the categories that we have invented, distinguishing those that are phenomenological and descriptive from those that are analytic and redescriptive, strikes me as one of the more important pieces in the methodological puzzle in front of those trying to go beyond secularism in their studies of religion.

In conclusion, let me say that my hope is that readers see the application of my wandering examples to the question at hand. For if the late Mary Douglas could convince so many of us that the distinction between soil and dirt told us nothing essential about the matter being classified, and if the late Edward Said could convince so many of us that the distinction between Orient and Occident told us nothing essential about the groups being classified—but, instead, that both sets of distinction were, much like distinguishing between the war’s various phases, evidence of prior preferences being put into practice—then I don’t see why we cannot understand such distinctions as church/state, private/public, and sacred/secular as socio-rhetorical devices that have stayed on our

²¹ For a more detailed description of Smith’s work, see McCutcheon 2006.

minds because they continue to prove so useful to a variety of groups over the past several hundred years, all of which have tried to regulate—to divide and rule—their highly competitive economies of signification.²²

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²² My thanks to Willi Braun for very helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.

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