Rejoinder: On Professor McCutcheon’s (Un)Critical Caretaking

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NOT EVERYTHING THAT Russell McCutcheon wrote about my article is inaccurate or simply false, but much of it is. Bolstered by his mis-reading of broad swaths of the article, Professor McCutcheon has done little more than insist, “No, this is not what I meant at all!” Alas, as Michel Foucault (and so many others) has pointed out, an author is typically the last to dictate the meaning of his or her words. Despite what McCutcheon may think, however, my JAAR article (2011) was neither about carrying forward his tradition nor his authorial intent.

Professor McCutcheon’s caricature of my argument begins with the suggestion that I fail to recognize his positing of the critic and the caretaker as mutually exclusive. Yet I offer an account of this bifurcation, highlighting its (limited) deconstructive utility as well as its reductionist tendency. Indeed, my article exposes the effectiveness and limitations of critique concretely by offering a core sample of a project that I fully develop in my forthcoming book When Peace Is Not Enough: How the

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Israeli Peace Camp Thinks about Religion, Nationalism, and Justice. Of course, it is hardly surprising that Professor McCutcheon fails even to consider the multifaceted examples I take up from the Israeli context, or any of the specific “critical caretakers” I introduce in the course of my article. This refusal is in keeping with McCutcheon’s curious reluctance to apply critique to concrete cases, preferring instead to rely on theoretical sloganeering.

I first address the most glaring of McCutcheon’s mischaracterizations, then explain why his brittle dichotomy cries out to be aufgehen, and finally, I explain how my account is, in fact, necessary for his own hopes for the “public” and “cross-disciplinary” study of religion to succeed.

TELOS VERSUS LENS

Declaring that my article “takes for granted just what constitutes peace, justice and the whole,” one wonders whether McCutcheon even read my explication of the concepts of peacebuilding and justpeace (461)? As I indicated, my colleagues at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, John Paul Lederach and R. Scott Appleby, identify peacebuilding as “a comprehensive lens for imagining processes of change and transformation of conflict.” This is a multidisciplinary lens, not a prescribed telos. It is the latter “teleological” agenda that McCutcheon ascribes erroneously to my work. My article, he asserts, “universalizes and thereby naturalizes a very specific and local sort of social formation—one that is, of course, in step with our own liberal democratic/free market interests.” Had he taken account of my critique of the myopic qualities of Israeli liberalism (e.g., 479) or my critique of an exclusive reliance of the human rights framework (487), Professor McCutcheon may have thought better of making this statement.

The same can be said of his complaints about my supposed lack of an operative definition of peace. I engage (461) the concept of justpeace as entailing overcoming direct as well as structural and cultural forms of violence. This allegedly nonexistent definition nonetheless suggests to Professor McCutcheon a normative liberal-modernist differentiation between indices of identity such as ethnicity, religion, and nationalism. He indulges this convenient misreading, despite my claim that “Deploying the human rights framework as a diagnostic lens . . . cannot be constrained by preconceived notions concerning what constitutes correct politics and what constitutes correct religion; it must insist on the need to renegotiate on a case-by-case basis the precise interrelation between religious and political space” (486). This is the pragmatic and
hermeneutical process which I refer to (and develop elsewhere) as the “hermeneutics of citizenship.”

To describe it as a pragmatic and hermeneutical process is to avoid appealing to a totalizing a priori conception to be applied across cases. The priority of the contextual specificity of peace and justice is precisely what I mean when I say that such matters will have to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis through the prism of justpeace. My account of “justpeace” entails a multiperspectival approach to justice that forces any narrative of identity (and attendant conceptions of justice and peace) to be challenged from within and without. In the case I take up in the article, the Arab-Jews (the Mizrahim), Palestinian-Israelis, non-Israeli Palestinians, and non-Israeli Jews all constitute various sites of critique of a Euro-Zionist hegemony. But their acts of critique cannot simply dissolve Jewish-Israeliness out of existence. Rather, these sites of critique can be re-conceived as participating in both transgressing and reimagining the meanings of Jewish-Israeliness. My conception of critical-caretaking surpasses any merely theoretical wheel-spinning and destructive futility of critique, as McCutcheon conceives it, turning instead to a constructive and contextually situated engagement with reframing and re-imagining actually existing sociopolitical discourses, in which justice and peace are points of persistence re-negotiation (rather than dictated by a fixed and a priori telos).

RELIGIOUSLY LIBERAL SCHOLARSHIP?

Professor McCutcheon specifies a central concern (footnote 4), asking “what makes Omer’s article an example of scholarship on religion, as opposed to religiously liberal scholarship?” In pasting the moniker “religiously liberal scholarship” on my work, McCutcheon reveals his negligence in reading my extensive critiques of liberalism and liberal conceptualization of the “religious.” Take, for example, my exposition of the work of the political scientist Daniel Philpott (463–466). Philpott illuminates what he views as the poverty of the theory of justice inherent in the liberal political framework, especially in its inability to provide resources for processes of healing and reconciliation in the aftermaths of mass atrocities.


2Since the publication of my article, Philpott’s book-length treatment of these issues has appeared as *Just and Unjust Peace* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).
Yet in doing so, I argue, he reproduces the underpinning liberal and conservative logic of the phenomenology of religion as critiqued by many scholars of religion (including McCutcheon). I affirm this critique, arguing that Philpott’s theory of religion presents an example of what happens in an academic context characterized by rigid disciplinary boundaries (and a dearth of cross-disciplinary engagement). It makes sense to many in international relations (IR) to theorize religion in unreconstructed modernist terms, either as purely epiphenomenal or, as Philpott does, as *sui generis*: religion as a self-evident cause, rather than an effect. This appears decades after similar accounts of religion as *sui generis* were, as I argue, “debunked by a long traditions of critical scholarship in the academic study of religion” (465; see also 468–469). Some critics within the recently emerging “IR and Religion” literature observe that construing religion as what they call an “independent variable” (what scholars of religion would call “an autonomous phenomenon” or *sui generis*, as I argue Philpott does) merely offers a new arena for old and unhelpful contestations between idealist versus materialist explanatory paradigms in IR (see, for example, Daniel H. Nexon 2011). This is one of the points at which scholars of religion have important contributions to make in collaborating with colleagues in other fields. Considering my own critique of Philpott’s version of the phenomenology of religion, it baffles me that McCutcheon positions my scholarship as “religiously liberal.”

Professor McCutcheon also missed my critical exposition of the work of another political scientist, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, who explicitly incorporates critical theory in the study of religion and post-colonial cultural critique in deconstructing and embedding the categories of the “secular” and the “religious” within their historically specific locations, revealing their Christo-centricity, and thus, their complicity with the histories of empire and colonial domination (466–469). In contrast to my argument against Philpott, I affirm Hurd’s self-reflexive critique, grounded as it is in anthropologist and cultural critic Talal Asad’s genealogical work. While I explicate why “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 *sui generis* phenomenon,” I also affirm that “Hurd’s conscious redescribing of ‘religion’ as it relates to power and epistemologies about the political . . . conforms to McCutcheon’s notion of the correct way of doing scholarship in religion” (469). But, I go further and ask: “Does it mean then

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3For a further elaboration of my critique of Philpott’s position, see Omer (2012).
that the work of religious studies can be subsumed under political science departments?” It is this question that McCutcheon may have missed when he so dismisses as “odd” my asserting the cross-disciplinary indispensability of the scholar of religion in making available the complex hybrid of critical caretaking.

My motivation in transgressing disciplinary divides was not, as McCutcheon’s wrenched-from-context paraphrasing suggests, that religion scholars “bring about conflict resolution on the geopolitical scene.” What I write is: “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 [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” (487). Such an approach, I argue, overcomes the conceptual traps that currently constrain scholarship on religion and violence in the academic study of religion, which typically “reinforce[s] 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 Girardian functionalism (469–470).”

CRITICAL CARETAKING

McCutcheon’s caricature of my argument is most evident in what he redacts from the one block-quote from my essay that he considers. He begins the quote as follows: “The critical caretaker . . . think[s] holistically about transforming unjust sociopolitical configurations.” What did he choose to omit? My original text reads: “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.” What might be the “resources” which McCutcheon has omitted in caricaturing my position? Responding to this question requires that we step back for a moment to another portion of my

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4 I discuss the current state of the field in the section from which this quote is lifted (see 469–472), underscoring the need to engage across disciplines with the theoretical work done by theorists of nationalism and religion (especially Anthony Smith, Anthony Marx, and Benedict Anderson). Again, to grasp the breadth and detail of my account, see When Peace Is Not Enough, Chapters 2–3. For further pertinent critiques of the religion and violence literature see William Cavanaugh, The Myth of Religious Violence and R. Scott Appleby, “The Strong, the Weak, and the Pathological,” Practical Matters Issue 5, May 2012.
article that McCutcheon conveniently overlooks, namely my exposition of the “constructive approach” typified in the works of historian Appleby and ethicist David Little (especially 472–476). I make the case that their complementary approaches overcome McCutcheon’s charge that critique necessarily precludes any and all constructive engagement with the resources of traditions being critiqued. In the case of Appleby, even though his account begins with Rudolf Otto’s *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, I demonstrate that an “insistence on the irreducibility of religion to how it is interpreted in specific historical locales . . . 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” (474).

In reference to Little’s extensive comparative work on religion, nationalism, and conflict, I critique Little’s “ahistorical and universal interpretation of human rights (474)” as akin to a *sui generis* conception of religion. However, because Little combines his conception of human rights with a context-sensitive, case-by-case testing of the Weberian notion of the elastic “elective affinities” between conceptions of nationality, ethnicity, and religion, I argue his approach likewise could facilitate critique of the power formations that configure these elective affinities in any given instance.

I further argue that my re-reading of the constructive approach not only mediates McCutcheon’s dichotomy of critics versus caretakers, but also critiques the unidirectionality about religion and change presupposed in Philpott’s account, in which scholarship and practice in religious peacebuilding will involve tapping into fixed and trans-cultural essences (475).

One critical caretaker whose work I draw upon in fashioning my critical analysis of Israel-quaque-Judaism, and my claim that historically situated, multiperspectival relationality is an indispensable basis for justice (not, per McCutcheon, “archaic meanings housed in supposedly timeless myths and rituals”) is Judith Butler. The feminist political theorist and cultural critic writes in her *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (published after my original article in the *JAAR* but consistent with how I characterize her contestation and reframing of the interfacing between Judaism, Jews, and Israeliness): “The kind of relationality at stake is one that ‘interrupts’ or challenges the unitary character of the subject, its self-sameness and its univocity. In other words, something happens to the ‘subject’ that dislocates it from the center of the world; some demand from elsewhere lays claim to me, presses itself upon me, or even divides me from within, and only
through this fissuring of who I am do I stand a chance of relating to another” (2012: 6). What makes Butler’s work an example of critical caretaking?

Let us examine carefully whether Butler’s work is consistent with McCutcheon’s notion of the scholar of religion as a “public intellectual and critic of authorizing practices.” McCutcheon’s scholar of religion as a “critical rhetor” stands outside her “subject matter.” She approaches her task “equipped with methodologies and theories to identify those homogenizing, ideological strategies so necessary for the manufacture and management of human communities—scholarly communities included” (2001: 142). Well, Butler interrogates and denaturalizes ontological claims but, unfortunately, she does so in order to engage questions about justice. This, McCutcheon tells us, is an aberration of scholarship in religion and something he “explicitly argue[s] against” in construing the role of the religion scholar qua critic. What is also an aberration (in McCutcheon’s view) apparently is to work from within one’s tradition, or to work immanently within a tradition in which one is not a participant, however critically and oppositionally. In contrast to this, Butler retrieves the Jewish ethical tradition represented by thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt and deploys them both in interrogating Zionist hegemonies and in revalorizing alterity and the diasporic as a modality for reimagining ethical cohabitation.5

Though not explicitly engaging the literature in the subfield of religion and peacebuilding, Butler argues against the tendency of this subfield to facilitate an exclusive reliance on, in this case, Jewish ethics to rethink the question of cohabitation. A case in point that I identify and unpack at length is the work of Rabbis for Human Rights, whose Jewish humanism propels them to “treat the strangers in our midst” with dignity, without asking how and why the indigenous inhabitants of the land turned into “strangers” to begin with.6 Such a reliance that brackets and normalizes the sufferings of Palestinians can only replicate chauvinistic privileging of Judaism and would amount to reaffirming the hegemonic interpretation of Judaism qua nationality which Butler seeks to dismantle. Hence, she stresses relationality as the ground for negotiating questions of justice.

In my article, and more extensively in my book, I offer critiques of such attempts that are grounded explicitly within the resources of Judaism (see, for example, my treatment of Jewish theologians

5For a critique that points out the limitations of Butler’s ethical model for cohabitation, see Omer (2013), chapters 5–7.
6For a full treatment of Rabbis for Human Rights, see Omer (2013), chapter 5.
Yeshayahu Leibowitz and David Hartman as well as scholar of Jewish thought Aviezer Ravitzky [476] and my analysis of Rabbis for Human Rights [480]). What such efforts are lacking is the kind of discursivity that denaturalizes through contextual contestations with various “others” (internal and external) that which seems to be ontologically stable and axiomatic: the Euro-Zionist frame.

Therefore, to go back to the reference omitted in McCutcheon’s redactions, “the resources” that the lenses of critical caretaking draw upon are not at all “in the mists of primordial time” but rather in the embodied and embedded counter-hegemonic experiences of, in the case I profile, hybrids such as the “Arab Jews” (Mizrahim) and Palestinian-Israelis, as well as in the margins occupied by non-Israeli Jews such as Butler. “The scholar of religion is a caretaker,” I argue, “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’” (484).

ON NORMATIVITY

Did I write “who we could become?” Oh no! Am I revealing my normativity and positionality? Surely, Butler à la Arendt and Benjamin cannot be a critical caretaker because she betrays a moral compass (of the kind McCutcheon accuses me of having). But, as I indicated, McCutcheon himself cannot escape from normativity, even if this expresses itself in his allergy toward hegemonies and epistemic regimes (including scholarly ones like phenomenology, though apparently not his own “critic not caretaker” epistemic regime).7

As mentioned above, McCutcheon accuses me of the kind of violence associated with the simplistic imposition of human rights talk, the language of, on the one hand “our democratic/free market interests” and empire, on the other. This accusation confirms my suspicion that he did not read, or read carefully, the pages (477–482) I devote to distinguishing between human rights conceived as a set of fixed and self-interpreting norms, human rights critically re-conceived as a diagnostic

and as such indispensable discursive framework, and the kind of critically hermeneutical work that will need to take place in each and every instance in which human rights norms are invoked and/or applied. Here I reach full circle, underscoring that I do not operate with a fixed telos. Why else would I integrate Michael Ignatieff’s critique of human rights, which, when construed as a secular “religion,” becomes idolatrous and, as such, a “conversation stopper” (477)?

This is where I distinguish myself from the constructive approaches I briefly sketched above (i.e., Little and Appleby). Pushing “the constructivist emphasis on the irreducibility of religion to nation,” I show through my scrutiny of Israeli liberalism that “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” (478). I ultimately argue that it is not only that Israeli liberalism constitutes a defective form of liberalism, but that the liberal discourse itself offers merely a limited compass for conflict transformation. My scrutiny and critique of Israeli secular and religious liberalism renders all the more absurd McCutcheon’s classifying of my work as “religiously liberal scholarship.”

And yet, repositioning human rights as a continually unfolding discourse—and as such one that incorporates (and is persistently subjected to) multidirectional critique and self-correction—remains indispensable. Even Edward Said, whose scholarship McCutcheon frames as “offering us one model for our role as transgressive public intellectuals” (2001: 133), acknowledges—and relies upon—this tradition. He invokes these norms against colonial subjugation generally, and Israeli oppression specifically. Here Michael Walzer’s “thick and thin” comes into my account to illuminate that the point is to not dispatch human rights norms because they have (and do) participated in hegemonic accounts, but rather to develop a context-sensitive, flexible, self-reflexive, and revising approach to human rights which aids in obviating vulgar relativism.8

8Incidentally, even Michel Foucault, whom McCutcheon endorses as another example of a “critic” in his later phase, acknowledged the indispensability yet insufficiency of human rights. In response to an interview question that framed the prospect of the gay movement as trapped “at the level of demanding sexual tolerance,” Foucault replies: “Yes, but this aspect must be supported. It is important, first, to have the possibility—and the right—to choose your own sexuality. Human rights regarding sexuality are important and are still not respected in many places,” see “Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity,” in Sylvère Lotringer, ed., Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961–1984 (New York, NY: Semiotext, 1989), 383; For a pertinent account that captures the often overlooked constructive implications of Foucault’s account, see Jason A. Springs (2009).
Said, along with Butler (who herself draws on Said in construing her ethical framework in *Parting Ways*), is another of the resources I draw upon in articulating a conception of justice as grounded in the kind of relationality born out of self-estrangement (e.g., denaturalizing axiomatic homogenizing conceptions of Zionist historiography), one that by definition cannot be confined exclusively to an intra-Jewish discourse, however “peaceful.” And yet, Said’s “transgressive” work must be analyzed within the context of his extensive critique of Israeli policies and how they are aided discursively by orientalism and its many variations (American, European, etc.). In fact, Said, an exemplar that McCutcheon heralds, wrote explicitly about justice as the necessary implication of engaging in “transgressive” scholarship (Said 2006). Of course, the rigidity of McCutcheon’s critic/caretaker dichotomy (and here is a perfect example of its bluntness as an analytical instrument) requires that McCutcheon mute his celebration of Said’s transgressive utility. McCutcheon refers to his “critic” as “differing somewhat from the moralist stand of such intellectuals as Noam Chomsky and Edward Said” (2001: 134). McCutcheon says all too little about what he means by “differing somewhat,” except that his scholar of religion as a “critical rhetor” is “more timid” in making her normative claims (135). This type of hedging and obscurantist rhetoric (“differing somewhat” and “more timid”) is especially egregious coming from a self-styled “rhetor” as brashly unequivocal as McCutcheon.9

MCCUTCHEON’S (UN)CRITICAL CARETAKING

This brings me to McCutcheon’s own uncritical caretaking. As is well known by now, McCutcheon demands that the study of religion be a dialectical science alternating between theory building and postmodern critique. As such, he says, it thereby fundamentally distinguishes itself from “the institutions we study” because the “participants in the latter attempt to insulate their claims and institutions from historically grounded analysis and critique” (2001: 61). Of course, McCutcheon prohibits “participants in the latter” from deploying the tools of “postmodern critique” for themselves, either self-reflexively or as critical participants in the study of religion (as he acknowledges, to take one

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9I am not the first to make criticisms of this sort. Any reader of the *JAAR* will find them repeated numerous times in critical reviews of McCutcheon’s work. For some examples articulated with greater patience and measured tones than I care to muster here, see Tyler Roberts (2005). Also helpful is Roberts’ earlier “Exposure and Explanation: On the New Protectionism in the Study of Religion,” *Journal for the American Academy of Religion* 72/1: 143–172.
example, many postmodern theologians have done\(^{10}\)). His reason for so prohibiting them, he says, is that “we do a tremendous disservice to the critical potential of postmodernism if we leave it to theologians to set the ground rules for how postmodern critique enters the study of religion” (2001: 61). In other words, “we” dare not allow theologians to “set the ground rules,” however postmodern. Yet nothing justifies McCutcheon’s declaration prohibiting this other than the default privileging of his own reductively naturalist commitments with all the ontological presuppositions that they bring in train. Moreover, the privilege he claims for his naturalist tradition to “set the ground rules” regarding who deploys postmodern critique, and how, simply insulates his own tradition from critique. Thus, it is not merely the case that McCutcheon is engaged in caretaking of his own tradition here. This is flagrantly uncritical caretaking.\(^{11}\)

Again, to insist that genuine scholarly study of religion must be free of concerns about justice is to adhere to an activist agenda (an antiactivist activism). And to assert that the scholar of religion must situate him or herself as a critic of a certain type within the “naturalist tradition of inquiry” (as McCutcheon defines it) is to be the caretaker of a tradition (however naturalist that tradition may be) (2001: 60). McCutcheon attempts to persuade his readers that this tradition ought to be the default tradition in the study of religion, a tradition for which any would-be scholar of religion must take responsibility (for instance, as McCutcheon says, responsibility in not letting the postmodern theologian “set the ground rules” for deploying postmodern critique [61]). In these ways, McCutcheon’s use of his own dichotomy is intrinsically self-contradictory. One wishes that McCutcheon would be more self-critical in his caretaking. Yet such claims are the bread and butter of his corpus.

Thus, I delight in conscripting McCutcheon’s brittle dichotomy for my own purposes; however, my use of it might contradict his “authorial intent.” It provides a pithy bit of jargon with which to begin. First, at one particular moment (well more than a decade ago), the phrase struck a chord as a caricature of McCutcheon’s self-described position in what he labeled the so-called theory wars. At that moment, the dichotomy might have served at least as a reminder that, methodologically, the study of religion was largely the progeny of a distinctively

\(^{10}\)For an update on the recent state of these developments, see for example, Graham Ward (2012). Another illustrative point of engagement appears in Garrett Green (2006: esp. 24–29).

\(^{11}\)This form of uncritical caretaking stands in contrast to the introspective tone of Talal Asad et al. (2009).
Protestant Christian theological modernism. Indeed, these are elements of shared history to be historicized and subjected to critique.

ON PUBLIC RELEVANCE

This point brings me to the utter irrelevance and isolation to which McCutcheon’s account of “the public study of religion” condemns itself in spite of its own prescriptions about publicity. McCutcheon concedes his agreement with Eliade that the scholar of religion ought to have a role as “public intellectual.” He only differs about the means (2001: 142). One does this by deploying methodologies and theory in order to incessantly point out “slippery logic, rhetorical flourishes, and ideological strategies” to which human community and institution-formation are prone (2001: 142). He later describes how he deploys one such methodological instrument upon his students, demonstrating that they can have no certainty that a piece of chalk he tosses into the air will necessarily fall back into his hand just because their previous experience suggests it will. How more effectively to waken his students from their dogmatic slumbers, teaching the lesson that we all have “pre-operative theories” that organize experience? McCutcheon would do better to explore the deeper implications of this insight for his own traditioned commitments. Any serious reader of Foucault (whom McCutcheon prescribes as essential to his “critic’s” repertoire) or Thomas Kuhn (among so many others) would be aware that the empirical verifiability McCutcheon places as a sine qua non for his definition of a scholar of religion is itself predicated on a leap of faith into the historically situated (and political) practices and presuppositions of empirical verification. Alas, McCutcheon does not seem to recognize this.

In no way am I suggesting that the scholar of religion ought necessarily seek for his or her work to be “publicly relevant,” nor that contemporary relevance is some sort of telos for the scholar’s vocation. And yet, for better or worse, “public relevance” has moved in the direction of the subject matter studied by scholars in the study of religion. This is true whether the subject matter is the massacre of Sikhs at a temple in the Punjab, or in Oak Creek, Wisconsin; whether that subject matter takes up the role of religiously self-identified institutions, roles, and repertoires in the raping and conscription of children in Congo, or the raping of children in parish churches across the United States; whether that subject matter takes up civil religion and religious nationalism as analytical categories for grasping the torrent of Islamophobic resistance to the “Ground Zero Mosque” in lower Manhattan, or the thirty-six other instances of public opposition to mosque and Islamic
center construction unfolding at that same time all across the United States; whether that subject matter take up the so-called Israel lobby or cultural operations of Christian Zionism in the United States, or religious and secular Zionisms in Israel; or whether it take up the role of religious traditions and commitments in various instances of the dozens of truth and reconciliation commissions set up in the wake of mass violence and atrocity in societies from South Africa to Chile; whether it take up the advisory roles of some U.S. Christian evangelicals in fashioning laws banning homosexuality in Uganda, or the fusion (and confusion) of religious and political commitments and cultural performances in eating a deep-fried “chicken” sandwich to protest same-sex marriage in the United States.

These are tip of the iceberg examples. Yet they indicate that the public relevance of the scholar of religion’s engagement with his or her subject matter has been thrust upon him or her, like it or not. Of course, no scholar need or must take issue with these. And yet, conversations and arguments have been emerging all across the academy for some time now. The question for any scholar with ears to hear is “do you have anything intelligent to say?” Do you have something to say beyond incessantly rehearsing abstracted methodological platitudes and quickly self-parodying trivialities of “slippery logics” “rhetorical flourishes” “ideological strategies”? Anything beyond “endless methodological foreplay”?

Do you have anything to say that results from actually applying the tools of critique to concrete cases? So my article begins. I apply tools of critique (i.e., Said’s accounts of orientalism and colonialism, Butler’s account of relationality, and the theoretical study of nationalism) to concrete cases of religious nationalism, derive a critically historicized approach to human rights, in order to say something of analytical, critical, and ethical substance about the blinders worn by the Israeli peace camp in a breadth of its manifestations (religious and nonreligious, Zionist and post-Zionist).

And yet, for someone who prescribed “our cross-disciplinary cooperation” as “essential to our survival within the academy” (2001: 214) McCutcheon, it turns out, is desperately out of touch with what that project requires here and now, and thus he misunderstands and misconstrues the indispensability of my article for his own prescriptions for a “public role” to be tenable at all. As a Political Science colleague of

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12Jeffrey Stout applies the phrase in a different context, but it is equally applicable here. See Stout’s, *Flight from Authority*, p. 147.
mine has recently recognized (almost begrudgingly), “religion is back in a big way.” Various scholars from across the academy perceive this insight as their own epiphany, in large part due to the failure of predictive power of their secularization models, or their recognition of the historical and philosophical un-tenability of secularism (as a theory of modernization) as an interpretive and explanatory frame. In fact, arguably, currently, there is emerging an entire industry of “religion experts” across the social sciences, and especially in the various subfields of political science. Many of these theorize religion as if Said’s Orientalism and postcolonial and cultural critique have never happened. Or, if they do (as in Hurd’s discursive work), their theorizing still leaves room “for the contextual and thick study of religion as it relates to political structures, inter- and intra-group conflicts, histories, and memories” (i.e., my own exposition of subaltern and counter-hegemonic discourses within the Jewish-Israeli contexts).

Accordingly, I critique religion and IR theorizing for their categories, with concrete cases at hand, and my own normative commitments self-reflexively in view. (Of course, there will always be silences in need of being subjected to further critique and revision.) I do this by drawing together the ad hoc resources and insights that the study of religion broadly construed affords (including the limited usefulness—once it has been aufgehoben—of McCutcheon’s blunt dichotomy). At their best, colleagues in Law, International Relations, Political Science, Sociology, Public Policy, Economics (etc.) want to know, regarding the cases above (and so many more): Have you anything pertinent to say?

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