penn state university press

Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion by Russell McCutcheon; The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning and Rhetoric by Russell McCutcheon
Review by: Mark Hulsether
Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal, Vol. 87, No. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2004), pp. 501-509
Published by: Penn State University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/41179267
Accessed: 10/02/2013 12:23

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Penn State University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*.

http://www.jstor.org

Russell McCutcheon
Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion
Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001

The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning and Rhetoric
New York: Routledge, 2003

Critics, Caretakers, and Some Other Forms of Religious Studies Undreamt of in the Work of Russell McCutcheon

The title of this brief reflection alludes to the famous words of Hamlet: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." I will conclude by making a related comment about Russell McCutcheon's writings on that slippery term, "religion," and the practice of studying it in the academy. My point is not that McCutcheon is completely unaware of the issues I will raise. Rather, I will argue that he tends to force interpretive choices that misperceive and devalue certain forms of religion in a way that severely truncates the range of religious studies he is able to appreciate. This is not to deny that McCutcheon, like Horatio, can perceive many important things before he reaches the limits of his imagination. Thus, we should proceed by clarifying both the strengths and weaknesses of McCutcheon's work, focusing on two recent collections of his essays, *Critics Not Caretakers* and *The Discipline of Religion.*

The academic study of religion faces similar challenges to many other scholarly fields which encompass a range of disciplines, subjects, and associated methods and theories. Given the extreme diversity of things that "academic study of religion" can mean, its scholars must be reflexive about how they are being "academic" and what they mean by "religion" — a term which we

Soundings 87.3-4 (Fall/Winter 2004). ISSN 0038-1861.

This content downloaded on Sun, 10 Feb 2013 12:23:55 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

must not take for granted as self-evidently clear, or even intelligible, for all people whom the field studies as examples of "religiousness." Neither the need for reflexivity nor the challenge of working in a decentered field is unique to religious studies. Cultural studies faces similar challenges on a larger scale, and disciplines such as history and literary studies have related internal debates. However, the study of religion faces distinctive challenges as it clarifies its place in the contemporary academy. One reason is that the study of religion emerged largely from Protestant seminaries and theological schools, and it still carries forward some of its work within such schools. Another reason is the historical influence of scholars, such as Mircea Eliade, who stressed that the core aspects of religious experience must be studied on their own terms, as opposed to being reduced to historical or social scientific categories.[1] This is not to say that Protestant theology and Eliadean standoffishness toward social science were the sole building blocks of the field. It *is* to say that a reaction against these influences led to intense efforts to create boundaries for the field, with associated strong feelings about the purity and/or pollution of scholars who fail to respect the boundaries deemed appropriate.

Since the publication of his 1997 book, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse of* Sui Generis *Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, Russell McCutcheon has been an energetic and single-minded advocate of policing the boundaries between what he sees as the respectable scholarly study of religion, as opposed to disreputable modes of study that presuppose religious commitments. This includes not only scholarship on theology and ethics, but also scholarship that uses primary sources in ways that seem to take claims of religious insiders at face value.[2] Amid the many ways to undertake study that is scholarly by McCutcheon's definitions, he champions a naturalistic and socio-political approach indebted to the Durkheimian and neo-Marxian traditions. Building on work by Jonathan Z. Smith and Bruce Lincoln, he advocates redescribing ideas and practices conventionally understood as "religious," explaining their meaning not at face value but as socio-political rhetorics that legitimize particular social formations. Typically, such legitimation happens through declaring totalized truth claims off-limits to criticism and/or through constructing "religiousness" as ahistorical and subjective. For Mc-

This content downloaded on Sun, 10 Feb 2013 12:23:55 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Cutcheon, the role of critical scholar, as opposed to a "caretaker," is to demystify and debunk claims about religion, both by devotees and by academics who are tainted by religious commitments.

Recently, McCutcheon has published two collections of articles written in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. *Critics Not Caretakers* features two relatively systematic introductions to his approach: "Redescribing 'Religion' as Social Formation" (first published in the edited volume, *What is Religion?)* and "A Default of Critical Intelligence? The Scholar of Religion as Public Intellectual" (first published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*).[3] Other articles restate this approach and apply it to topics including postmodernism, religion and film, the study of myth, the naturalistic theories of Walter Burkett, the 1993 World's Parliament of Religion, and the teaching of introductory courses in religious studies. McCutcheon often attacks scholars whom he finds deficient in their boundary maintenance; in this volume, they include Karen Armstrong, Diana Eck, Martin Marty, Benson Saler, William Paden, and critics of his *JAAR* article. *The Discipline of Religion* continues in the same vein, but with fewer systematic statements to anchor the collection. Among other things, McCutcheon tackles work by Lincoln and Eliade, the state of the academic job market, the theology of Karl Barth, mapping subfields within the American Academy of Religion, a response to criticism by Ivan Strenski, theodicy as an everyday political discourse, McCutcheon's own experiences at international religious studies conferences in South Africa and Toronto, and writings by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Several of these pieces appeared during the same years covered by *Critics Not Caretakers* and apparently did not make the cut for the earlier collection. Thus, a reader who wants to select just one of these books might be better served by *Critics Not Caretakers*, even though *Discipline of Religion* contains some articles that are more recent.

Notwithstanding this ambitious list of subjects, McCutcheon's articles tend to be variations on a theme: identifying forms of religious studies that he perceives as dominant and attacking them on the grounds that they are too conservative and inadequately theorized. For McCutcheon, a paradigmatic example of the dominant approach would blend five characteristics. The first is an understanding of religion as subjective and privatized,

This content downloaded on Sun, 10 Feb 2013 12:23:55 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

even to the extent that "the very concept of religion as such — as an entity with any distinction whatsoever from other human phenomena — is a function of the same processes and historical moments that generate an individualistic concept of it."[4] The second is a deployment of such suspiciously privatized understandings, not simply in efforts to identify "religious" aspects of particular cultures — for example, religion in Australia, religion of the Kwakiutl — but as part of an even more suspicious and ungrounded search for a least common denominator of "human culture" across many times and places. Alternatively, this search may be for harmonious inter-religious dialogue tending in this same direction. Against scholars who seek to use large-scale comparative schemes as frameworks for pursuing more concrete and fine-grained analysis, McCutcheon typically suggests that a failure to do this with adequate historical specificity may be nearly inevitable, given the wrong categories and methods of comparison.

The third tendency McCutcheon criticizes is how humanist ideals about universals and/or cross-cultural dialogues often coexist with neo-colonial agendas and/or ideologies of corporate globalization. This does not mean a critical and self-conscious coexistence, but rather an obliviousness toward and complacency about such coexistence enabled by background assumptions that focus on *sui generis* religious experience, that frame religion as something distinct from socio-historical power, and that dovetail with a conservative politics of nostalgia. For McCutcheon, Eliade is the paradigmatic example of such problems, and Eliade's youthful involvement in Romanian fascism is a key to understanding his tradition. Recently, Diana Eck has been gaining on Eliade as McCutcheon's most vilified scholar; McCutcheon charges her with reflecting and reinforcing a liberal culture based on corporate globalization.

McCutcheon is not the sort of theorist who is willing to interpret anything with deep existential meaning as "religious." He argues that human practices should not be deemed religious unless they involve perceived relations between humans and "non-obvious beings" such as gods, demons, and supernatural forces. Attention to such beings is a fourth characteristic of dominant approaches to religion, as McCutcheon perceives them. He writes that the term "religion" is descriptively useful "to distinguish talk of the gods from talk of the family or talk of the nation

This content downloaded on Sun, 10 Feb 2013 12:23:55 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

state" — even though he hastens to add that "the category 'religion' has no explanatory value whatsoever," so that scholars need to redescribe religious talk in socio-political categories.[5]

Moreover, McCutcheon assumes that religious people cannot understand gods and other "non-obvious" forces in terms commensurate with Enlightenment reason. Thus, a fifth characteristic of dominant approaches to religious studies, in McCutcheon's view, is excessive respect for discourses that are irrational. He is not at all interested in the forms of modern religious thought that inquire about overlaps between theologically warranted and rationally warranted truth claims. Even to pursue such questions would be, for McCutcheon, an example of blurring basic boundaries between second-order scholarship (which he considers non-theological by definition) and first-order data in need of redescription. Such an inquiry would be polluting.

Insofar as a majority of these five themes — privatized understandings of religion, ungrounded and ahistorical comparisons, complicity with colonialism, belief in gods, and irrationality — come together in particular instances of religious practice and/or scholarship in religious studies, the result is the antithesis of the publicly accountable critical thought that McCutcheon advocates. At his best, McCutcheon writes with verve and passion to show that these themes can and do come together. In a typical article, McCutcheon starts with an example of one of the above themes that has caught his eye, perhaps from an academic publication, popular film, or news report. He proceeds to restate his rationale for rejecting the assumptions about religion informing his example and to suggest a socio-political redescription. Frequently, he is persuasive in showing how religious commitments involve forms of false consciousness; due to the workings of discourses of and about religion, people may be constituted as parts of social formations and rendered unable to perceive and to criticize these formations. This is the strength of his work.

Unfortunately, McCutcheon tends to see such problems arising virtually any time that scholars say anything positive about religion in any sense, even if they seem to be discussing non-privatized understandings of religion, anti-colonial praxis, or arguments that are historically grounded and fully reflexive. There is slippage in his argument. On the one hand, he launches well-grounded complaints that religious studies discourse frequently

This content downloaded on Sun, 10 Feb 2013 12:23:55 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

posits conservative individualist meanings for religion, thus screening out other dimensions of the practices that are being analyzed. On the other hand, his definitions of religion ensure that any practice that comes under the definition will be individualist, irrational, and conservative. In both cases, we deal with categories that screen out certain dimensions of "religious" practice. However, in the second case, McCutcheon becomes an *example* of the limits that he complains about in the first case. All too often, his work is parasitic on the positions he attacks. In other words, he works from categories much like theirs — although he deplores rather than promotes them — but has difficulty seeing beyond them. His background definitions make it difficult for him to perceive certain forms of religion at all, even when they share many of his criticisms and socio-political values.

This problem is exacerbated by McCutcheon's efforts to police a hard boundary between theology and religious studies. He puts great stress on the idea that no one can know where to look for "religion" in the first place without clarifying one's definitions. Although this general point should be uncontroversial, there are various ways to clarify such definitions. For example, one might proceed by taking cues from some existing group that is commonly understood as religious, then engaging in a back and forth dialectic which tests this group's historical practice against scholarly definitions. This is *not* McCutcheon's approach. He is strongly committed to a three-level approach in which second-order scholars and third-order meta-theorists control the definitions. Moreover, he insists on explanatory and reductive definitions, as opposed to merely descriptive ones. Such definitions constitute religious insiders as first-order "data" to be explained, as opposed to agents that deserve a voice in academic discussions.

McCutcheon gives mixed signals on the question of whether there should be one preferred way to frame such definitions — if so, definitions would presumably be framed according to his naturalistic, social-rhetorical approach — or whether there should be a more "postmodern" multiplicity of ways of framing questions, within which he simply suggests one possible way to be scholarly and reflexive. Increasingly, he has supported the second option. For example, he grants that there is room for both sociological and psychological hypotheses to explain religious

This content downloaded on Sun, 10 Feb 2013 12:23:55 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

data within a framework of "pluralistic methodological reductionism."[6] Nevertheless, he often leaves an impression that the range of his approved approaches is rather narrow. He is unambiguous and passionate about excluding any appeals to a postmodern diversity of research paradigms, insofar as this raises the specter of "caretakers" maintaining a foothold in the academy. The most common face he puts on this specter is the pollution of academic discourse by conservative Barthian theists, although he ranges among all five of the themes mentioned above.

What should we make of McCutcheon's way of seeing the world? It is crucial to break apart his sweeping indictment and test it case by case. In fact, the five components mentioned above, which he sees dominating discussions of what religion is and what the study of religion should be, are not always dominant as one moves across the sub-fields of religious studies. Moreover, they are independent variables. McCutcheon tends to see them circulating as a package, or at least as a loose ensemble which creates the dominant *ethos* of the field, such that one component tends to imply the others, and when in doubt, he can treat the package as a default. This leads him to give consistently sour readings, even when he treats approaches that share common ground with him on a given front, since he can highlight (or impute) negative implications on another front. For example, if one pointed to a religiously informed approach that shared his critique of religious privatization, he might exclude that approach from scholarly conversations on the grounds that it was theistic. If one pointed to a theistic approach that was not vulnerable to his charge of irrationalism, he might reject it as complicit in the legacy of colonialism.

The fact that these themes are actually independent variables, and that they may or may not be dominant in particular cases, is a crucial matter. Even though McCutcheon's paradigmatic model does match much existing work, the model also blinds him to other existing work. This model often prevents him from interpreting existing work at its strongest, and it greatly oversimplifies his picture of the field. Consider that one can find privatized religions with or without gods, discourses about gods that are colonial or anticolonial, practices of anticolonialism that build on humanist ideals or critique them, humanist ideals that

This content downloaded on Sun, 10 Feb 2013 12:23:55 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

may or may not presuppose religious privatization, and so on. Scholars by no means agree whether religions require a discourse about gods and, if so, whether the sorts of forces and mysteries associated with gods must be conceptualized in ways incommensurate with reason. Academic theology — to say nothing of theologically informed social ethics — comprises much more than conservative Barthian theology.[7] Whereas McCutcheon interprets the history of religious studies largely through Eliade, the field also draws on many other approaches that are harder to discount as tainted by ahistorical theology, from the approaches of Emile Durkheim and Clifford Geertz to the approaches of postmodernist and feminist scholars. Indeed, McCutcheon's central polemic against Eliadean phenomenology echoes the battles between functionalist and idealist approaches which many scholars have been trying to transcend since the 1970s. Importantly, many scholars are convinced that some forms of religion are capable of perceiving the problems of religious individualism which McCutcheon calls "religion as such" and of working from within religious discourses and communities to counteract these problems. Thus we must not prejudge questions about what José Casanova calls "deprivatized religion," nor discourage concrete investigations into the diverse ways that an antimodern politics of nostalgia may function as we move from case to case.[8]

McCutcheon is not completely unaware of these insights; indeed, at times he presupposes them but treats them as if they described an unweeded garden in need of discipline and order. Nevertheless, these insights rarely come into focus in his work because his underlying model forces one to make a choice: Is one a debunking non-religious "critical scholar" or a duped religious devotee captured by a discourse that is (by definition) individualist and irrationalist? Is one a crypto-religious "caretaker" of such dupes, a sort of misbegotten monster who is obscuring the clear boundaries between scholarship and theology? Anyone who does not fit one of these options must be *forced* to fit. Furthermore, unless one is unambiguously in the "scholarly" camp, other scholars have the prerogative to "redescribe" one's positions toward this end.

For these reasons, McCutcheon's work is ultimately unsatisfying as a guide to mapping the discipline of religious studies, as a

This content downloaded on Sun, 10 Feb 2013 12:23:55 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

framework within which to compare a range of research paradigms in the field, or as a model for publicly engaged cultural criticism. True, his criticisms of specific topics often hit home. Moreover, his is a significant voice within larger conversations about methodological reflexivity and socio-political awareness that are important for everyone in the field. Thus, both *Critics Not Caretakers* and *Discipline of Religion* are important contributions, provided that readers remain alert to their limitations. Nevertheless, there are more forms, both of practices known as "religious" and of scholarship in the interdisciplinary field of religious studies, than can be dreamt of using the tools and definitions he offers.

Mark Hulsether
University of Tennessee

NOTES

1. See Brian Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1996).
2. *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse of* Sui Generis *Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997); McCutcheon has also served as a coeditor of the journal *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion,* and he coedited (with Willi Braun) *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 2000).
3. Thomas Idinopolus and Brian Wilson, eds., *What is Religion? Origins, Definitions, and Explanations* (Leiden: Brill, 1998); McCutcheon, "A Default of Critical Intelligence? The Scholar of Religion as Public Intellectual," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65.2 (1997): 443-68.
4. Quote from William Arnal, "Definition," McCutcheon and Braun, *Guide to the Study of Religion* 32. McCutcheon cites a similar quotation from the same page of Arnal's article in *Discipline of Religion* (276).
5. McCutcheon, *Critics* 23.
6. *Discipline* 152.
7. Tyler Roberts develops this point in explicit relation to McCutcheon in "Exposure and Explanation: On the New Protectionism in the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72.1 (2004): 143-72.
8. José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994). See also June O'Connor, "The Scholar of Religion as Public Intellectual: Expanding Critical Intelligence," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66.4 (1999): 897-918; and Mark Hulsether, "New Approaches to the Study of Religion and Culture," *New Approaches to the Study of Religion,* ed. Peter Antes, Armin Geertz, and Randi Warne (Berlin: Verlag de Gruyter, 2004) 344-82.

This content downloaded on Sun, 10 Feb 2013 12:23:55 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions