

The Enduring Presence of Our Pre-Critical Past Or,
Same as It Ever Was, Same as It Ever Was...¹

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North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR)

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No need to remember when
'Cause everything old is new again

- "Everything Old is New Again" by Paul Allen and Carole Bayer Sager (1974)

When invited to deliver a paper to the 2019 meeting of the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR) on the topic of the history of the field, I accepted, though I admit to doing so with some small degree of trepidation; for I felt the need to say something a little different from what I've already put into print, on a variety of past occasions, concerning problems found in the history of the study of religion—a history that seems rather distant to us now, given that it was situated in the midst of nineteenth-century European colonialism (see, for example, McCutcheon 2000) or, more recently, in the Cold War politics of two generations ago (McCutcheon 2004). For, as those two citations make evident, I have already discussed the practical implications (both inside and outside of the academy) of how prior scholars approached the study of religion—approaches that were, in the earliest years, grouped together and called either Comparative Religion or the Science of Religion. To state it simply, my argument has been that, given my understanding of what it means to study human beings from within the modern research university, some of those approaches are more fitting than others. In fact, as I've also argued, some of these approaches actually undermine the field, at least as I understand

¹ My thanks to Aaron Hughes and Craig Martin for their feedback on an earlier draft of this paper.

it to be properly constituted, despite being offered by their supporters as but one more viable alternative; for I contest the position that holds that virtually any use of the word “religion” in a post-secondary setting, or as part of a piece of research, qualifies as but another instance of the so-called big tent that some think we all inhabit.² As with how I discuss definitions in my own introductory classes, then, when it comes to an academic pursuit I would argue that what some now see as the admirable desire to include as much as possible actually hampers the field; instead, when it comes to scholarship, the more precision the better.³

So, having made plenty of such claims in the past about all of this, I felt that this occasion presented an opportunity to say something new...; recollecting both Roland Barthes’ views on authorship and that strategically brief piece that I’ve often used in classes, “Borges and I” (1999: 324), I could say that, qua scriptor, I certainly know how to write like the author that shares my name, so this—or so I reasoned—might be an ideal moment to go against the grain a bit, to offer something a little unexpected, perhaps in hopes that those who, at least as I see it, stereotype my work as a means to dismiss it might be surprised, just a little. For along with that surprise there might be a temptation actually to read it for a change and not, as I’ve seen on many past occasions, assume that a little bit of *Manufacturing Religion* or a chapter or two from *Critics Not Caretakers* (both containing work from more than twenty years ago or more; in fact, the former

² Readers would not be incorrect to read this, in part, as a commentary on the structure and self-understanding of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), the world’s largest professional association for scholars of religion. But my experience, over the years, in a variety of other scholarly associations tells me that the troublesome breadth of scholarship included within the AAR is not unique. What’s more, to fine-tune my point, even many who adopt the so-called big tent approach can, upon closer analysis, be shown to police a rather narrow range of uses of the term “religion” let alone methods they see as useful for its study, despite the inclusivist claims they might make.

³ Although one might hope that this goes without saying, the either vague, multiple, or even non-existent definitions of religion that often guide scholarship in our field should make evident that this point bears repeating—something that, thankfully, frequently takes place on Craig Martin’s social media presence.

contains work almost 30 years old), told them all they needed to know about my work.⁴ But, sadly, despite this earnest desire, I've decided that I see little new to say when I look again over the work that helped to establish our field but, more importantly, the work that now characterizes large segments of our field, much of it coming from a newer generation of scholars; for, in both cases, I find myself returning to the same old unresolved themes, since many of the problems that I still find with past practices and the criticisms that I have offered on past occasions strike me as being just as relevant today, when applied to the work that some consider to be at the field's cutting edge.

And so, because it seems to me that the old problems endure, I feel that I have no choice but to use this opportunity to repeat—well, let's just say reinforce, shall we, since it seems to avoid the idea of redundancy—what I have said in the past,⁵ though exemplifying the recurring challenges of the field at sites that I may not have previously discussed in print. Despite the section of the conference program in which this paper appears, it is therefore not about the past at all (but, come to think of it, *when is the past ever about the past?*)⁶; for despite a wide variety of contemporary writers, notably some who now identify as post-critical or post-theoretical,⁷ claiming to have left flawed earlier practices and assumptions behind—after all, who even reads

⁴ A similar motive prompted me to write “I Have a Hunch,” for the first workshop of the Yale Seminar in Religious Studies (April 15, 2011), a workshop devoted to the topic of religious experience (and a piece first published in 2012). The paper was disarming enough that, after delivering it, a conference participant inquired more, in all seriousness, about my hunches.

⁵ Consider this from 2012: “But after looking a little more closely at the work of some of those who are now rethinking their use of the category ‘religion,’ it has become clear to us that troublesome assumptions persist despite the so-called advances” (Arnal and McCutcheon 2012: 7).

⁶ See Touna 2017 for one of the more thoroughgoing applications of this principle to the study of so-called ancient religion.

⁷ I take this position to be one that, for instance, highlights the importance of critiques of the category religion yet which nonetheless laments how excessive focus on such critiques prevent us from just getting on with the work of actually studying religion. It is a sentiment that I also find in the work of so-called critical realists; see McCutcheon 2018a: 95-120 for an extended discussion of critical realism in our field.

Eliade anymore, one might justifiably ask⁸—the practices and assumptions that continue to drive the field today are, I argue, little different from those that did decades ago.

Before continuing, I should distinguish what I am about to argue from the recent co-written work of two mentors of mine, both from the academic generation prior to my own and both among NAASR's founders: Donald Wiebe and Luther H. Martin. In a 2012 article published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, they contend that:

a history of the development of religious studies as a scientific enterprise in the modern university is an incoherent contradiction that reveals tensions between putative claims to academic status and the actual reality of continuing infiltrations of extra-scientific agendas into the field. (2012: 591)

On this score I differ little from them, though I would add some qualifications; based on early modern intellectual (and, I would add, political) developments in Europe, a way of conceptualizing and talking about this thing commonly designated by some (but not all—a crucial point) as religion was devised and, over the coming centuries, refined and implemented in both universities, as a way to generate knowledge about (more likely than not, other) people, both at home and abroad, as well as in constitutions and laws by governments, as a way to organize and govern people, until we arrive at today when, at least as practiced in the university of modern nation-states, the academic study of religion is seen as somehow different from

⁸ On a past occasion my work was criticized as being aimed at outdated straw targets, inasmuch as, or so it was phrased to me then, “no one reads Eliade anymore.” (Aside: this criticism, I’d argue, is evidence of a far too quick reading of some of my work, given that, early on, my focus on Eliade’s work [e.g., two chapters in McCutcheon 1997] was always as a particularly condensed and therefore useful illustration of issues found throughout the field, helping to explain his place in the field more as a representative, than a cause, of wider trends that pre- and post-dated him.) I replied by asking if people instead now study the thing they call religion as utterly reducible or at least akin to any number of other mundane elements of human practices. Lacking evidence of such an approach being in any way widespread—for, sooner or later, at least in my reading, religion turns out to be a special case requiring special attention—the focus on Eliade’s work struck me, and still strikes me, as still having utility.

studies meant to prepare oneself for a professional role as a ritual specialist or so-called religious functionary. Moreover, also in agreement with Wiebe and Martin, this distinction between what an earlier generation (I think here of Ninian Smart, among others) might have characterized as *the study of* and *the practice of* has continually been under attack by those who see such compartmentalization, as they might call it, as inhibiting either the legitimacy or the spread of their interest in the carrying out these practices (aka undermining the identity and social implications that come from membership within groups that scholars who make this distinction study as nothing more or less than another curious instance of human behavior), with many members of the current generation of scholars proclaiming that what was once called the insider/outsider problem⁹ or, before that, the theology/religious studies debate is now passé—yet finding themselves still divided between those elaborating and defending the study of/practice of distinction as opposed to those criticizing such work in an effort to erase what they see as an artificially imposed and thus detrimental difference.¹⁰

However, at least one place where I differ (as might already be evident from some of the above qualifications) concerns what Kocku von Stuckrad, in a reply to Martin and Wiebe’s article, rightly (I would argue) identified as a “naïve image of the natural sciences that most

⁹ Were I to revise the reader on the insider/outsider problem that I edited early in my career (1998), I would add—thanks to a conversation I once had with Jonathan Z. Smith—a chapter on the manner in which this oscillating distinction goes all the way down; for the relative and co-constitutive nature of these two positions ensures that for every asserted inside there is always an outside, ensuring that there is no such thing as a true insider or a definitive outsider.

¹⁰ The strategy of the latter group, of course, has been to find a similarity that undermines the presumed difference that animates the work of those who see *studying* as being removed from *practicing*. (To study is itself but a form of practice, some assert, making us all the same, or so they claim.) For example, if the social arrangement that we often call secularism or the viewpoint known as atheism can also be designated *as* religious, or as no less a so-called worldview than is religion, then (or so the reasoning goes) these two must be taught side by side, perhaps with so-called believers of each charged with representing them to students—what some today refer to as “teaching the controversy” or what a previous generation referred to as the pluralistic zoo model of the field, in which a Christian was hired to teach Christianity, a Muslim to teach Islam, and so on and so on.

historians of science would deconstruct today” (2012: 61).¹¹ Based upon this view they not only presume that it ought to be inevitable that a rational discourse on religion develops (if not for certain cognitive proclivities, as argued in their 2012 article) but then come to lament their career-long efforts to make it so—a “false and unshakeable delusion” to which they provocatively confess in the above-cited article. While I’ve argued at length concerning the differences between my own approach and that of at least Wiebe (see McCutcheon 2006),¹² this admission, on their part, highlights a key difference that I had previously not considered: what I’ll characterize as my own far more pragmatic view of academic intervention and change.¹³ For while Wiebe and Martin have confessed to being deluded when they reflect back on their optimism for the development of a truly scientific study of religion I am instead content in the knowledge that a critical study of religion will *never happen*—at least never happen *en masse* as

¹¹ Several responses to Martin and Wiebe’s paper (along with their own replies) appeared separately in both *Religio* as well as *JAAR*; see Part 5: A Scientific Discipline of Martin and Wiebe 2016 for the complete set of these replies and responses.

¹² This reply was in response to an article of Wiebe’s (2005) in which my work was, in my estimation, mischaracterized in order to compare it favorably to those with whom Wiebe disagreed. Despite this disagreement, however, it should be said that Wiebe, once a teacher of mine at the University of Toronto, and I have maintained a long friendship and productive working relationship.

¹³ See McCutcheon 2015 and forthcoming for two specific examples of this viewpoint as it can be applied to institution-building within the study of religion. With this topic in mind, I think of my own early experiences in what was then called The Centre for Religious Studies at the University of Toronto, a cross-disciplinary graduate unit, in the 1980s, that was autonomous from the then Department of Religious Studies (which drew upon not only U of T faculty but also faculty from the Toronto School of Theology [an association of neighboring Christian theological colleges on the campus of the University of Toronto]). Eventually, those supporting this autonomous model for graduate education lost (in the early 1990s) and the grad unit was absorbed into what became the Department for the Study of Religion, where, doctoral students are now “eligible to take a course offered in the Toronto School of Theology (TST), provided it is an Advanced Degree course (5000 level only), and is taught by a TST faculty member who is also a member of the Graduate Faculty of SGS.” In fact, according to a 2012 Quality Assessment Report, commissioned by the Provost of the University of Toronto, the difference between what takes place at the Toronto School of Theology and the University of Toronto was considered by the reviewers as negligible (see Martin and Wiebe 2016: 325; see also Wiebe 2016). A closer relationship was then represented by the outside assessors as desirable so as to enhance “Toronto’s stature as a center of interreligious dialogue” (the report is quoted by Martin and Wiebe 2016: 325-6; the assessors were the late Ellen Aitken of McGill University, David Ford of Cambridge University, and Richard Rosengarten of the University of Chicago). For background see chapter 13 in Wiebe 1999, “Alive, But Barely: Graduate Studies in Religion at the University of Toronto.”

opposed to being an occurrence in more or less isolated but, in my assessment, intellectually vibrant and, hopefully, influential pockets of the field.¹⁴ For if my analysis of the discourse on religion is persuasive¹⁵—an analysis that understands the classification of just some or discrete elements of the human *as* religious, in distinction from other elements (which are termed social, cultural, political, ethnic, secular, etc.), as having the effect of arranging and thereby privileging certain aspects of otherwise mundane daily life, in the service of a variety of practical social interests and situations—and, what’s more, if the people who continue to elect to become scholars of religion largely come from groups for whom this designation is but a commonsense term in their inherited folk lexicons (making it a way that they too, despite being scholars, arrange and thereby privilege certain aspects of their otherwise mundane daily lives, in the service of a their own specific practical social interests and situations), then how could we expect the academic study of religion to be anything other than what it has generally become: a largely normative exercise in the service of reproducing specific understandings of religion so as to normalize specific ways of arranging social actors and thus social life, to the benefit of just some aspects within society? For that’s just how the discourse on religion functions—whether used by scholars or anyone else, I maintain. (And by normative I mean far more than the old religious studies vs. theology framing but, instead, imply the link between the study of religion as a disciplinary practice, and large scale socially formative exercises aiming to shape the nation in

¹⁴ Although there are a variety of ways to signal that the study of religion is carried out in a way that differs from an approach that might be characterized as sympathetic to the people under study (such as some calling it the academic study of religion or retaining the earlier term, the science of religion), lately the term “critical” has been favored by some, such as Ramey 2015b. For the purposes of this paper I will adopt this nomenclature, noting the importance to distinguish this from the more common understanding of what it means to criticize someone or something. On this distinction see n. 16 below; see also McCutcheon 2018a: 96 ff. for a discussion of the various uses of this term “critical” in the field today.

¹⁵ Aside: see the forthcoming *Discourse Research and Religion* (edited by Johnston and von Stuckrad—a volume going through an open, online peer review process as this paper is being written) for a volume on the breadth of what is today called the discursive approach to the study of religion.

specific ways.) From the well documented politically liberal and inter-religious dialog model that informs much of the long-standing world religions genre (both the courses and their textbooks; more on this below) to more recent efforts to establish and enhance so-called religious literacy standards throughout society (thereby standardizing and policing an authorized discourse on religion of benefit to certain understandings of the nation; more on this below as well), the academic pursuit known as the study of religion, at least as practiced by many today, in large part constitutes an effort to reproduce and entrench one among many specific ways of using the “religion” category, in the service of a practical political program. For while it would be rare to find a scholar of religion today agreeing that this word “religion” names, say, inferior attempts to mimic the saving grace and love of Jesus as found in Christianity (a use of the term religion that is easily found today),¹⁶ it is not difficult to find scholars who define religion in such a way as to name the presumed non-empirical, essential, and thus universal core of human nature that is, of course, aligned with rather specific social and political goals (yet another use of this word “religion,” but one that happens to be in direct contest with the one just identified). While the sort of world that results from the latter strategy may be one in which I would prefer to live, where I would prefer to shop, go to work, and own a house—a point that we cannot overlook, to be sure—the question is *whether an approach to the field that is driven by such preferences or seeks to realize them in practice, no matter how widely they are shared, best exemplifies what an academic pursuit ought to be or ought to be designed to accomplish.* For although I have

¹⁶ I have in mind those positions that opt to classify a specific form of Christianity as somehow superior to those other social movements that are usually known as religions (a latter grouping that could very well include disfavored forms of Christianity, not to mention any of the usually-identified world religions), inasmuch as the former is represented as being about a personal relationship, which is then claimed to be superior to what is portrayed as the mere rituals and traditions of other people—a socially-invested classificatory move not much different from recent efforts to distinguish mere religion from those supposedly “deeper” or more profound things known as spirituality or faith, let alone much earlier efforts to distinguish “our” religion from “their” superstition.

distanced myself from the way authors such as Wiebe and Martin define science as a disinterested pursuit (not dissimilarly to how I distance myself from those, on the other side of these debates, who portrays authors or participants as somehow being disinterested, self-aware, and thus authentic sources of information), I nonetheless share with them the assumption that an academic approach to some topic ought to be distinguishable from engaging in that topic itself, indicating that a degree of distance, irony, or even alienation from personal investments in the topic (what I recall Bill Arnal early on referring to as deracination) is a necessary prerequisite for the academic life.¹⁷

Sadly, I find that just the opposite view is, more often than not, taken, when it comes to our field today, regardless the ink spilt on critical theory in the study of religion—whether in any number of past and easily documented instances (where, for example, but one religion, usually a form of Christianity, was once commonly assumed to be either original or normative and thus the ideal type by which all others could be judged as wanting) or in current practice (where, for example, but one type of Islam is now commonly assumed by many scholars and media pundits alike to be either original or normative and thus the ideal type by which all others could be judged as wanting). I think here of a recent critical reply that Martin Kavka and I co-wrote (2017) to an article published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (see Nadeem and Farid [2017a]; see also 2017b for their rejoinder), on the colonial era roots of modern homophobia in parts of the Arab world. Our complaint, though in part about the authors’ decision not to define “justice” (an term that they claim to be at the heart of their paper), mainly

¹⁷ Given how frequently I have heard criticism and critique confused—as if being a critic, as I once opted to call this position, meant criticizing, belittling, demeaning or disagreeing with people’s choices and practices—I feel the need to clarify that alienation, as I use the term here, does not imply that one has something at stake in the correctness of the position under study. Instead, it merely implies that the scholar sees the practice or the organization as human, all the way down, and ensures that no privileged remainder is set aside, free of historicization.

revolved around the article's move from *description* of a situation to their *advocacy* for how that situation ought to change. For the latter is only possible should scholars themselves, in their role as scholars (as opposed to their role as citizens), hold a position on how the groups we study ought to treat their members.¹⁸ Given the breadth of positions that one could occupy concerning how the Arab world *ought* to treat homosexuals—and the fact that all of these positions are contestable and debatable by those invested in these issues, each using a variety of devices to authorize their stand in the contest—it struck Kavka and I as inappropriate for this article to have been published in one of the field's leading scholarly journals.¹⁹ That our critical reply was characterized by the original authors, in the opening lines of their rejoinder, as supercilious and then met on social media with accusations that we were yet two more Cis-gendered white males telling people outside North American and Europe how to act strikes me as but another layer to the problem; for we were under the impression that, as members of the profession, it was well within our rights to take a stand, by means of argumentation and evidence, concerning what should constitute the limits of the profession itself (i.e., what counts as a persuasive argument—

¹⁸ In our field the claim that we should compartmentalize is often greeted with suspicion, as in Spencer Dew's reaction to Asprem and Taves's claim of "saving our feelings of empathy or opposition for other contexts" (2018: 199; see Dew 2018 for his thoughts on their rigorously explanatory approach), though the vast majority of scholars likely understand how to present themselves to their students *as* professors as opposed to presenting themselves as, say, siblings or as parents or maybe customers—roles that many of us equally play but only at other times in our lives. In fact, the very setting in which we have debates about compartmentalization, i.e., the modern university, is itself the result of generations of members working to set themselves apart from others for practical effect, and thus we arrive at, for instance, the practice of peer review (a form of self-governance) or even the institution of tenure. So I contend that compartmentalization (and thus the distance from identifying with ones object of study) is a necessary feature of scholarship; the question, then, is the degree to which one compartmentalizes, the practical effects, and how accessible this is to scholars working in various subfields of the academy. For further thoughts on compartmentalization (deriving from a critique of a recent AAR President's "revolutionary love" conference theme), see McCutcheon 2018c: 115-116.

¹⁹ The problem, of course, is that as with our field's main taxon, religion, there is also no clear definition of what counts as scholarship on religion and thus what ought to be included or excluded from the pages of peer review journals in the field. Among the goals of this paper is to take one more step toward clarifying this and, more importantly, to ensure that a younger generation of scholars clearly understands that this issue now falls to them.

the sort of judgment that, presumably, we all routinely make in our capacity as teachers and thus graders). Simply put, the interests of the authors did not strike us as being sufficiently removed from the interests of the groups under study, for their efforts were ultimately directed at—as is so often the case in current scholarship in Islam—changing the groups to suit their own preferences.²⁰

Despite the seeming advances in the modern field, then, it seems to me that an effective and always ready rearguard action (as the military tacticians would phrase it²¹) has effectively undermined those gains, domesticated theory, and ensured that, to use Bruno Latour's title (1993), but for my own purposes, scholarship on religion has never really been modern—for despite saying that we've read the critical work, by and large we continue to pursue our studies with colonial era tools in the pursuit of normalizing our self-interests.²²

To put it another way, it's remarkable how many people in our field still routinely talk about the west and the east, or western and non-western religions, despite all of us having apparently read (and understood?) our Edward Said. Or, consider how Naomi Goldenberg

²⁰ See McCutcheon 2005 for a small book motivated by the many post-9/11 commentaries on Islam, by scholars, politicians, and the media, which aimed to identify the correct (i.e., peaceful and tolerant) form of Islam, one that was seen to be in step with liberal democratic interests. Such commentaries, by the way, have not lessened in the intervening years.

²¹ For those unfamiliar with the phrase, it names a defensive strategy whereby a secondary force, in the rear of an advancing front, responds to incursions made against that front or protects it from attacks at the rear, thereby coming in handy should the group be forced to withdraw and retreat. "I've got your back" might be the colloquial way of phrasing this.

²² This has long been apparent to some in the field, when they considered (a) how frequently the work of the late Jonathan Z. Smith is cited appreciatively in the field despite (b) the critical impact of his work was rarely operationalized. The manner in which critical gains grouped together under the banner of theory have been domesticated and thereby tamed and managed was a theme of the essays collected together in Hughes 2017 (originally presented as part of NAASR's 2016 annual meeting). By claiming that we've never been modern I also do not have in mind the sort of argument put forward by Josephson-Storm (2018); interested readers can see my own thoughts on his recent book (McCutcheon 2018b). Concerning Smith's contributions to the field, see Crews and McCutcheon (forthcoming).

(herself a onetime NAASR President and strong advocate for the governance role of the rhetoric of religion) has described this problem:

My department colleagues ... are a highly intelligent, accomplished group of religious studies scholars. They are familiar with the substantial body of critical scholarship in the discipline that, for the past two decades at least, has argued ... that “religion” is a modern concept that operates as a distorting anachronism when applied to the study of earlier epochs ... [and] that “religion” has roots in European colonial ambitions and intellectual history.... I do not expect my colleagues to refrain from disagreeing with some or even all of these general tenets of the sub-field of “critical religion.” Rather, what I find disconcerting is their choosing to ignore critical approaches to fundamental terms when they are describing religious studies as a discipline. (2018: 80)²³

And, as Ian Cuthbertson observes, in a reply to Goldenberg’s above-cited article, Colleagues in the religious studies department where I teach will often listen attentively whenever I insist that religion is not a self-evident thing in the world and then shrug their shoulders and proceed with the serious academic business of studying various individuals, texts, and practices in an attempt to determine what these might reveal about religion as a coherent object of study or thing in the world. (2018: 103)

²³ Her paper opens by describing three learning outcomes created by her Department—outcomes that, in her estimation, perpetuate several longstanding assumptions in the field (what Stoddard and Martin, she recognizes, might call clichés [2017]) that remain intact despite being the focus of much critical work (her own included) over the past twenty years. I could add one more: that the use of the category “religion” *distorts*, as Goldenberg phrases it. Although we agree on many things, I would insert more nuanced language at that point, one that avoids the impression that a more accurate or correct description of past events and groups is possible if only we used better and non-anachronistic terms.

So, to elaborate on my thesis concerning what Emily Crews has called “a rash of scholarship that operates blindly when considering ‘religion,’ failing to parse the many layers of problematic meaning the category religion has accrued” (2018: 117), return, for a moment, to this now popular idea of the link between the study of religion and advocating for increased religious literacy (an attempt to create increased tolerance in diverse liberal democracies).²⁴

While we could mention Stephen Prothero’s 2008 book on this topic—whose marketing materials phrase the point of the book as follows:

“We have a major civic problem on our hands,” says religion scholar Stephen Prothero. He makes the provocative case that to remedy this problem, we should return to teaching religion in the public schools. Alongside “reading, writing, and arithmetic,” religion ought to become the “Fourth R” of American education.²⁵

—we could also cite the AAR’s ongoing, five year initiative (begun 2016 with a \$160,000 grant from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations)²⁶ to “produce consensus guidelines on religious literacy that administrators and faculty nationwide can draw upon to help shape college curricula”²⁷ while also drawing attention to Harvard Divinity School’s current Religious Literacy

²⁴ See chapter 10 of McCutcheon 2001 for my earlier critique of the discourse on tolerance in the study of religion.

²⁵ His interest in this topic continues, e.g., his April 6, 2018, public lecture on “Religious Literacy in an Age of Religious Nationalism” at the University of Kansas.

²⁶ The foundation, established in 1952, and which has a program specifically to fund interfaith leadership as well as religious literacy, is driven by its “founder’s principle that religious diversity is essential to civil discourse within a democracy and that leaders in all walks of life are more effective through an appreciation for the religious views of others” (quoted from: <https://www.avdf.org/Programs/InterfaithLeadershipReligiousLiteracy.aspx> [accessed September 15, 2019]). Davis (1867-1962), the onetime President and Chairman of the Board of the Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa), was also a large land developer in the Bahamas and Florida before establishing the foundation.

²⁷ The committee, which also involves a team of respondents and which holds public sessions annually, is led by Eugene Gallagher and Diane L. Moore; learn more here: <https://www.aarweb.org/about/religious-literacy-guidelines-for-college-students> (accessed September 15, 2019).

Project²⁸ along with Diana Eck's much earlier (begun in 1991) and not unrelated Pluralism Project,²⁹ let alone a variety of Departments of Religious Studies that now see the topic of religious literacy as a thematic engine capable of driving, to whatever extent, their programing initiatives and institutional identity.³⁰ This should make plain that one would not be incorrect to understand the effort to increase the public's knowledge of religions—both inside and outside of our classrooms—is now one of the major rationales of the field.³¹

²⁸ This initiative was founded, and is led by, Diane L. Moore, cited in the previous note; the project “advances the public understanding of religion with special attention to power, peace, and conflict. Through resources and training for educators and other professionals we explore the complex roles religions play in society” (see the project's self-description at: <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/about> [accessed September 15, 2019]).

²⁹ Learn more at: <http://pluralism.org/about/our-work/history/> (accessed September 15, 2019).

³⁰ To name but a few: Northwestern University grounds its major in the context of Prothero's work on religious literacy (notably his March 19, 2007, appearance on “The Daily Show with John Stewart”; see <https://www.religious-studies.northwestern.edu/undergraduate/first-year-focus.html> [accessed September 14, 2019]) while Stanford's Department of Religious Studies' home page claims that “[r]eligious literacy is key to global citizenship in the 21st century” (see <https://religiousstudies.stanford.edu/>; accessed September 14, 2019), the chaplain's office at Brown University (the proper place for such an endeavor, I contend) sponsors a Religious Literacy Project (see <https://www.brown.edu/campus-life/spiritual-life/chaplains/office-chaplains-and-religious-life/religious-literacy-project> [accessed September 14, 2019]) and San Diego State University's Department of Religious studies offers a 15 credit hour Global Religious Literacy Certificate. The University of Vermont has a course on the topic, REL 105 Religious Literacy, described as follows: “Religious literacy entails understanding the history and contemporary manifestations of religion, including the central texts, beliefs and practices as they are shaped within specific contexts. Introduces ways of thinking about the public expression of religion and profession-specific engagements with religion”; it also celebrated October 2019 as religious literacy month (see the course description at: https://www.uvm.edu/courses/rel_105 [accessed September 15, 2019] and find #RelLitUVM on social media for a list of programing events associated with their religious literacy month). And even such an initiative as the American Religious Sounds Project (a project which seems not to define religion) seems part of this initiative, inasmuch as “the need for understanding religious pluralism has arguably never been greater. Given the remarkable diversity of American religious life and the increasing polarization of our politics, building a civic culture that is inclusive and valuing of all peoples constitutes one of the most pressing challenges we face today” (see <http://religioussounds.osu.edu/about-faq#whyReligion> [accessed September 15, 2019]).

³¹ It should be noted that the American Academy of Religion's mission statement itself reads as follows: “to foster excellence in the academic study of religion and enhance the public understanding of religion”; to that end it has as Committee on the Public Understanding of Religion, which, among other initiatives, annually awards the Martin E. Marty Public Understanding of Religion award as well as an award to journalists (see: <https://www.aarweb.org/about/committee-public-understanding-religion> [accessed September 15, 2019]).

As phrased in a 2015 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, this turn toward teaching religious literacy recognizes

the urgency to make our campuses successful models of communities of diversity and global citizenry that do not ignore but recognize—and draw on—the significance, beauty, and complexity of religion. (Rosenhagen 2015)

That the just-quoted piece was written weeks after the November 2015 terrorist attacks across Paris and in the more immediate context of candlelight vigils held on the author’s campus (University of Wisconsin at Madison)—attended, as he describes it in his opening paragraph, by students of a variety of faiths (as well as the religiously unaffiliated)—cannot go unnoticed; for the desire to arrive at a civil and inclusive public square (civil and inclusive as judged by specific and usually undisclosed and thereby naturalized standards, of course—*this* is the issue that needs attention)³² is the driving force behind the religious literacy initiative.³³ Or, as the author, Rosenhagen—himself an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America who also holds a Ph.D. from the University of Heidelberg and who was the Associate Director of the onetime Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions while now being the Director

³² A suspicion from the political left (rightly, I’d argue) usually greets the discourse on civility when it is wielded by those on the right of contemporary politics, for in such cases it is recognized to be a way to promote a certain sort of order and thereby suppress resistance to it (by ruling such resistance as being out of bounds, because it is “uncivil”). For example, consider the reaction by some to the recently founded program for civil public discourse at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, established by its Board of Governors—a board that is understood by some UNC faculty to be at odds with the idea of shared governance (see: <http://publicdiscourse.web.unc.edu/> or for a recent article on the program and faculty reactions, see: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/09/12/program-civic-virtue-unc-chapel-hill-raising-concerns-about-secrecy-and-funding> [accessed September 12, 2019]). The irony, however, is that when the same term, “civility”—which, I would argue, is *always* a rhetorical term with socially formative effects—is used by those on the political left it is often left unscrutinized by them, as if it only now just means what it naturally says and is no longer the strategic front for other, undisclosed claims. Case in point: I see little if any critical analysis in the field to the links between religious literacy projects and claims that it enhances some untheorized notion of civility.

³³ In November of 2015 130 people were killed and 494 people injured as part of attacks in the French capital, involved a bombing at a sports stadium and attacks on the streets, restaurants, and a night club.

of the University of Wisconsin at Madison's Center for Religion and Global Citizenry³⁴—phrases it:

Colleges need to invest more in their students' religious literacy—not proselytizing, not affirming any particular faith—but simply teaching vital competence about religion and its impact on global affairs that will prepare students for their future while enlightening our civic discourse along the way.

Or, as Moore's Harvard project defines religious literacy:

Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses.

Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess:

- a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts

³⁴ Although it closed in June of 2016, as described on their now out-of date website, “The UW Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions opened in July, 2005, testimony to the vision and benefactions of Sheldon and Marianne Lubar of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Concerned about rising religious tensions worldwide and believing Jews, Christians and Muslims to be capable of prolonged and honest inquiry into both their common heritages and varying perspectives, they imagined a center that would advance mutual comprehension by mingling scholars with the general public, clergy with laity, and members of different faith communities with citizens of Wisconsin, the United States, and the world. Through encouraging people belonging to and/or interested in the Abrahamic traditions to engage each other and to find out more about both of these several traditions and their intersections, the Lubar Institute is dedicated to strengthening the values of religious pluralism so vital for sustaining American civil society and peaceful international discourse.” Interestingly, this unit was an institute in the College of Arts & Sciences at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, a public land-grant university in the US. (See <https://lubar.wisc.edu/welcome/mission.html> for the source of this description [accessed September 21, 2019].) The Center for Religion and Global Citizenry was established on the same campus in August of 2017, explicitly as a revised version of the Lubar Institute (see: <https://religion.wisc.edu/about/> [accessed September 21, 2019]). Aaron Hughes's critique of the category of Abrahamic religions (2012) as a socially formative devise used by liberal religious pluralists to establish the basis for interreligious dialog, and thus a category of no analytic power for scholars of religion, deserves mention at this point.

- the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place³⁵

So, not only do we see in this discourse on religious literacy a normative notion of religion as a constructive (i.e., peaceful, beautiful, and civil) force in human affairs, as well as a politically and theologically liberal understanding of diversity and inclusion, but we also find traditional or what we might better call pre-critical notions of religion as a socio-politically autonomous force that is merely “shaped” by history while “manifesting” itself in various discrete locales; in this way, beneficial practical effects are said to be achieved by one or more of the so-called world religions, effects enabled or promoted by our correct understanding of the religions...—*all of which flies in the face of a variety of critical gains made in the field over the past generation or two of scholars.*

To name but one example that might have already come to the reader’s mind, the work of such scholars as Tomoko Masuzawa and Suzanne Owen (not to mention about half the authors in Cotter and Robertson’s volume [2016])³⁶—work specifically on the manner in which the discourse on world religions not only was, from the start, intertwined with very specific colonial governance efforts but which remains invested in a variety of modern political projects—goes completely unrecognized and thereby ignored in the religious literacy literature. What is fascinating in all this, then, is that, despite the critical work of such writers and the way that their research seems to have driven much of the conversation in the modern field (or at least in some

³⁵ Quoted from <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/our-approach/what-is-religious-literacy> (accessed September 15, 2019).

³⁶ I say half because, as elaborated in the Afterword that I wrote for the volume, about half the book, much as we see in the religious literacy initiative, is devoted to using the world religions category better (e.g., adding more traditions to it that have been, in the estimation of such scholars, inappropriately ignored in the past, such as pagan or indigenous traditions) while the other contributors wish to dispel with the category all together.

of its corner), the main problem with the world religions discourse today, at least according to many in our field, is *that people do not know it, and thus use it, well enough*; in other words, the problem is *not* that scholars and the general public at large commonly divide the world into a number of so-called faith traditions (thereby perpetuating a sort of idealism and individualism that each, or so it has been argued, have profound socio-political implications) but *that we all don't know the descriptive ins and outs of each*.³⁷ Recall that, as quoted above, among the goals of Harvard's religious literacy initiative is to enhance "a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions." What's more, if we add to Masuzawa, Owen, et al.'s critique of the discourse on world religions the work of those engaged in the wider critique of the category religion itself (the genus of which world religions could be said to be but a species), and its practical effects in modern liberal democracies, then we arrive at the curious moment when a portion of the field is working to limit our attraction to naming something *as* religion while much of the field remains focused on reviving and securing an undefined notion of civil society by ensuring that the population can—to put it crassly—properly distinguish a Sikh from a Muslim from a Hindu from a Jain from a . . . , all in hopes, I gather, that a universal oneness among all humanity, and a deference to certain sorts of differences, will become apparent to those sufficiently articulate in the use of this taxonomy.

³⁷ While I agree that we ought to be careful in the description of other people's claims and actions (with a nod toward Wayne Proudfoot's once widely quoted criticism of what he termed descriptive reductionism, as opposed to his support for explanatory reductionism [1985: 196-197]), this agreement does not prevent me from also reminding scholars (with a nod to a point demonstrated long ago by reflexive anthropologists), that our very questions, assumptions, and categories frame the conversation in ways that often predetermine what our so-called informants or interlocutors say in reply to us (as I elaborate later in this paper); our nuanced or sensitive description of others' claims therefore does not prevent our (perhaps unwitting) determining of how others are understood in our work.

While I can think of other examples, more of which I will provide in a moment, where a disciplinary past that some of us had thought that we had left far behind turned out, upon closer inspection, to be far more current than we had thought, the contradiction between, on the one hand, contemporary religious literacy initiatives, championed by some of the leading or most influential (or at least well-funded) aspects of the field and, on the other, critical scholars of religion who treat the study of religion as no different than the study of any other domain of human life, should cause us to pause and ask a few questions about just how modern this modern field actually is. For the world religions discourse that many in our field think they've left far behind turns out to be as current as it ever was, whether or not world religions courses continue as the so-called bread and butter classes of Departments. (My hunch is that they still are, by the way—this would be an interesting study to tackle.)³⁸ What's more, the notion of religion as unique and irreducible—a stance associated by many with the now out-of-date though once prominent Chicago school of thought (though it was never just about Chicago, of course)—remains, I contend, as invigorated and consequential as ever, for it is the assumption that drives the use of the term religion in these literacy efforts;³⁹ for, as in pollsters collecting data outside polling stations and thereby trying to determine how religious beliefs inform voting patterns, religion is still generally assumed by such scholars to be a pre-social, non-political disposition that merely has political and social “dimensions” and cultural “expressions” (as per the Harvard Religious Literary project). Here, as I've identified before, the etymology and modern uses of

³⁸ Studying the credit hour production that comes through such courses—a key indicator of a Department's vitality—along with obtaining sales information on still thriving world religions textbook genre, would provide insight into this. On the enduring influence of Huston Smith's still in-print 1958 textbook, originally entitled *The Religions of Man* (including its unwavering sales over the years), see McCutcheon 2018a: 46.

³⁹ Aside: there's even an annual world religions day, established in 1950 by the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, and which is celebrated around the world; see Goldenberg 2018: 85 for a description of a Canadian celebration of the day.

“express” are helpful to keep in mind, inasmuch as it connotes “speaking ones mind” or putting something nonverbal “into words”—thereby reproducing the common “ghost in the machine” model of the human, whereby a dynamic, prior, and private inner consciousness and meaning is, by means of some secondary and invariably flawed step, said to be conveyed into the public by means of a symbol system that exists at a distance from the original intention (“That’s not what I meant!” is sure evidence of this model, also making plain its agonistic role.) And thus, despite longstanding protests to the contrary, the old Cartesian dualism is, as alive as ever in the study of religion—something evident from the very beginning of this now popular subfield, as in when once of its founders, Colleen McDannel (though we could easily quote the work of other influential figures, such as Robert Orsi), noted that her topic was “[t]he physical expressions of religion” and, in particular, “the material dimension of Christianity,” thereby prompting her research to have “ranged broadly over many expressions of material Christianity” (1995, 1-2, 276).

Taking all of this into account suggests to me that, despite the ease with which many in the field convey that they too have read all the critical work and have taken it into consideration, the field has changed very little in the past 150 years; for, citing but one scholar who has already been mentioned above, the distance between Naomi Godenberg’s approach to the category religion as a tactical governance device, whereby what she terms marginal, vestigial states are created and policed by dominant populations (2015), on the one hand, and, on the other, contemporary religious literacy initiatives is so great that the latter is but one more data point in

need of the former's analysis.⁴⁰ If anything has changed at all, over this time, it is perhaps the political causes supported by the same old devices.⁴¹

Before going on to document further enduring problems at yet other places in the field, let me be clear on the reason for doing all of this. Although I may be incorrect, of course, I have the impression that some members of a younger generation for whose work recent critical gains are important have sometimes naturalized the contemporary place where they do their own work, thereby failing to recognize or appreciate that their institutional and disciplinary space is historically contingent, meaning that its establishment and maintenance was hard won, i.e., gained only by previous scholars tackling the work of their predecessors and peers in order to make plain how it was lacking or how it therefore led to a study of religion that was out of step with what they understood to be the usual requirements of scholarship. While I have noted that I do not share Wiebe and Martin's despair over what they described as their delusion, I admit to being concerned that without scholars at all career stages being willing to stand up and make strong statements about the inadequacy of some of their peers' work, the gains that some of us value in our field will, within a surprisingly short time, be lost. For, as just argued, despite many of us agreeing that the world religions genre is an antiquated relic from a prior era, I would conjecture that it is now as vibrant and influential as ever.⁴²

⁴⁰ See the last chapter to McCutcheon 2003, "Religion and the Governable Self," for an example of my own analysis of the political function of the category religion—an approach certainly related to but by no means coterminous with Goldenberg's approach.

⁴¹ I admit that I think here of the notion of strategic essentialism and the manner in which a form of essentialism, hotly critiqued by scholars in many cases, can nonetheless be seen by some to be allowed or embraced so long as it is in support of causes or interests which they support.

⁴² At the University of Alabama, where I've worked since 2001, my colleague, Steven Ramey, teaches this course but does so in a way that ultimately problematizes the idea and the course itself for his students.

Now, I recognize that there are always prices to be paid in engaging the work of others, those whose scholarship strikes one as problematic—prices that vary based on, among other factors, the place of the critic and the place of the one being critiqued. This is what I meant by the *hard won* gains that we risk taking for granted today. I think here of the earnest warning that my own doctoral supervisor once offered to me, just a short time into my own tenure-track career, concerning the behind-the-scenes work of some of those who were then (and still now) well placed in the field—efforts, as he characterized it, to undermine those with whom they disagreed concerning the shape and effects of the study of religion. I also recall a variety of incidents and interactions in my own career (some of which had administrative and thus institutional force behind them while others were more akin to polite warnings from no doubt well-meaning colleagues)⁴³ but, far more than this, I also recall the experiences of scholars in the generation ahead of my own, for whom firings (due to what I can only interpret as disciplinary disputes) were not an unusual part of the career for those who thought the study of religion could be something more than interreligious dialog. There are always things at stake, after all, and one would be naïve to ignore that; though the spoils are not that great (at least by some measures), there are spoils nonetheless, and, like all professions, there is an economy of status, rank, and

⁴³ This varies from once being called on the carpet by a Department chair, at the insistence of a school's Associate Provost and also being denied tenure, to being advised by a senior colleague to use the word "approaches" rather than "theories" in a course title (so as not to alienate others), being told by another to place the work of Peter Berger on a syllabus so as to satisfy yet another senior colleague who saw in Berger the pinnacle of theoretical work in the field, having work rejected by a peer review journal for being too critical (cue the policing function of the discourse on civility), being likened to a small dog that has learned a new trick in an article on my work published in that same journal, and having my work trivialized as being mere journalism. Related to this, see Hughes and McCutcheon (forthcoming) for a critical analysis of the discourse on collegiality (an article rejected by the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* because, as we were told, it was not about world religions or methods for studying world religions—the only topics the journal apparently published. On another occasion I plan to elaborate on firsthand reports that have come back to me concerning serious warnings that others in the field, at early career stages (both in graduate school and in teaching positions), have been given, either in private or public, about associating their work and careers with my own.

perks that governs our institution (everything from gaining admission to a graduate program to obtaining employment, let alone a full-time tenure-track position, to finding a position in certain schools, supervising doctoral students, gaining lighter teaching loads, or being recognized for awards). But, writing as someone who is certainly not as far along in the career as such scholars as Wiebe and Martin but who nonetheless is part of the generation whose members are now beginning either to retire or at least consider it, I admit to having concerns for where all this might be going in the near future, a concern which drives my effort to persuade you today that the field is not as far along as some of us might imagine.⁴⁴ For, should my analysis of the role played by the category religion be persuasive, then we would be well advised to consider that no critical gain will ever be widely influential, let alone permanent. For just as with each new crop of students entering our classes, every new academic generation will bring with it long entrenched habits of thought and action that will require examination and, in some cases, undoing.⁴⁵

As another example of the domesticating nature of the current field, and thus its still rather traditional nature, consider the podcast of the Department of Religion at the University of

⁴⁴ As everyone knows, changes over the past decades in how public higher education is funded (i.e., cuts in government support) have led to a situation in which university administrations have not only increasingly relied on tuition revenue but have also opted to employ far greater numbers of (cheaper) non-tenure track faculty (i.e., contingent faculty). Although the detrimental effect of this policy on young scholars certainly deserves our attention, I maintain that it has also not helped the situation in the study of religion; for it means that far greater numbers of early career scholars remain in unprotected settings (employed course-by-course or year-by-year), thereby denying them the protections of tenure and providing little incentive to tackle the work of their elders, with an eye toward the health of the field at large.

⁴⁵ I have noted on other occasions, the introductory class is a place where we would do well to make our students curious, as soon as they arrive in our classes, of their own taken-for-granted practices and knowledge, making their presumptions about the world and habits in the world their objects of study. Or, to borrow Smith's language, gains in such courses often result from defamiliarizing the material for the students.

Virginia, “Sacred & Profane,” now with several episodes.⁴⁶ On its homepage (written over a cartoon image of three women taking pictures of themselves at the beach, with one having a darker complexion than her friend and wearing a full body suit now commonly called a burkini while another wears what seems to be a head scarf and gloves) we read the following:

We may imagine that the sacred is set apart from life, but religion is involved in every aspect of our day-to-day world. How we live together and apart. How we argue. How we flourish. The sacred is the profane.

Although I happen to agree that “the sacred is the profane,” Bill Arnal and I did not have this particular sense of the phrase in mind when selecting a title for a set of essays that we collected together and published a few years ago (2012). While we, of course, do not own nor can we determine how this phrase is used by others, the difference between these two readings is worth considering, for it is a difference that might not at first be apparent to readers, given how the podcast’s use of the phrase seems to be in step with recent scholarship on the role played by classification in the field—and thus open to the possibly arbitrary or at least tactical distinction between those two domains often known as the sacred and the profane.

Now, by that title Arnal and I implied the manner in which naming something *as* religious or sacred or spiritual or contemplative or mystical or..., was itself always a human and thus mundane classificatory act, one with the usual practical motives or effects that attend any act of naming, distinguishing, and ranking (the threefold set of things entailed in classifying something), and thereby (re)producing, negotiating, and contesting identity and place in the

⁴⁶ The following example is adapted from a brief blog post, published online on September 1, 2019. Find it at: <https://religion.ua.edu/blog/2019/09/01/the-sacred-is-the-profane/>; find the UVA podcast at <https://religionlab.virginia.edu/podcast/>. (I have seen blogging, over the past several years, as a Petri dish where ideas and arguments can be tested, often making them, as in several places in this paper itself, the raw material for further elaboration at a later time. For more on this, see chapter 10, “Why I Blog,” in McCutcheon 2018c.)

world (processes that make it possible to come to the conclusion that we even inhabit a world, by the way). What we *did not* mean to denote by that phrase was that this thing called religion or spirituality, etc., somehow defied all boundaries and thereby pervades all of mundane life, manifesting itself first here and then there, and thereby informing or influencing seemingly non-religious actions or claims—such as, let’s say for argument’s sake, taking a photo at the beach. But that’s certainly another way one can take that phrase—a way that, in my reading, is in keeping with those who argue that religion is influential of, but uncaused by, the ordinary aspects of our day-to-day lives.

And so, just what is the difference between these two readings?

Well, in the one case so-called sacred things (the “so-called” is crucial to this use of the phrase) are not in any significant way different—*not whatsoever*—from any other element of the mundane world of human doings, though some social actors who use this term work very hard to create the impression that they are, such as calling so-called religious people on the move “pilgrims” and non-religious people “tourists”—and thus we now study one group differently from the other, given that the former are presumed to be on the move for unique, deeper or more ethereal and thus non-mundane reasons that so-called sensitive scholars must take into account. In other words, it would be just a bit insulting to think that that they’re “mere” tourists, no? (And here we see but one more traditional element to this still dominant approach: the privileging of what the observer takes to be just some agents’ intentions.)⁴⁷ But in the other case,

⁴⁷ Of course not all participants whom we study have their stated intentions “taken seriously,” i.e., understood to be determinative of how scholars ought to study them. Those whose actions, and claimed rationales for those actions, contest or undermine the taken-for-granted norms of the scholar’s own social world are rarely, if ever, taken at face value in scholarship, as scholars usually do when someone claims they are “on a pilgrimage.” Instead, understanding the origins or causes of such “obviously” problematic claims and actions is a priority for the scholar (for in such cases, the rationales are often understood by scholars as deluded and the actions deviant—thereby making evident the normative stance that often informs scholarship on marginal groups [whether that stance is intended or not; see Ramey 2015a]). In

or so it seems to me, this thing called religion or spirituality or..., is not an identity presumed to be the result of human, structural, or historical action but, instead, is assumed to predate and thereby inform all human actions, resulting in religion or the sacred being “involved in every aspect of our day-to-day world.”

Despite the appearance of both stands being informed by the same recent critiques in the field concerning the fluid nature of the boundary between the sacred and the profane (a fluidity certainly not presumed by earlier generations of scholars), this strikes me as a considerable difference in approach and thus a choice that most in the field end up making as they set off to study religion. For in the one case studying religion will mean learning how “the sacred manifests itself” (to hearken back to more traditional phrasing that, as should have been evident in the earlier discussion of religious literacy, is still as relevant as ever), sometimes doing so in surprising places (the “religion of baseball” approach, we might call it—an approach that shares much in common, I’d argue, with Eliade’s once prominent new humanism, inasmuch as both see the scholar of religion’s reach as virtually limitless given that religion informs virtually all aspects of the human).⁴⁸ But in the other case, the things that some call religious, etc., will be studied as merely one example of the results of ordinary human actors arranging their worlds in ordinary (but nonetheless curious) ways, by designating something *as* “set apart and forbidden” (to recall an equally old phrasing, but one associated with a rather different tradition of studying

cases where the scholars’ world and expectations are left uncontested or confirmed, the self-understanding of the participant generally sets the terms by which they are to be studied, for otherwise scholars risk adopting what others will likely characterize as an imperialist approach to studying others. That self-interest can be demonstrated to drive the choice of when and where to sanction participants’ own so-called self-understandings should cause us to pause and reconsider this whole notion of intention in our field.

⁴⁸ See his essay, “History of Religions and a New Humanism,” which opened the inaugural issue of *History of Religions* (1961), reprinted in his essay collection, *The Quest* (1969).

sacredness in the field).⁴⁹ Maybe people do this to privilege something (or someone) in relation to other things (such as, at least currently in the US, people appealing to what are known as religious exemptions in order to free them from laws that usually govern life in the nation), but it's just as likely that they do it to demote and delimit (such as labeling something *as* religious so as to disallow it, such as, with the US still in mind, courts banning from public schools, as unconstitutional, the approaches to studying the origin and development of biological life known as Creationism and Intelligent Design)—which is what we'll have to figure out as we dive in to study the larger world that produced these and just these supposedly religious things or people.

It was with this disciplinary distinction in mind that I tweeted a photo not too long ago, of a sandwich board advertising “Authentic Mexican Food,” in response to a colleague, Emily Crews, who (correctly, I think) observed that “data is everywhere.” The question, though, is how can this advertisement be something that a scholar of religion would study—does the sign have religious aspects and effects that we'll correctly see *as religious* only if we look at it just a bit closer, in order to see how it corresponds to/overlaps with other members of the broad family known as religions,⁵⁰ or, as I'd instead argue, whether the things that we end up calling religion

⁴⁹ I refer here, of course, to Emile Durkheim's earlier work, in which sacredness was understood as a contingent identity that resulted from prior human action (i.e., of following a rule system, by which one sets something apart *as* forbidden), thereby making sacred an adjective, i.e., a quality of items in the world, rather than Eliade's use, as I've described this elsewhere, in which it is a noun (and thus always preceded by a definite article). In fact, the usage “the sacred” is still easily found to this day, more than likely signifying an approach to the study of religion found wanting in this essay: as but a particularly apt example, consider the historian Nancy van Deusen's *Embodying the Sacred: Women Mystics in Seventeenth-Century Lima* (2017), described by its publisher as follows: “In seventeenth-century Lima, pious Catholic women gained profound theological understanding and enacted expressions of spiritual devotion by engaging with a wide range of sacred texts and objects, as well as with one another, their families, and ecclesiastical authorities.... Through close readings of diverse primary sources, van Deusen shows that these women recognized the divine.... In these manifestations of piety, each of these women transcended the limited outlets available to them for expressing and enacting their faith....”

⁵⁰ I insinuate here the role played by the well-known family resemblance approach to defining religion in enabling scholars to see the sacred as pervading the profane. For a critique of the still commonly used family resemblance approach to defining religion, see Fitzgerald 1996.

are the result of something no different than the act of setting apart *this* food from *that* food, all in an effort to (as Mary Douglas might have put it) impose a system of order so as to attain some very practical effects (in the case of the sign I just cited, to attract customers and, presumably, make a profit for the restaurant). For now the study of religion is but one element of the far wider study of how people identify and order (and yes, contest) the worlds they've made for themselves, a process examined at one particular and manageable place, but with analogues (i.e., data) everywhere (including an ordinary sign outside a restaurant).⁵¹

To return to my second example, the podcast mentioned above:⁵² an approach to defining and studying religion that I consider to be pre-critical (i.e., exemplified decades ago) again lies behind what at first seems to be an initiative that is innovative and thus one that apparently has taken into account some of the most recent critical work in the field. Ironically, I would argue that, as with the religious literacy movement, just the opposite has happened, inasmuch as the phrase “the sacred is the profane” now signifies (at least for some) the former pervading all of the latter, thereby domesticating and limiting the critical gain associated with understanding those aspect of the human usually designated *as* sacred as being sites where the ordinary acts of signification and contest can be studied.

⁵¹ This is what I take Smith to have meant when he spoke of something as an e.g.—a specific instance of a far wider human topic, of interest to the scholar, that could also be exemplified equally well in any number of other places or times, with no one instance being ideal, unique, or prototypical. See the blog for Culture on the Edge (edge.ua.edu), a research collaborative comprised of scholars of religion, for numerous examples of how to make this shift when it comes to studying culture at large and not just that domain often termed religious. See also my own Department's Luce-funded initiative (which involves most faculty in the Department, under the leadership of PI Michel Altman), American Examples, for another instance of how this model can help us to rethink parts of the field (<https://americanexamples.ua.edu>).

⁵² Because it might not go without saying, let me be clear that I am impressed by the work of UVA's faculty and students in producing this podcast, an effort, presumably, to convey their work to wider audiences and publics well outside our usual classrooms. My own Department has taken this seriously as well, from hosting an active blog to a podcast of our own; the blog can be found at: <https://religion.ua.edu/blog/> and the podcast at: <https://soundcloud.com/studyreligion>.

A third example of the field's read guard action is the trend, gaining significant speed over the past two decades, toward studying what is now widely referred to as material culture. Whether our field's version of this is known as religion on the ground, material religion, lived religion, embodied religion, etc., this approach is now among the most central for many scholars of religion, and seen by them as provocative and critically-edged. It is portrayed by its advocates as historical and rigorously empirical, given its focus on discrete objects, and, because of this, it is usually represented as being at odds with what is portrayed as having outdated idealist connotations: the once dominant text-based model—a model, we are often told, that once lodged the field in mainly studying elite social actors' creation, circulation, and interpretation of texts, doing so at a significant distance from what some now see as the real people and their real lives. As described by Richard Carp, in his entry to Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler's *Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*: "At most times and places, only certain elites—usually men—produced texts, while women, the poor and even slaves created material culture" (2014: 475). By applying a method devised by the earlier social history movement among historians, many scholars of religion (especially those in a younger generation) now aim to study religion in the lives of those not previously studied, doing so by means of a home shrine, for example, or at an impromptu shrine on the sidewalk of a busy city, or at a display alongside a busy highway that marks a traffic fatality, to name just three examples that are represented as falling far outside the field's once widely shared focus on the beliefs that were inferred to motivate the actions, associations, and productions of ritual and textual specialists.

But does this apparent emphasis on the empirical and the local/marginal actually free us from what many now see as the old rut of studying disembodied beliefs.⁵³ For instance, take the

⁵³ The following derives from an October 3, 2013 post at: <https://edge.ua.edu/russell-mccutcheon/eliade-has-not-left-the-building/>.

following quotation from the Spring 1997 newsletter of the Material History of American Religion Project, centered then at the Divinity School of Vanderbilt University and funded (like much contemporary scholarship on religion in America) by the Lilly Endowment, and then involving several key figures in the early years of this movement (e.g., Robert Orsi):

[T]he scholars associated with this project have set out to pay attention to a neglected dimension of the history of religion in America. Too often the story of religion has been told as though it were a matter of thoughts and ideals alone. Material history is embodied history and recognizes that religious people have enacted their spiritual beliefs and religious ideals in a very material world. We are looking at the material evidence, getting into the material, and finding out a great deal in the first year of this project.⁵⁴

But, given this initiative's effort to distance itself from idealist versions of the field, dare we ask: material evidence of what...? Well, apparently of the beliefs—i.e., “enacted their spiritual lives and religious ideals”—that are still assumed to motivate people to do this or that with their bodies and thus with their artifacts. Anyone with an understanding of the assumptions that have driven much in the field might justifiably say, upon reading this: *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, non? To come at it in a different way: just because we've banished the word “belief” does not mean that material religion studies constitute an advance, for just what is being “enacted” or “materialized” in these objects...? Sooner or later, I suggest, we work our way back to the presumption that individuals have prior beliefs—or, to avoid the systematic and doctrinal overtones of the term “belief,” one might instead opt for such terms as “faith” or “experience,” to signal something presumed to be more authentic and thus pre-cognitive/pre-social—that are later

⁵⁴ <http://www.materialreligion.org/newsletters/news1/index.htm> (accessed September 9, 2019).

manifested in tangible items outside their minds (or hearts?)—an idealist presumption, no matter which term one opts for, that has long dominated our field and many others.⁵⁵ The gain of the material religion movement, then, is merely to extend this traditional position to the study of non-elite and therefore everyday, common, and often overlooked items—not nearly as significant a gain as its advocates claim.

Aside: it needs to be mentioned that the texts that material religion specialists claim we have solely studied in the past *are themselves material items*—a point that seems to be lost on those advocating this position today. [Recall the ease with which Carp, above, distinguished texts from material culture.] What’s more, if we take critical theorists seriously, concerning the limitless nature of text [recall Jacques Derrida’s famous quote about texts?], let alone the need to address the intentional fallacy in our field, then I’m not really sure how, despite defining our data domain far wider, switching to pots, rugs, and key chains from books, manuscripts, inscriptions counts as an improvement over, in Carp’s words again, prior “more immaterial and disembodied understandings” (486). For religion is left largely untheorized in all this, with the scholar somehow just seeming to know where to find “the presence of religion in secular cultural landscapes” (486), such as Carp himself who, without defining religion, somehow just seems to know to list together “the taste of a sacred meal, the scent of incense, the feel of rosary beads in one’s fingers, the proprioception of one’s body in sacred postured or gestures (kneeling in prayer

⁵⁵ In my more recent work I have purposefully avoided the discourse on belief, whenever possible, and have opted, instead, to discuss claims that situated social actors make, to highlight that, as scholars, we not only have no access to beliefs but might also be quite mistaken to infer their existence (in our explanatory effort to come up with a unified source for human action and organization) since all we have are actors making claims and counter-claims (i.e., the difference between studying beliefs and studying discourses on belief); the move to claims, influenced by Bayart’s work (2005), thereby opens the door to the materialist position that belief (much like claims of authenticity, let alone unbelief) is a rhetorical trope employed by social actors who find themselves in disputes that cannot be resolved in the usual ways, doing so in an effort to justify their previously uncontested preferences and actions by lodging them within the presumably unassailable confines of the private self.

, for example, or making the sign of the cross) or the kinesthesia of one's body engaged in religious activity (for example *sa'y* during the *Hajj*)," all places where this method can be used. (475).

My point in all this? I am at a loss to explain how—apart from, say, merely changing the old phenomenologist's word "manifestation" to the now preferred term "embodiment" or perhaps "enacted"—this new approach is any different from the old approach that once dominated our field, represented so nicely by the work of those who (yes, like Eliade) drew on hermeneutics, phenomenology, and a late-nineteenth century sort of comparative method intent on finding sameness to come up with a way to somehow "get at" what they considered to be the essential and historically universal *sine qua non* of religion by first studying diverse people's myths, symbols, and rituals (to reference a once prominent undergraduate course title). For in both cases—phenomenology then and material religion now—"that which presents itself to our senses" (as phenomenologists used to say, as if the world marched toward us of its own accord, with scholars just passively watching or receiving it) is assumed by the observer to be evidence of a something else (there's more than meets the eye..., as it were), and that "something else" is asserted to be prior and non-empirical and thus only be inferred from our so-called historical, descriptive, and comparative studies. For after all, "[r]eligion is always realized. It is conveyed and apprehended in the sound of music, through prayer, rhetoric discussion, confession and song..." (Harvey 2014: 502)—but what the prior "it" *is*, that which is claimed to be realized elsewhere, is never in question. Call it faith, call it belief, call it spirit, or call it soul, or even call it meaning, if you will (the last being the preferred term of a number of humanists who study religion), but I'm not sure what difference it makes, for what these two approaches share—material religion and, at least for some, the discredited phenomenology of religion—is a

presumption that history is merely an arbitrary, secondary, and contingent stage on which ahistorical and necessary themes and dispositions of universal scope are played out.

(A further aside: Given that Lilly supported the above quoted material religion project, maybe none of this should come as a surprise. After all, as the Foundation phrases its mission:

Our primary aim in religion is to deepen and enrich the religious lives of American Christians, principally by supporting efforts that enhance the vitality of congregations. We seek to ensure that congregations have a steady stream of wise, faithful and well-prepared leaders. We also support efforts that help Christians draw on the wisdom of their theological traditions as they strive to understand and respond to contemporary challenges and live their faith more fully. In addition, we work to foster public understanding about religion and help lift up in fair and accurate ways the contributions that people of diverse religious faiths make to our greater civic well-being.⁵⁶

It seems to me that a scholarly approach that heralds the empirical, but which turns out to be in the service of conserving the common assumption concerning the primacy of a non-empirical spirituality and inspiration, can understandably be interpreted to enhance and sustain the participant's viewpoint. The question, though, is whether a mere paraphrase of what people are already saying about themselves and their lives [i.e., that the historical is a mere stage on which

⁵⁶ Quoted from <https://lillyendowment.org/our-work/religion/> (accessed September 9, 2019). Their former website phrased it as follows (emphasizing ministry more and not making reference to “diverse religious faiths”): “The ultimate aim of Lilly Endowment’s religion grantmaking is to deepen and enrich the religious lives of American Christians, primarily by helping to strengthen their congregations. To that end, our religion grantmaking in recent years has consisted largely of a series of major, interlocking initiatives aimed at enhancing and sustaining the quality of ministry in American congregations and parishes” (as quoted in October 2013).

eternal themes are played out] constitutes the kind of work that should be considered as falling within the boundaries of scholarship on religion.)

That the so-called material religion approach is but a rebranded phenomenology of religion was confirmed for me with a book that I used in an undergraduate class a couple of years ago: Brent Plate's *A History of Religion in 5 1/2 Objects* (2014).⁵⁷ While engaging and therefore nicely accessible to a novice reader, it strikes me as little different from Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1996)—a classic (but, for many, long outdated) study, from 60 years ago, of cross-cultural symbolism and the way in which everything from water to stones can be an active agent that, as phrased by earlier scholars, “manifests the sacred.” And so, keeping in mind what I previously characterized as the now widely shared presumption that the approach once represented in Eliade's work is long behind us, it strikes me as significant that on pages 7-8 of Plate's book we find who else but Eliade (a person who, he writes, “thought long and hard about what makes certain activities, gatherings, objects, people, and beliefs ‘religious’ and not just some other part of mundane existence”), not only quoted appreciatively but, I'd say, being used to anchor the whole exercise that is to come—which also includes a chapter on what I might as well term the agency of, among other objects, stones; for they “can be manifestations of a divine force, provoking people to pilgrimage” (2014: 24), Plate informs his readers.⁵⁸ Whether that divine force is mere human projection onto an inanimate world or the human perception of an

⁵⁷ This example derives from a February 26, 2015 post; see: <https://religion.ua.edu/blog/2015/02/26/the-more-things-change/> (accessed September 10, 2019).

⁵⁸ Aside: Eliade's continued influence outside our field is easy to document; for example, such works as *The Myth of the Eternal Return* and his *Shamanism* appear alongside the works of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell in the citations of Karen Armstrong (e.g., 1993 and 2005)—perhaps the widest selling author writing on religion for the general public—and Eliade's three volume *History of Religious Ideas* features on Jordan Peterson's list of books that he “found particularly influential in [his] intellectual development” (see: <https://www.jordanbpeterson.com/books/book-list/> [accessed September 13, 2019]); curiously, one of the books Peterson lists as being “what [people] should read to properly educate themselves” was written by Peterson himself (1999) and, yes, it heavily cites Eliade's work.

even deeper mystery is—much like in Eliade’s work—left rather vague, at least as I read it. For instance, concerning the Ka’ba in Mecca Plate writes:

The power of the stone to draw people to it is so strong that a series of silver frames have been placed over it for protection. (27)

How the Ka’ba was signified in the first place, and how that signification has been reproduced and adapted (even contested) over time are not questions this approach aims to investigate.

It was encouraging that a number of my undergraduate students saw problems here as well—understanding that mere descriptions of how people themselves might talk about the world (“I felt drawn to it..”) when scholars ask them questions, hardly is a sufficient academic exercise. So, to repeat: despite what many people in our field may claim, Eliade definitely has not left the building, something that is especially evident when we fail to redescribe and theorize the claims made by the people that we happen to study.⁵⁹ For while I have no doubt that people the world over *claim* that their objects possess a unique or inspiring gravitational force all of their own (what we could somewhat flippantly call “the power of Christ compels you model,” quoting a classic line shouted in unison by priests in the 1973 film, “The Exorcist,”) as a scholar working at a distance from these social worlds I cannot help but see the objects that people routinely surround themselves with as under-determined canvases used for any number of purposes.

⁵⁹ It may be worthwhile to specify that by redescription I mean Smith’s specific sense of the term, something different from how other authors now use the term, such as Goldenberg, for whom it connotes mere repetition of participant claims (2018: 90-92) and Aspren and Taves, who see interpretation (as opposed to explanation) as being synonymous with it (2018: 135). For Smith, redescription signified how claims made in one domain are translated—another term of choice for him—into another, much as Durkheim (as per Smith 2004: 383) could be said to have translated, and in the process redescribed, so-called religious claims into the language of sociology. See Smith 2004: 29 ff. for his own thoughts on the advantages of understanding the goal of our work as redescription, followed by the rectification of the categories we have used to go about our work—a goal that avoids the ontological overtones of much reductive/explanatory work in the field.

So although it may go without saying, it strikes me that the stones are not talking and don't have any power to act of their own accord; instead, we are the ventriloquists throwing our voices—something I admit that Plate suggests, in places (“Perhaps it is the ubiquity of stones in human life ... that has prompted us to bestow certain stones with spiritual power...” [29] or again, “Individuals as well as communities gather objects, place them in one locations, and allow these objects to hold a significant sacred place in their lives” [31]), but which seems to get lost in all the advice concerning learning to listen to what stones are telling us. For, as far as I can tell, we're talking to ourselves here, making the objects that we surround ourselves with useful props that allow us to portray a monologue as something other than what it is.

While I will leave to others further documentation that the work of Eliade is still an appropriate representative of much of the modern field, no matter how much distance some may claim separates us today from when he first wrote many of his now famous studies in the history of religions (that is, back in the 1950s)—for example, demonstrating that Tanya Luhmann's now influential work (e.g., 2012) can also be seen in the same light as Plate's neo-phenomenology would be a project worth tackling—I was lucky enough to have Plate comment on my critique of his book, resulting in a brief online back-and-forth, during which he posted the following comment:

I may be an unwitting Eliadean. So be it.⁶⁰

I found this an interesting retort, because, for some time, I've been privately predicting that the work of Eliade would be, or already was, making a return (insert your own “eternal return of the same” asides here). It is a prediction premised on two assumptions that I now offer here.

⁶⁰ See the comments posted at: <https://religion.ua.edu/blog/2015/02/26/the-more-things-change/> (accessed September 11, 2019).

First, as I've argued elsewhere, a decontextualized approach, such as Eliade's, that reduces—yes, it's as reductionistic as any, just not to naturalistic elements—diverse human actions and claims (i.e., putting moon symbolisms from all over the world alongside each other only inasmuch as they all involve the moon) to a supposedly unified private experience of the thing he called “the sacred” offers an appealing model for anyone trying to overlay a grand, developmental narrative and thus unified identity onto what I'll instead describe as the happenstance of human history and association, as a way to tame and thereby make sense of what others might name as difference, diversity, competition, or even outright contradiction. It therefore offers what many would characterize as an ahistorical response to historical situations (what Eliade referred to as “the terrors of history”)—i.e., when contingency seems to defy our efforts to make sense of the world as a predictable, uniform, and thus understandable place. I think that the temptation to make the environments in which we find ourselves cognitively and socially habitable by making the moves that we see in his body of work is great indeed, so one would expect that such approaches would not go away any time soon (even if they are tweaked, just a bit).

(I think here of how, in US courts, Intelligent Design approaches to the origins of life have been effectively demonstrated to be just a slight revision to the already outlawed (in the public school science class, at least) Creationist approaches [they were ruled unconstitutional in *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578 (1987)]. This slight revision to the already discredited approach was made evident in *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District*, 400 F. Supp. 2d 707 (M.D. Pa. 2005), a federal court case from the Fall of 2005.⁶¹ This regrouping after a loss, only to

⁶¹ Find the judge's December 20, 2005 ruling at: https://web.archive.org/web/20051221144316/http://www.pamd.uscourts.gov/kitzmiller/kitzmiller_342.pdf (accessed September 12, 2019).

revise and retry strikes me as an apt image for what's been going on in the field since the late 1980s, when rigorous, and for some persuasive, criticisms of the phenomenological method were first entering the literature, causing advocates of this approach to retreat and recalibrate their approach.)

But second, the generation of scholars that followed Eliade, those who developed some pretty strong and persistent critiques of his work (both its academic shortcomings as well as the possible socio-political motives or effects of such an approach), is now, as noted earlier, either at retirement or nearing the point of retirement in their own careers, which means that the fierce battles over theory and method in the study of religion that were waged beginning in the 1980s—when many of these now senior scholars were themselves rising to prominence and when the then dominant Eliadean approach was for the first time seen as a problem—now seem like ancient history to subsequent generations, either the one now starting their careers or the one coming along after that (those in undergrad or grad programs now). And so, once again, we come back to this over-used notion of the eternal return: the sorts of critiques that once seemed to hold this decontextualized approach at bay, to whatever extent, within the academy are now more than likely not read or taught all that much (ignoring something is a power mode of response), which nicely clears the way to, for example, assume that anyone who uses the word “sacred,” as either noun or adjective, is seen as doing so in the same fashion, making their works interchangeable. So my argument is that when the persistent urge to dehistoricize in the service of making an authorized place in the here and now meets the eventual or possibly inevitable decline of ardent critiques of how this tendency is enshrined within academia itself we find scholars there who simply dismiss the critique by replying “So be it” when their work is read as exemplifying what others see to be some of the most problematic features in the field.

The punch line that I keep returning to throughout this paper is therefore rather simple: each academic generation bears the responsibility to continue, to refashion, and to redeploy the critique in key places, in order to maintain an alternative institutional space and a social identity, should any of its members agree that the academic study of religion can or ought to be something other than a learned repetition of the sorts of claims that are often made by the very people whom we study (e.g., claims of transcendental identities and assumptions of human actors being little more than passive recipients of meanings projected from elsewhere). For if our field is something other than undoubtedly well-meaning paraphrases of participant reports then the argument for that to be the case can probably never be presumed but, instead, must continually be made and remade.

As but another instance of these challenges, take into account the notion of public religion, a topic much discussed by a number in the field today, notably those interested in the role religion plays in social change (a topic of much importance to many scholars today, studying everything from 1979's Iranian revolution to the role of evangelical Christian voters in the US's 2016 presidential election). However, much like the problematic notion of material religion, the idea that religions can be either private or public is, I maintain, a troublesome one that we seem not to be able to get beyond. Although the category has a longer history than one might expect,⁶² it's a notion given significant steam 25 years ago with the publication of José Casanova's *Public Religion in the Modern World* (1994); as described on the publisher's site:

⁶² Martin Marty, writing in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society* (1998: 393), notes the appearance of the term "public religion" in Benjamin Franklin's writings: "In 1749," Marty writes, "the American founder made 'proposals' for an educational academy in Philadelphia. When discussing the study of 'history,' he argued that it would 'afford frequent Opportunities of showing the Necessity of a Publick Religion,' arguing 'from its Usefulness to the Publick; the Advantages of a Religious Character among private Persons,' and the like." The relations to the more recent notion of civil religion are observed by Marty; on problems surrounding the use of civil religion as a category in the study of religion see McCutcheon 2003: 279-283.

During the 1980s, religious traditions around the world, from Islamic fundamentalism to Catholic liberation theology, began making their way, often forcefully, out of the private sphere and into public life, causing the “deprivatization” of religion in contemporary life. No longer content merely to administer pastoral care to individual souls, religious institutions are challenging dominant political and social forces, raising questions about the claims of entities such as nations and markets to be “value neutral,” and straining the traditional connections of private and public morality.

Instead of assuming that religion is first and foremost an inner experience that (for good or ill) is somehow expressed publicly,⁶³ whether as some secondary step for the individual or as an historical development (i.e., deprivatization) associated with so-called modernity—a stand associated with what I’ve elsewhere called the private affair tradition in the study of religion—how would we rethink this entire tradition of scholarship on so-called public religion if we instead understood all of daily life to be public (i.e., social and contestable)—always and already?

For maybe religion never was in the private (i.e., either interior or non-political) sphere but, rather, we may have used that word, “religion,” and a host of other socio-political management techniques, to create the impression of a walled-off and (literally) self-contained realm to which we attached the term privacy, in order to just get some things off the social table—a series of techniques that, in this so-called modern world, no longer seem to be able to separate and contain what they once did (hence the impression that things are now entering the public domain). For social (thus public) roles concerning such things as gender and generation

⁶³ See the introduction to Martin and McCutcheon 2012 for my own views on the socially formative rhetoric of religious experience.

are easily found within the confines of the apparently private home, no? And each of us not only adopts but is framed by the expectations of others, making them part of the seemingly private self that we each apparently think that we have to ourselves alone, no? My point is that the limited (or should we just say the rhetorical) utility of the private/public binary is pretty evident, for each time it is invoked it can easily be collapsed, demonstrating that privacy is itself a social and thus negotiable construct; yet, despite this evidence, it retains a social efficaciousness (case in point: a rebellious teenager claiming their room is private and, for the good of the family, parents agreeing to this..., for the most part) that prompts us to keep using this way of asserting “thus far and no further” to our peers.

So what if we just acknowledged all of this and agreed, from the outset, that privacy is invariably a public construct? What would we then make of talking about religion going public...?

For if this alternative position was our starting point—not that supposedly private things are eventually expressed or manifested so that they meander through or pervade the public but, instead, that claims of privacy are just that, *claims* that are made in specific social situations by specific social actors, the effect of which is either to try to limit what your neighbors see or limit what your neighbors do—then how would we rethink not just what we mean by, but also what we do with, “religion” as well as the other popular signifiers in our field, e.g., experience, faith, belief, feeling, sentiment, and spirituality? And how would we rethink this now booming scholarly industry on so-called public religion—an industry very much in keeping with traditional views in the field concerning the primarily or initially experiential nature of religion? For now we would no longer have any notion of privacy as naming a substantial thing in the world from which we could then move outward; instead, we’d examine the practical effects of

rhetorics of privacy. For, to tweak that phrase of Bayart's, all we may actually have are operational acts of privatization.

This strikes me as a dissertation waiting to be written, one that takes the secondary literature on public religion as its primary source, asking why this scholarly tradition arose when and where it did and what its practical effects have been for how we understand (and regulate) difference in this modern world, as opposed to proceeding, as do so many studies today, with the old assumption that religion has periodically broken into the public realm, for good or ill. The more novel project, I'd wager, would include among its data points much work being done today on religion and law, such as Winifred Sullivan's now influential work where, for example, we read the following:

Religion has proved to be not an irrational private, and authoritarian pre-modern relic destined to fade away, but has proved remarkably vital and ubiquitous, refusing the place assigned it by the modern consciousness. (2005: 152)

Religion, here, is not theorized but, in my reading, is instead presumed always to have been on the scene, though being much larger and more dynamic than previous advocates of the secularization thesis once assumed it to be.⁶⁴ Instead of theorizing the things that we commonly call religion as themselves being *a product of law* (i.e., the designation is itself a modern tool used in the governance of groups and the management of difference) those in this subfield seem to take for granted that religions exist in the world and are therefore mainly concerned with how best for governments to interact with them (i.e., how to manage the freedom of expression in US political life). Should we make the shift advocated above, then we will not lament that lack of explicit definition of religion in US law, as do so many of those work in religion and law, but,

⁶⁴ In fact, it's the once prominent secularization thesis that many of these scholars seem to be working against, in an effort to demonstrate the inevitability and universality of religion.

instead, we'll see in this vagueness a tactical nimbleness that the nation-state allows itself, thereby understanding the lack of an articulate definition as a feature rather than a bug in the governing system. For now, on a case by case basis, using differing criteria, all depending on the demands of each occasion, some governmental action can be outlawed, because it was religious, or allowed, inasmuch as its possibly religious nature was conveniently defined out of existence.⁶⁵

Before wrapping things up, consider one final example: recent developments in a subfield devoted to the study of belief and unbelief—as a place to see where some of the earlier-named issues all apply. I'll use as my example, Lois Lee's *Recognizing the Non-Religious: Reimagining the Secular* (2017).⁶⁶ Lee, Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kent, is also the project lead on both the Scientific Study of Non-Religious Belief project, at the University College London's Institute of Advanced Studies, as well as the Understanding Unbelief program at the University of Kent (both of which are recipients of large grants from the John Templeton Foundation). The co-editor of the online *Oxford Dictionary of Atheism* (2016), and co-founder of the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network, Lee is a Cambridge-trained sociologist who divides her time between focusing on the study of religion/non-belief and public policy, with *Recognizing the Non-Religious* being the published form of her 2012 doctoral dissertation. If not already familiar with it, those interested in what she rightly characterizes as the fast-growing area of research on secularism and unbelief may welcome her aim to add some precision to what can, at times, appear to be a somewhat confusing research area (e.g., just what does an author mean by “the secular”?). Resisting the temptation to

⁶⁵ The examples of the tactical advantage to having no official definition are too numerous to mention, but consider how the city's nativity scene in the case of *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668 (1984) was primarily understood by the US Supreme Court as an economic issue and not a first amendment issue, i.e., an incentive for people to come to the downtown to spend money during the holiday season.

⁶⁶ This example derives from a review of Lee's work forthcoming in *Religion*.

conclude, as some in our field have, that we have now entered a post-secular era, Lee instead tries to offer a more nuanced approach to studying what she considers to be varying types of secularism and, along with it, this thing that many scholars now call nonbelief as well.

Distinguishing between insubstantial and substantial secularism (i.e., between the absence of religion or lack of belief [what some mean by secularism] and that which is non- or possibly even proactively anti-religious—such as the difference between, as she puts it, “being *without* religion ... [and] being *with* something else” [5]), the book’s argument lies in the results of recent polls in which the number of those some came to call the unaffiliated, or perhaps the Nones, was surprisingly large and, apparently, growing. This empirical research (e.g., the 2008 British Social Attitudes survey, which reported 37% of respondents to be non-religious) arrived a few years after the already-mentioned secularization thesis had fallen on hard times. Now the question was, or so it seems to me, whether those increasing numbers of people reporting being unaffiliated *undermined* the study of religion, by relieving us of our data and thereby confirming the secularization thesis, or, ironically, *re-invigorated* it inasmuch as those attending church, as well as those not (whether or not they report being Spiritual But Not Religious [SBNR]), could all be seen as having what, say, Ninian Smart (and now Ann Taves) once characterized as a worldview. (After all, or so the reasoning goes, those self-identified atheists and agnostics more than likely believe all sorts of things that enable them to organize their worlds, act in them, and thereby live their lives in ways that they see as principled, consistent, or meaningful.) If scholars opt for the latter course, then those studying religion have just as much warrant to study nonreligion as anyone else. (Thus, the field is invigorated.)

Here, by the way, we see how recent critiques of the category religion have been used by those in this growing subfield, inasmuch as the loss of its once presumed essence and thus

distinction from all nonreligious things, now enables those trained to study religion to examine all sorts of things that a previous generation of scholars might not even recognize as a legitimate place to do their work. So, given that it's the latter course (as identified above) that many scholars who study religion have by now taken, they've redefined just what they mean by their object of study and concluded that it's the *function* of the thing formerly known as religion that they actually study and, so along with religion, anything else serving that same world-building/meaning-making function (with a nod to Bill Paden's earlier work) is fair game. And thus, or so I would argue, we arrive back at the religion of baseball model of the field, whereby the critique of "religion" has been used to name even more things as religious.

As previous portions of this paper should have by now made clear, I am not sympathetic to these developments. In fact, for some time (dating back to early conversations with my colleague, Steven Ramey, who developed his own critical interests in the literature on the Nones)⁶⁷ it has seemed to me that, had pollsters *not* posed just this or that question to respondents, we might never have known that the Nones even existed. But the question here—thinking of both Lee's title and that old nugget about that unaccompanied tree falling in the forest—is whether the unaffiliated were out there patiently waiting to be discovered or, instead, whether they were in fact constituted in the very posing of questions about church attendance and membership. This debate certainly won't be settled in this paper but it should be pointed out that, depending on how one responds to this choice, the now significant body of scholarship that has now grown around the study of such groups will come to be seen in rather different lights. For we all know, I assume, that, depending on the types of questions one includes in a survey instrument, let alone the way that they are each phrased, pollsters can arrive at all sorts of curious

⁶⁷ Consider the papers, including Ramey's own presentation, given at the 2013AAR meeting in Baltimore, MD, filmed and collected together at: <https://vimeo.com/showcase/2643896>.

conclusions about the people they poll. So, for example, should we come to the supposedly empirical study of religion armed with “the ‘conventional’ Western understanding of religion ... as a theistic tradition” (as does Lee [see her glossary’s definition (204)]—relying on what I’d characterize as an untheorized, directional qualifier that, as already noted, many of us still use despite Said’s critique), then perhaps regular (and precisely *what* do we mean by that?) attendance at a service will (as it often has in the past) constitute the measure of affiliation, thereby helping us to *recognize* the previously undocumented existence of the unaffiliated who were staying home all along. But, given that all of this rests on our definition and starting place, that we may have just *constituted* (as opposed to *recognized*) our seemingly real, empirical object of study should not go unnoticed here (but, lamentably, it usually does, for we easily erase out fingerprints from the scene), as well as the fact that we’ve just *created* the basis for our own research projects inasmuch as we might now be concerned to study the puzzling fact that the unaffiliated nonetheless report holding views on, say, the afterlife. However—and this is the curious thing in all this, making evident, yet again, how key self-reflexivity could be to our work—had we approached this from the outset by defining religion as, let’s say for argument’s sake, someone who claims to hold beliefs in an afterlife (hardly an illegitimate definition), then the apparently empirical facts on the ground change quite a bit, since notion of affiliation as some “defining” characteristic utterly disappears and at least one scholarly quandary currently presented by the so-called SBNR along with it; for now many of the respondents distinguished from one another in the scholarly literature by means of our present taxonomies (i.e., those who came to a worship service versus those who stayed at home) might just end up counting as equally and uniformly religious, since their shared reports of believing in the afterlife override the supposed difference of their institutional affiliation.

But at this point, a second concern arises, one already addressed in this paper, for I think back to the wording that I just used: “someone who claims to hold beliefs...”. Taking seriously some current scholar’s desire for empirical studies (which I read as a response to previous critiques of a past generation’s grand theorizing and generalizing), I’d further argue that, as already noted, we never actually study those supposedly ethereal things that we sometimes term beliefs (a term surprisingly neither defined in Lee’s glossary, by the way, nor included in her book’s index); rather, observers infer their existence from studying the claims that people make in response to the scholar’s queries and thus prompts (harkening back to my earlier point—the sort of self-implicated point that some reflexive ethnographers realized a generation or so ago but of which we continually need to be reminded, it seems). Somewhat like David Hume’s (to me at least) persuasive argument about causes, the seemingly commonsense things that we call beliefs can be redescribed as postulations that observers routinely make in their effort to make sense of what they hear people say and see them do, thereby presuming, in a suitably individualist manner, that some inner, coherent, and intentional ghost drives the machine that’s doing things out there in the world. In agreement with Donald Lopez, in what I still consider to be an important chapter in Mark Taylor’s edited *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (1998), discourses on belief are best understood as an agonistic affirmation that functions as a boundary device, a verbal flag that we plant to mark who “we” are in distinction from “them.” Or, to rephrase, we likely don’t have beliefs spontaneously roaming around our heads (or, as noted earlier, in our hearts) until we’re asked about them or until we are challenged and/or happen upon someone doing something other than what we have either been taught to do or have become accustomed to doing. And, voila, we suddenly employ this handy discourse on inner

(and thus unassailable) sentiments to justify the difference being asserted—“Well..., *I for one believe that...*”.

If beliefs, identities, and questionnaires could be argued to have such a complexly intermixed existence, then I’m not sure what to make of the rapidly growing literature on unbelievers, the Nones, and SBNR. For only if one accepts the so-called conventional Western understanding of our object of study (much as cognitive science of religion scholars do as well, by the way—a development that should no less attract our attention),⁶⁸ thereby reproducing a certain commonsense view of the world that only some of us happen to have been raised on, is some of this scholarship even possible. But, for those seeking to historicize these discourses, such work may very end up counting as but one more object of study, further evidence of how scholars at a specific point of time, in a specific place, tried to make sense of a world in which previously useful or at least dominant ways of organizing people and knowledge were in upheaval.

While one could certainly offer further examples for how the modern field, despite many of its critical gains, is largely but a revamped version of its earlier and more traditional self—something that readers of this paper who are better versed than I in yet other subfields within the study of religion may be able to do—let me conclude by citing a specific and recent example of the practical means by which critical scholarship is marginalized today.⁶⁹ So consider a moment

⁶⁸ See McCutcheon 2010 for my own thoughts on problems in the cognitive science of religion.

⁶⁹ Just as the current job market creates conditions in which critical scholarship on religion can be marginalized (as previously discussed), the conditions recently established by the prominence of scholars using social media to discuss their work deserves mention as well; for the very nature of the medium—i.e., pithy or even flippant “got-cha” comments that lack nuance and which are often read quickly or in passing, while a user scans a page for updates, makes caricatures of positions tempting to offer, as if they amount to a rebuttal. For instance, on too many occasions I have read rebuttals to so-called social constructionist positions in our field, posted on social media, that do little more than represent the position in the worst or most outrageous possible light, making it easy to dismiss or trivialize.

in an online interview with the Duke University's David Morgan, then Chair of their Department, when he reveals far more than he might imagine.⁷⁰

Randall Stephens: How do you think theory should inform the study of American religion?

David Morgan: Theory is a great tool, but a lousy end-in-itself. Honestly, I think theory-wonking is pointless. But there is nothing so consequential as the creative revelation that happens when a theoretical model allows us to see our evidence, our questions, and our field with new eyes. It's like waking from sleep. Suddenly, the world is much richer. So it is very important for doctoral students to endure theory seminars. It's a vital rite of passage. It shakes them up, challenges them to recognize the importance of the critical interrogation of the *métier* they are struggling to master. It's part of the disciplining that makes for good scholars.

We should always read widely and we should be smartly challenged by our students and colleagues. Academics easily miss how dogmatic they can become. I see it all the time. The older we get, the less risky we become. Historians are among the worst in this regard. There is something about the work of historians that makes them theory averse. I'm not sure what it is. I guess they are so taken by their subject-matter and the often deft way they are able to write about it that they mistrust theoretical engagement. But we need not choose between good

⁷⁰ This portion derives from a blog originally posted on December 13, 2013, find it at: <https://religion.ua.edu/blog/2013/12/13/working-not-wonking/> (accessed September 13, 2019).

prose and theory. It is quite true that some of the worst writing in the last century has come from high theory types. But that is no excuse to avoid their work.⁷¹

As I read it, Morgan—himself a well-known advocate for visual and material culture studies in the field (e.g., 2005)—is articulating a pretty standard realist view within our field: there’s obvious stuff that we all know is out there (i.e., “our evidence” or the “subject-matter”) and then there’s the tools that we use to talk about it in this or that way, tools that may help us to see the it of our studies in a new light. The former is real and primary, whereas the latter is helpful, I guess, but we all know it’s merely secondary and nonessential and an excessive focus on the latter can be detrimental to ones work. Thus, only studying the former counts, since people who study the latter are—yes, you read him right—theory-wonking, and thereby engaged in a “pointless” exercise.

This sort of characterization of the work with which one disagrees strikes me as a rather luxurious position to be able to adopt. Because, as someone who thinks of himself as doing work well outside the mainstream, it should be obvious that, despite my own rank in the field, I cannot dismiss (and if you read that quote as anything but an outright dismissal then I think that you’re kidding yourself) people who study, say..., religion and visual culture, by saying that, honestly, they’re just descriptivist-wonks who do pointless work. (Even in a more informal online interview one would likely have to elaborate far more than that for such a claim even to make sense to most readers.) What’s more, what if I went on to say that it is quite true (luckily, truisms require no evidence—such as the still current truism that religion is about a deep feeling projected outward later...) that some of the worst writing (and we all know what counts as the bad writing, right?) in the last century has come from people who do old school phenomenology

⁷¹ Find the interview here: <http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2013/12/four-questions-with-david-morgan.html> (accessed September 13, 2019).

but repackage it as trendy “material religion” or “visual culture” and the like. But, as I might imagine myself going on, that’s no excuse to avoid such work; so grad students beware: you really should figure out how to “endure”—that’s right, endure, as in to undergo a trial, suffer through, persevere, tolerate, put up with—those material or embodied religion seminars because getting through them is a necessary rite of passage....

No, I could never get away with saying something like that and, what’s more, I hope that I would never resort to making such claims, for flippant and unsubstantiated generalizations strike me as undermining the profession, inasmuch as its legitimacy is, to my way of thinking, based on nuanced argumentation. But the luxury of dominance ensures that you are exempted from this and so you can get away with off-the-cuff dismissals and the last thing anyone would call you is dogmatic and anti-intellectualist, let alone ask for some a wee bit of evidence and argumentation to support your claims. Instead, I’d conjecture that, to many readers, Morgan’s words are probably read as showing an enviable command of the field and a benevolent generosity toward those whom “we” all already know to be, you guessed it, *wonking*.⁷²

Now, I hope that it is obvious that I could not disagree more with Professor Morgan’s position. In a blog post from 2013 I tackled this very issue, as it once came out of the mouth of an old school phenomenologist.⁷³ My post opened as follows:

When I was a doctoral student, sometime in the late 1980s, I recall Will Oxtoby (d. 2003)—then a professor at the University of Toronto, member of my doctoral supervisory committee and, a few years later, editor of a very popular two volume

⁷² *Wonk* (noun): “overly studious person” (1962), earlier “effeminate male” (1954), American English student slang. Perhaps a shortening of British slang *wonky* “shaky, unreliable,” or a variant of British slang *wanker* “masturbator.” It seemed to rise into currency as a synonym for nerd late 1980s from Ivy League slang; see: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/wonk> (accessed September 13, 2019).

⁷³ See the July 2, 2013 post at: <https://edge.ua.edu/russell-mccutcheon/our-primary-expertise/> (accessed September 12, 2019). Portions of this section derived from that post.

world religions textbook—saying that theory was like a snowblower (using a suitably northern analogy to make his point); “it helps you to move things around,” he said.

In reply to Oxtoby I instead likened theory to a snowmaking machine at a ski resort, for without the device there is nothing to move around and no hills to be groomed. That is, I started with the assumption that the world does not actively pre-arrange and then present itself to our senses in neatly and naturally packaged units.... So theory is a word that I used not just for explanatory, causal accounts but for the self-conscious examination of the conditions ... that make it possible to say that we know something about the world, that something in particular is significant and ought to be talked about.

I then concluded the post as follows:

So without theory—without a self-consciously employed system to distinguish and then focus attention on a this as opposed to a that—there is, it seemed to me then and still does, nothing to sort through and arrange, for we have no way to mark anything as significant and worth talking about.

There is much riding, as I then concluded, on that notion of self-consciousness, for, as I already suggested earlier in this paper, it seems to me that a scholar’s job is to take the usually taken-for-granted and thus unrecognized structures that allow people to arrange and navigate daily life (in the most mundane of ways, which makes them all the more interesting because of how taken-for-granted they become) and, by looking at them from an ironic distance, make of them items of conversation and debate by placing them alongside other things that we do, ideally doing so in unexpected or provocative ways, in

order to see something new that we'd not known before.⁷⁴ This is likely why the work of the late Jonathan Z. Smith—who, through an odd quirk of administrative need, was himself a doctoral advisee of Oxtoby's when Smith wrote his (unpublished) 1969 Yale dissertation, "The Glory, Jest, and Riddle: James George Frazer and *The Golden Bough*" (see the Preface [p. iii])⁷⁵—has increasingly struck me, over the years, as being so important for a field that has never really shaken off the late-19th century notion of animism (inasmuch as many scholars of religion still seem to presume that the world speaks to them in its own voice, of its own significance); for, as Smith famously wrote, over thirty years ago, in a portion of text usually quoted for rather different reasons:

the student of religion, . . . must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study."

(1982: ix)⁷⁶

There's something about those who see themselves as *working*, and not *wonking* (a change of just one consonant makes a considerable difference, does it not?), on the margins that makes them attuned to theory as the means of deciding what gets to count as subject-matter and as evidence (or, according to Morgan's interview, who gets to count as a legitimate scholar). After all, as I've also pointed out on past occasions, anyone paying attention to a criminal or civil trial (let alone all those popular procedural cop dramas on Netflix) knows that the juiciest parts are the pre-trial hearings, for that is *where they determine what gets to count as evidence*, i.e., what gets to count as something the lawyers can talk about and which the judge or jurors can even

⁷⁴ Which brings to mind Bruce Lincoln's 10th and 11th theses on method (1996), both concerned with the reasons why the critical distance afforded by the comparative method is necessary for our work.

⁷⁵ See Braun and McCutcheon 2018: 47 on Oxtoby's role in Smith's general exams.

⁷⁶ I refer, of course, to the now (in)famous "*there is no data for religion*" line that occurs slightly earlier in this book's introduction, and which has (unfortunately, I'd suggest) earned far more attention than the lines just quoted.

know about and thereby consider in coming to their decision; understandably, cases are often won or lost there and not during the trial. Self-conscious lawyers are mindful of this as they walk into court's first day.

So calling a focus on that same moment in scholarship—the means by which signification and identification take place, the set of assumptions that allow us to see ourselves as working in a field to begin with, and when we might contest the presumptions that we each bring to the table before ever getting on with the job of describing something—as pointless wonking is, it seems to me, merely dismissive name-calling that is beneath the dignity of a scholar. Finding such an attitude throughout the field is then not only a lamentable commentary on the state of our art but, more importantly perhaps, it provides an occasion to examine in detail how gains that we've collectively made are curtailed at discrete sites in our profession, not because they are rigorously critiqued and shown to be wanting but because they have been so trivialized as to be ignored, all in the service of portraying a discredited old as new again. But though the problems endure—ensuring that they will reappear, in some new guise, no sooner than they are critiqued⁷⁷—I'm hopeful that a critical self-consciousness among those who see these gains as worth fighting for will be just as wily and even more resilient.

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⁷⁷ See Rubenstein 2012, where the discourse on experience is aptly compared to a carnival game in which toy moles keep popping up out of their holes no matter how many times you've whacked them.

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