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Book Review

The Study of Religion as an Exercise in Problematization
*Some Meta-Theoretical Considerations**

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Abstract

In recent decades traditionally accepted theories and methods in the study of religion have come under criticism. Theories and methods based on metaphysical essentialisms, which once dominated the field, have now largely been rejected in favor of conceptualizations which emphasize the socio-cultural and historical embeddedness of the category. Much of this criticism draws from a body of thought loosely categorized as poststructuralism, and can be understood to be metatheoretical in nature. Using Foucault's concept of problematization as an interpretive framework, this paper sets out to examine the metatheoretical deconstructions and reconstructions of a number of prominent thinkers in the field who demonstrate an acute awareness of these more contemporary socio-cultural and historical concerns. The primary aim of the work is to probe the question of how well these metatheoretical explorations have served the discipline.

Keywords: Metatheory, Foucault, Problematization, poststructuralism, J.Z. Smith, Russel McCutcheon, Tomoko Masuzawa, Talal Asad, Thomas Tweed.

I n his 2007 publication *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor suggests that the term and study of religion—confined to the North Atlantic world—developed as a response to the difficulties and uncertainty surrounding the waning influence of the Christian church.[1] Viewed through a Foucaldian lens, this claim can be understood to reflect the concept of problematization, which, in Foucault's own words, describes "[the] development of a given into a question, [the] transformation of a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems to which the diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response."[2] Problematization should not be understood as a methodological enterprise set on rejecting all possible solutions except for The One, but rather as an ongoing exercise in thought that eschews metaphysical essentialism to instead focus on the historically contingent. Foucault's conceptualization of thought is rather

unique, and does not describe, "what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it meaning"[3] but rather, "what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and to question its meaning, its conditions and its goals."[4] To problematize is thus to explore the diverse set of relations and difficulties made discernable through the objectification and defamiliarization of something normative, something given or something taken-for-granted, and, "in connection with [these difficulties], develop the conditions in which possible responses can be given."[5] As Thomas Flynn states in "Foucault's Mapping of History," "writing the history of a 'problem' rather than of a 'period' [allows] Foucault […] to consider only those events that are relevant to the problem at issue, its transformation and displacement, the strategies it exhibits, and the truth games it involves."[6] Problematization, then, it can be argued, is indeed a useful way to conceptualize the type of historical shift Taylor is articulating, however it would be a mistake to think that the relationship between religion and problematization ends here, with the category of religion simply acting as a placeholder for a Christian tradition no longer culturally dominant.

The response to the problematization of Christianity not only led to the category of religion, but also to a very particularized conceptualization of the category that found its roots in evolutionary thinking and eventually developed into an essentialism. Although this conceptualization itself became normative and institutionalized, shifting socio-cultural concerns and changing historical contexts soon prompted the continued problematization of the category. Today this problematization is perhaps most clearly evident in the metatheoretical deconstructions and reconstructions that reflect these contemporary socio-cultural and historical concerns. The purpose of this paper, then, will be to critically examine the metatheoretical contributions of a number of notable scholars—namely, Russel T. McCutcheon, Talal Asad, Tomoko Masuzawa, Thomas Tweed and Jonathan Z. Smith—in an effort to investigate how well this type of problematization has served the discipline.

Before delving into my analysis of the thinkers up for examination, it will perhaps first be pertinent to provide a bit more contextualization with regards to where metatheory can be situated within the tradition of religious scholarship. Early elucidations of the category of religion fell pray to the fervor of evolutionary thought: religion was conceptualized to be "a primitive and therefore outmoded form of the institutions we now

encounter in truer form (law, politics, science) in modern life."[7] This type of evolutionary thinking led to the types of arguments we find in Durkheim or Frazer[8], which, while perhaps impressive in their prosaic elegance and neat systematizing, were ultimately harmfully misrepresentative of the peoples and belief systems they set out to investigate. These efforts perpetrated an erroneous picture of human development, which, in retrospect, appears to be little more than colonialist apologia. As the 20th century progressed these evolutionary ideals were largely abandoned in favor of an approach that, from the outset, appeared to be much more egalitarian: rather than viewing religion as an archaic holdover from a much more primitive time, it was understood to be a distinct, innate, and irreducible mode of human practice and belief. Such an approach fuels both phenomenological and comparative methodologies, and is epitomized in the work of Eliade and his notion of homo religiosus.[9] This latter, essentialist, configuration of the category proved to have widespread and lasting appeal, and is a theory of religion still accepted—albeit with various types of critical qualifications—and taught today. Metatheory throws both of these previous understandings into question and strives to conceptualize religion as a discursive rather than metaphysical object. This particular conceptualization of religion can be unsettling for some scholars, as it takes the focus away from traditional fieldwork models and particular traditions—a shift that brings to light a number of important criticisms that have hitherto been obscured. Russel T. McCutcheon addresses this discomfort early on in Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion, and an examination of how he does so sheds light on both his project and his motivations.

In the introduction to Manufacturing Religion, McCutcheon makes reference to the confusion he is often met with when other scholars find out that his project is, as previously outlined, an effort to critically investigate religion as a discursive object manufactured by Western scholars, and not, as they might expect, "aimed at making a substantive contribution to our knowledge about religion in general or about specific religions."[10] Accordingly, he would not categorize his project as "an attempt to develop a theory of religion"[11], as his efforts—inspired by the methodologies of well-known critical theorists such as Terry Eagleton, Edward Said, Fredric Jameson, Michel Foucault, and others—entail the problematization, indeed the overt transgression, of the boundaries of the category as a whole. "But where", McCutcheon reports these confused scholars questioning, "do you get your hands dirty? [...] What has it got to do with religion?" [...] Where

is your hard data? Have you been in the field? Where is your ethnographic evidence?"[12] These types of questions can also be leveled at the other metatheoretical thinkers up for examination, and the way in which their work responds to them—or doesn't—will reveal important considerations for the question at hand, and, by extension, for the future of the discipline as a whole.

McCutcheon's response to such inquires is that he is "getting his hands dirty," just not in the traditional sense. As his concerns are metatheoretical in nature, his material is not particular traditions or particular religious elements—ritual, myth, etc.—but rather: conferences, course syllabi, departmental meetings, and the plethora of scholarly discourse on religion. While some scholars might consider this type of focus unavailing, McCutcheon asserts that the stakes are high: "it is an attempt to demonstrate why religion is what it is for us scholars, what is at stake for keeping religion and its study that way, and what might be gained by changing it."[13] His particular focus, then, lies in examining the place of religious studies in the modern public university. Although the institutional milieu of the modern public university is one of naturalism, religious scholarship has, for the last 100 or so years, tended to conceptualize religion as being sui generis—that is, as a category that is highly unique, essential, and ultimately distinct from all other facets of human life. This traditional conceptualization of religion is thus at odds with naturalist theorizing, and McCutcheon is interested examining how this particular understanding of religion came to be: What are the implications of portraying religion in such a way? What—and whose—interests are represented by such a move? What are the ramifications of challenging such essentialism? McCutcheon knows that the answers to these questions will be unsettling and destabilizing, but he argues that this is inevitable and necessary: the current status quo is untenable.

A common refrain throughout McCutcheon's argument is Eliade's oft-quoted statement, "it is the scale that makes the phenomenon."[14] While Eliade originally intended this statement to stand against reductionism—he is arguing that something essential would be lost if one's scales of analysis failed to respect the irreducible nature of religion an sich—McCutcheon offers an alternative reading:

> *If, contrary to the dominant interpretation, one reads Eliade's assertion as indicating the socially constructed nature of human cognitive categories and experience, then not only the phenomenon one studies (e.g., religion, religious experiences, myths, rituals) but the phenomenon of the study itself (e.g. the science of religion, Religionswissenschaft, [...]) could, to whatever degree, be said to be the result of one's scale, point of view, theory or method* [15]

This alternative reading, then, holds that the theoretical and methodological frameworks one employs play an active role in shaping and legitimizing the phenomenon under study, whether it be a particular datum of study (i.e. myth) or the datum of the study itself (the science of religion). Thus, the theoretical frameworks of phenomenological or comparative approaches—those which, as previously indicated, have dominated the scene for the last 100 or so years—can, and should, be seen to play an active role in the construction, or to use McCutcheon's term, the manufacturing, of sui generis religion. The implications of such a construction are manifold, but McCutcheon's biggest concern is with how presenting religion in such a way acts to champion abstract essences, homogeneity and timelessness over and above historical and sociopolitical concerns—which include, but are not limited to: class, age, gender, geography, etc.[16]

By representing religion as some mysterious, elusive, and irreducible phenomenon, then, scholars have effectively managed to decontextualize and dehistoricize the category as a whole. This, in turn, McCutcheon argues, allows scholars of religion to create a coveted and isolated institutional space for themselves: "by proclaiming themselves as the sole interpreters of this supposedly autonomous aspect of human life, scholars claim for themselves and their methods a similar autonomy from historical flux and conflict."[17] This atmosphere of isolation indicates to McCutcheon that such scholars are working from a position of self-generated authority, and he is interested in revealing how the metatheoretical application of those excluded scales of analysis—the historical and sociopolitical—can undermine this authority and lay bare the problematic issues it obscures. McCutcheon acknowledges that he is certainly not the first to take issue with such essentialism, however he does wish to distinguish himself from those criticizing the antireductionist approach on the grounds that it is "crypto-theology."[18]

Those scholars that do lodge such criticisms—Robert D. Baird, Ninian Smart, Hans Penner and others[19]—McCutcheon argues, are overlooking the fact that such criticisms actually share problematic discursive ground with what they hope to critique:

> *By labeling aspects of the discourse of religion as being in some way essentially theological, critics may in fact perpetuate the division of scholars of religion inasmuch as one group purports to study essentially religious data. In other words, much effort has been expended on critiquing the sui generis claim as if it were an essentially religious claim, but not much energy has been exerted in critiquing it as a sociopolitical claim* [20]

What McCutcheon seems to be arguing here is that such criticisms don't deny sui generis claims per se, they merely criticize the idea that such claims belong in the academy. In other words, they are simply interested in strengthening the division between theology and religious studies, and not in asserting that the idea of sui generis religion is in and of itself a sociopolitical construct, and a problematic one at that. These criticisms thus largely leave the status quo undisturbed: "they do not fully operate on a naturalist, historical scale. Rather, [...] they function to isolate further, and thereby perpetuate the perception of, the essential autonomy of the religious phenomenon."[21] McCutcheon, who identifies himself as being "unapologetically reductionistic,"[22] is thus interested in denying such essentialism altogether, a position with much more serious implications.

By examining the construction of sui generis religion metathoretically through a variety of different scales—intellectual, social, economic, and political—McCutcheon comes to the conclusion that the departmental autonomy of religious studies is inextricably linked to the construction of religion as sui generis. By constructing religion in such a way, scholars have guaranteed themselves access to the intellectual, material and social benefits that accompany departmental autonomy: "secure and tenured university positions, endowed chairs, accessibility to government grants, access to a variety of archives and information, interviews in the popular media, and the general participation in producing and managing cultural capital."[23] The political ramifications of maintaining such essentialism are also significant—as McCutcheon argues, the historical and sociopolitical decontextualization of religion paints religious scholars as being

disinterested, apolitical observers, and the people they set out to study as some homogenized mass of "believing, disembodied minds" [24] Neither portrayal is accurate, and both should be challenged: such historical and sociopolitical bracketing is not only undesirable, is not methodologically sound, for it excludes all other scales of analysis—the sociological, the political, the psychological, the feminist, the economic, etc.—that may challenge its assumptions and offer competing insights.[25]

It is McCutcheon's position, then, that the most effective corrective to this problem is the fostering of "a discursive and institutional environment where naturalist theorizing can take place."[26] This type of environment is necessarily multi-disciplinary, and thus may, McCutcheon warns, "hasten the death of the academic discipline variously known in English as religious studies, history of religions, and comparative religion."[27] Accordingly, McCutcheon does not present the "death" of religious departments as being undesirable or overly problematic, but instead remains optimistic that such a move "might [...] open the way for a cross-disciplinary, de-centered study of this intriguing aspect of human communities"[28]—an approach he feels is occluded by the isolation brought on by sui generis constructions. While McCutcheon's focus thus lies in problematizing the place of sui generis religion in the modern public university, Masuzawa and Asad both hold different points of focus. Although all three can be identified as metatheoretical thinkers and also share a number of common conclusions, a comparison of the nuances in their discussions provides valuable critical insight into the arguments of each.

Like McCutcheon, Masuzawa is not interested in a particularistic study rooted in a specific tradition or concept, nor does she want "to advocate a particular programmatic scheme or a change of course in the way the study of religion is to be done."[29] Although she does not use the term "metatheory" to describe her approach, her focus in The Invention of World Religions—the scholarly discourse on world religions—reveals her project to indeed be metatheoretical in nature. This project sets out to examine shifting trends in religious scholarship, from the traditional projections of universalism—"[where] the world as totality comes to prevail as a direct extension of European Christianity"[30]—to the more current doctrine of pluralism. While the projections of universalism were based on "evolutionary, pseudotemporal, [and/or] hierarchical"[31] theories, the pluralist doctrine—manifested and epitomized in the conceptualization of "world religions"—subscribes "[to] a geographic,

pseudospatial, decentralized order of representation."[32] The assumption here, often made explicit, is that this shift represents a move away from the unabashed and problematic Eurocentricism of universalism to a more egalitarian delineation. Masuzawa is highly critical of this assumption, and a discussion of her chosen method of investigation will reveal why.

Masuzawa's method is one of genealogical analysis. This method, she asserts, reveals the discursive formation of world religions to be "rhizomatic"[33]—a Deluzian term emphasizing, in this context, non-linear development. While the traditional conceptualization of the category "world religions" adheres to a linear, narrative understanding of historical development, a rhizomatic conceptualization follows a non-linear, "piecemeal" understanding of historical development. Thus, through her genealogical historicism—"a matter of being historical differently"[34]—Masuzawa is able to excavate the discursive practices of the nineteenth century (she states in a note that her purview concerns the "long" nineteenth century, 1789-1914) for an alternative history of the conceptual emergence of world religions and its accompanying ramifications. It is her main assertion that by tracking the "transmigration and mutation" of the term, it becomes clear that "certain ideological underpinnings of the older hierarchical discourse did not so much diminish and disappear as become unrecognizable under the new outlook of the pluralist ideology—or supposed democracy—of world religions."[35] To unpack these claims a bit it will first be necessary to relate some of her discussion regarding the history of the term.

According to Masuzawa's genealogy, the emergence of the term "world religions" coincided with the move to secularize Europe. Energizing this move was the ethos the Enlightenment and the bifurcation of knowledge into two domains: "natural science on the one hand, [...] 'arts and letters' on the other."[36] Within this binary the natural sciences were favored over and above what we now call the humanities, and the creation of a third domain of knowledge followed shortly thereafter. This third domain sought to investigate human social phenomena through a model derived from the "well-regarded" natural sciences, and was thus aptly termed "the social sciences."[37] With the creation of the social sciences came the means to articulate new ways of understanding human social existence. Areas of life that had previously been the purview of the Church were now understood through sociological, political, and economic lenses—lenses that reflected the development of Europe into a secular, mature and rational society with little need for supernatural authorities.[38] However, as Masuzawa

explains, when it came to the understanding of non-European societies these categories were seen as insufficient, for "In [...] every region of the nonmodern non-West [...] all aspects of life were supposedly determined and dictated by an archaic metaphysics of the magical and the supernatural."[39] This belief led to the creation of the fields of anthropology and orientalism, fields which regarded religion as a prime means of differentiation and thus acted to further the hierarchization of human beings: while the latter was intended to provide a framework through which to examine the declining civilizations of the East, the former was meant to provide the framework to examine smaller-scale "tribal" societies, those imagined to be even less developed than their oriental counterparts.[40] In this way, Masuzawa explains, nineteenth century intellectuals were able to neatly separate "the West from the Rest."[41]

Once the examination of this othered "rest" gained momentum, it became harder and harder to avoid the conclusion that "just as Christianity had shaped and disciplined the European nations for centuries, in a non-European nation, a world of religion of one kind or another had been functioning as the veritable backbone of its ethos."[42] The creation, explication and categorizaton of world religions, then, aided Christian Europeans in their efforts to work out their identity and place in the strange new world of modernity, a place that had to accommodate the realities of plurality, the pressures of scientific rationality and the discourse of secularism. As Masuzawa explains, the discourse of world religions thus "quickly became an effective means of differentiating, variegating, consolidating, and totalizing a large portion of the social, cultural, and political practices observable among the inhabitants of regions elsewhere in the world."[43] When viewed in such a light, it is hard to defend the claim that the conceptualization of world religions offers shift away from eurocentricism and a move towards egality: these efforts have as their implicit goal the formulation of "the essential identity of the West,"[44] and are dependent on a project of othering that essentializes discrete cultures and traditions while claiming the process is apolitical—as if the category of world religions was a concrete reality just waiting to be discerned and explicated.

So, like McCutcheon, Masuzawa envisions herself "getting her hands dirty" not through fieldwork, but through discourse analysis. Unlike McCutcheon—think of his repeated calls for a shift to exclusively naturalist theorizing—Masuzawa does not offer any prescriptive remarks for the scholar interested in internalizing her criticisms but continuing

on with comparative work. She does not explicitly call for comparative work to come to an end, and does not present her position as the only logical way to conceptualize the category of world religions: she poses questions throughout the work that reveal the conceptual lacunas in narrative historicity, however never seems to directly assert that her method is more advanced or developed than others. Some scholars who argue against linear, narrative accounts of history—and I would here include McCutcheon—seem to imply, rather ironically, that genealogical historicism has supplanted linear, narrative history—as though they still subscribe to the linear narrative which assumes that the most current historical vantage point (genealogical historicism) is somehow the most evolved or truthful. Masuzawa seems to avoid such implications: she maintains that the difference between narrative and genealogical methods is merely a difference in ontology and professional orientation,[45] and seems to want to let the usefulness of her method speak for itself. Now we will turn to Asad, whose specific focus revolves around issues of power.

Like Masuzawa, Asad identifies his project as being genealogical in nature, and like McCutcheon and Masuzawa, he is interested in problematizing essentialist constructions of religion by revealing how the concept is in actuality the historical product of discursive processes. In "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category", one of eight essays contained in Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam, Asad explicitly sets out to demonstrate how genealogical analysis reveals universal definitions of religion to be constructs "developed in response to problems specific to Christian theology at a particular historical juncture."[46] As a means to explicate this argument, he offers a critical reading of the universal definition of religion offered by celebrated anthropologist Clifford Geertz.

In Geertz's universal delineation, religion is "(1) a system of symbols which act to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."[47] Briefly summarized, Asad's critique of this definition is as follows: (1) Geertz's understanding of symbols as "meaning carrying objects external to social conditions and states of the self"[48] is problematic, for it opens up a "logical space for defining the essence of religion"[49] by positioning religious symbols as somehow separate and distinct from the discourses that

legitimate them and invest them with authority. (2) Once it is understood that symbolic meaning is not innate but a product of historically specific legitimizing discourses, it follows that the "moods and motivations" these symbols inspire are also products of this discourse: "it was not the mind that moved spontaneously to religious truth, but power that created the conditions for experiencing that truth."[50] (3) If it is accepted that symbolic meaning and religious dispositions are products of legitimizing discourses (and thus power relations) Geertz's subsequent claim—that the same system of symbols that induces religious dispositions also positions these dispositions in a cosmic framework—proves untenable: on the one hand, historical examples prove that being guided by religious moods and motivations does not necessarily entail the ability or desire to articulate these through a clear-cut understanding of the cosmic framework.[51] On the other, this claim reveals a concern with differentiating the religious from the secular, a concern which reveals the specific Christian history of these types of universal definitions—a history which thus problematizes the universal nature of the claims (4). Once the specific Christian history of universal discourse is exposed, the positioning of "the believing individual" as a universal characteristic of religion becomes suspect: there is no basic, unifying, or universal axiom underlying "the religious perspective"—"it is preeminently the Christian church that has occupied itself with identifying, cultivating, and testing belief as a verbalizable inner condition of true religion."[52] (5) The occlusion of these facts is harmful and misrepresentative: "[it] invites us to separate [religion] conceptually from the domain of power,"[53] and thus blinds us from the implicit imperializing going on in the field.

As this overview of his critique indicates, Asad's main concern with Geertz's definition is the way it turns a historical construct that can be traced back to the discursive practices of a specific group of people—European Christians—into a transcultural, transhistorical essence with universally identifiable characteristics. This process presents religion as a wholly benevolent and apolitical phenomenon, sets it apart from "science, common sense, aesthetics, politics, and so on,"[54] and thus insulates it from charges of irrationality—how could something positioned to only be understood on its own terms be irrational? In Asad's words, "If religion has a distinct perspective (its own truth, as Durkheim would have said) and performs an indispensable function, it does not in essence compete with others and cannot, therefore, be accused of generating false consciousness."[55] Set apart as a unique phenomenon with its own universal truths, problematic power

implications are indeed obscured. In what way, then, can Asad be seen to respond to the "dirty hands" question?

While McCutcheon and Masuzawa clearly indicate that they understand themselves to be "getting their hands dirty" solely through discourse analysis on the category as a whole, Asad is a somewhat different case. Although Asad's main focus is also discourse analysis, he does seem interested in engaging in the particularistic study of certain religions and religious concepts, as his concluding suggestion for "[the] student of particular religions"[56] evidences. As his discussion is coming to a close Asad states, "[they] should therefore begin from this point, in a sense unpacking the comprehensive concept which he or she translates as 'religion' into heterogeneous elements according to its historical character."[57] Interestingly, this is a remark that McCutcheon takes issue with. In a review piece called "The Category 'Religion' in recent publications: A Critical Survey", McCutcheon, while generally supportive of Asad's overall project, does problematize his final parting suggestion:

> *In place of such universal definitions, Asad recommends that students of particular religions should unpack such 'comprehensive concepts' as 'religion' and 'culture' into their heterogeneous and historically specific elements, each of which reflects a variety of power relations in local situations. Although this respect for local details is important, one cannot help but think that Asad's reccomendation lands the researcher in a bit of a problem. For, as important as it is to avoid universal generalizations about religion that ignore local details, it is equally problematic to generalize about 'particular religions.'*[58]

In light of some of his earlier remarks—namely, the suggestion that religion would perhaps best be subsumed into other disciplines—McCutcheon's problem with Asad's support of particularistic studies is telling, and brings to light some of the shortcomings of his own critique.

McCutcheon, while repeatedly making appeals for a shift to naturalist theorizing and scales of analysis, never really gives a clear example of why this necessarily must lead to "the development of decentralized and nondepartmental institutional locals,"[59] or how this development would circumvent many of the concerns he lists—as Masuzawa notes,[60]

categories like sociology and anthropology are also Western constructs with Christian, imperialist underpinnings, and, as Thomas Tweed notes[61] in Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion, all other disciplines in the social sciences have their own set of definitional and methodological problems, many of which overlap with the concerns listed by McCutcheon. There thus seems to be a bit of a divide between these three thinkers with regards to how those scholars interested in "getting their hands dirty" in the traditional sense should proceed: while McCutcheon seems to indicate that such an endeavor should occur outside of the confines of religious departments, and Masuzawa seems content to let her methodology speak for itself—in other words, those interested in utilizing her criticisms within particularistic studies should figure out how to do this on their own—Asad is open to the idea of particularistic studies, but doesn't offer a lot to go on.

While metatheory, then, through the project of problematization, has managed to provide transparency on a number of previously occluded issues, it seems to have stopped just short of providing practical information for the scholar who is interested in "getting their hands dirty" in the traditional sense; who wants to participate in the particularistic study of specific traditions and religious elements. This lacuna seems to position the discipline rather strangely, as either the bastion of some outdated metaphysical mumbo-jumbo, or as a highly problematized discursive object perhaps best subsumed into other disciplines. Where then, does this leave us? Can there be no mediating position between these two extremes? Can one not reject essentialism while still embracing the autonomy of the discipline and the potentiality for meaningful intellectual gains through fieldwork? While some may argue that it is unfair to pose such questions to these thinkers—as, admittedly, such questions transgress the stated boundaries of their investigations—I argue that it is important to consider the question of authorial intent.

Questioning the authority of authorial intent is a characteristic feature of poststructuralism, a body of thought which largely informs the metatheoretical approach. As Jacques Derrida, a highly influential poststructuralist thinker, asserts, "the effects or structure of a text are not reducible to its 'truth,' to the intended meaning of its presumed author"[62] If this claim can be accepted, how, then, can the stated aim of the metatheoretical thinkers up for examination dictate the effects of their work once it has entered into public discourse? Should we not question the

practical application of their insights merely because they state they are not interested in such an endeavor? Isn't it to be reasonably expected that one such effect of their work would be the effort to somehow articulate a middle ground between religion as sui generis and religion as pure discursivity, lest either extreme render the whole enterprise untenable? I will now turn to two scholars—Thomas Tweed and Jonathan Z. Smith—who seem to be attempting to bridge this gap; both vehemently reject essentialism and accept many of the critical insights previously outlined, yet remain optimistic about the category of religion and the potential for fruitful gains through fieldwork therein.

Tweed, in stark contrast to McCutcheon, argues in Crossing and Dwelling that the category of religion should remain intact and that scholars of religion should feel obligated to defend its autonomy. He also, without making claims to universality, doesn't shy away from offering up a definition of religion that he thinks could have wide application, and seems unapologetic for his interest in researching particular religions and religious elements. According to his analysis, religion should be considered sui generis, however "in that weak sense of the term"[63]: as a category that constitutes a discipline that we are justified in defining and theorizing about[64] As he states, "scholars who have been trained to participate in academic conversation have a role-specific obligation to reflect on their work—and the constitutive terms of their discipline."[65] He is not interested in a return to attempts to reify religion as some type of abstract thing or essence with concrete boundaries and universalizing implications, but rather with bringing to light the awareness that all constitutive disciplinary terms are locative and contested—which is to say, the all arose in a particular time and place for a particular purpose and thus most likely don't have cross-cultural equivalencies in all societies—and that "no constitutive disciplinary term is elastic enough to perform all the work that scholars demand of it."[66] Does this mean we should abandon such terms? Tweed's answer is an emphatic no.

His position is that "definitions matter."[67] He considers multiple definitions of religion, identifies their primary tropes—usually in the form of a root metaphor—and then demonstrates, through an analysis of these tropes, how they draw attention to certain points of focus while obscuring others. This interplay between putting into focus and obscuring is important. As previously noted, no definition will successfully be able to hold universal appeal; what this means is that each definition should be taken "as a

placeholder for a specific set of inquires"[68] being undertaken by specific people in particular contexts. When one definition obscures something another takes as focal, the dialogue between the two will give birth to yet another set of orientations and illuminations: "it direct[s] our attention to practices that we might otherwise have missed. It has prompted further conversation, more contestation. It has done its work."[69] In this way, religion and religions can be perceived in terms of movements and relations that occur in time and space. This is why tropes, and metaphor in particular, are exceptionally important: "metaphor is a reciprocal interactive process."[70]

Having demonstrated his acknowledgment of and sensitivity to most of the metatheoretical criticisms just explicated, Tweed goes on to provide his own definition: "Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries."[71] He continues by explaining the thought process behind each of the tropes he uses, in an effort to explicitly demonstrate how these tropes show self-reflexivity and critical awareness, and why they might be useful for researches engaging in a diverse array of pursuits. As previously mentioned, he never tries to universalize his claims, nor does he seem to suggest that his position is above criticism. Mentioning McCutcheon specifically, he notes that the use of a gerund in the title Manufacturing Religion, seems to be a strategic choice to "[avoid] the allure of reification,"[72] a choice that seems odd when one considers that "the rejection of hypostases can itself be reified."[73] This comment seems to highlight the possibility of over problematizing the category: when problematizing the category of religion and presenting it as a discursive object, one must be careful not to reify this presentation as if it was capital-T truth—such a reification seems to contradict the very spirit of self-reflexivity that energizes metatheory by introducing an element of stasis. Tweed's strategy, on the other hand, never seems to loose its dynamism, and positions itself as a mediating approach between those only interested in fieldwork, and those only interested in discourse analysis, demonstrating that there are ways—the plural form is important here—to reject essentialist constructions of the category religion, defend the autonomy of the discipline, and apply metatheoretical criticisms in fieldwork. Jonathan Z. Smith's approach demonstrates yet another way this can be done, and, like Tweed, also favors the use of geographical metaphors.

Within the first four lines of "Map is not Territory"—the title chapter of Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religion—Jonathan Z. Smith reveals that what follows is an exercise in self-reflection.[74] He goes on to state:

> *Without advocating some odd breed of nominalism, the first item this process of introspection yielded was the pattern of conjunctions that follows the listing of my name in the Faculty Directory: Religion and the Human Sciences, Religion and the Humanities, History of Religions. Each of these terms, taken by themselves, are difficult to define and controversial. Joined together, the difficulties are compounded. Yet such a series of pairings is, I trust, not accidental. It is symptomatic of a direction in contemporary scholarship about religion, a direction which my own work seeks to advance and affirm.*[75]

The direction he is discussing is decidedly metatheoretical, and is rooted, he goes onto explain, in a post-Kantian philosophical anthropology according to which, "man is defined as a world-creating being and culture is understood as a symbolic process of world-construction."[76] Two important things should be noted here: 1) he is interested in self-reflexivity and maintains that religion is a thoroughly human phenomenon, something of our making, and 2) he accepts that both religion and the conjunctions that commonly surround it "are difficult to define and controversial," but nevertheless maintains that the difficulty and controversy are worth the trouble—why? According to Smith, these conjunctions act "as boundaries of concreteness over against which to judge [the] more speculative and normative inquiries in religious studies."[77] If the normative inquires in religious studies are speculative, why not, like McCutcheon suggests, do away with "Religion" in "Religion and the Human Sciences", and let these other disciplines deal with the phenomenon? Smith's answer to this revolves around a geographical metaphor.

In line with Tweed, Smith doesn't shy away from the challenge or controversy of defining the term:

> *Religion is the quest, within the bounds of the human, historical condition, for the power to manipulate and negotiate ones 'situation' so as to have 'space' in which to*

> *meaningfully dwell. [...] What we study when we study religion is the variety of attempts to map, construct, and inhabit such positions of power through the use of myths, rituals and experiences of transformation. [...] Other maps will be drawn as the scholar of religion continues his task.*[78]

Reflecting on the constructive quality of all this, the title of the work begins to make sense: to say that "map is not territory" is to acknowledge that the maps we make—whether they be religious maps of the cosmos or scholarly maps theorizing about our own intellectual approach to things—should not be confused with ontological representations of reality. They rather embody human attempts to find orientation, to navigate through the plurality and messiness of historical being, and to assert power, meaning and significance. Consequentially, Smith explains, the categories religious scholars set out to explore are "situational" and "relational", and represent "mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed."[79] This attitude seems to reflect Masuzawa's comment about differing philosophical orientations, a comment I assert does much to prevent—to use Tweed's phrase—the reification of the rejection of hypostases, a reification contradictive to the spirit of metatheory and problematization.

In the remainder of the article Smith goes on to demonstrate how this type of thinking can aid in "getting one's hands dirty" in the traditional sense, and, of equal interest to the present inquiry, how this type of thinking can lead to the conclusion that problematization is not only a vehicle for scholars mapping out religious theory, but also a vehicle for adherents mapping out religious experience itself. Discussing his interest in exploring particular religious categories such as myth, Smith explains how exploring different types of maps can yield new insights into our understanding of these categories and challenge preexisting interpretations. According to Smith, scholars of religion have been most successful in describing and interpreting what he calls "locative maps."[80] These types of maps "guarantee meaning and value through structures of congruity and conformity. [...] They are largely based on documents from urban, agricultural, hierarchal cultures, […] [and] are the production of well organized, self-conscious scribal elites who had a deep vested interest in restricting mobility and valuing place."[81] This means, Smith explains, "[that] in most cases, one cannot escape the suspicion that in the locative map of the world we are encountering a self-serving ideology which ought not to be generalized into the universal pattern of religious experience and expression."[82] Why,

then, do so many religious scholars seem intent on utilizing this particular map of the cosmos to do just that?

Smith's own cartographical task aims to counteract these generalizations by "explor[ing] the dimensions of *incongruity* that exist in religious materials."[83] It is his assertion that the experience of incongruity is a fundamental element of the human condition—as he states, "it is the perception of incongruity that gives rise to thought"[84]—and, furthermore, that generalizations which deny this possibility are problematic. As Smith goes into further detail explaining why this is so, it becomes clear that problematization—which is characterized by the perception that discrepancy and discord can act beneficially by giving rise to thought—can be seen as a fundamental part of religious experience itself.

Smith's main issue with the universalist theories derived from locative maps is largely in line with the criticisms made by Masuzawa: universalist theories of religion, be they 19th or 20th century formulations, actively strive to bifurcate the West from the Rest and paint this "Rest" as some exoticized Other. As Smith states, "the moral of this [...] is obvious. The West is active, it makes history, it is visible, it is human. The non-Western world is static, it undergoes history, it is invisible, it is non-human."[85] And, indeed, what is human about portrayals of other cultures that assume "experience plays no role in challenging belief [...] [that] discrepancy doesn't give rise to thought but is thought away."[86] According to Smith, when one discards the generalizations put forth by universalist understandings of religion and instead constructs a map acknowledging incongruity, it becomes apparent that "symbolism, myth, ritual, repetition, [and] transcendence [...] play [...] between the incongruities to provide an occasion for thought."[87] Incongruity, then—a sense of defamiliarization—can be seen to energize both religious understandings of existence and scholarly attempts to map these understandings out. Like Tweed, Smith is not interested in universalizing his claims, and states that the maps he has just explicated "are not to be identified with any particular culture at any particular time. They remain coeval possibilities which may be appropriated whenever and wherever they correspond to man's experience of the world. Other maps of religion will be drawn as the scholar of religion continues his task."[88] What he is interested in is the particularized study of certain religious elements, and he is able to demonstrate how his conceptualization of religion—decidedly metatheoretical—can produce valuable insights that can be applied directly to the particularized study of his interest. I would

now like to return to the question framing this discussion: Is all of this adequate to the discipline?

In my final analysis I would like to assert that metatheory—and the problematizations that energize it—has, on the whole, been of great value to the discipline of religious studies. It has allowed us to critically reflect on how the field has been implicated in the problematic imperalization of other cultures. It has drawn attention to issues of power, and demonstrated how method and theory can either exacerbate uneven power relations or assuage them. It has fostered a view of religion that accepts plurality and diversity—befitting contemporary sentiments—and shown that truth itself is plural and diverse. While some metatheorists, like McCutcheon and Masuzawa, seem content to leave it at that—to expose these important insights and let others do with them what they will—others, like Asad, Tweed and J.Z. Smith, have taken on the challenge of trying to apply these insights to practical application. To return to Smith's metaphor, while McCutcheon and Masuzawa seem largely content in exposing the idea that "map is not territory", Tweed and Smith—Asad too, but perhaps more abstractly—want to take things one step further and emphasize that, "map is not territory—but maps are all we possess."[89] Both approaches to metatheory are valid, but I believe the latter to be more reflective of what studying religion is really all about. To end with some words from Smith: "the work of the professional scholar of religions does not consist primarily of reading our colleagues works but in reading texts, in questioning, challenging, interpreting and valuing the tales men tell *and* the tales others have told about them."[90]

Notes

* This paper was formulated in ongoing conversation with Dr. Marc P. Lalonde, Senior Lecturer at Concordia University, and inspired by the materials that make up the graduate course Reli. 609 "Theories of Religion."

1. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007).
2. Michel Foucault, "Polemics, Politics and Problematizations" in *The Essential Foucault*, ed. Paul Rainbow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003), 24.
3. Ibid., 23.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 24.
6. Thomas Flynn, "Foucault's Mapping of History" in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault,* ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 43.
7. Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category" in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27.
8. See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen and Unwin LTD., 1915). Or, Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (London: Macmillian & Co., 1890).
9. See Mircea Eliade "Human Existence and Sanctified Life" in *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (San Diego: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1959).
10. Russel T. McCutcheon, "The Manufacture of 'Religion'" in *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostaligia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 6.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 7.
14. Ibid., 7.
15. Ibid., 8
16. Ibid., 13.
17. Ibid., 13.
18. Ibid., 16.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 17.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 21.
24. Ibid., 13.
25. Ibid., 13.
26. Ibid., 6.
27. Ibid., 21.
28. Ibid.
29. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 10.
30. Ibid., 13.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 11.
34. Ibid., 21.
35. Ibid., 33.
36. Ibid., 14.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 15.
39. Ibid., 16.
40. Ibid., 15.
41. Ibid., 2.
42. Ibid., 18.
43. Ibid., 20.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., 31.
46. Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category" in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 42.
47. Ibid., 29-30.
48. Ibid., 32.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid., 35.
51. Ibid., 36.
52. Ibid., 48.
53. Ibid., 29.
54. Ibid., 50.
55. Ibid., 50-51.
56. Ibid., 54.
57. Ibid.
58. Russel McCutcheon, "The Category 'Religion' in Recent Publications: A Critical Survey," *Numen* 42, no. 3(1995): 289.
59. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 21.
60. Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, 15.
61. Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 38.
62. Jacques Derrida, "Octobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name" in *The Ear of the Other*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 29.
63. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 60.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid., 30-31.
66. Ibid., 39.
67. Ibid., 42.
68. Ibid., 36.
69. Ibid., 41.
70. Ibid., 48.
71. Ibid., 54 (emphasis his).
72. Ibid., 78.
73. Ibid.
74. Jonathan Z. Smith "Map is Not Territory" in *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the His-*

tory of Religion (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), 289.

75. Ibid., emphasis mine.
76. Ibid., 290.
77. Ibid., 289.
78. Ibid., 291, 309.
79. Ibid., 291.
80. Ibid., 292.
81. Ibid., 292-3
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid., 293 (emphasis mine).
84. Ibid., 294
85. Ibid., 295.
86. Ibid., 297.
87. Ibid., 309.
88. Ibid.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid., 298 (emphasis mine).

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