Can a Critic Be a Caretaker too? Religion, Conflict, and Conflict Transformation

Atalia Omer*

This article argues that Russell McCutcheon’s notion of the religion scholar as a critic is crucial for envisioning a distinct relevance to the academic study of religion in multidisciplinary conversations concerning questions of religion and conflict. However, McCutcheon’s critical approach is insufficient for thinking about transforming conflicts and underlying structures of injustice. To actively conceptualize processes of conflict transformation, the religion scholar needs to assume the role of a caretaker and a critic and thus overcome McCutcheon’s binary construal of these two approaches. The religion scholar as a critic and a caretaker may offer not only a second-order re-description of religion as a social construct but also a problem-oriented constructive engagement with histories, memories, and theological resources. The cultivation of a uniquely religious studies approach would depend on the ability of the religion scholar to become such a "critical caretaker."

WILL A RELIGION SCHOLAR with training in religious studies be contacted to offer an analysis the next time religion captures the headlines? The academic study of religion has struggled to attain such public relevance. I suggest that a context-specific focus on conflict analysis and

*Atalia Omer, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame, 100 Hesburgh Center, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA. Email: aomer1@nd.edu.

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peacebuilding can provide an entry point for such relevance and applicability. One place to start is to look into the long tradition of self-reflective critique of the study of religion and see where religious studies can offer resources to refine the kind of analyses of religion one finds these days in the works of political scientists and other recent interlocutors who wish to take religion seriously. Conceptualizing a distinctly religious studies approach, this article builds on but also challenges theorist of religion Russell McCutcheon’s now famous call, in his Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion (2001), for re-descriptive scholarship that distinguishes critically between *emic* folk categories and *etic* scholarly accounts and subsequently understands the role of the scholar of religion as a public intellectual and cultural critic.

Stressing the task of historicizing and re-describing “religion,” McCutcheon argues that scholarship in religion has defaulted on its critical task and rendered itself as publically irrelevant because of a deep-seated metaphysical reductionism—“the longstanding but misguided assumption that studying religion provides deep, essential, absolute, or otherworldly insights into the very nature of things” (2001: 129). This, accordingly, led many scholars to become uncritical caretakers of traditions (“translators” or “color commentators”) by presupposing “their datum and their work to have self-evident authority, relevance, and value” (ibid: 130). The problem with McCutcheon’s approach is that it blocks the possibility of thinking constructively about alternative modes of socializing that both redress past injustices and ask how religion and theology as well as other cultural resources may fit into the refashioning of national boundaries (especially where “religion”-qua-“ethnicity” or “culture” explicitly delimits the thresholds of inclusiveness).

Hence, McCutcheon’s critical approach is insufficient for thinking about transforming conflicts and underlying structures of injustice. It identifies pathologies, but does very little to help us rethink narratives and relational patterns. Focusing on the case of Israel as a primary example, I show that to analyze and conceptualize processes of conflict transformation, the religion scholar needs to assume the role of a caretaker and a critic. This ability simultaneously to deploy methodologies and analytic tools that historicize, deconstruct, and denaturalize perceptions of identity and collectivity, and to draw on substantial knowledge of religion in different historical, political, and social contexts, may be the unique contribution of religious studies.

The word “denaturalize” is crucial. It denotes a process whereby one’s basic assumptions about one’s history, destiny, and attributes are re-assessed. In the context of renegotiating a group’s identity, this mode of analysis involves revisiting the group’s defining narratives, symbols,
and memories, identifying how they came to represent the group and to show how they are not natural and axiomatic.

Before proceeding, I offer some clarifications. The term “peacebuilding” is an umbrella concept encompassing the work on questions of conflict prevention, conflict management, conflict resolution and transformation, and postconflict reconciliation. The Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies defines “Peacebuilding,” therefore, as a multidimensional effort “to resolve injustice in nonviolent ways and to transform the structural conditions that generate deadly conflict” (2008). Peacebuilding is a long-term approach that “becomes strategic” when it works horizontally and vertically with grassroots and local organizations as well as with transnational forces and international bodies such as the U.N. The intention is “not only to resolve conflicts, but to build societies, institutions, policies, and relationships that are better able to sustain peace and justice” (2008).¹

In further developing this concept of “strategic peacebuilding”, John Paul Lederach and Scott Appleby highlight the multidisciplinarity of peacebuilding (2010). These authors view peacebuilding as a comprehensive lens for imagining processes of change and the transformation of conflict. This comprehensive outlook highlights the interdependency and connectedness needed for developing sustainable relationships. Peace is more than the cessation of violence (“negative peace”); it is also the cultivation of productive relationships and social justice (“positive peace”). In the parlors of peace studies, sometime the always contextually contested concept of justpeace is used to capture the meanings of peace with justice—peace processes that aim not only at the elimination of direct forms of violence but also at the long-term elimination of structural violence.² Hence, the study and practice of peacebuilding has moved beyond the purview of security studies, arms control, political science, and international law to include also the humanities and the social sciences. The study of religion, however, has not been a systematic participant in those multidisciplinary spaces of engagement.

This article highlights the potential contribution of the field of religious studies to peace research, and a growing industry of religion experts in the social sciences, especially in political science and international

¹For a review of the concept of “Strategic Peacebuilding,” see also Lisa Schirch (2008: 1) and Philpott and Powers (2010).
²See Lederach and Appleby (2010). Lederach and Appleby define this orienting concept of justpeace in the following way: justpeace is “a dynamic state of affairs in which the reduction and management of violence and the achievement of social and economic justice are undertaken as mutual, reinforcing dimensions of constructive change” (2010: 23). See also, Lederach (1999).
relations scholarship. At the very least, it is important for the academic study of religion to develop some fluency with the works of the new religion experts.\(^3\) It would be odd if religious studies did not participate in analyzing on a case-by-case basis how religion may be related to questions concerning the causes, patterns, and transformations of conflict. McCutcheon’s notion of the religion scholar as a critic and public intellectual is indeed crucial (albeit insufficient) for envisioning a distinct relevance to the academic study of religion as an important participant in conversations concerning questions of religion and conflict—an area that seems of obvious importance yet is little covered in the various venues of the American Academy of Religion, including the JAAR. The inquiry about religion and national formation and reformation has subsumed primarily under the political scientific study of nationalism.\(^4\)

A current of scholarship in religious studies that does engage with the publicity of religion and religion’s relevance to public debates is associated with the works of José Casanova, Ronald Thiemann, Jeffrey Stout, and Nicholas Wolterstorff among other thinkers. While insightful in explicating modes of interface between the political and the religious/cultural and in revising secularist paradigms, they are thoroughly and self-consciously embedded in Christian and mostly North-American contexts and traditions of political liberalism and (liberal) multicultural interpretations of citizenship. Consequently, the challenge persists: how a focus on a rich tradition of democratic practices and conversations concerning the publicity of religion can be extended beyond the particularities of contexts defined by liberal and civic conceptions of membership (even if the Christian undertones are not diminished), and whether such an extension could offer a framework for thinking about conflict transformation in zones of ethnoreligious national conflicts. How can conversations about democratic practices and virtues that allow explicit religious reasoning unfold in other contexts that do not view the “religious” and “national” as differentiable facets of one’s identity? And how might religious reasoning challenge and perhaps denaturalize axiomatic conceptions of identity, thereby potentially transforming religio- and ethnocentric interpretations of nationhood and moral justifications for engaging in war and other forms of systemic aggression? A study of the political agenda of Serb nationalism, Hindutva in India, Sinhala Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Zionism, to cite only a few examples, attests to this point: any attempt to

\(^3\) For examples of such works, see (Fox 2007), (Toft 2007), and (Norris and Inglehart 2004).
\(^4\) See Marx (2003) and Smith (2003a, 2003b), with only a few scholars working explicitly from within religious studies or theology. See, for example, Little (1995), Sells (1996), Hastings (1997), Tambiah (1992), and Juergensmeyer (2003, 2008).
think about justice in those situations will involve exposing and reimagining the connections between “religion” and “nationality” (Omer 2008).

In this article, first, I use McCutcheon’s work as a lens to analyze dominant approaches to questions of religion and conflict both from the disciplinary perspectives of political science and religious studies. Secondly, the works of several theorists of religion, conflict, and peacebuilding are assessed. Their constructive and comparative approach overcomes some of the critique of the study of religion articulated in McCutcheon’s thesis because of how a clear normative orientation and a nonreductive view of religion enable them to offer both a critique of political ideologies as well as resources for rethinking exclusivist political frameworks. Subsequently, I discuss why a systemic critique of reigning discourses and national historiographies does not need to preclude the phenomenological study of religion.

**UNCRITICAL CARETAKERS?**

The task of deconstructing perceptions of identity but also imagining alternative conceptions of membership suggests a role for the scholar of religion in conflict analysis and strategic peacebuilding processes. Because of religious studies’ self-critical fluency in postcolonial and postmodern frameworks as well as its fluency in the theological, historical, and cultural resources of ethical and religious traditions, the discipline can contribute expertise not readily accessible to political scientists. Political theorists such as Daniel Philpott and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd have begun to offer important correctives to conventional reductive or instrumentalist analyses of religion in the social sciences.⁵ Their works theorize religion either in an attempt to enrich and challenge secularist frameworks of analysis that delimit the explanation of the so-called resurgence of religion, or in an effort to incorporate thick theological reflections as integral to processes of transitional justice and societal reconciliation. In what follows, I address their respective arguments and then put them in conversation with McCutcheon’s view on the study of religion.

**Political Science and the Study of Religion and Conflict**

Philpott’s work⁶ integrates theology onto theorizing the politics of post-conflict reconciliation processes. He focuses on the potential role

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⁵For examples of the reductive and instrumentalist genres, see Collier (2001), Huntington (1993: 22–49), and Laitin and Fearon (2003: 75–90). See also Gurr (2000) and Norris and Inglehart (2004).

⁶In many respects, Daniel Philpott’s groundbreaking book [see Philpott (2001)] pioneered the genre of religion-sensitive scholarship in political science. Philpott attributes the emergence and
of religion in addressing post-conflict concerns with forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation by asking whether the idea of reconciliation grounded most explicitly in particular biblical traditions is consistent with the principles of the liberal political framework. Theologians, religious leaders, and religiously attuned peace practitioners have long highlighted the potential role of theological resources for conflict transformation and post-atrocities reconciliation processes. What distinguishes Philpott’s scholarship is his attempt to draw on theology in order to enrich the conceptual boundaries of political theory. He concludes first by underscoring the limitations of liberal political theory to accommodate conceptions of reconciliation. He contends that as a product of the Enlightenment and Deist orientations, liberalism leaves little room for the relevance of the tradition of divine restoration (2006). Secondly, Philpott argues for the possibility to enrich and expand the vista of liberalism to substantially confront the imperative for political reconciliation in post-conflict settings. This kind of engagement, he argues, would necessitate moving beyond liberal concepts such as rights, freedom, equality, utility, and retributive justice and drawing explicitly on comprehensive conceptions of justice as primarily concerned with “restoration of wounded individuals and relationships.” While such comprehensive conceptions of justice as restoration are not readily available in political liberalism, Philpott highlights their availability (though he does not exclude a priori the possibility of nontheological accounts) in the theological traditions of what he calls the “Abrahamic faiths” and especially Christianity.

Philpott analyzes the explicit invocation of theologically laden languages in extraordinary moments when societies try to deal with “past evil” as a form of renegotiating the premises of liberal politics and its presuppositions about correct secular practice. In responding to the eventual global spread of the Westphalian arrangement and the international system of nation-states to fundamental revolutions in ideas concerning legitimate political authority. Specifically, he identifies the Protestant Reformation as key to understanding the end of Christendom and the emergence of European nation-states. In a second wave, notions of equality and the impulses of colonial nationalism brought about the demise of colonial empires and the complete globalization of the Westphalian logic. Following Philpott’s insightful thesis concerning the global expansion (or exportation) of Protestant interpretations of the relationship between the religious and the political, it is important to devote some space for considering, with some detail, leading works in international relations and political science that question the premises of conventional methods for analyzing religion in international affairs. This current of scholarship is already in conversation with religious studies.

For further engagement of liberal theorists with the questions posed by “reconciliation” and “forgiveness,” see Rotberg and Thompson (2000).

liberal critique of the role of religion in the TRC in South Africa that grounded itself in a Rawlsian notion of “public reason,” Philpott cites the inevitability of spontaneous prayers and thick and unapologetic religious (Christian) language of forgiveness for the smooth fruition of the reconciliation processes (2006). Elsewhere, Philpott further underscores the relevance of explicating how religion relates to the analysis of transitional justice (Philpott, 2009b). According to Philpott’s findings, religion is most efficacious in the processes of transitional justice when institutionally autonomous and when espousing a political theology of reconciliation (Philpott, 2009b: 206).9 These conclusions support a particular understanding of religion as occupying (optimally) a distinct social and institutional sphere (church). While citing a few empirical cases of religious reconciliatory efforts outside of Christian contexts, Philpott himself wonders about the transferability and/or availability of the traditions of reconciliation and forgiveness in non-Christian milieus. Citing works by scholars like Abdulaziz Sachedina’s The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism (2001), he concludes that equivalencies could be located or retrieved in an effort to conceptualize a theory of political reconciliation. However, as I illustrate, Philpott’s approach presupposes an independent sphere to religion as an ahistoric reality (to be distinguished from his empirical study of historical and institutional variations or “manifestations” of religion.10 The presumption undergirding this orientation has been debunked by a long tradition of critical scholarship in the academic study of religion.

Still, Philpott’s focus on theology is noteworthy because seldom would political scientists engage and converse with theological texts and traditions in an effort to challenge and embolden political paradigms. In developing his approach for expanding the liberal account of political reconciliation, Philpott’s interlocutors are primarily Christian theologians such as Donald Shriver, Desmond Tutu, Miroslav Volf, and Nigel Biggar (among others), who argue for integrating the motifs of reconciliation and forgiveness onto political processes of rebuilding and healing. His work also resonates with the above mentioned primarily U.S.-based “religion and public life” debate that contain conversations about the modes in which religion can enter and/or participate in

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9 Often, Philpott stresses, religious communities and leaders are deeply involved with conducting truth commissions as well as in healing and recovery on the level of civil society. However, religious communities may play a very different or perhaps diminished role in contexts where their complicity with atrocious regimes is uncontestable. In general, religion is most positively associated with post-conflict truth recovery and less significantly with punitive justice.

10 For example, see Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shah, 2011.
public discourses (Thiemann 1996; Wolterstorff and Audi 1996; Stout 2003; MacIntyre 2007 [1981]; Wolterstorff 2007). Although Philpott’s work challenges the reigning paradigms of political science and especially their suspicion of religion (or theology more explicitly) born out of the particular discursive formation of liberalism and the Westphalian framework and its Protestant notions of the supposed proper place of religiosity, he essentially accepts liberalism albeit expanded to include the legitimacy of religious vocabularies in public life and discourse as a preferred political framework.

Like Philpott’s analysis of the role of religion in imagining processes of political reconciliation, Hurd’s account challenges conventional modes of analyzing religion in the social sciences. Her The Politics of Secularism in International Relations significantly enriches international relations theory by recognizing and challenging the secularist and modernist legacy inherent in the construction of the categories of the “religious” and the “secular” as deployed by international relations theory.11 Drawing on familiar conversations in religious studies, especially the work of Talal Asad, William Connolly, Charles Taylor, and other critics of the conventional paradigm of secularism, Hurd’s work exemplifies an attempt to reflect critically on how secularist ontologies and epistemologies have constrained the analytic compass of international relations theory. She argues that theorizing in international relations has been beholden to two trajectories, which she calls “Laicism” and “Judeo-Christian secularism.” The underlying assumption of religion as irrelevant and privatized in the case of Laicism and the integration and naturalization of Judeo-Christian assumptions onto the very fabric of the modern nation-state has limited the capacity of international relations theory to interpret phenomena such as religious resurgence and political Islam. She insists that we must challenge the secularist presuppositions in order to reframe and revisit the analyses of these phenomena. Instead of explaining resurgent religion and political Islam as transgressive forces inherently foreign to Judeo-Christian and Laicist conceptions of the secular, as may be suggested by titles like The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State (Juergensmeyer 1993), they should be explained as attempts to renegotiate the boundaries and definitions of multidirectional and multifaceted theo-political landscapes. The failure of theories of international

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11To this extent, her work can be traced to the highly self-reflexive work of the political theorist Roxanne Euben (1999). The latter underscores the importance of analyzing the thought of Sayid Qutb on his own terms rather than as merely reactive to modernist–secularist western modes of being.
relations to recognize the socially constructed and fluid nature of the categories of the “secular” and the “religious” as well as the multiple forms secularism has assumed in different contexts, Hurd argues, has significantly constrained the ability to analyze and formulate responses to the manifestations of religion in international affairs. Instead, Hurd suggests deconstructing the premises of the field of international relations in order to introduce different kinds of research questions, such as why and how the boundaries of the secular are refashioned in particular contexts.

Hurd’s focus on multiple secularisms and on contesting and parochializing the hold of procrustean secularist narratives and presuppositions on the analytic vista of international relations theory is indeed important. It resonates with José Casanova’s recent proposal to undergo a study of secularism in global comparative perspective. Thinkers such as Hurd and Casanova illuminate the critical role of the analyst in exposing the role of power in constructing “religion” and “secularity.” The greatest contribution of Hurd’s work lies in her focus on how secularist presuppositions have influenced practices, attitudes, and theory in international relations and in her interrogation of discourses (like Orientalism) undergirding those premises. On this basis, she ultimately contends that thinking beyond and exposing the forces underlying the two dominant secularist narratives are needed in order to explain the role of religion in international affairs and especially the phenomena of political Islam and religious resurgence. This is the primary intention of Hurd. Secondly, her view of religious resurgence as a form of renegotiating the precise nature of the relation between religion and politics on a case-by-case basis opens the way for the contextual and thick study of religion as it relates to political structures, inter- and intra-group conflicts, histories, and memories. But this undertaking may include both a historically localized ethnographic focus and a comprehensive command of trans-historical resources of religious traditions; and these requirements may push beyond the expertise of the political scientist.

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12 Casanova (2008) takes into account some of the biases (noted by Talal Asad) inherent in his earlier work [for this exchange, see for example, Casanova (1994), Asad (2003), and Hirschkind and Scott (2006)], namely its western-centrism and its confinement of “public religion” within the bounds of “civil society” and finally its focus on church-state-civil society relations—a focus that both overlooked the transnational dimensions of religious communities and accepted the Westphalian paradigm as axiomatic.
Not Mere “Color-commentators”

While Hurd’s approach to the study of religion is highly historical and contextualized, Philpott wishes to isolate the “religious” or the theological as a distinct ahistorical or trans-historical category that may best enable processes of political reconciliation when it is institutionally autonomous. For Philpott, “religions are not first and foremost concerned with or defined by what political orders do or look like, that is, their principles of legitimacy, structure, policies, or pursuits. Rather, they are communities of belief and practice oriented around claims about the ultimate ground of existence” (Philpott, 2009a: 192). This quote stands in striking contrast to “only” which was McCutcheon’s response to the question whether religion was also or only social, biological, political, economic, and so on (2001: x). Philpott’s definition of religion as entailing an orientation toward the ultimate locates his account within the familiar longstanding tradition of scholarship on religion, traceable to Friedrich Schleiermacher and the interpretation of religion as sui generis in the works of Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, and Paul Tillich, to name a few notable examples. This current of scholarship frames religion as a private affair and as an essentially “unexplainable and irreducible element of human consciousness.” This perception of religion as sui generis secures a notion of religion as “somehow pure, internal, intentional, creative, socially autonomous, and efficacious and can therefore only be studied through its various secondary, symbolic manifestations” (McCutcheon 2001: 5).

McCutcheon criticizes this phenomenological approach as amounting to mere description, translation, or color-coding. Therefore, phenomenology, McCutcheon argues, casts the scholar of religion as an uncritical caretaker of religion. The approach to the study of religion as the study of sui generis and free-floating phenomenon may also implicate the scholar of religion in the very dynamics of power underlying insiders’ conceptions of religion, culture, and identity. Instead of analyzing why certain interpretations of culture emerge, McCutcheon argues, scholars of religion-qua-translators have “opted for the highly conservative practice of entrenching ideologies and rhetorics” (133). As noted, for scholarship in religious studies to have any kind of public relevance, it would need to focus on “critiquing the strategies by which communities decontextualize and marginalize, mythify and deify one side in what is more than likely a complex situation” (134). Thus, the religion scholar as “critical rhetor” (to use McCutcheon’s own terminology) is not invested with the art of translating but rather in challenging dominant normative discourses. Hence, the intellectual task is to denaturalize
and recognize the socially constructed nature of such things as society, text, nation, ethnicity, tradition, intuition, gender, myth, or even religion as well as the history of power and domination behind such constructs (140). Therefore, McCutcheon concludes: “Our role is not to act as caretakers for religion . . . but rather our role is unfailingly to probe beneath the rhetorical window dressings that authorize conceptual and social constructions of our own making” (141).

Philpott’s account of religion mirrors some of the conceptual problems McCutcheon identifies in the phenomenological and hermeneutical study of religion. Philpott’s treatment of religion is vulnerable to the critique of the scholar as a “caretaker” of religion who provides mere translations of religion as a sui generis phenomenon, distinct from the realms of history, politics, and social exchange. Indeed, in accordance with his working definition of religion, Philpott stresses an imperative for political science to analyze religion as a distinct variable (2009a:193). In so doing, he overlooks what Hurd’s analysis illuminates—her insistence on denaturalizing the axiomatic status of the central narratives of secularism, an analytic move that exposes how power dynamics and dominant narratives influence the analysis of (“resurgent”) religion as a subversive force in global politics.

In contrast, Philpott depicts an unproblematized interpretation of religion and theology that does not only conform to and privilege liberal definitions of religion (that are wholly consistent with the phenomenological tradition) but also lacks the same kind of self-reflexivity we find in Hurd’s. Hence, considering Hurd’s conscious redescribing of “religion” as it relates to power and epistemologies about the political, it seems that her scholarship conforms to McCutcheon’s notion of the correct way of doing scholarship in religion. Does it mean then that the work of religious studies can be subsumed under political science departments? Before returning to this question, we must make a brief detour to discuss dominant paradigms in how the field of religious studies has generally approached the study of religion and violence.

Religious Studies and the Study of Religion and Conflict

As observed poignantly by William Cavanaugh (2007, 2009), whether focusing on the ritualistic (and theatrical) patterns of contemporary religious violence or on the reactionary force and ideology of a so-called religious rebellion (Juergensmeyer 1993, 2003; Lincoln 2003), the academic study of religion’s treatment of the role of religion in conflict does not only reinforce the secularist narrative concerning the displacement of religion from its former central location
as the organizing principle of society but also insinuates a form of a Girardian functionalism.\textsuperscript{13} Perhaps, the most mainstream and audible religious studies approach to the question of religion and conflict is associated with the work of Mark Juergensmeyer. Juergensmeyer explains that religion serves as a vehicle and language of protest and rebellion against the structures of the secular state. In his \textit{Terror in the Mind of God} (2003), he discusses how religiously vindicated political violence often betrays a conception of a “cosmic war” where political battles symbolically transform to represent contemporary manifestations of cosmic mythic struggles between good and evil. This process of ritualized performative violence offers a clear perception of cosmic order that transcends the sense of disorder or displacement introduced by the imposition of the institution of the modern secular nation-state. To this degree, Juergensmeyer’s account of religious violence is indeed thoroughly Girardian because he views it as motivated essentially by the desire to restore and maintain a sense of social order.

In many respects, McCutcheon’s own \textit{Religion and the Domestication of Dissent} (2005) also echoes the Girardian analysis of religion as mechanisms deployed for neutralizing and domesticating dissent and ensuring the relatively peaceful cultivation of the \textit{status quo}. As noted, McCutcheon resists depictions of religion as an ahistorical and disembodied phenomenon relegated to the “private” sphere of individual conscience and practice. McCutcheon argues that the rhetorical construal of religion as “private” and as \textit{sui generis} facilitates the domestication of dissent by outlining difference as a private matter with no real consequences to political and social discourses. This rhetorical distinction between public and private is indeed central to the operation of the liberal secular state because it allows for the assimilation (and neutralization) of those who are different as long as they frame their difference in terms of private affair and interiority. If they violate this conceptual boundary between private and public and become “political,” they are perceived as transgressing the very fabric of modernity and progress (62–63). This perception (as Hurd likewise underscores) most closely resonates with conventional interpretations of political Islam\textsuperscript{14} as aberration, reactionary force and threat to the principles undergirding modern

\textsuperscript{13}See for expositions and critiques of Girard’s theory of religion and violence: Segal (2007, 2008).

\textsuperscript{14}See, for example, Huntington (1993), Toft (2007: 97–131), and Juergensmeyer (2003, 2008).
western liberal democracies. This current of scholarship then presupposes the validity of secularist historiography concerning the displacement of religion from public/political life. This presupposition undergirds an understanding of the modern “nation” as either neutral with respect to religion or—in a Durkheimian fashion—as a surrogate religion. When analyzing the role of religion in ethnoreligious national conflicts, one would need to supplement this line of research with some insights already available in the study of nationalism (Anderson 1991; Hasting 1997; Marx 2003; Smith 2003).

As a sub-genre within political science, the theoretical study of nationalism offers a variety of apparatuses for thinking about the role of religion in the emergence of modern nationalisms. For instance, Benedict Anderson famously argued that the nation is an imagined community and that it was imagined not ex nihilo (as Ernest Gellner before him had it (1983)) but out of its cultural and religious building blocks. Of course, postcolonial critics would later push for a power analysis asking whose imagination determined the thresholds of belonging to the “nation” (Chatterjee 1996). Looking at the cases of Spain, France, and England, Anthony Marx discusses how the intentional exclusion of a “domestic other” (an ethnoreligious group) was central to the consolidation of states in premodern Europe. Focusing on nationalism as a form of heterodox religion, another theorist of nationalism, Anthony Smith, discusses the continuous and undiminished religious dimensions of nationalisms—both in terms of nationalism’s selective retrieval of religious and cultural memories and symbolisms and in terms of national rituals, sacred spaces (such as battlegrounds, war memorials, and national museums), and sacred histories (whether they involve the appropriation of religious resources like the Tanach in the case of Zionism, or the sacralization of memories as in the appropriation of the martyrdom of Prince Lazar in the construction of the ideology of Christo-Slavism in Serbia.

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15Cavanaugh (2007, 2009) refers to the topic of “religious violence as a myth and renders the framing of the issue as a rhetorical move that enables the cultivation of western superiority and a further bifurcation of ‘us’ versus ‘them’,” continuously perpetuating acts of aggression under the pretense of humanitarianism.

16What became a worthy topic of exploration in the study of religion (as in political science) is precisely where religious behavior seemed to violate the boundaries of the “public” and “de-privatize” as José Casanova famously characterized the so-called resurgence of religion (1994). For instance, Bruce Lincoln’s analysis of religious violence shows adherence to the truism of modernist historiography concerning the displacement of religion [see Lincoln 2005: 8–10; 2003]. Consequently, the eruption of religion to the scene needs to be analyzed in relation to this basic narrative.
under Milosevic). The nationalism literature overlaps to a certain degree with scholarly studies of civil religion but without much interface between the two areas of research. The nationalism literature then illuminates that the modes in which religion relates to the imagining of national identity is neither predetermined nor inevitable. It also suggests that if certain interpretations of religion-qua-ethnicity or nationality were so influential in imagining a group identity and cohering national boundaries, then religion may also be relevant for deconstructing and reimagining such identities. This approach is especially pertinent where it is clear that the thresholds of membership in the nation are exclusively ethno- and religio-centric, even if such chauvinistic conceptions of citizenship do not necessarily translate onto theocratic agenda.

The question that remains after this brief survey of approaches to the study of religion and conflict/violence is still how a distinctly religious studies approach may contribute to Hurd’s scrutiny of the “politics of secularism” and Philpott’s appeal for an explicit integration of theology to public debates, especially in extraordinary moments of healing and reconciliation. It is certainly not clear how Juergensmeyer’s account of religious nationalism as a reaction against the doctrine of secular nationalism could sustain Hurd’s discursive critique of the “secular.” Nor—despite the works of some theologians (Volf 1996; Schreiter 1998; Gruchy 2003)—is it apparent whether the academic study of religion has found it worthy to focus on how religion may relate to processes of post-conflict healing as in Philpott’s suggestion without falling into the kumbaya syndrome that frequently inflicts efforts to think about the role of religion in peacebuilding—efforts that often take shape in common prayers and interfaith dialogues. The future public relevance of religious studies would depend on whether it develops a research trajectory that responds to these challenges. The next section discusses how the constructivist approach, because of its strong orientation to questions of peace and justice and its comparative focus, addresses these challenges and where further challenges arise.

THE CONSTRUCTIVE APPROACH

The "So What?" Question and the Study of Religion, Conflict, and Peace

Comparative analysts such as David Little have long focused on the human rights framework as a pivotal factor in both the analysis of unjust political and social contexts and in redressing such predicaments. This
orientation underlies Little’s work with Scott Appleby on religious peacebuilding and suggests his approach particularly conducive to global and comparative questions of conflict transformation and peacebuilding. Both Appleby and Little advance a constructive approach to the role of religion in peacebuilding. They underscore the irreducibility of religion to nation, despite frequent rhetorical arguments of nationalists to the contrary (2004). This irreducibility is in turn instrumental to constructive and peace-promoting engagement with the nonviolent and justice-oriented resources of tradition, including religious leaders and institutions.

Little’s conflict-specific focus enables overcoming some of the problems inherent in the comparative–encyclopedic approach that has characterized the subfield of comparative ethics and comparative religion more generally (Smith 1982). The pragmatic comparative engagement in conflict zones facilitates the cultivation of theoretical frameworks that may offer analytic tools for thinking more generally about questions of religion, conflict, and peacebuilding. The publication that came out of a conference Little and Donald Swearer hosted at Harvard Divinity School in April of 2005 highlights this point. In reflecting on the conference, which discussed the question of religion and nationalism in Iraq in comparative perspective, Little and Swearer identified four essential themes: the salience of religious and ethnic identity in the cases under consideration (Sri Lanka, Sudan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Iraq); the significance of the history of colonialism and imperialism in each case; the challenges

17It is important to stress that the study of religion and conflict transformation or peacebuilding is primarily engaged by scholars of conflict resolution and as such this subfield occupies a marginalized location in conflict transformation literature. The work most frequently identified with initiating this sub-genre of religious peacebuilding is Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, eds. Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). This work highlights that despite the obvious relevance of religion to many conflicts around the world, its potential contribution in terms of diplomacy and peacebuilding is overlooked. The book features a series of case studies where religious or spiritual factors played a significant role in the prevention and transformation of conflicts. This work initiated a series of conversations concerning “faith-based” diplomacy. My argument, however, goes beyond this focus on “faith-based” diplomacy because I focus on the more ambiguous spaces where “religion” and/or secularized (selectively retrieved) theological arguments inform conceptions of collective identities, which often present themselves as “secular,” “national,” and “cultural” rather than explicitly “religious.” I argue that the focus of religious peacebuilding needs to move beyond the purview of the explicitly religious. Remaining within the confines of the “religious” betrays an unreconstructed secularist orientation. [For further works with a similar conceptual orientation, see, for example, Avruch (1998), Gopin (2002, 2009), Schirch (2005), Abu-Nimer et al. (2007)]. Because of its focus on "problem-solving," the religious peacebuilding subfield highlights the constructive rather than destructive or pathological aspects of religion. But, only occasionally does it receive a node of recognition from the academic study of religion. I further develop this line of critique of the subfield and industry of religious peacebuilding in Omer (2010).
and perils of post-independence self-governing, and the place of international involvement (Little and Swearer 2006). Despite the peculiarities of each case and zone of conflict involving religion in some capacity, the comparative angle brings to the fore important and insightful common motifs. Recognizing those commonalities is not a futile exercise in knowledge accumulation; rather, it enables a multidimensional analysis of the role of religion in conflict. Determining the complex role of religion in conflict would subsequently carry direct implications for conceptualizing the role of religion in conflict transformation. Here is the response to the so what of the comparative exercise.

Therefore, Little’s work represents a significant departure from the role of the scholar of religion as a mere “color-commentator” (as McCutcheon caricatures it) that explains why religious people and doctrines “erupted” to the fore or how religious politics challenges modernist and secularist presuppositions. Further, the constructive approach’s insistence on the irreducibility of religion to how it is interpreted in specific historical locales does not necessarily betray a perception of religion as sui generis phenomenon (although, in the case of Appleby, it may be that) and thus a fossilized and essentialized invention of colonialist and Orientalist discourses. In fact, even while grounded in Rudolf Otto’s idea of the sacred as the mysterium tremendum et fascinans, Appleby’s notion of the “ambivalence of the sacred” (the understanding that religion may play negative and positive role in the dynamics of conflict and peacebuilding) invites a context-specific engagement with the analysis of how religion relates to structures of control and how it may contribute to rethinking those structures as well as to interrogating and reforming the tradition and its institutions (Appleby 2000). Likewise, even if grounded in an ahistorical and universal interpretation of human rights, Little’s work is informed by the religion and nationalism scholarship mentioned above and grounded in the Weberian insight into the “elective affinity” and dynamic interrelation between conceptions of religion, ethnicity, and nationalism. Hence, his human rights orientation does not preclude deeply contextual engagements with the resources of the relevant traditions under consideration.

The point of departure of the constructive approach is recognition of the internal plurality of religions and the relevance of intra- and extragroup contestations to questions of conflict and peacebuilding. So, in response to McCutcheon’s charge, the constructive approach, as I read it, suggests that historicizing and contextualizing the “religious” does not exclude the relevance of phenomenological and hermeneutical scholarship. Instead, the study of religion in conflict and conflict transformation would use these methodologies to help develop a thickly
historical and analytical framework: one that recognizes how and why “religion” came to be interpreted in a certain way in a particular location in time, but also one that deploys a broad historical and theological knowledge of how and why alternative interpretations may be available. Hence, when deployed constructively and with a clear normative human rights orientation to engage the dynamics of specific historical circumstances, as in Appleby’s work, the phenomenological approach overcomes McCutcheon’s notion of the complicity of the “scholar as caretaker” with the underlying discourses of power.

The constructive focus similarly overcomes Philpott’s unidirectional understanding of the role of religion in conflict. Historical circumstances may offer opportunities for change and reform which are deeply contextual. But the potential of change is not only located in how religious resources can be deployed to transform state or political praxis or to cultivate, through religiously informed activism, what Lederach calls a “peace constituency” along various axes of the society (from the level of grassroots organizing to the sphere of policy-making). But the possibility of reform is also a function of how political and historical realities could dynamically transform or introduce innovations to the tradition. In fact, the predicament of conflict that involves religion as it relates to national, ethnic, cultural, and/or geopolitical agenda offers a fertile ground for actively theorizing about religion and change. In particular, in conflict zones defined by ethnoreligious claims, those claims need to be evaluated through a deployment of a multiperspectival conception of justice that studies one group’s perceptions of justice and historiography in light of the experiences of other groups that are entangled in the dynamics of conflict both in terms of intra-group contestations of identity and in terms of inter-group disputes. Hence, while grounded in a human rights perspective, the study of religion in conflict and conflict transformation is inherently contextual and multiperspectival (without being relativist), taking into account a multiplicity of views in analyzing why certain interpretations of religion vis-à-vis political and social identification have gained prominence and whether such interpretations violate the dignity and life of other groups (including the “outsiders within” who fall outside normative conceptions of belonging). Yet, this approach is not relativist, because it presupposes that certain actions like the

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18Research on questions of religion and nonviolence similarly began to interrogate and denaturalize chauvinistic interpretations of religion through a creative engagement with the resources of various traditions. See, for instance, Queen (2007), Shastri and Shastri (2007), Zaru (2008), Tenenbaum Center (2007) and Coward and Smith (2004).

19See also Omer (2010).
imposition of collective punishment are simply unjust regardless of the rationales and fears of the perpetrators of the violent acts. There is therefore an important multidirectionality in the interrelation between religion and political frameworks that is not captured in an approach that tries to posit religion as an ahistorical reservoir of resources.²⁰

Because of the profound implications for questions of justice to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, the case of Israel’s Jewish identity provides again an especially instructive example. Jewish theologians and scholars such as Yeshayahu Leibowitz and David Hartman recognized that the historical moment of return to Zion and the establishment of a modern nation-state necessitated reforms to Jewish law that for millennia had developed in a communal context without political autonomy and a reassessment of the nature of Israel’s covenantal relationship with God (Leibowitz 1992; Hartman 1998).

This point also echoes Judith Plaskow’s now famous insight in her *Standing Again at Sinai* (1991). Plaskow argues that the attempt to reconstruct and re-imagine Judaism along feminist lines cannot take place without challenging and critiquing the underlying male normativity, a critical process that will involve rescuing the silences, the sites of female life precluded from the Jewish narration of history and law. This feminist insightful focus on silences indeed provides a creative framework for thinking about systemic rather than merely cosmetic change and it resonates with the challenge I offer below to McCutcheon’s dichotomization of critic and caretaker in the study of religion. In the same way that a feminist re-reading of Judaism could transform basic normative presuppositions, the political and historical (rather than messianic or metahistorical) return to the land of Palestine could introduce innovative resources for change and transformation. Hence, for example, Aviezer Ravitzkiy (1993), a Jewish-Israeli scholar of Jewish thought, revisits Jewish historical periods like that of the Hasmonean kingdom of Israel in an effort to renegotiate the meanings of a Jewish political existence. By stressing a period marked by human fallibility, Ravitzki’s primary interlocutors are religious Zionists who perceive of the return to the land as a messianic moment. The example from Ravitzki’s work illustrates how a phenomenological approach need not preclude an analysis of power. Nor does it block the dynamic multidirectionality between religion and historically located institutional configurations. I now turn to introduce some of the limitations in the constructivist approach.

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²⁰A similar case could be made for introducing innovations to the human rights tradition as a result of the dynamic exchange between general and particular conceptions of justice.
Human Rights Conventions as a Diagnostic Framework

Indeed, as the constructive approach highlights, a human rights orientation could be effective in unmasking unjust practices and structures. For instance, while Israel frames the erecting of a wall of separation as an act of self-defense (and one needs to take Israeli conceptions of an existential threat seriously), the voices of the people separated from their properties as a result of this construction project complicates and challenges Israel’s position. Are both sides right? Are both wrong? How can one adjudicate between the claims? The response to this line of questioning demands recognizing the claims of peoples caught in the dynamics of conflict on their own terms but also affirming a theory of justice that provides a compass for determining whose claim/grievance has more moral currency and validity. This analytic gymnastic is crucial for diagnosing conflicts (by outsiders and “connected critics” alike, to borrow from Michael Walzer’s vocabulary) and for designing strategies for holistic peacebuilding that envision both horizontal (societal, cultural) and vertical (institutional, systemic) processes of healing and restructuring. But whatever diagnosis emerges does not necessarily constitute the final verdict on the matter at hand. The human rights framework thus provides an orientation for a constructive and embedded engagement with the resources of traditions, marshalling intra- and extra-group resources for redressing the conditions and memories of injustice.

However, following Michael Ignatieff’s argument in his “Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry,” this orientation cannot be deployed as a conversation stopper or as an imperial universal and ahistorical moral argument but rather as a basis for initiating a conversation concerning competing claims. Read this way, the human rights framework offers a dynamic international/transnational and cross-cultural tradition rather than the embodiment of an imperial western project.21 “[R]ights,” Ignatieff writes, “are not the universal credo of a global society, not a secular religion, but something much more limited and yet just as valuable: the shared vocabulary from which our arguments can begin, and the bare human minimum from which differing ideas of human flourishing can take root” (Ignatieff 2001: 95). This process is especially

21Here I follow the influential account by Johannes Morsink of the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [see Morsink (2000)]. Morsink’s account of the drafting process shows the underlying processes of cross-cultural negotiations and translations. Subsequent developments and human rights conventions also highlight the continuously dynamic character of the human rights tradition. This is not to dismiss the point concerning the perception of human rights as a code word for another variation and/or mutation of western-Christian political, economic, and cultural domination.
acute in zones where the denaturalizing of the most basic perception of “who we are as a group?” is key for devising frameworks for transforming underlying relationships.  

Therefore, the human rights approach, as I view it, provides an important diagnostic lens that illuminates underlying root causes of conflict. Of course, the Palestinians do not need the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) to know that Israel’s policy of land confiscations hurts them, but the human rights framework nonetheless provides an empowering and vindicating vocabulary that is deeply comparative, drawing analogies to other cases of injustice elsewhere. Certainly, it is important to integrate into one’s analysis the discursive critique of secularism articulated by theorists like Hurd and the critiques of liberalism by thinkers such as Iris Marion Young and Michael Walzer. Still, it is as important to safeguard against a wholesale rejection of everything “liberal,” including some of the presumptions about correct politics inherent in human rights conventions about cultural, political, and civic rights. Thusly understood, the human rights perspective opens the way for contextual engagements with the particular meanings these principles could assume in every instance.  

In contexts thoroughly marked by exclusionary conceptions of membership, the application of the human rights lens cannot be constrained by reified interpretations of religion-quà-ethnicity, culture, and nationality.

Drawing on the insights animating research on comparative secularisms and modernities could provide resources for renegotiating the relations between ethnoreligious markers of identity and the principles informing conceptions of citizenship. I argue above that the constructivist emphasis on the irreducibility of religion to nation offers especially creative routes for rethinking ethnoreligious national contexts. But, in such instances, the mere recovery of “multiple interpretations of a given religious tradition” is not sufficient, because the politics of secularism could impose conceptual blinders on underlying religious motifs and claims to entitlement. The case of Israel exemplifies this point. The mainstream secular Zionist camp perceives itself as liberal and secular, yet insists on the Jewish and democratic character of the Israeli state, an insistence that not only necessitates undemocratic practices in the form

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22I also address this point in my discussion elsewhere of the global Palestine Solidarity Movement: see Omer (2009).

23For works addressing the role of constitutionalism in peacebuilding and conflict transformation, see, for example, Deng (2008), Little (2006), and Bell (2003).

24For examples of works challenging the hegemony of a unitary conception of “modernity”, see Eisenstadt (2003), Eisenstadt (2002), and Harding (2008). For works confronting the relevant topic of “multiple secularisms,” see Casanova (2009) and Bowen (2010).
of what Israeli political geographer Oren Yiftachel refers to as “creeping apartheid” (2006); it also carries profound implications for questions of justice vis-à-vis the Palestinians. For instance, Yossi Beilin—a leader of the liberal peace camp and a champion of civil rights to nonreligious Israeli Jews and minorities in Israel—narrates the story of the Zionist settlement in Palestine as an act of return to the ancestral land (Beilin 2006). This story of return glosses over a narrative of Palestinian displacement. Beilin’s sublimated national theology notwithstanding, he reframes Judaism as “ethnicity,” “culture,” and “nationality,” a reframing that enables him to bracket Judaism-qua-religion as a private choice that should not intrude on the wishes of nonreligious Israeli Jews to drive their cars on Shabbat or eat shrimp in the center of west Jerusalem. A scrutiny of Beilin’s position as well as that of other Israeli secularists shows how the dominant Zionist interpretation of the interrelationship between religion and national historiography has delimited the possibility of reimagining alternative relationships between Judaism, the Jewish people, and Israel. Beilin, who upholds the objective of cultivating Israel as a Jewish democracy, repeatedly frames the question of immigration to Israel as a “right to return,” unreflective of the theological undertones of the concept of “return” in this context (Omer 2008).

This example demonstrates that despite the trappings of the liberal–secularist discourse, Beilin’s position is myopic in that it normalizes the illiberality of the undergirding ethnoreligious national discourse. Another example of the conceptual (ethnonational) blinders of the secularist discourse in Israel is the Gavison-Medan Covenant, drafted by a notable rabbi and a prestigious secularist and non-religious jurist in Israel. The Covenant offers a comprehensive attempt to outline state–synagogue relations. The authors of the document challenged the monopoly of the rabbinate in Israel over issues concerning the personal life cycle (births, marriages, burials) and especially—advocating the recognition of Reform conversions—over the hotly debated question “who is a Jew?” Grounding its rationale in Rawls’s political liberalism, the Covenant also advocates for cultivating a pluralistic society. Yet—and here the case of Israel is significant in exposing the problems with this model of political justice (or rather its diffusion beyond a particular context25)—the discourse of liberalism is confined within the exclusivist boundaries of an ethnonational discourse, one that reinterprets Judaism as a secular national identity but ignores how it continuously draws its

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25For an interesting account of the challenges of globally diffusing the discourse of liberal multiculturalism as a theory for ethnocultural justice, see Kymlicka (2007).
legitimacy from sublimated theological motifs such as the notion of “return” and “the ingathering of the exiles.”

Religious peace activism in the Israeli context is similarly delimited by the boundaries set by axiomatic Zionist assertions concerning the Jewish meaning of the Israeli state. For instance, Rabbis for Human Rights (RHR)—an organization of rabbis influenced by the Reconstructionist tradition of Mordechai Kaplan and Jewish humanism more broadly—operates within a conceptual distinction that differentiates the imperative to end the occupation of the territories captured in 1967 from the commitment to a Jewish democracy within the 1948 borders, thereby vindicating their legitimacy. Despite courageous acts of solidarity with the Palestinians, the peace activism of RHR still operates within a dominant interpretation of Zionist teleology (one that intimates a conception of Israel as the telos of Jewish history and destiny) which does not imagine the possibility of significantly moving away from a majoritarian citizenship discourse nor does it question the automatic right of Jewish return to the land.

These examples illuminate the important analytic task of not only historicizing how religion relates to the emergence and reification of certain modes of narrating national histories as McCutcheon insists, but also of recognizing possible alternatives or counter-narratives that may give rise to less exclusivist conceptions of identity. This analytic task with its potential applied relevance does not amount to the imposition of western political frameworks; it rather indicates that one’s point of departure is a basic recognition that discriminatory practices based on religion and ethnicity are positively correlated with the eruption of violent conflicts. Assuming that such violence is something undesirable, the institution of constitutional safeguards for minorities is articulated by analysts like Little as a mode of nonviolently mediating possible identity conflicts (Little 1995). The case of Israeli liberalism, however, shows that this constitutional turn (deeply rooted in the tradition of political liberalism) will not address what Lederach calls the “epicenter of conflict,” especially if a constitutional framework is simply dictated or imposed, without addressing the conceptual blinders and flaws of Israeli liberalism (i.e., its enduring commitment to an ethnocentric national project).

The mere granting of minority rights to the Palestinian citizens of Israel, for example, domesticates an issue that needs to be addressed within the broader Palestinian–Israeli context. Identifying the Zionist ethnoreligious citizenship discourse as a root cause of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and the marginalization of Palestinian–Israelis, “The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel” (henceforth “the Vision”)—an important document put forward by a broad coalition of Palestinian–Israelis in 2007—proposes a new vision of Israel as a
multinational state that would secure significant autonomy and collective rights for Palestinian–Israelis. Here, the imposition of multicultural and multinational citizenship discourses that cohere with a human rights orientation would not be sufficient unless it is accompanied by a thoroughly embedded reimagining of how Judaism and Jewish history interrelate with conceptions of membership in Israel.26

Indeed, Little’s focus on how religion relates to the construction of group boundaries and to imagining and narrating a group’s history may be one way to begin thinking about the role of religion in conflict transformation—this process as I show above would involve reimagining the interrelation between different facets of one’s identity in a way that would exemplify greater consistency with the human rights conventions. In zones of ethnoreligious national conflicts, this would entail an emphasis on attaining more inclusivist definition of citizenship and belonging that challenge a monocultural conception of the “nation.” This process also facilitates the possibility of change and innovation within religion, recognized as thoroughly plural and multidimensional and indeed historical. The degree to which religion is involved in authorizing unjust practices would directly correlate with the degree to which the reimagining of religion vis-à-vis the “nation” would need to be integrated into designing programs for conflict transformation. But this task cannot diminish, neutralize, or interiorize religion, because such an approach would merely reinforce what Hurd identifies as a lack of self-reflexivity in the social scientific study of religion. Consequently, while the deployment of a human rights orientation is crucial for the diagnosis phase, the mere recovery of tradition-specific resources that are consistent with this orientation is not enough. Such a framework also needs to integrate the analytic uncertainties that come with notions such as “multiple modernities” and “multiple secularisms” and explore what that might mean in every case.

In other words, even if the constructive approach to religion and peacebuilding demonstrates the limits of McCutcheon’s binary construal of critic versus caretaker, it still privileges what Hurd calls the discourses of secularism. While the constructive approach to religion and peacebuilding dismantles McCutcheon’s critique of the phenomenological approach to religion—especially its inability to analyze the relation between religion and power and its inability to carry public relevance—Appleby’s reliance on Otto’s conception of the sacred renders his approach theoretically vulnerable to an analysis of religion that still privileges a

26I develop these issues in sustained details in a book length manuscript When Peace is Not Enough: How the Israeli Peace Camp thinks about Religion, Nationalism, and Justice (forthcoming).
liberal conception of religion as most basically a private, autonomous, and interiorized mode of being and relating to the ultimate or the sacred. Thus, isolating the “religion” aspect of conflict transformation and peacebuilding in practice and in theory (as illustrated in the case of the Israeli peace camp) bypasses the hermeneutical act of rethinking the parameters of collective identities which I identify as key for conflict transformation.

Hence, while the human rights approach as deployed by Little may provide certain parameters for thinking about peace and justice as they translate into a thin interpretation of the role of government vis-à-vis cultures, religions, and ethnicities, it can only function as a diagnostic tool; to do work, it must be accompanied by a transformative, embedded, and therapeutic confrontation of the underlying causes of conflict. This type of contextual engagement does not mean replicating liberal normative understandings about the presupposed correct place of religion in public life, but it also does not entail disregarding constitutional principles such as the respect for minority rights. Instead, it would present human rights, as Ignatieff does, as a point of departure rather than a recipe. For instance, while a document like the “Vision” locates the root cause of the marginalization of Palestinian–Israelis in the dominant Zionist ideology, its programmatic proposals for instituting ethnocultural justice are inadequate to address the challenges they identify. Therefore, the constructive approach that invites the cultivation of knowledge about “religion”—one that transcends the most immediate “political” ramifications and constraints—should be supplemented with and emboldened by a careful exploration of subaltern counter-narratives or marginalized voices; it must explore how, when made audible, they may contribute to the process of substantially reframing ethno- and religiocentric attitudes and conceptions of identity. The voices from the margins also could introduce potential reforms and innovations to “religion” and thus significantly challenge a commitment to the idea of “religion” as ahistorical, unchanged, and unmoved reality with entrenched socio-cultural and political practices (see Plaskow’s notion of the “Return to Sinai”). While such a commitment (as in Philpott’s work) may allow for historical analysis of religion and religious institutions in specific contexts, it does not permit a multidirectional engagement among religious traditions and their histories, contexts, and competing claims.

This is the focus in the final part of this article.

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27This orientation also permeates the practical dimensions of the field of religious peacebuilding, which Appleby and Little define as “the range of activities performed by religious actors and institutions for the purpose of resolving and transforming deadly conflict” [see Little and Appleby (2004: 5)].
Returning to the case of Israel, a focus on three marginalized voices—that of the Jewish diasporas, the Palestinian citizens of Israel and the Mizrahim or the “Arab-Jews” (Israeli Jews who trace their origins to Islamic and Arab countries)—may both expose the formation of Zionist Ashkenazi hegemony as well as the possibility of creative alternative interpretations of Jewish Israeli identities. For instance, as a non-Israeli and non-Zionist American Jewish philosopher, Judith Butler expresses resentment of the hegemonic hold of Zionist teleology on the various Jewish diasporas (2004: 101–128), an orientation that ignores millennia of Jewish learning and flourishing and construes the diasporic space as significant only insofar as it relates to the drama of exile and return. Butler retrieves and joins a tradition of Jewish thinkers from Walter Benjamin to Hannah Arendt, Franz Rosenzweig and, more recently, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin who valorize the diasporic as the most authentically Jewish condition, thereby rejecting the Zionist ethos of the “negation of exile” and Israel’s position as the mouthpiece of the Jewish world. By exposing Israel’s orientalist biases and discriminatory practices, the hybrid voices of the Palestinian citizens of Israel and of Mizrahim offer further challenges to the self-perception of Israel as European and democratic. As discussed above, Palestinian–Israelis challenge the ethnoreligious boundaries of Israeli democracy. The Mizrahim are in a position to challenge their cooptation into a European Jewish experience, the humiliating and marginalizing treatment they have received from the Ashkenazi elite and the construal of their “Arab” and “Jewish” identities as inherently antithetical. Both groups challenge the taken-for-granted hegemony of the Ashkenazim in useful ways.

Such a focus on the subaltern and marginalized challenges McCutcheon’s dichotomization of the scholar as critic or caretaker. The approach I propose underscores both the denaturalizing of religion vis-à-vis other dimensions of one’s identity and a serious critique of the dominant discourses, as well as a constructive engagement with

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28By “Ashkenazi hegemony” I first allude to the importance of analyzing Zionism as a nationalist movement that had emerged in European contexts and on the backdrop of a variety of discourses: colonialism, orientalism, nationalism, and anti-Semitism. The leadership of the early Zionist movement and subsequent Israeli elites were predominantly Ashkenazi (or of European origin). The reference to the orientalist discursive background is important because the Ashkenazi leadership of the Zionist movement had also imagined Israel and the Israeli (or the new Hebrew) as “western,” “liberal,” and “cultured.” This self-perception contradicted the kind of adjectives the Zionist leadership used to describe the non-Ashkenazi Jews or the Mizrahim. An orientalist stereotyping also led to systemic policies of marginalization vis-à-vis the non-European Israelis.
the histories and counter-histories, memories, symbols, traditions, and theologies operative in a given context, and how they may relate to the alleviation of suffering and the reframing of unjust structures of control and domination. Hence, a specifically religious studies approach to the study of religion, conflict, and conflict transformation deploys not only methodological reductionism trying to explain, expose, and re-describe why and how certain interpretations of community or membership came into being and gained dominance but also what alternative interpretations may emerge out of specific contexts of conflict and subaltern traditions and histories. It is precisely this task of thinking constructively about reframing dominant structures and narratives that builds on and develops Hurd’s analysis by underscoring the potential role of the religion scholar as at once critic and caretaker.

The scholar of religion is a caretaker only insofar as she historicizes and contextualizes how religion interrelates to sociopolitical and cultural practices, and identifies counter subaltern historiographies or the narratives of the “outsider within” or the “domestic other”—these (as my discussion of the Israeli case illustrates) are the sites that enable the process of denaturalizing seemingly axiomatic claims about “who we are” as well as reimagining “who we could become.” This exercise offers conflict analysis that goes beyond the particularistic perceptions and narratives of injustice of groups locked in intractable conflicts. Notably, the process of denaturalizing and contesting reigning discourses is not only directed toward ethnocentric conceptions of citizenship that are obviously “violent” and “exclusionary.” By deploying the insights of the secularism debates underlying Hurd’s analysis, the scholar as a critical caretaker also aims to deconstruct how the conceptual blinders of liberal and secularist interpretations of the nation and religion may have glossed over underlying and less obvious ethno- or religiocentric sets of entitlements. And these liberal–secularist underpinnings, despite their conventional construal as “peaceful” and indeed “civic,” may have themselves contributed to conflict and the deepening of structural violence through the domestication of dissent and through the secularization of ethnoreligious citizenship discourses. The case of Israeli liberalism I discuss above exemplifies this point.

To be a constructive critic, the religion scholar must both recognize the thoroughly historical and social characteristics of religion but also acknowledge that it cannot be reduced to this context and history. This is not because of a presupposition of religion as *sui generis*, an ahistorical first-order category, but rather because of the reality of multiple histories, multiple interpretations, and multiple contexts, some located in different epochs and some contemporaneous (but perhaps inaudible
and even nonexistent). Unlike McCutcheon’s framing of this conversation, the aim is not only “to lay bare... mechanisms of power and control” (141), but rather recognition that the role of the scholar of religion as a critic would entail imagining ways to redress abuses, misinterpretations, manipulations, and unjust interpretations of religion vis-à-vis political, cultural, and economic organizations of social life. This exercise in reimagining religion acknowledges the centrality of the analysis of power and dominant discourses, but also insists on the irreducibility of religion to the structures of power and control and the possibility of agency and change. Indeed, McCutcheon’s approach exposes the mechanisms of power, but it fails to ask how the subaltern counter-narratives may offer what cultural critic Homi Bhabha refers to as “third spaces” or hybrid locations that do not only provide a challenge to received narratives and truisms but offer alternative formulations of identity (Bhabha 1994).

My analysis of the constructive approach also demonstrates that, like McCutcheon’s redescriptive approach, the effectiveness of the human rights compass as a tool for thinking about conflict transformation is limited to the level of diagnosis. While allowing a space for regional variations, this approach is still constrained by secularist assumptions concerning the proper place of religion vis-à-vis the political. Social and political change would necessitate contextual engagements with questions and perceptions of justice that may be inconsistent with the standards of justice as articulated in the human rights conventions. This does not entail relativism; it rather recognizes the added complexities involved in thinking through change and transformation in a way that brings to bear not only the decontextualized phenomenological study of religion but also a thick ethnographic study of alternative formulations that may be found in the lived experiences located in hybrid or counter-hegemonic spaces. The logic of exclusionary national ideology inevitably creates such third spaces of hybridity—inhabited by people and groups whose identities and histories do not fit into the dominant ethos.

A focus on the marginalized, therefore, would involve amplifying a critique of the interrelation between power and religion that is already present in the constructive approach. It expands the points about the recognition of the internal plurality of a tradition and the irreducibility of religion to nation, in order to include a scrutiny of the possibility of innovation and reimagining that may be located in hybrid identities that challenge, in their very experiences and historicity, purist chauvinistic conceptions of membership and historiography. Serbo–Croat households, Arab–Jews (Mizrahim), and Palestinian–Israelis are only a few examples that can offer embodied alternatives to their respective dominant ethos.
Those alternatives do not neutralize religion, but re-imagine its relationship to understandings of the nation in a manner that may enable the emergence of nonhegemonic political practices. Hence, introspection of the tradition as in the constructivist approach constitutes only one part of imagining the process of conflict transformation; the ethnographic and deeply contextual study of the “domestic other” and the subaltern. Deploying the human rights framework as a diagnostic lens, such an exploration cannot be constrained by preconceived notions concerning what constitutes correct politics and what constitutes correct religion; it must insists on the need to renegotiate on a case-by-case basis the precise interrelation between religious and political spaces.

Examples of what I am proposing are not hard to find. The pious Egyptian women Saba Mahmood studies in her *Politics of Piety* (2005) point to the complex relations between dominant and subaltern or inaudible narratives (of women in this case). In their embodied practices, the pious Egyptian women Mahmood engages offer alternatives to mainstream interpretation of Egyptian religiosity and social life. Mahmood’s notion of multiple modalities of agency, therefore, sheds light on the limits of McCutcheon’s analysis of power, and suggests the creative and transformative alternatives that may be located under the surfaces of the rhetoric and ethos of social and political elites. Likewise, in his study of the Mizrahim in Israel, Israeli sociologist Yehouda Shenhav (2006) explains how their identity as “Arab–Jews” occupies a hybrid location that challenges official Zionist rhetorical efforts to construe the “Arab” and the “Jew” as inherently antithetical and antagonistic identities. Further, the Mizrahi experience strongly challenges Zionist historiography and universalizing of the Jewish experience. Like Butler’s reinvigoration of the ethical Jewish tradition represented in the works of Arendt and Benjamin, reclaiming and (re)narrating Mizrahi history could have profound ramifications on rethinking the relationship between Judaism and Israeliiness, among other issues. These two examples from Shenhav and Mahmood suggest the creative spaces from within (the “domestic others”) and their transformative potential, even while recognizing the forcefulness of dominant discourses. Moving away from McCutcheon’s bifurcated explanatory paradigm and building on the insights inherent in the Foucauldian paradox as in Mahmood’s work and on the postcolonial reading of the Mizrahi experience as in Shenhav’s, enable not only the critique of power and structures of control but also the recognition of a wealth of resources (including the experience of subordination and discrimination) available for dismantling reigning narratives (including secularism) and for reframing and reimagining the interrelation between the different facets of identities.
The critical caretaker, by virtue of this hybrid construct, would draw on all these resources in an effort to think holistically about transforming unjust sociopolitical configurations. To dispel possible confusion: the “critical caretaker” approach does not paternalistically propose telling people how they should think of themselves and their group identity in a way that will be more appeasing to a UDHR orientation. Rather, this approach suggests an entry point for scholarship in religion to engage creatively and offer relevant expertise to peacebuilding processes in imagining the transformation of relational patterns, especially in contexts where religion, ethnicity, and nationality seem to be conflated with one another. This point, as I have argued above, resonates with the constructive approach which highlights the irreducibility of religion to conceptions of nationhood and other notions of identity, and shows how multiple interpretations of religious warrants relate to militancy and chauvinism as well as toleration and active peacebuilding. However, the “critical caretaker” reinterprets the human rights framework as a starting point for conflict diagnosis rather than a fixed telos for conflict transformation. Subsequently, it combines the phenomenological input of the constructive approach with the critical scrutiny advocated by McCutcheon as well as with a thick engagement with subaltern narratives and hybrid identities, born out of the realities of conflict. Thus, those hybrid formations open pathways of change and innovation in how religious and political realities intersect with one another.

In summary, I have argued that the scholar of religious studies, by virtue of the kind of conversations that have defined the discipline in recent decades, is in a position both to expand Hurd’s deconstruction of the premises undergirding thinking about the interface between religion and politics and to recognize the constructive potentialities found in theological resources as apparent in Philpott’s account. But theology cannot be deployed as a resource for peacebuilding without an introspective interrogation of the dominant theo-political discourses that delimit, naturalize, and define identities and the spheres of social and political interactions. This is often the problem with the genre and practice of religious peacebuilding. The cultivation of a distinctive religious studies approach to the study of religion, conflict, and conflict transformation would depend on the ability of the religion scholar to become such a “critical caretaker.” Critical scrutiny, therefore, needs to be supplemented by a thorough exploration (and at times excavation and appropriation) of counter-hegemonic narratives, subaltern experiences, and minority opinions. Those two modes of analysis need to take place in tandem to avoid the charge of ahistoricity, on the one hand, and over-historicity, on the other hand.
Familiarity with the wealth of tradition—including historically sublimated and repressed motifs and contemporary challenges, changes, and transformations introduced by the reality of an international system of nation-states—offers resources for constructively re-imagining religion vis-à-vis the critique of sociopolitical and cultural institutions and practices. Here lie the distinguishing characteristics of a religious studies approach to the question of religion in conflict and conflict transformation. Especially now that several political scientists have become increasingly versed in the secularism debates and are learning to integrate attempts to think about the so-called constructive role of religion in postconflict reconciliation, religious studies needs to recognize its niche and public relevance in debates concerning the role of religion in conflict and conflict transformation.

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