

57 Russell T. McCutcheon: *On the Co-Dependency of the Religious and the Secular* (2007)

Introduced by Christoph Kleine

Introduction

Russell Tracey McCutcheon is a prominent Canadian-American scholar of religion. Born in 1961, he obtained his PhD in religious studies from the University of Toronto in 1995. He has been a professor at the University of Alabama since 2001. His areas of interest include the history of scholarship on myths and rituals, secularism, theories of religion, and the relations between the classification of ‘religion’ itself and the rise of the nation-state.

In theoretical discussions in the study of religion, McCutcheon has become known above all for his critical work on the use of the concept of religion. In the article excerpted here, he emphasises that the concepts of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ are co-dependent, and do not refer to any external reality. They are a conceptual pair that was coined in modern Europe, and serve specific purposes as “socio-rhetorical devices.” According to McCutcheon, they are not, however, “analytic categories helpful in accounting for the creation, the successful reproduction, and the export of the worlds that their use has made possible.” McCutcheon’s critique of regarding the concepts of the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ as quasi-natural categories referring to real things, rather than realising that they are a strategic means of social classification in competitive economies of signification, has become extremely influential in the academic study of religion. Similar arguments can be found in the contributions by Fitzgerald (text no. 10) and Horii (text no. 22), excerpts of which are printed in this volume.

Bibliographical Information

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Christoph Kleine, Leipzig University, Research Centre Global Dynamics, KFG 2344 “Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities”; Leipzig University, Faculty of History, Art and Area Studies, Institute for the Study of Religions

I propose that the modernist invention that goes by the name of secularism is in fact religion's alter-ego (see Arnal 2000, 2001), that it is the *only* means for imagining religion even to exist, because "the religious" and "the secular" are, as my friend Willi Braun has phrased it, co-dependent categories. To put it another way, for those interested in talking about this thing that goes by the name of religion, that is somehow presumed to be distinguishable from that other thing that we commonly know as politics – the one premised on private experience and the other on public action – then *there is no beyond to secularism*. [. . .] [T]he conceptual pairing of the secular with the category religion provides the intellectual and social conditions in the midst of which, as phrased by Talal Asad, "modern living is required to take place" (2003: 14). Moreover, [. . .] [p. 178/179] attempts to assess the adequacy of secularism for studying religion not only presupposes the existence of the secular; but also effectively reproduce that location where this act of assessment – an act constitutive of our modern living – is taking place, the site made possible by these categories' use: the liberal democratic nation-state.

In entertaining this thesis we need to keep in mind Emile Durkheim's basic, though crucial, insight [. . .] that sacredness is a contingent attribute that results from actors *choosing* to implement sets of negotiable social rules; after all, as he famously defined it, people, places, actions, and things are sacred *not* because of some inner quality expressed or manifested in the world but, instead, because they can all be "set apart and forbidden" – highlighting both *placement* and *regulation*, activities that beg us to inquire just who did this setting apart, for what reason, and apart from what or whom. Asking such questions is therefore premised on our post-Durkheimian ability to entertain that, just as with early anthropological studies of other peoples' use of such designators as "clean" and "unclean," our "religious" and "secular," our "sacred" and "profane," do not name substantive or stable qualities in the empirical world, one pre-dating the other or one superior to the other.¹ Instead, [. . .] they are mutually defining terms that come into existence together – what we might as well call a binary pair – the use of which makes a historically specific social world possible to imagine and move within; a world in which we can judge some actions as safe or dangerous, some items as pure or polluted, some knowledge as private or public, and some people as friend or foe. [. . . p. 179/180 . . .]

[S]ocial groups use a variety of local devices to navigate decisions over which of the many items of the empirical world get to count as significant and thus memorable. We would therefore be wise to avoid either universalizing or concretizing these devices [. . .]. To make this point, consider the now widely used, and thus taken for granted, conceptual pairing of citizen/foreign national. Although it may be correct to assume

¹ [note 5 in the original] Keeping in mind Mary Douglas's biting critique of Durkheim exempting his own society's cherished truths (i.e., science, mathematics, etc.) from his own social analysis (see the Preface to the first edition in Douglas 1999), we could say that the fact of our being able to look upon the familiar with the same Durkheimian eyes that we use to see the strange is evidence of the limitations of his original work as well as its profound influence on subsequent theorists.

that “[s]ocial classification is a cultural universal, and categorical differences are coeval with human history” (Lie 2004: 13), as John Lie immediately goes on to observe, we would be doing rather sloppy history if we assumed that the means by which we do this in the modern nation-state were representative of all such social techniques. We therefore cannot elevate our local “citizen/foreign national” distinction to the status of an analytic category quite so easily.

Returning from citizen/foreigner to binaries of more direct relevance to our field, we [...] must be prepared to enter [p. 180/181]tain that our own “religious” and “secular” are, for our purposes as scholars, folk or phenomenological categories. No doubt, they will continue to be useful in our scholarly description of some people’s world-making activities – activities taking place in the very groups that we in the modern liberal democratic world inhabit, as well as those elsewhere who, for whatever reason, have adopted (or, possibly, been forced to adopt) these social techniques. However, without careful retooling, they are *not* analytic categories helpful in accounting for the creation, the successful reproduction, and the export of the worlds that their use has made possible. This very point is nicely made by John Bowen in his new book, *Why The French Don’t Like Headscarves* (2007). Referring to the French term “laïcité,” only roughly translated as “secularism,” he observes that, although French politicians may speak of laïcité as a causal agent or explanatory principle, “[it] does not. . . serve as a useful analytical tool. It makes no sense for a social scientist or historian to ask, ‘Does this policy reinforce laïcité?’” (2007: 2). Why? Because, as he points out, “there is no historical actor called ‘laïcité’: only a series of debates, laws, and multiple efforts [on the part of various social participants with differing interests] to assert claims over public space” (33). [p. 181–184] Names and identities are not neutral and thus inter-changeable descriptors of stable items in the natural world. Instead, they are devices that we use and argue over while making a world that suits our differing purposes. [p. 184/185]

Apparently, then, classification is a lot more complicated than common sense tells us. Taking this into account, our work on the religious and the secular will have to keep in mind the historical nature and practical utility of our terms, no longer treating them as natural kinds. Instead, we must be open to scrutinizing the socio-political worlds and practical interests that the very existence of such a term as “religion” helps to make possible and persuasive. As well, our scholarship will no longer be able to spin nostalgic yarns, as did that lecturer on African religions, about a simpler, pre-colonial time comprised of [p. 185/186] undisturbed religious identities. Instead, it will have to be open to entertaining, that, as phrased by the French scholar, Jean-François Bayart, “the crystallization of particular identities . . . took place *in the colonial period*, under the combined (but possibly conflictual) action of the foreign occupiers, their autochthonous collaborators, and their adversaries” (2005: 88; emphasis added). As he then concludes: “Far from pre-existing the state, primordial groups, whether religious or ethnic . . . are the more or less poisonous fruit of the state itself” (emphasis added). Much as a discourse is but the sum total of a series of practices, Bayart argues that there are no authentic, pristine social identities that move through time or which can be violated

by alien naming conventions. Instead, there are only a series of historically discrete strategies, always developed and deployed in situations of difference (possibly contest), for specific reasons and with practical effects, that work to establish and normalize this or that thing that we come to call an identity – strategies working in concert with, or against, those practiced in other locales.

The question for scholars is whether we will take all of this into account when studying not only distant and unfamiliar social practices but local and familiar ones as well, prompting us to be more methodologically self-conscious in our labors, studying how and for whom such strategies work, or whether we will simply adopt those that suit us – or at least the “us” that we each wish to be perceived as – thereby adopting the illusory but nevertheless useful identities that they make possible.

Now, I recognize that I have used the term “methodologically self-conscious” but without elaborating on it. When using this phrase, I have in mind the work of Jonathan Z. Smith: “The student of religion,” he writes, “must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study” (1982: xi). Why? Because, as he memorably stated in the lines immediately preceding those that I have just quoted, “Religion is solely a creation of the scholar’s study. . . . Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.”

On my reading, Smith is arguing that when used as a name for a universal, experiential trait which, due to the varying sites of its public expression, comes in a relatively small number of more or less stable forms [p. 186/187] (known today as “the world’s religions”), then we have little choice but to conclude that the modern concept “religion” – complete with its emphasis on belief over behavior and experience over expression – was developed in that research laboratory we call the modern academy; it is an academy whose history parallels the movement from the so-called “the Age of Discovery” and “the Enlightenment,” through the colonial era, and past the rise of the nation-state. For it is during this period that reconnaissance reports from abroad prompted Europeans intellectuals and administrators to confront human novelty of a magnitude previously unknown. The category “religion,” for those reworking their society’s epistemological and socio-political grids in light of these new Others, became a handy indicator of intangible likeness in the face of what seemed to be overwhelming empirical difference. For [. . .], “[t]he question of the ‘religions’ arose in response to an explosion in data” (Smith 1998: 275). In fact, it was this explosion of data that led to what Tomoko Masuzawa (2005: 147–178) has characterized as the fissure in the once taken-for-granted European sense of its direct link to the ancient Greeks and Hebrews – a gap resulting from such novel developments as the philological studies of Sanskrit made possible by colonial contact.

[. . . p. 187/188] Throughout the period that we know as modernity, then, the category “religion” became a shorthand designation for the degree to which “they” were or were not like “us.” If they were, then the question was just how much; but if they were not, then a number of designators was at hand for naming the new found alien peoples’ beliefs, behaviors, and institutions: along with the already mentioned term “magic,”

such classifiers as apostasy, pagan, heathen, native, savage, uncivilized, and superstition come to mind.² [. . .]

The category “religion,” then, used as a designator of an intangible likeness shared across cultures is therefore just as Smith says: solely a creation of the modern scholar’s study [. . .], one situated in a world where [. . .] the prior, taken-for-granted economy of social affinity and estrangement was being shaken in a rather dramatic manner. That people around the world eventually adopted this category [. . .], such that now people worldwide routinely conceive of themselves as having an active, inner religious life that is distinguishable from their outer political activities, does not undermine Smith’s point. Rather, it provides compelling evidence of the transportable utility of a distinction originally developed several centuries ago to address challenges to a specific set of identity claims. [. . . p. 188/189. . .]

Instead of keeping in mind “that our current practice is haunted by moral compromises made centuries ago” (Spiegel 2005: 12), and thereby recognizing that the faith/practice, belief/institution, and religious/political distinctions, from the seventeenth-century on, have been strategic contrasts [. . .] our historical amnesia allows us to ontologize these tactical distinctions. The result is that we have turned them into commodities that can be exported to distant shores and distant times, as if all groups naturally manage issues of social affinity as we do. Much like the current young generation’s inability to imagine a world without computers, scholars who see religion lurking around every cultural corner fail to imagine the category as our historical invention, helping us to satisfy our intellectual interests and to achieve our practical goals, thereby making it a crucial building block in our social world. [p. 189/190. . .]

But how, specifically, does this conceptual pairing accomplish all this? [. . .] Having created these binary types, they can now be used to mark a discursive boundary of a structure that manages the various items that constitute actual historical existence. [. . .] Once the arbitrary limits are established – either by persuasion or coercion – discourse can then take place, identities conceived, comparisons entertained, and judgments made.

Which brings me back to the category “religion:” [. . . p. 190/191. . .] I suspect that the modern invention of “belief” and “practice” and “the sacred” and “the secular,” continue to play a central role in regulating that high stakes game that we call modern

2 [note 12 in the original] This point is nicely made by Chidester in his historical study of comparative religion in colonial era southern Africa (1996). Unfortunately, much like some authors already cited, he recognizes the historical nature of our terminology while yet universalizing that to which it supposedly points, as in when he faults early colonialists’ failure to “recognize the existence of indigenous religions in southern Africa” (xv). If “religion” – both word and concept – is part of a bundle of conceptual and social relations that we trace to early modern Europe, then “indigenous religions” is no longer a neutral descriptor, as it is often used by such scholars. Instead, it is an imperial move to project backward in time not only our local taxon but also the social interests that drive it and the social relations that it helps to make possible.

identity. For the concept “religion,” in naming that which is understood to be both universal and ineffable, when paired with the concept “politics,” identifying that which is particular and tangible, establishes an always useful structure capable of regulating the many social differences that jockey for any group’s attention, energy, and resources – especially those large scale groups we call nation-states, in which common identities are presumed to unite their millions of citizens, all of whom also identify themselves with a variety of differing (often competing, sometimes contradictory) sub-groups.

I say that this discursive pairing is always useful – and thus is easy to keep on our minds – because the goal posts of this particular game are, as already stated, ideal types that inhabit discourse and can thus be applied in virtually any situation. For the historical world of public particularity that goes by the name of “the secular” is populated by far too many discrete items for the concept secular ever to be useful in any act of signification – for secular names a cacophony of unregulated stimuli, somewhat akin to white noise. And as for the term “religion”? Well, ask anyone who has tried to define it and you’ll learn that its utility is linked to its inability to be defined – much like someone telling you, “I can’t quite put it into words” – making it applicable to virtually any situation yet meaningless, because it has no agreed upon limits. So, when juxtaposed to the infinite particularity of what we classify as the political world, that which goes by the name of religion turns out to be our version of the utterly empty – and, because of that, the immensely useful – French phrase, “*Je ne sais quoi*.” In the midst of saying nothing, it seems to say everything.

So, whereas “the secular” says far too much (i.e., is over-determined), “the sacred” says far too little (i.e., is under-determined). Whereas one category is too full the other, as termed by Ernesto Laclau (1996), is an empty signifier.³ On their own, they are therefore useless concepts; but, when used as a binary pair, they set malleable limits that make almost anything possible to say. [. . . p. 191/192. . .]

As for our pairing of the sacred and the secular, what lies between their coordinated use? None other than the idea of the largest social formation we’ve yet come up with: the nation-state, with its regulating conventions (e.g., the police, the courts) that are used to negotiate the ever changeable limits of novelty and tradition, affinity and estrangement. They do so not only by defining certain items as more vegetable than fruit, but also as more allowable than prohibited, more private than public, more religious than secular – simply put, more empty, more inconsequential, more tolerable, and therefore in less need of governance, or more full, more consequential, more intolerable, and thus in greater need of regulation. [. . . p. 192–197. . .]

So what’s the moral of this tale? As a scholar of social classification, I see no reason to assume [. . .] that the categories “religion” and “politics,” or “sacred” and “secular,”

3 [note 14 in the original] For example, as phrased by Sullivan, “[t]here is no accepted legal way of talking in the United States about the vast array of religious beliefs and practices that are represented” (2005: 100). While for some this may seem to be a shortcoming of U.S. law, according to this paper this is necessarily the case.

refer to actual qualities in the real world. Instead, they are nothing more or less than co-dependent, portable discursive markers whose relationship we can date to a specific period in early modern Europe, and whose utility continues to this day [. . .]. Developing just such a self-consciousness in our use of the categories that we have invented, distinguishing those that are phenomenological and descriptive from those that are analytic and redescriptive, strikes me as one of the more important pieces in the methodological puzzle in front of those trying to go beyond secularism in their studies of religion. [. . .] I don't see why we cannot understand such distinctions as church/state, private/public, and sacred/secular as socio-rhetorical devices that have stayed on our [p. 197/198] minds because they continue to prove so useful to a variety of groups over the past several hundred years, all of which have tried to regulate – to divide and rule – their highly competitive economies of signification.

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