

Critical Trends in the Study of Religion in the United States

by

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1. Introduction

Despite the fact that the academic study of religion is well over one hundred years old in Europe and, in its most recent form, has been institutionally sanctioned in North America for nearly forty years, the problem of developing useful theories and methods—and by means of these, a secure institutional identity as part of the human sciences—continues to plague the field in the U.S.¹ I say “continues to plague” to signify that the current North American field is characterized by a long-standing split: between theologians and liberal humanists, on the one hand, and those more inclined to study religion in a social scientific manner, on the other. Whereas for the former group the study of religion is defined by its object, the latter group presumes that scholarly interests and theories comprise the organizing principles for any academic endeavor. For members of the former tradition, the object of study—variously termed God, the Sacred, the *mysterium tremendum*, ultimacy, religious experience, or simply Human Nature, the Human Spirit, or the Human Condition—cannot be grasped by the usual epistemological techniques and must therefore be deciphered by studying its varied expressions (e.g., myths, rituals, symbols). For members of the latter tradition, however, all such discourses on privileged discernment are facts of social life susceptible to the ordinary methods of study used throughout the human sciences.

Despite the fact that any description of some recent trends in the U.S. will inevitably be idiosyncratic and sadly partial (as the following surely is), such a

¹ I say “in its most recent form” because the North American field flourished but then died out prior to the first world war. Among the reasons commonly cited for the early field’s demise is the turn to neo-orthodoxy among post-World War I Protestant theologians coupled with the fact that the early study of religion was too linked to lone, charismatic professors, thereby lessening the field’s viability once they retired or died. On this see Shepard 1991.

description cannot help but examine the tension that has marked the long relationship between these two competing approaches. This chapter does just this, paying special attention to the practical implications of the liberal humanist approach that, today, has come to dominate the study of religion in the United States.

2. Impulses, Beliefs, and Convictions

In a 1994 special issue of the North American field's largest circulating periodical, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*,² Sam Gill of the University of Colorado, offered the following blunt assessment:

The emergence of an academic study of religion has been disappointing despite the boost it received thirt years ago when religion entered the curricula of state-sponsored American colleges and universities ... As an academic discipline distinct from the religious study of religion, it has failed to advance any sustainable body of theory, any cadre of religion theorists, any substantial body of literature. (1994: 965–66)

In the same issue of this journal, Dartmouth University's Hans Penner echoed Gill's sentiment by flatly stating:

When you review the theoretical status of the study of religion over the past decade I believe you will agree with me that not much, if anything, has happened. We speak and write metaphorically rather than theoretically, concerned with things like "thick descriptions." The academy, for the most part, continues to be interested in religious dialogue and experience rather than criticism. (1994: 977)

In his lament for the state-of-the-art, Gill goes on to observe that, at least in part, the budgetary problems experienced by many U.S. departments of religious studies during the 1990s can be traced to the inability of their members to articulate an overall, coherent theoretical basis for their field, a failure that has had ramifications for their failure to generate a continuing institutional identity (a position echoed in Smith 1995). Simply put, in Gill's estimate theories are not lofty, purely intellectual items. They have practical, institutional, and political implications.

2 The special issue's title was, "Settled Issues and Neglected Questions in the Study of Religion." Apart from the AAR's quarterly newspaper, *Religious Studies News*, close behind *JAAR* in terms of circulation is the *Bulletin of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion* as well as *Religious Studies Review*, both published by the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion (CSSR)—an "umbrella" organization comprised of twelve professional associations, including the Catholic Biblical Association, the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion, the North American Association for the Study of Religion, and the Society of Christian Ethics.

In the estimation of these writers, the conflation of the scientific study of religion (where “religion” is conceived as but an aspect of larger socio-cultural practices), with the study of religion conceived either as a liberal humanist or theologically ecumenical pursuit (what Penner termed “religious dialogue”), is one of the primary theoretical and institutional problems currently facing the U.S. field. Thus, any survey of recent trends takes place against this backdrop, for this is the Sisyphusean hill currently being climbed by a loosely knit collection of North American scholars intent on saying something new about both religion and the study of religion. So, to understand what—if anything—might be “new under the sun,” we must first understand that, on many campuses throughout the U.S., the study of religion as a component of a liberal arts curriculum is conceived—and thereby justified—as the means whereby students will become “civilized,” inasmuch as they will learn of their own culture’s supposedly deepest values as well as learn to understand, appreciate, and tolerate the “Other’s” equally deeply held beliefs and values. The study of religion is thus sold to university administrators, and the general public as well, as a crucial aspect of nation-building. For example, a university where I once worked was recognized by the U.S.-based John Templeton Foundation³ as one of the outstanding “character-building” schools in the U.S.—possibly a dubious distinction for a publicly funded school to receive since “character,” much like “values,” is generally a codeword for a very specific set of characteristics portrayed as universal and thus self-evident. As might be expected, at least the senior administration at this school seemed to understand the study of religion as one way to develop a student’s “character,” thereby making them a better

3 It is the Templeton Foundation which annually awards the £ 700,000 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. Quoting from their website: “The John Templeton Foundation was established in 1987 by renowned international investor, Sir John Templeton, to encourage a fresh appreciation of the critical importance—for all peoples and cultures—of the moral and spiritual dimensions of life. The Templeton Foundation seeks to act as a critical catalyst for progress, especially by supporting studies which demonstrate the benefits of an open, humble and progressive approach to learning in these areas. It is the Foundation’s purpose to stimulate a high standard of excellence in scholarly understanding which can serve to encourage further worldwide explorations of the moral and spiritual dimensions of the Universe and of the human potential within its ultimate purpose ... Through its programs, the Foundation seeks to encourage the world to catch the vision of the tremendous possibilities for spiritual progress in an open and humble approach to life; encourage institutions of learning to incorporate training towards excellence in character in their efforts to prepare the next generation for service; to encourage growth in appreciating the potential of free societies; and to promote the understanding of the significant responsibilities associated with freedom in its several aspects, moral, spiritual, political and economic” (<http://www.templeton.org/about.asp>).

“citizen.” The study of religion, then, is understood to have a redemptive and salvific quality, for both the individual and the nation.

Or, as another example, take a recent quantitative study of religion, and the academic study of religion, on U.S. campuses. The authors surveyed four representative schools,⁴ finding that the “distanced objectivity” end of the teaching spectrum “seemed to be more sparsely populated than the opposite extreme” (outright religious advocacy) (Cherry/De Berg/Porterfield 2001: 11). Citing examples of professors who made claims in their classrooms concerning the religious value of the Hebrew Bible or the professor of Buddhism who “wanted his students to study Buddhism from the inside, gleaning religious truths from it for their own lives” (11), the authors refer to only one specific example of a professor who ruled such judgments out of bounds. Sadly, they provide no evidence for their conclusion that his “dedication to neutrality or objectivity had its limits” (12). Most revealing, perhaps, is their finding—long suspected by a number of professors, to be sure—that students, like their professors, see the religious studies classroom as a sacred site. “The academic methods and intentions of faculty aside,” they remark,

we discovered that for the students the religious studies classroom was often a site and resource for religious meaning and personal transformation. The line between the practice and teaching of religion thus could become blurred. In some instances, the blurring of the boundaries was invited by the faculty themselves. Even at the public university, where the transformation of the students’ lives was a goal infrequently expressed by those who taught religion, students who were interviewed spoke of the important life issues raised in these courses, the all-night discussions they had about them, and the religious studies major as something undertaken for personal development rather than preparation for a specific career.

“In short,” the authors go on to comment, “many students **too** religious studies courses because the courses forced them ‘to think’ and spoke to their search for meaning” (12). At the close of their article, the authors offer the following conclusion: “it is possible that religious practice and education have never been more connected with personal responsibility for society [i.e., good citizenship]. More clearly, our study reveals that the ethos of de-centered, diverse, religiously tolerant institutions of higher education is a breeding ground for vital religious practice and teaching” (13).

From the preceding it is clear that, in the U.S. at least, the category “religion” (often replaced by the now popular “spirituality”) is often associated

4 Although not identified by name, the schools were: a large public university, a private Protestant (Lutheran) school, a private Roman Catholic institution, and a non-denominational, traditional African-American school (originally in the Presbyterian tradition). The article cited is an excerpt from the author’s co-written book, *Religion on Campus* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

with an utterly personal yet universal feeling, conviction, or moral disposition which is housed within the individual and which has lasting value for society as a whole. Perhaps this accounts for why Paul Tillich's vaguely subjective "faith in an ultimate concern" thus remains the definition of choice for many scholars, followed closely by Clifford Geertz's penchant for seeing religion as a system of "moods and motivations." Thus, ill-defined religious impulses, convictions, and interior states of emotion are presumed to reside somewhere deep in that which is shared by everyone, the all-inclusive "Human Nature"—an undefinable something to which scholars of religion are said to have access.

But such mythic inclusiveness is purchased at a high price. As phrased by Douglas R. Brooks in his *JAAP* article on the state of the study of Hinduism within North America's largest professional association for scholars of religion, the American Academy of Religion (AAR):⁵

working without consensus about definitions and boundaries, scope and methods, and clearly stated agendas makes us fair targets for those who would accuse us of marginality, irrelevance, or unimportance within our institutions, or even within our larger guild. This may be a responsibility we cannot afford either to abdicate or delegate to others without risking further marginalization within institutions. (1994: 1192)⁶

The necessary parameters by means of which boundaries, scope, and methods—let alone institutional identity—are determined are thus largely absent from the study of religion *qua* interreligious dialogue on deeply personal moods and motivations. Moreover, the agendas that drive these vague and therefore misleadingly inclusive parameters are generally undisclosed.

A clarification is, perhaps, necessary at this point. The preceding's allusion to Clifford Geertz's classic 1966 definition, which defined religion in relation to "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations" (1973), deserves some attention before we proceed. Some would argue that it is disingenuous to equate Geertz's work with that of such liberal Protestant theologians as Paul Tillich. For the purposes of this chapter, they are remarkably similar, however, inasmuch as both are preoccupied with questions of such things as nonhistorical truth, value, and meaning, rather than with an examination of the thoroughly historical—and

5 There has been no more vocal critic of the crypto-theological nature of the AAR than the University of Toronto's Donald Wiebe. His most recent collection of essays, *The Politics of Religious Studies* (1999) is by far the place to start for those interested in his assessment of the North American field, especially the formation of the AAR from the previously existing National Association of Bible Instructors.

6 Such blunt criticisms seem applicable to much of this very issue of *JAAP* inasmuch as it continues to portray the study of religion as carried out in North America as a predominantly American, Christian, and theological enterprise.

thus negotiable and contestable—structural conditions that make such things as truth, value, and meaning items of discourse. Although Geertz's work seems to have moved remarkably beyond the concerns of theologians, the continued popularity of his definition owes much to Geertz's concern with a hermeneutic; for in his work we find "an eminent anthropologist drawing on the cultural sciences ... [to] rescue religion from the ravages of positivism" (Frankenberry/Penner 1999: 618). Geertz's enduring contribution to the study of religion was to assist his peers to shift the ground from disputing *truth* to ascertaining the *meaning* of cultural acts by means of a nuanced, or what he called thick, description of the practice. His goal, then, was not to explain these assorted practices, but merely to chronicle them and recover their meaning *as if* *was believed the participants themselves understood them*. As Frankenberry and Penner go on to conclude in their recent reappraisal of Geertz's early influence on the study of religion, "we suspect that the continued use of this definition of religion has gone hand in hand with a diminution of critical reflection on its central theoretical and methodological assumptions." This diminution, and its practical effects, is the critical trend of concern in this chapter.

Of the many problems with Geertz's definition that they examine in detail, take but one: the manner in which the definition assumes a correspondence or representational theory of truth. Symbols, he asserts in his essay, are any object, act, event, etc., that "serves as a vehicle for a conception—the conception is the symbol's meaning"; we find here the presumption of a one-to-one relation between nonempirical and thus pre-symbolic meanings and empirical symbols. This presumption relies on the same, virtually Platonic logic as the earlier phenomenological equation between a nonempirical essence and empirical manifestations. As Frankenberry and Penner convincingly demonstrate, neither Geertz nor his followers have ever investigated just what a conception might be or how it is that something can serve as a vehicle for one (1999: 619–26). Presuming a thoroughly historical setting for all human practices, including the study of human practices, they conclude, "there is no vantage point from which speakers [i.e., users of symbol systems] can transcend the symbolic language in which they are embedded in order to judge that the correspondence is indeed 'simulating,' 'imitating,' or in any other way representing some nonsymbolic reality" (623).

Confronted with the supposedly dehumanizing dangers of a mid-twentieth century positivistic, explanatory approach to the study of religion (in which "things religious" were completely reduced to other ordinary forms of human practice), while more than aware of the limitations of an explicitly theological and hence normative approach, this hermeneutic, middle path seems to have been tremendously appetizing to politically and theologically liberal scholars in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, despite this apparent shift of attention, the presumption of a nonempirical reality and vantage point, either out there in the universe somewhere or lurking in the interior regions of the Human

Condition, remained intact. Given the Church/State separation described in the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the latter, liberal humanist approach struck many people in the early field as nontheological (since it made no reference to God and, instead, referred to values and meanings). Thus, it was deemed acceptable in the confines of the then growing publicly funded study of religion.

A useful example of the appeal of this subtle shift is unwittingly provided by Robert Ellwood, a graduate of the University of Chicago's famous program and now well known for his many textbooks and reference works on religion, mysticism, and spirituality. In his recent book, *The Politics of Myth* (1999), Ellwood makes several autobiographical asides that provide interesting clues as to the appeal writers such as Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell held for students in the late 1960s, the generation that re-established the field in the U.S. The "Eliade effect"—which, if my students are any measure, continues unabated to this day—is evident at the outset of the book:

One day [in 1962 while Ellwood was a U.S. Marine chaplain stationed in Okinawa], I came across a review of one of Eliade's books. Something about the account led me to believe it might help. I ordered the slim volume, read it, and suddenly the significance of a wholly new way of looking at religion arose into consciousness: not theological, but in terms of its phenomenological structures ... It was one of those books that make one think, 'This was really true all the time, but I didn't realize it until now.' Soon I left the chaplaincy and enrolled as a graduate student under Mircea Eliade at the University of Chicago Divinity School. (5)

Just what Ellwood needed "help" with was dealing with what he later terms "modernity's pluralism of space and time" (111). "I could not help but believe," he writes, "that some indefinable spiritual presence lingered in the lovely sylvan shrines of Shinto, or that there was more than mere atmosphere in the great peace that filled temples of the Buddha" (5). Jung, Eliade, and Campbell's works—not to mention Geertz—thus enabled readers in the 1960s and 1970s to depart from what they had come to see as their confining, sectarian perspective and embark on an equally salvific quest for what Ellwood calls "benign pluralism"—a truly liberal quest in which the utility of the comparative method is that it "enables one to experience vicariously the passions of other faiths as well as one's own, so leading to the enrichment of *total human experience*" (110–11; italics added). Simply put, the attraction of the field for those mid-twentieth century U.S. practitioners disillusioned with denominationalism was its ability to shift the ground from seemingly incontestable truth to infinitely variable symbols acting as ill-defined vehicles for elusive meaning—"and by meaning," Ellwood writes, "is denominated that which comes from a *universal source* but is congruous with one's own dreams and deepest significant fantasies" (177; italics added). Armed with what, at first glance at least, appears to be all things to all people, how could the history of religions fail to win converts in the U.S.? The attraction to studying such things as religion, myth, and ritual, then, is

obvious for, expressing the core assumption of this tradition, Ellwood writes: "Myth, like all great literature, can become universal, transcending particular cultural settings" (177).⁷

This liberal refashioning of dogmatic truth into elusive and all-inclusive personal meaning—a refashioning to which Clifford Geertz's hermeneutic anthropology contributed significantly—continues unabated in our field's general unwillingness to define religion in light of a specifiable set of observable human acts and institutions. Working without what Brooks terms a consensus about definitions and boundaries is puzzling, for without a commonly accepted definition of "religion"—some way of rather narrowly demarcating this category and the social domain to which it refers from such other categories and domains as "worldview," "belief system," "culture," "ideology," etc.—how do any of us know precisely what our colleagues are talking about when they make claims about this thing "religion"? Without a consensus on what in the inter-subjectively observable world counts as religion, and what does not, what, precisely, do members of our field study? More importantly, without an agreed upon manner for determining how it is that one goes about proposing, applying, testing and criticizing definitions, how will we know when anything "new" has happened in the field?

It is therefore understandable that when apologies for the academic study of religion are offered to our colleagues throughout the guild—let alone the reading public at large—more often than not they are written by people who conflate the role of the scholar of religion with that of the liberal, religious, if learned, devotee speculating on issues of ultimate meaning and inexpressible essences housed within a thing called "Human Nature"—all of which are "things" that hardly constitute legitimate data for scholars in the public university. As suggested by both Gill and Brooks, at a time of shrinking university budgets, such a conflation does not help us to offer persuasive justifications for the continued place of the study of religion within the public university. To repeat Brooks's conclusion: "This may be a responsibility we cannot afford either to abdicate or delegate to others without risking further marginalization within institutions."

Although this can easily be seen in the case of several of the articles that appear along with the previously cited quantitative study of religion on U.S. campuses—published in the journal of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) [name of journal – *Liberal Education?*]⁸—two other examples of such troublesome apologies can be found in articles published in

7 It is to Ellwood's credit, however, that he immediately cautions his readers: "the mythologists ... did not always take into account that myth, like everything human, can be of quite varied moral worth ... [A]bstractions are not the solutions to problems."

the U.S. periodical, *Academe*.⁸ According to Martin Marty (1996), the University of Chicago's recently retired and tremendously influential liberal historian of U.S. religion, "religious faith" and "religious impulses" motivate and inspire human behavior; according to William Scott Green (1996), former editor of *JAAR*, religion or what he latter terms "religious conviction," "has become and yet remains a tremendously potent force in American social, political, and economic life." Because religious faith, impulses, and convictions are firmly housed within individual experience and private consciousness, they can only be expressed by the one who holds them and then, once made public, they can be described, translated, understood, and—in a mode of inter-religious dialogue—eventually appreciated by the observer. This leads to a field which, as already suggested by Penner, concentrates on recovering and then interpreting highly personalistic and non-empirical meanings (hence the continued popularity of Geertz's notion of "thick description" among scholars of religion) rather than theorizing on the empirically observable causes and consequences of such meaning systems.

Admittedly, the position represented by both Marty and Green is not limited to the U.S.; it may be likely that the private/public, belief/practice, or essence/manifestation rhetorics necessary for this viewpoint are among the more successful, and thus persuasive and pervasive, techniques employed within social formations for reproducing dominant forms of organization (more on this below). In the study of religion these rhetorics have a long history and can at least be traced back to the German Pietist theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) who effectively protected—and thereby, some would say, simultaneously marginalized—those dimensions of social life then labeled as "religion" from what he saw as the cynical, prying eyes of Enlightenment rationality, by claiming that religion was essentially a personalistic, affective experience, somewhat akin to an aesthetic experience. Thus, the content of "religion" could not be observed or quantified, let alone explained. Just as for Marty and Green, so too for Schleiermacher: religious experiences are exclusively the causes of other things; they cannot be explained as merely the effects of other ordinary human behaviors. Such experience is understood as irreducible, primary, and utterly unique (i.e., *sui generis*).

But there is an equally long-standing tradition in the field that sees categories such as "religious impulse," "the sacred," "ultimate concern," and "faith" as so vague and subjective as to be of little or no theoretical use in studying the causes, functions, and consequences of human behavior and social organization. Traced back at least to the Scottish philosopher, David Hume (1711–1776)—and today represented in part by the members of the North

8 *Academe* is the bi-monthly periodical of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP).

American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR)⁹—this tradition forgoes speculating on “deep” trans-historical meanings and pristine impulses. Instead, its representatives are generally interested in developing testable theories which are based in a shared rational discourse, theories on the workings of human cognition, the observable reasons and implications for human behavior, and the ways in which people construct and contest durable social identities.¹⁰ Accordingly, the *claims* people routinely make about such “things” as the gods, trans-historical meanings, origins, and deeply personal, non-empirical realities turn out to be the objects of study for this type of scholarship on religion. In the words of Gary Lease, head of the History of Consciousness Program at the University of California at Santa Cruz, “the goals of evidence are not to replicate experience; not to validate as real this or that particular experience or claim; not to establish, in other words, exclusive norms or systems governing reality absolutely” (1997: 139). Shifting attention from appreciating and thereby reproducing the content of indigenous experiential claims (as in a previous era’s phenomenology and morphology) to studying the causes, functions, and effects of the claims themselves gives this oppositional group its thoroughly anthropological focus.

What remains to be said is that such a shift does not, of course, mean that the study of religion has finally become the purely objective or non-biased activity once hoped for by those influenced by logical positivism. Such a dream is animated by the same drive that prompted efforts to determine the extra-historical truth or the deep meaning of religion. As with all human activity, it too is the product of certain contexts and thus open to critique and revision (as has resulted from the feminist critique that rightfully identifies the gendered presumptions that drive much scholarship on religion [see Juschka 1997, 2001]). But this shift does draw attention to the necessarily perspectival and thoroughly historical nature of all human systems of knowledge, a significant change from the effort to ascertain deep meanings associated with liberal humanistic scholarship on religion.

9 Founded in Sidney, Australia, in 1985 by E. Thomas Lawson, Luther H. Martin, and Donald Wiebe, NAASR is the North American affiliate of the International Association for the History of Religion (IAHR). Its quarterly journal is *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* (published by Brill of the Netherlands).

10 See Jensen/Martin 1997 for essays from a conference at Aarhus University, Denmark, on the role of rationality in the study of religion. NAASR members are prominent in the collection.

3. The Taxon “Religion”

Therefore, one of the most wide-reaching developments of the past twenty years is the interest among a small but productive group of writers in shifting attention from phenomenologists collecting supposed facts concerning the content of belief to historicizing the very tools, terms, and categories by which we discuss the issue—a shift in attention that may well be characteristic of the rebirth of theory or the “linguistic turn” found throughout the human sciences.¹¹

Despite the fact that the term “religion” is used by many people to name certain of their own beliefs, behaviors, and institutions, scholars of religion have a history of defining the term in a very particular way, depending on the theory of religion they are using. As already suggested, folk or popular definitions of a term such as religion do not necessarily meet the standards of inter-subjectively available, cross-cultural data. Echoing Gill and Penner’s assessment, for the Brandeis University anthropologist, Benson Saler, the general question that scholars of religion continue to face is how they can “transform a folk category into an analytic category that will facilitate transcultural research and understanding” (1993: 1). Despite a number of heated debates, such categorial retooling has successfully taken place over the past twenty years in literary studies (e.g., “literature,” “author,” “intention,” and “text”) as well as anthropology (e.g., “culture”), but, as Donald Wiebe has remarked, “it is clear that a generally accepted notion of ‘religion,’ upon which an understanding of the nature of the scientific study of religion can be based, and one that will be found acceptable to the majority of scholars in the field today, has not yet emerged” (1994: 104).

As a step toward retooling “religion,” a number of scholars have looked to the term’s etymology.¹² We know that it has equivalents in such modern languages as French and German; for example, when practiced in Germany the study of religion is known as *Religionswissenschaft* (the systematic study, or *Wissenschaft*, of religion); when practiced in France the field is known as *Sciences Religieuses* (e.g., Canada’s main, bi-lingual periodical is entitled *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*). Even just a brief comparison of these and other related languages helps us to see that modern languages impacted by Latin possess something equivalent to the English term “religion.” This means that,

11 Indicative of this trend is the appearance of various wordbooks or handbooks on “key terms”; for example, see Taylor 1998 and Braun/McCutcheon 2000.

12 Although he is theologically inclined (inasmuch as he prioritizes an inner and unseen “faith in transcendence” over religion, which he understands merely to refer to the observable “cumulative tradition”), the early and influential work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1963) cannot go unnoticed when discussing the history of the category “religion.”

*for language families unaffected by Latin, there is no equivalent term to "religion"—unless, along with liberal humanists, we pompously assert that our local word/concept captures something essential to the entire human species, thereby distinguishing local word from universal concept (i.e., "Although they do not call it religion, they still have //"), an assertion made all the easier by the long history of European influence on non-Latin-based cultures/languages by means of trade, coercion, and conquest. For example, although "religion" is hardly a traditional concept in India, the long history of contact with Europe has ensured that modern, English speaking Indians have no difficulty conceiving of what we might call "Hinduism" as their "religion"—although, technically speaking, to a person we might call a Hindu, "Hinduism" is not a religion but is, rather, *sanatana dharma* (the eternal duty/obligation/order). As might be expected, despite its authoritative status in the history of textual studies, the Christian New Testament is not much help in settling these issues, for its language of composition—Greek—naturally lacked the Latin root word/concept *religio*. Thus, English New Testaments will routinely use "religion" to translate such Greek terms as *eusebia* (e.g., 1 Timothy 3:16; 2 Timothy 3:5), terms that are in fact closer to the Sanskrit *dharma* (duty), the Chinese // (rules of propriety and social rank), or even the Latin *pietas* (practices that maintain proper social relations) than our term "religion."*

Appeals to etymology are thus not much help in sorting out this problem in taxonomy, for even in Latin our modern term "religion" has no equivalent—if, by "religion," one means worshipping the gods, believing in an afterlife, or simply being good. The closest we come when looking for Latin precursors to our modern term "religion" are terms such as *religare* or *religere* which, in their original contexts, simply meant such things as "to bind something tightly together" or "to pay close or careful attention to something." So, where does this linguistic turn leave us? Well, it leaves us with a lot of questions in need of investigation: Just what do we mean by "religion"? If a culture does not have the concept, can we study "their religion"? Is there such a thing as "the Hindu religion" or "ancient Greek religion"? Is "religion" a supremely imperialistic concept that "we" use to name "them"? Is cross-cultural, comparative analysis of all such inevitably localized human meaning even possible? Or is "religion" simply an arbitrary taxon some of us in the guild use to organize and talk about aspects of the observable world that strike us as curious?

Although most often associated with the ground-breaking work of the University of Chicago's Jonathan Z. Smith—particularly his widely read essay collection, *Imagining Religion* (1982) as well as his most recent survey of the concept "religion" (1998)¹³—I wish instead to focus on two other examples of

13 Smith famously wrote in *Imagining Religion* that there is no data for religion. In other words, he argues that, apart from its various folk usages among members of Latin-

this sort of work: the often cited work of the anthropologist Talal Asad (1993) and the more recent work of the scholar of Christian origins William E. Arnal (2000). Taken together, they provide an example of how members of this oppositional tradition see the very rhetoric of private, religious experience as an historical datum that can be studied without presupposing “things religion” to be deeply personal, mysterious items of belief and deep conviction.¹⁴ Thus, two recent trends will simultaneously preoccupy us in the following: the dominance of the liberal humanist tradition and its critique.

4. The Politics of Experience

In a move that would more than likely baffle those whose studies of religion are limited to describing and comparing the manifestations of deeply held personal beliefs in either this or that, both Asad and Arnal link the presumption that “religion” connotes a disembodied, deeply personal experience to the advent of the nation-state. (This thesis is directly applicable to the earlier comments on the manner in which religious studies in the U.S. is today often considered to have the effect of enhancing a student’s character, making him/her a better citizen.) The former group of scholars have thus become the object of study for the latter.

As phrased by Asad:

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

based language families, the very category “religion” when used as a technical term is a product of scholarly imagination, curiosity, and interests. The discourse on religious impulses and experiences found throughout the North American field may well, then, comprise an instance of the folk usage of the term, rather than a technical retooling of it. To this tradition of scholarship one can add Fitzgerald 1999; McCutcheon 1997b; and Saler 1993.

- 14 Apart from “religion,” this move to rethink our categories, and the role played by scholars in using them—a move often associated with the work of such “self-reflexive” anthropologists as James Clifford and George Marcus (1986)—can also be found in the study of “Buddhism” (Almond 1988; Lopez 1995), “Gnosticism” (Williams 1996), “Confucianism” (Jensen 1997), “myth” (Lincoln 1999), and “ritual” (Bell 1992).

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

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

Arnal, then, concludes that

the very concept of religion as such—as an entity with any distinction whatsoever from other human phenomena—is a function of these same processes and historical moments that generate an individualistic concept of it ... The concept of religion is a way of demarcating a certain socio-political reality that is only problematised with the advent of modernity in which the state at least claims to eschew culture *per se*. (2000: 31)

As suggested earlier, this seemingly well-meaning, benign, and all inclusive discourse on "experience" and "belief" is more complex than it first appears. Discourses on experience thus have a political effect, a means whereby alternative and therefore competing social worlds are privatized, ghettoized, and thus governed. The rhetoric of "religious experience" is therefore what Wayne Proudfoot, of Columbia University, once aptly called a "protective strategy" (1985).

As the University of Michigan scholar of Buddhism, Robert Sharf, has recently phrased it in an article on the category of experience, "the term [religious experience] is often used rhetorically to thwart the authority of the 'objective' or the 'empirical,' and to valorize instead the subjective, the personal, the private" (1998: 94). As argued by Arnal, the philosophically idealist rhetoric of "experience" presumes that pristine, pre-reflective moments of pure self-consciousness (or, along with Schleiermacher, we could call it "God-consciousness") float freely in the background of the restrictive conventions of language and social custom—what Jonathan Z. Smith, quoting Nietzsche, once called "the myth of immaculate perception." It is a position comparable to that which once fueled literary studies, inasmuch as "Literature" was thought by some to embody essentially transcendent themes and values that stirred the Human Heart and expressed the meaning of the Human Condition.

Within the study of religion—specifically, the study of early Christianities—Smith has traced this Romantic rhetoric of pristine origins and

pure experience to what he terms “the regnant Protestant *topoi* in which the category of inspiration has been transposed from the text to the experience of the interpreter, the one who is being directly addressed *through* the text.” After identifying the anti-Catholic polemic that lurks within quests for original moments (as found in attempts to bypass the supposed tyranny of “popery” and “tradition” by means of appeals to “the biblical witness” and “the historical Jesus”—appeals eerily similar to some scholars’ appeals to the authenticity of lived experience or the priority of the insider’s viewpoint), Smith concludes: “As employed by some scholars in religious studies, it must be judged a fantastic attempt to transform interpretation into revelation” (1990: 55). Once contextualized within the wider geo-politics that characterized the period in which the modern concept of religion first arose in Europe (“wider” simply meaning outside strictly denomination rhetorics examined so well by Smith), Arnal concludes that

one of the current political *effects* of this separation—one of the political ends served currently by it—is the evisceration of substance, i.e., collective aims, from the state. That is to say, the simple positing of religion is a covert justification for the modern tendency of the state to frame itself in increasingly negative terms: the secular state is the institutional apparatus by which the social body *prevents* the incursion by others into the personal and various other goals of individuals, rather than being the means of achievement for common projects and the collective good. This 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 any substantive collective goals (salvation, righteousness, etc.) are individualized and made into a question of personal commitment or morality. (2000: 32)

As this critique makes clear, the rhetoric of experience has, to some degree, come under hard times in the U.S. Although there still exists a thriving industry in recovering the authenticity or immediacy of experience,¹⁵ some scholars now understand so-called lived experience to be a thoroughly socio-political construct. Outside the study of religion, the work of the feminist historian, Joan Wallach Scott, comes to mind as another example of this critique

15 Perhaps one of the more notable examples is provided by Karen McCarthy Brown’s influential study of immigrant Haitian Vodou in New York, *Mama Lola* (1991). Helping to turn the tide toward a more self-reflexive, participatory form of ethnographic writing, Brown’s book prompted heated debates in the study of religion. Chronicling her own growing participation in the life and rituals of the Brooklyn Vodou community, specifically her longtime, and ever deepening relationship with Alourdes—the priestess known as Mama Lola, whom she first met in 1978—the book’s chapters alternate between more traditional ethnographic writing and fiction/short stories intended to uncover a deeper meaning or experience not communicable in ethnographese.

of experience. In the conclusion to an essay entitled, "The Evidence of Experience," she writes:

Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident or straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political. The study of experience, therefore, must call into question its originary status in historical explanation. This will happen when historians take as their project *not* the reproduction and transmission of knowledge said to be arrived at through experience, but the analysis of the production of that knowledge itself. (1991: 797)

Or, as Sharf phrases it,

the rhetoric of experience tacitly posits a place where signification comes to an end, variously styled "mind," "consciousness," the "mirror of nature," or what have you. The category experience is, in essence, a mere placeholder that entails a substantive if indeterminate terminus for the relentless deferral of meaning. And this is precisely what makes the term experience so amenable to ideological appropriation. (1998: 113)

As counter-intuitive as it may at first sound, "privacy" is an item of public contestation and claims that privacy has self-evident limits are evidence of a political debate—ask former U.S. President Bill Clinton, whose "private" conduct while holding the "public" office of U.S. President made for some wonderful rhetorical flourishes on both sides of the political divide. Like "privacy," then, "experience" does not come pre-packaged from the grocery store.

That two very different types of study of religion develop, depending on how you talk about "experiences," should be evident. As suggested in the opening lines to this essay, for some time these two fields have been, and currently are, contesting each other. If we follow Asad and Arnal in seeing the "private/public" distinction as a rhetorical technique crucial for making the modern, large-scale social identities (i.e., the nation-state) possible, then it may be a foregone conclusion that in the modern research university—but one component of what is often referred to as the military-industrial-educational complex—the discourse on pristine, pre-social experience has the home field advantage.

5. The Politics of Tolerance

It may then make some sense as to why a brand of explanatory—what is most often referred to, somewhat dismissively, as reductionistic or scientific—scholarship has not won the day in the U.S. Instead, as already observed by Penner, scholars of religion who engage in various forms of liberal, inter-religious dialogue continue to dominate the scene, setting the agenda in the field's professional societies, the programs at its conferences, and providing the

public face of the field in the media.¹⁶ Most recently, they have gone by the name of “public intellectuals,” a rather empty but rhetorically fertile designation (see McCutcheon 1997a). Due to the recent history of immigration that has made much of North America an apparent cultural mosaic, we can easily see the reason for the concern among such intellectuals with using the study of religion *qua* deeply personal, private beliefs as a tool for resolving what Ellwood, somewhat abstractly, termed “modernity’s pluralism of space and time.” This problem of observable cultural difference (the many) is resolved by essentializing and dehistoricizing it within the heart of unseen yet universal religious identity (the one). It may therefore not be a coincidence (though demonstrating a causal link must await another article) that the triumphant rebirth of this personalized discourse on religion in the U.S. roughly coincided with the Immigration Act of 1965, which, in the words of the literary critic Stanley Fish, “shifted [U.S.] immigration priorities from those Nordic European peoples who had furnished America with its original stock to Asian and African peoples from Third World countries” (1994: 83). Thus, the presence of a new “them” who could not simply be coerced or housed on reservations required new techniques to re-make what had previously seemed to be a seamless “us.”

As but one example of this recent exercise in nation-(re)building, take Diana Eck’s much heralded CD-ROM classroom resource, *On Common Ground* (Eck 1997).¹⁷ In one of the web articles that states the goals of the project, Diana Eck writes: “Pluralism requires the cultivation of public space where we all encounter one another.”¹⁸ On one level this all sounds well and good for, as one might ask, “Who could ever be against a public space where we all *encounter* one another?” Despite the fact that, since the September 11, 2001, air attacks on New York City and Washington D.C., virtually everyone can easily imagine groups who might not wish to be included within such an ill-defined encounter, for the time being we can grant to the proponents of this kind of inclusive pluralism that they have well intentioned visions of some idealized, even cosmogonic, public forum where citizen-equals mount the proverbial soap

16 I think it fair to say that, over the past decade when a scholar of religion is interviewed in the mainstream, national U.S. media, more often than not it has been Martin Marty, who is most always identified as being both an ordained minister and a University of Chicago professor.

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

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

box and freely “speak their piece.” The infectiously quaint nationalistic paintings of the U.S. illustrator, Norman Rockwell, come to mind at this point, specifically, his “Freedom of Speech,” a 1943 cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* magazine.¹⁹

Given Asad and Arnal’s earlier comments, it is not now—nor ever was—quite as simple as this. The case of “free speech” zones come to mind: specific, public areas set aside on some U.S. university campuses in the late 1990s and early 2000s where protests or the distribution of materials not officially sanctioned by or connected with the University are allowed to take place.²⁰ Although free speech is presumably a non-negotiable value in a social democracies, the perceived need to have such set-apart zones makes it evident that there are obvious limits to what one can and cannot say. As reported in January, 2001, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

At the University of Mississippi, protesters are limited to demonstrating in front of Fulton Chapel, designated in 1997 as the university’s free-speech zone. [Within two years two other zones were also created on campus.] Officials say a specified protest area is needed to prevent demonstrators from disrupting the business of the campus. Last August [2000], Arthur Baker, a student and cofounder of a conservative campus group, was arrested for failing to obey a police officer who ordered him to move his protest against the student newspaper to the area ... At New Mexico State, students can protest freely in three designated areas of the campus, but they must get permission from the university to demonstrate elsewhere. In September, Mr. Rudolph, a graduate student, was arrested for distributing a flier outside the zone without first getting permission from the university’s student-affairs office. The flier was an advertisement for Mr. Rudolph’s underground newspaper, which criticized the university’s speech policy.²¹

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- 19 This well known piece of Americana shows a proud but humble-looking, flannel-shirted, working class man standing alone, posed to “speak his mind” at what appears to be a small town hall meeting. He is surrounded by seated people stretching their necks to watch and 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.
- 20 Such zones are becoming increasingly popular techniques for managing dissent. For example, they were used for protestors at the August, 2000, Republican National Convention in Philadelphia and, as of February, 2001, such zones were also planned for the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics. On the latter, see the February 13, 2001, article in *Sports Illustrated* (archived at http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/more/news/2001/02/13/aclu_complaint_ap/). At the time of writing this chapter it is not entirely clear how the attacks of September 11, 2001, will affect these zones. As of November 24, 2001, it was reported that four such zones will exist in Park City, Utah, one of the competition sites and one will exist in Salt Lake City itself (see the archived article from the *Park Record*, <http://www.parkrecord.com/Stories/0,1002,8138%257E237707%257E122%257E,00.html>).
- 21 This article, which appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (a weekly periodical that focuses on matters pertaining to higher education in the U.S.) on January 12, 2001, was entitled, “Promoting Order or Squelching Campus Dissent.” The web archived version appears at <http://chronicle.com/free/v47/i18/18a03701.htm>. See also the *New*

As such, certain sorts of speech only exist in these specified areas, making evident that, despite the way it is used rhetorically, “freedom” is rather more structured and controlled than it first appears.²² A related, anecdotal example involves a U.S. university where I once worked. In the early fall of 2000 the campus’s officially sanctioned gay and lesbian student association, BIGALA (the Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian Alliance) attempted to distribute a flyer to a campus-wide mailing list—at no cost to the association, since it was to be done through the campus mail system—which described what they saw to be the unethical, and perhaps illegal, activity of the Boy Scouts of America in “discriminating” against gays. Their flyer requested faculty members to protest by withholding their donations to the campus’s annual United Way campaign (a national, non-profit charity organization, associated with the Boy Scouts, that holds annual fund-raising campaigns on many U.S. campuses). The flyer quickly caught the administration’s attention. The administration understood the distribution of the flyer to be a grave misuse of campus mail, suggesting early on that it might have been an illegal act (U.S. postal regulations were cited by the administration). The episode prompted the formation of a task force to overhaul the campus mail policy, further restricting what can and cannot be sent legally through that university’s campus mail.²³ Despite still routinely receiving flyers on such things as weight loss and belly dancing lessons sponsored by the campus wellness center, these other sorts of flyers are now disallowed.

So, to return to Eck, precisely what does it mean to “encounter” each other? As in the case of free speech zones, or the case where one must obtain a government permit to protest the government (often disguised as a license to hold a “parade”), what undisclosed ground rules stipulate the nature and extent of this freedom to encounter? More than likely, the public square is not open to just anyone—e.g., it’s likely not a coincidence that males naturally are the subject of Rockwell’s “Freedom of Speech” portrait. To participate in any so-called public space one must already be operating by a set of socio-political

York Times article, “Student Life: Boxing in Free Speech,” archived at <http://www.uh.edu/admin/media/topstories/nytimes040901speech.htm>.

22 Understandably, the existence of such sites has been contested, and contested successfully in some cases, prompting some university administrations to forgo the idea. One case in point is Iowa State University. On October 19, 2001, the student newspaper, the *Iowa State Daily*, reported that the University President “announced a proposal to allow broader use of university grounds and facilities by students, staff, faculty and the general public” (see the web article at <http://www.iowastatedaily.com/vnews/display.v/ART/2001/10/19/3bcfc9648bb89>).

23 For minutes from the faculty senate meeting in which this issue was first raised, see http://www.smsu.edu/acadaff/fsenate/minutes/2000_Sept.htm.

values and rhetorical standards that make it possible, attractive, meaningful, and compelling to “encounter,” “understand” and “appreciate” the Other in just this manner, in just this context, for just this end. Simply put, without giving prior, implicit assent to such an unseen structure, one might hold a revolution rather than a parade.

So it seems legitimate to ask whether one gets to be part of the religious pluralist’s “we” and “public” if these generally unnamed values and rhetorics are not a priority? For example, if one does not see free market capitalism and a growth economy as the logical end point of human civilization—what we today call globalization—is one allowed into the big tent? While one may personally find it commendable to work toward some sort of social inclusion—much like being in favor of “freedom” or “family values,” it is easy to be in favor of ill-defined inclusion—one would be terribly remiss if one understood or portrayed the ground rules of such a supposedly inclusive, public forum as somehow being ahistorical, self-evidently meaningful, commonly shared, and utterly persuasive—as if free speech zones simply sprouted from the ground overnight, fences and all. Presuming a disengaged “public” to which everyone automatically and equally belongs, and to which everyone wishes to belong, strikes me as already resolving in favor of some “our” the issue of “the many” long before ever seriously entertaining the topic of diversity and contestation. The sort of idealization needed to bring about such premature resolution is but one instance of the technique identified by Arnal, whereby “religion, as such, is the space in which and by which any substantive collective goals ... are individualized and made into a question of personal commitment or morality.”

To see the slippery nature of the logic that grounds the liberal dialogical position so popular in the current U.S. field—a position that bears striking similarities to the classic *Verstehen* tradition facilitated by Wilhelm Dilthey’s split between *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*—consider the widely read book that preceded and, in many ways, is the basis for *On Common Ground*, Eck’s *Encountering God* (1993). There, Eck distinguished the pluralist option from what she calls exclusivism and inclusivism (168) and argued that pluralism is more than the recognition of a plurality and is far more demanding than mere tolerance of difference: one must *participate* within (i.e., encounter, engage, etc.) a plurality to count as a pluralist, and the scholar of religion is in the forefront of those who have skills to bring about such participation and understanding. As rightly observed by Eck, tolerance is, after all, an expression of privilege, and it therefore stands in the way of what she considered to be true pluralism. As she argues,

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

But there is a difficulty in seeing such a wide divide between, on the one hand, exclusivism and pluralism, and on the other, between tolerance and pluralism, a difficulty that liberal writers such as Eck and Martin Marty fail to recognize, perhaps because their own hegemonic position blinds them to the contingent basis of their common sense notions of engagement and understanding. What they fail to recognize is that one cannot have it both ways: one cannot call for an engaged pluralism among those committed to deep values while at the same time arguing that this pluralism is more than mere tolerance, for the difference between pluralism and tolerance is merely rhetorical. The only way to have such co-existing differences is if “the Other” is already well on the way to playing one’s own game, making the leftover, minor cultural differences something the dominant group can easily put up with. Case in point: Eck’s dialogue partner in the above quotation—the proverbial Oriental “m/other” presented in her text in what at first appears to be a fashion far superior to those representations first critiqued by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978)—is busy whispering sweet nothings into a baby’s innocent ear, not mounting a violent protest at, say, a world trade meeting or hijacking passenger planes. Her “Other” is thus a specifically *religious* Other and thus an idealized and safe Other whose differing—perhaps contradictory, incommensurable, even threatening—beliefs are so deeply held that they cannot be manifested in any form of public practice.

To those not usually acquainted with international news, after September 11, 2001, it is more than obvious that there are many “deeply held” and “real commitments” with which so-called encounter is, even for well meaning liberal sentiments, downright impossible. In working to find a discourse that is all things to all people, such liberals now seem to have little choice but to construct a discourse that, by means of such rhetorical devices as “evil,” “fanatic,” or “cult” separates what are understood as our sensible, deep commitments from those that actively challenge the foundational principles of our “free” social order. Following the air attacks on the U.S. this discourse was put into play surprisingly quickly by politicians and pundits, ensuring that those who acted on their dissent were understood as “terrorists” and “evil fanatics” while others equally identified with such cultural markers as Islam, the Arabic language and culture, etc., who either did not dissent or whose dissent did not prompt them to take violent action, were understood as “peaceful” and “tolerant.” As characterized by Marty in his meditation on how the U.S. is able so productively to maintain its unified “one” amidst the contestable “many,” so-called tribal life is exclusive and dangerous:

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

For whatever reason (perhaps because they are attempting to reallocate actual resources, gain greater influence in regional or global politics, acquire increased material wealth, etc.), some people have little interest in encountering and understanding “us” (the ones who generally seem to do much of the owning); such people want to change the rules of the game by—at times—violent and coercive means. They choose not to “play nice” in the public square and this upsets liberal sentiments a great deal. That makes these so-called tribalists and extremists rather dangerous—not in some abstract sense but dangerous in a very practical way, dangerous to a very particular set of interests usually portrayed as universal and therefore neutral, along with a way of conceiving of the world and its socio-economic relations. However, in the above passage it seems as if Marty’s conception of the world conveniently forgets just who usually sells the weapons and who designs the communication technologies that are being put to such dangerous uses. In other words, the critique of the extremist, dangerous “Other” all too easily avoids the kind of self-implication that comes with understanding that the performance of “our” mutual funds in part depend on a rather profitable worldwide trade in technologies.

If, as Eck asserts, “in a world of religious pluralism, commitments are not checked at the door” (1993: 193), then what do we do with those commitments which, for example, lead people to kill doctors who perform abortions or to work toward the violent overthrow of this or that regime? Are these commitments allowable in a pluralistic world, a world where we as scholars supposedly take seriously differences among competing core values? Or do such commitments deeply offend some obvious, standard of decency to which all humans—insomuch as they share some nonempirical human nature—give unconditional assent? Which commitments are to be left at the door, then? If *real* pluralism requires openness and commitment then, given the colorful ideological spectrum on today’s political map, it is more than obvious that only a rather narrow party line of commitments will gain admission to this public square of open engagement. Specifically, they will be those commitments which occupy people’s attitudes, their “hearts and minds,”²⁴ but which are not manifested in organized political action.

6. Conclusion

Anyone not in favor of these rules and the social world they make possible is, in suitably illiberal fashion, branded as an exclusivist, radical, militant,

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

extremist, tribalist, belligerent agitator. Such name-calling strikes me as eliminating from serious consideration the very groups whom liberals claim to include in their pluralist umbrella, making the supposedly dialogical basis of religious pluralism surprisingly monologic. At this juncture, readers must be clear on one point, however: I am not offering a criticism of this tactic, only a description, following Arnal and others, of a particularly effective rhetorical technique that portrays self-beneficial, tactical maneuvers as timeless, abstract principles. As Fish has recently observed in his critique of the rhetoric of “principle,” “[s]witching back and forth between talking like a liberal and engaging in distinctly illiberal actions is something we all do anyway; it is the essence of adhocery, which is a practice that need not be urged because it is the only one available to us” (1999: 72).²⁵ In arguing for an ill-defined engagement and an encounter that recognizes the necessity for “real commitments” that can inform action only if they happen to fall within a rather narrow party line, liberal scholars of religion fabricate a toothless “Other” whose seeming differences—“Look, dear, they call God ‘Allah,’ and we call God ‘God’”—are easily resolved on “our” terms.

Religion, conceived as an undefinable, distinct, private experience of meaning, is thus the ultimate “Other” of the nation-state, useful in all acts of social formation inasmuch as it is an empty concept. The seemingly unassailable zone of private experience it makes possible is thus the refuge and the end of dissent, for there, discord finds a safe haven but only inasmuch as it is not acted upon. Indeed, the posited split between belief and practice, text and context—in the words of postcolonial critic Partha Chatterjee—enables anticolonialism to create “its own domain of sovereignty within colonial societies well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power” (1993: 8). Such marginal groups, for whose members this concept religion “is an aspect of their culture, a valuable support in a hostile environment” (Sarup 1996: 3), thus obviously benefit from the ability to divide

the world of social institutions and practices into two domains—the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the “outside,” of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed ... The spiritual, on the other hand, is an “inner” domain bearing the “essential” marks of cultural identity. The greater one’s success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one’s spiritual culture. (Chatterjee 1993: 8; quoted in van der Veer 2001: 69)

However, inasmuch as this artful technique is successfully employed in housing marginal groups in alien and potentially hostile environments, such

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

success is ironically evidence that these groups have succumbed to a larger hegemony. They have had to rethink and retool their own group identity and sense of self, in the process trivializing and privatizing that which previously had been public and taken for granted. For, insomuch as “Hinduism” comes eventually to be successfully portrayed as a “religion,” with rights and obligations once reserved only for Christians, “it”—like Christianity before it—now falls under the governance of the State, ensuring that while private Hindu belief is indeed acceptable, the practice of, say, *sati* (so-called widow burning) is outlawed (as it was by the British in 1829) and the *caste* system ridiculed (as it most recently was in the liberal U.S. media during the boycotted, international human rights conference held in 2001 in Durban, South Africa²⁶). The discourse on religion thus provides a pivotal technique for housing a disparate and desperate citizenry’s necessarily unrequited desires.

As should be clear from the preceding, when discussing critical trends in the study of religion we necessarily employ pairs of metaphysical concepts, such as sacred/secular and private/public, clean/unclean, us/them, even global/indigenous. They are concepts that, in themselves, are utterly meaningless but which, when held in varying degrees of tension, make meaningful worlds possible insomuch as they provide spaces in which squatters can reside or be contained, and where acts of comparison, conformity, and contestability can take place. The distance between these concepts is slippery and the social spaces they make possible are inherently negotiable. As Tim Fitzgerald has most recently phrased it, with regard to the modern sacred/secular pairing:

This conceptual separation was a product of the struggle of new classes against the restrictions imposed by the church [understood, here, not as a religious institution but simply as among many institutions vying for control], its unaccountability, and its control of thought and action. Only by defining in a new way the realm of the “religious” and the realm of the “secular” could the separation of church and state be achieved and a bourgeois civil society be developed ... It amounts, in effect, to the replacement of one ideological system by another. (2001: 111)

Contrary to the recent trend to study religion as something apart from politics, as something that helps to make a civil society, Fitzgerald, Asad, and Arnal draw our attention to the manner in which these two classifications—“religion” and “politics”—are used in ongoing contests over just what is and what is not understood as civil, and thus acceptable. Fitzgerald’s own conclusion, then, aptly serves as the last word for this chapter: “the religion-secular distinction is

26 In January, 2002, an episode of the popular U.S. television talk show hosted by Oprah Winfrey focused on the caste system and the untouchables. It was clear from the tone of the host, and her response to the personal stories from her “untouchable” guests, that institutions such as this ought not to exist in the twenty-first century.

the new ideological system in which the principles expressed by 'no taxation without representation' are central and definitive ... [W]e cannot research 'religion' as though it were something distinct from, or independent of, the central democratic capitalist principles" (111).²⁷

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27 Portions of this essay involve work elaborated in McCutcheon 2001 and **forthcoming a, and forthcoming b.**

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