MATERIALIZING RELIGION

The New Materialism in Religious Studies

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I seek to explain and contextualize the movement of New Materialism within the field of religious studies. I argue that New Materialism is deeply influenced by Steven Katz's and Wayne Proudfoot's critiques of methodologies premised on unmediated experience, leading New Materialism to strive to overcome the protectionism supported by such methodologies. I further contextualize this discussion against the background of an antagonistic relationship between theology and religious studies. Following the work of scholars as Donald Wiebe, I show how New Materialism presents itself as a corrective to the encroachment of confessionalism into the field of religious studies. Finally, I assess the strengths and possible problems of adherence to a strict New Materialist program. New Materialism brings a positive influence to the field as it opens productive avenues of research. However, if left unchecked, New Materialism runs the risk of impoverishing religious studies by substituting one form of protectionism for another.

Dans cette thèse, je cherche à expliquer et contextualiser le mouvement du Matérialisme Nouveau dans le domaine des études religieuses. Je soutiens que le Matérialisme Nouveau est profondément influencé par les critiques de Steven Katz et Wayne Proudfoot des méthodologies fondées sur l'expérience directe, amenant le Matérialisme Nouveau à chercher à surmonter le protectionnisme soutenu par de telles méthodes. De plus, je contextualise davantage cette discussion sur le fond d'une relation antagoniste entre la théologie et les études religieuses. Suite aux travaux des chercheurs comme Donald Wiebe, je montre comment le Matérialisme Nouveau se présente comme un correctif à l'empiètement du confessionnalisme dans le domaine des études religieuses. Enfin, j'évalue les forces et les problèmes possibles de l'adhésion à un programme Matérialiste Nouveau strict. Le Matérialisme Nouveau apporte une influence positive dans ce domaine en ouvrant des voies productives de la recherche. Toutefois, si ce n'est pas réglementé, le Matérialisme Nouveau court le risque d'appauvrir les études religieuses en substituant une forme de protectionnisme par une autre.

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INTRODUCTION

In her article "Is Nothing Sacred?" (1996) in the now defunct literary journal *Lingua Franca*, Charlotte Allan attempts to illustrate a significant conflict in the field of religious studies. Proceeding from a conversation she has with Ron Cameron, former chairman of the religion department at Wesleyan University, Allan considers "a rump group of scholars, some organized, some not [who] has been pushing for more than a decade for a dramatic redefinition of the word 'religion.'"[1] Scholars in this group, including Cameron himself and Donald Wiebe, of the University of Toronto, wish to do away with terms as "religious experience" and "sacred" in favour of a more scientifically rigorous vocabulary. In addition, according to Allan, they are adamant about rooting out theological and confessional interests within the academic study of religion. The underlying ethic of this program is neatly summed up in the words of Wiebe as "[t]here's the *academic* study of religion, and there's the *religious* study of religion – we believe in the academic study of religion."[2] Allan offers a general survey of the field of religious studies into which she attempts to situate this movement, although her explication of the scholarly position of this movement itself is, perhaps due to space, rather limited. However, the publication of the influential *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (1998) a scant two years later, provides more support for the scholarly trend identified by Allan.

In the introduction to *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* editor Mark C. Taylor explains that the collection does not attempt to impose an overarching methodology or narrative upon the essential character and ends of the critical study of religion. It instead focuses on

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[1] Charlotte Allan, "Is Nothing Sacred?" *Lingua Franca* 6 (1996): 31.
[2] Donald Wiebe as quoted in "Is Nothing Sacred?" 32.

presenting "[a]n incomplete web of open and flexible terms"[3] intended to spur contemporary scholars to take up the challenges of the academic study of religion. In his review of the book, however, David Chidester recognizes a tendency within a majority of the pieces to focus on the material aspects of religion and religious practice. This is a focus that appears programmatic. While reading through the collection, it becomes clear that, in the contemporary configuration of the field, "belief, experience, inner states, and spirituality are out; embodiment and materiality are in."[4] This tendency to focus on materialities, which Chidester terms "new materialism," is so prevalent that he takes "the liberty of appropriating the text as a manifesto for a new materialism in the academic study of religion."[5]

There is enough similarity between Chidester's and Allan's characterizations of the intellectual programs they identify, that it is reasonable to assume that they are speaking about the same general movement within religious studies. The term "new materialism" is utilized in a recent article by Stephen S. Bush critiquing one of the essays included in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*.[6] Bush's article, written twelve years after Chidester's, makes clear that the tendency that Chidester discerned in the collection has in fact become an important force within the area of religious studies. This New Materialism can be seen in influential works by, among others, Donald Wiebe, Robert Sharf, Robert Segal, Ivan Strenski, and (with a "post-modern" twist) Russell McCutcheon. These writers, although not actively taking on the label "New Materialist," share many commonalities in their approaches and methodologies, including a strong position regarding the most legitimate means of drawing the acceptable limits for the

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[3] Mark C. Taylor, "Introduction," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 16.
[4] David Chidester, "Material Terms for the Study of Religion". *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no.2 (2000): 369.
[5] Ibid., 378.
[6] Stephen S. Bush, "Are Religious Experiences Too Private to Study?" *The Journal of Religion* 92, no. 2 (2012): 199-223.

academic study of religion. These commonalities allow one to conclude that they can be classed as representatives of the type of movement that Chidester and Allan see at work in the field. Thus, the following work will borrow Chidester's term "New Materialism" to identify this trend. Whether or not *Critical Terms For Religious Studies* was intended as the manifesto that Chidester would like it to be, it is certainly true that, as a force within religious studies, this New Materialism is now a reality to be reckoned with.

Key Issues

Historians may find New Materialism surprising in a field heavily influenced by phenomenology of religion and its antagonism to reductive views of religion. By breaking with traditions within the academic study that see religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon irreducible to material conditions—and with methodologies that privilege inner states and experiences of the "sacred", "numinous", or "holy"—New Materialism presents a decisively different direction for religious studies than may have been envisioned a half-century ago. However, the problematization of the field in both method and object of study has left the phenomenological approach, and the field in general, in a nebulous state.[7] As this problematization has come primarily from within the field itself, it can more accurately be termed a self-problematization. New materialism stands as an important and current response to this self-problematization of the field of religious studies, particularly in the guise of phenomenology of religion.

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[7] See, for example, Russell T. McCutcheon's *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Talal Asad's "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27-54. Also, any one of the many critiques of Mircea Eliade and his "creative hermeneutics", and criticism of the phenomenology of religion more generally in, for example, Hans Penner's *Impasse and Resolution: A Critique of the Study of Religion* (New York: Cassell, 1999).

> However, as Chidester argues in the article cited above:
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> this new materialism cannot be equated with any old materialism, whether naturalist, empiricist, positivist, cultural, historical, dialectical, or otherwise, as long as it retains the critical term 'religion' as both its disabling problem and its enabling prospect for analysis. (378)

This difference between a "new" and "old" materialism is predicated on religion as a centering term. As a new movement, however, and one whose identifying term is used more often by commentators and critics rather than New Materialists themselves, it is difficult to see immediately what the contours of this New Materialism are. This fact occasions this study, in which I will ask: what is New Materialism and what exactly does it bring to the discussion as a response to the self-problematization of the field of religious studies?

Methodology

Through a review of authors cited above, I will examine New Materialism both in its form and method. By closely examining the work of writers that seem to fall under the label of New Materialist (notably Segal, Wiebe, Sharf, Strenski, and McCutcheon), the following will focus on the methodological parameters set out by New Materialist theorists. The question of methodology, however, is closely tied to the question of what constitutes the proper object that the methodology in question aims to study. Any assertion of one proper method, whether explicitly or implicitly, lends definition to a proper object to be studied. The object here is religion and it is the term "religion" that lends New Materialism its unique flavour. If Jonathan Z. Smith is correct in his assertion that "religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study,"[8] it is necessary to decipher what definition of religion is occasioned by the New Materialist methodology and program of study.

[8] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.

Within this examination of New Materialism, it is critical to address that this new approach, although perhaps still in its infancy, has a history. Rather than attempting a comprehensive study of the history of the field of religious studies, I will use the New Materialist texts to set a program of research into a limited history of the positions that guide New Materialism.[9] Much of the scholarship in this area draws important connections to criticism of the phenomenological approach to mysticism in the late 1970's and early 1980's by Steven Katz and Wayne Proudfoot. As the criticism brought out by these two scholars center around the experience as an analytical category within the field of religious studies, this will form the basis of the discussion in Chapter 1. By briefly tracing the history of experience as a category, and the criticism of methodologies premised upon it, the chapter will strive to situate New Materialism within the historical discussion. Chapter 2, utilizing programmatic work by Donald Wiebe and Robert Segal, will build upon the first chapter by further situating the New Materialist position within a larger debate regarding the relationship between religious studies and theology. The discussion will also examine criticisms of Mircea Eliade by Ivan Strenski as a case study of the New Materialist antagonism to theological and spiritualist approaches to the study of religion. Through contextualizing the New Materialist movement within these larger discussions a positive conception of New Materialism can be further developed through an in-depth understanding of the method and approach against which New Materialists align

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[9] It is important to note that New Materialism as a philosophical movement, as developed in the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1980) and continued now in such thinkers as Alain Badiou (2009) and Slovoj Žižek (2007), will not be my focus. It is certainly true that this type of New Materialism has some significance for the field of religious studies as evidenced by recent volumes that attempt to take philosophical precepts of this form of New Materialism and bring them to bear on scholarly discussion of religion, creating in this way interesting approaches for the field. A good example of this can be found in Manuel A. Vásquez's *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (2011). However, the New Materialism about which Chidester speaks does not appear to share the same philosophical framework. The writers under consideration do not cite nor avail themselves of the vocabulary or organizing concepts germane to the philosophical understanding. It would thus be reasonable to assume that Chidester provided the moniker without intended reference to the already existent movement within philosophy. Thus, the primary focus of this work will be on the way New Materialism, as understood by Chidester, has been developed as a program for scholarly inquiry within religious studies primarily in North America.

themselves. Finally, Chapter 3 will assess the strengths of the New Materialist by examining contemporary work by Bruce Lincoln and David Chidester. This chapter will also examine possible weaknesses of New Materialism suggested by recent criticisms brought forward by such writers as Tyler Roberts and Clayton Crockett.

Concluding Problematic

Having developed a comprehensive overview of the New Materialist position, I will examine the methodological commitments of New Materialism. This portion of the thesis will focus on the redrawing of religion as a material and public phenomenon. This redrawing is clearly visible in Bush's attempt to reconceptualize "experience" as a working category by bringing it "out of the recesses of unassailable interiority and situate it soundly within material and social practices."[10] This reconceptualization of religion in material terms is significant in how it can differentiate New Materialism from "old" materialisms. At the same time, it also brings important presuppositions of new materialist thought to light. By championing such a conception of religion it becomes clear that New Materialism, while distancing itself from previous essentialist conceptions of religion, still shares with them a commitment to delineating a proper object that is religion, in order that the scholar may study this object. In essence, New Materialism has replaced one problematic determinate conception of religion with a new, but no less determinate, conception. The final portion of the thesis will attempt to reflect on the presupposition guiding the new materialist re-inscription of religion to bring its limits to light. It will be necessary here, not to determine whether the new materialist conception is itself

[10] Stephen S. Bush, "Are Religious Experiences Too Private to Study?" *The Journal of Religion* 92, no. 2 (2012): 215.

problematic, but rather assess the limits in general of a strategy that attempts to codify religion into a proper object in order that it may be adequately studied.

CHAPTER 1

EXPERIENCE IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

The New Materialist program of study can be read as a response to earlier approaches to religious studies that put particular focus on the personal and private experience of the devotee. By shifting the focus of research to material, social, and political concerns, New Materialism presents itself in contradistinction to such methodologies. By examining approaches to religious experience premised on private unmediated experience, and subsequent criticisms of such positions, it becomes easier to historically situate this portion of New Materialist discourse. Through such a discussion it will be possible to place New Materialist rhetoric within a historical continuum regarding the place of experience within the study of religion.

The first order of business will be to narrow the scope. The breadth of scholarship regarding the category of experience, and its intersections with religion, is too vast to cover adequately in such short overview. Rather, the aim of this chapter will be to narrow in on a small number of key thinkers whose discussion of the role of experience in religion and religiosity is influential in the academic study of religion. To this end, the chapter will begin by presenting a brief overview of scholarship in the realm of religious experience in the early through late mid-twentieth century. Discussion will then focus on a buck in the prevailing trend precipitated by works of Steven Katz and Wayne Proudfoot. The criticisms of the sovereignty of experience as a protective strategy, masked as an interpretive tool, opened the way for the shift in scholarship evidenced in New Materialism. To draw out this connection I will focus on the work of Robert Sharf and his critique of experience. The hope is that, in drawing this

trajectory, it will be possible to situate the New Materialist movement in religious studies as part of a larger discussion within the discipline in which the methodological programs laid out by New Materialism can be seen as a critical continuation of an earlier discussion regarding the role of private immediate experience.

Critique of Classical Notions of Religious Experience: Steven Katz and Wayne Proudfoot

Classical Notions: William James and W.T. Stace

At the beginning of the twentieth century William James (1842-1910) published his now classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). In this work James isolates, among other things, four marks of mystical experience: 1) ineffability; 2) noetic quality; 3) transience; 4) passivity.[11] These four characteristics effectively set the blueprint for the way scholars would view the category of mysticism, and religious experience more generally, for much of the twentieth century. Of the four characteristics, it is ineffability that most directly speaks to the concerns of New Materialism. For James, the ineffability of religious experience is "the handiest of the marks" within his typology in that it "says immediately that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words."[12] This means, "mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect."[13] Just as it is nearly impossible to explain the smell of roses or the taste of chocolate to someone who has never experienced them, so too is the case with mystical experience. Thus, for James, mystical states are attended by an internal certainty of feeling, but one that cannot be adequately expressed to those who have not had this experience. James sees the impossibility of communication as related to the content of

[11] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Mentor, 1958), 292-293.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid., 293.

the experience in terms of the "overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute."[14] The nature of such an experience, whose essence is unity with the absolute, cannot be adequately captured by concepts, which require identification of discrete characteristics.

James's characterization of religious experience as ultimately ineffable and more akin to feeling than states of intellect places religious experience in a separate domain from other human experiences. As seen above, James grounds his assertion in an understanding of the core of mystical experience as concerned with human contact, or submersion within, the "Absolute." Such an understanding tacitly accepts the reality of the absolute, inferring its existence from the supposed ineffability of the experience, while at the same time using it to support claims of ineffability. Despite this possible circularity in James's reasoning, the uniqueness of the experience is made clear. The ineffable nature of mystical experience means that there is a portion of mysticism that cannot be analyzed from the outside but, rather, can only be known through association. Furthermore, given James's view that ineffability is directly tied to the core of the experience as contact with the Absolute, the portion of mystical experience which escapes rational outsider analysis is perhaps the most important part. As a characteristic of religious experience, it is ineffability that most clearly places the experience in a unique realm that requires personal acquaintance in order to be fully understood. By characterizing religious experience as, at its core, ineffable the door is opened to consider mysticism as a unified category of experience, unbound by the specific religious and cultural particularities of varying traditions.

Since James, a generation of commentators has accepted ineffability as a marker of mystical experience and one need only flip through a journal on mysticism to see the term,

[14] Ibid., 321.

often uncritically, attached to the mystical state.[15] Many scholars of mystical experience tend to accept ineffability as natural to the mystical experience considering the profundity of the experience itself. Arthur Deikman, for example, considers that ineffability may stem from "a revelation too complex to be realized"[16] while William Ernest Hocking speaks of the "other-than-theoretical relation to the object,"[17] which makes subsequent objective description impossible. A slightly different perspective is taken by C.J. Arthur, who speaks of the "radical unlikeness" of what is experienced. For Arthur, a mystic could say his experience was ineffable "if there were no threads of comparison between a particular experience and anything else he had ever experienced, if no effective appeal to likeness could be made to stitch together known and unknown."[18] Regardless of how exactly ineffability is viewed in this context, for many scholars ineffability remains a fundamental characteristic of the religious or mystical experience. Since such a focus on ineffability guarantees that all articulations of such experiences cannot fully capture mystical experience, some prominent scholars like Ninian Smart, Evelyn Underhill, and Walter T. Stace, have drawn a strong distinction between religious experience in general and conceptual descriptions of it specific to various traditions. In this way, ineffability opens the door to positing a unique essence common to all mystical experience that acts to ground all specific articulation of this experience.

Much of the understanding surrounding ineffability focuses on a distinction between the pure experience of the mystic and the conceptual gloss introduced to describe and explain the experience after the fact. Evelyn Underhill, for example, claims that "Real" knowledge "always

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[15] Most examples in the following paragraph are drawn from the collection *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. Richard Woods (New York: Image, 1980). For further examples see Paul Henle, "Mysticism and Semantics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 9 (1949): 416-22 or K. Pletcher, "Mysticism, Contradiction, and Ineffability," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 10 (1973): 201-11.
[16] Arthur J. Deikman, "Deautomatization of the Mystic Experience," in *Understanding Mysticism,* 257.
[17] William Ernest Hocking, "Mysticism as Seen through Its Psychology," in *Understanding Mysticism,* 225.
[18] C. J. Arthur, "Ineffability and Intelligibility: Towards an Understanding of the Radical Unlikeness of Religious Experience," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 20, no. 2 (1986): 113.

implies an intuitive sympathy more or less intense" that is immediate and that "analytic thought follows swiftly upon the contact."[19] Ninian Smart, on the other hand, draws attention to the fact that religious terms can be interpreted with varying degrees of ramification. Thus, if a mystic says God, a Christian listener "presupposes such propositions as that God created the world, God was in Christ, etc."[20] If this degree of ramification is brought into what the mystic says, then the mystic must be understood to be speaking of a determinate concept. However, it is important to note that, according to these thinkers, this ramification is a function of the terms available rather than the experience itself. The religious experience is both private and prior to the conceptualizations. As the experience itself is understood to be wholly ineffable, the concepts that derive from it can only ever be approximations of the "truths" inherent in the experience. Although, in discussions of their experiences devotees naturally make use of the vocabulary supplied by their traditions with the rich ramifications attached to it, this is a matter of later interpretation rather than constitutive of the experience itself. A clear and worked out articulation of such a position is given in the work of W.T. Stace.

In *Mysticism and Philosophy* (1961), Stace begins his study by outlining the presuppositions that the scholar brings to the subject matter. A key presupposition for Stace is the importance of making "a distinction between a mystical experience itself and the conceptual interpretation which may be put upon it."[21] Stace admits that, for mystical as well as sense experience, "[i]t is probably impossible in both cases to isolate 'pure' experience."[22] Regardless of the difficulties, and Stace cautions that they should always be kept in mind, it is incumbent on the scholar to attempt to disentangle the two as much as possible, mystical experience itself

[19] Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism: A Little Book for Normal People* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1914), 4-5.
[20] Ninian Smart, "Interpretation and Mystical Experience", in *Understanding Mysticism*, 84.
[21] W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 31.
[22] Ibid.

and its conceptual expression. He proffers that this will help one to adequately analyze the mystical experience as such. Stace continues by elaborating two different types of mystical experience; extrovertive and introvertive, each with their own set of, sometimes overlapping, characteristics.[23] For the present discussion it is significant that ineffability is attributed to both types of experience, albeit in slightly different ways. Introvertive mystical experiences can be classed as ineffable due to their internal character which presents similar problems for articulation as any purely internal state. In the case of extrovertive experience, on the other hand, Stace grants only that they are "[a]lleged by mystics to be ineffable."[24] Stace elaborates on this further in the chapter entitled "Mysticism and Language," in which he makes the distinction between the experience and the memory of it.

Clearly utilizing the distinction between experience and interpretation, Stace grants that the experience itself is ineffable, as for him it is an experience of absolute unity where the division of data necessary for conceptualization cannot be present, however the memory of the experience need not be. Stace points out that mystics do indeed write and speak of their experiences utilizing concepts that appear to capture it but insists that "concepts arise only when experience is being remembered and not while it is being experienced."[25] Although granting conceptualization to interpretation, and so providing a foothold for the scholar's study, Stace still places the mystical experience in the bounds of ineffability. Here, along with Smart and Underhill, Stace interprets the mystical experience as distinct and, at least in theory, separable from the subsequent articulation and conceptualization.

[23] Ibid., 79, 89, respectively.
[24] Ibid., 79.
[25] Ibid., 306.

Critique I: Steven Katz

It was in an academic climate strongly influenced by such thinkers that Steven Katz published his article "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism" (1978). This piece strove to overturn the prevailing assumptions functioning within the study of mysticism. From the outset Katz takes issue with a commonly accepted schema that has been posited in three distinct but similar theses. He characterizes them as follows:

> I) All mystical experiences are the same; even their descriptions reflect an underlying similarity which transcends cultural or religious diversity.
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> The second, more sophisticated, form can be presented as arguing:
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> II) All mystical experiences are the same but the mystics' *reports about* their experiences are culturally bound. Thus they use the available symbols from their cultural-religious milieu to describe their experiences.
>
> The third and most sophisticated form can be presented as arguing:
>
> III) All mystical experience can be divided into a small class of 'types' which cut across cultural boundaries. Though the language used by mystics to describe their experience is culturally bound, their experience is not. [26]

It is Katz's intention to show that these types of schema, regardless of their level of sophistication, are mistaken as they are "too reductive and inflexible, forcing multifarious and extremely variegated forms of mystical experience into improper interpretive categories which lose sight of the fundamentally important differences between the data studied."[27]

In order to show the error of the above schema, Katz focuses the brunt of his attack on the distinction between experience and interpretation so important to writers such as Stace. Katz states unequivocally that "*There are* NO *pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences*"[28] and that this is true no less for so called "mystical" experiences as for any other type of human experiences.

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[26] Steven Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 23-24.
[27] Ibid., 25.
[28] Ibid., 26.

The reason for this is that "*all* experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways."[29] Katz applauds Stace's recognition that the ultimate separation between experience and interpretation may be impossible. However, rather than acceding to this impossibility, Stace in vain attempts to separate these two to focus on the pre-interpreted experience. For Katz, this move is fundamentally mistaken because such a separation is untenable on principle. Thinkers like Stace fail to realize that the relationship between experience and belief is not one directional but in fact "contains a two-directional symmetry: beliefs shape experience, just as experience shapes belief."[30] Katz's position is that our experiences are fundamentally shaped by the concepts and expectations that we bring to them. Due to this, the scholar must attend carefully to the presuppositions that mystics bring to their experience if one is to have any hope of understanding this experience.

Katz notes a possible response to his position focusing on the limitations of language. He begins with the position championed by many students of mysticism that "all mystics are wary about using language to describe their experience, and many are absolutely opposed to its employment, arguing a form of 'I don't mean what I say and I don't say what I mean.'"[31] Through this type of rhetoric, scholars can argue that the experience is independent of language due to the latter's inherent limitations and inability to capture the experience. However, Katz maintains that "this 'escape' is no escape at all"[32] as a refusal to grant any literal meaning to the language utilized by mystics leaves theorists unable to support any interpretive positions regarding mystical experience whatsoever. If what mystics say has *no* literal meaning, then the

[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., 30.
[31] Ibid., 40.
[32] Ibid.

content of such experiences "cannot serve as the *data* for any position … certainly not the view that all mystical experiences are the same, or reducible to a small class of phenomenological categories."[33] Ultimately, for Katz, insisting on the absolute ineffability of religious experience cancels the mystic's testimony from any claim to validity of analysis and so "is no foundation for a phenomenology of mysticism or a typology of comparative mystical experience."[34] Rather, "the proposition 'x is PI (Paradoxical and Ineffable)' has the curious logical result that a serious interpretation of the proposition neither makes the experience x intelligible nor informs us in any way about x, but rather cancels x out of our language."[35] This means that, in order to attempt any analysis of mysticism it is necessary to abandon an insistence on ineffability in order to work with the data that mystics provide in the forms of accounts and theories of mysticism. As Katz makes clear throughout his chapter, the breadth of differences and significant theoretical assumptions in various branches of mysticism simply cannot support a thesis that champions the inherent similarity of these experiences. If one accedes to the idea that mystical accounts, at least in some way, actually portray the experiences of mystics, one must abandon an essentialist stance that speaks of a unified category of mysticism across tradition in favour of a recognition of many mysticisms, each distinct and unique to a given tradition.

Critique II: Wayne Proudfoot

Katz's criticisms of the reigning methodologies premised on private unmediated experience were followed quickly by Wayne Proudfoot's *Religious Experience* (1985). In this work, Proudfoot agrees with Katz's claim that "*There are* NO *pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences*" and much like Katz, believes that mystics' expectations and prior commitments

[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid., 56.
[35] Ibid.

determine the type of experience in question. In this way religious or mystical experience is no different than other types of human experience and Proudfoot clearly adopts the same epistemological presupposition as Katz in his understanding of mysticism. Due to this, Proudfoot can be considered a direct continuation of Katz's attack upon the rhetoric of experience. At the same time, Proudfoot's approach is slightly more nuanced than Katz's, plumbing more deeply the function and motivation behind the rhetoric. Proudfoot's work is also more historical in its attempt to provide answers to these questions. To this end, Proudfoot devotes much of the book to a critique of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), the celebrated Protestant theologian and pioneer of essentialized religious experience. Proudfoot notes that the drive to associate religious experience with a pre-reflective affection or emotion rather than intellectual knowledge was largely motivated by two concerns: the search for what is common among religious experiences across traditions and the desire to differentiate the religious from other dimensions of human experience. According to Proudfoot, the first of these "is roughly descriptive and the second apologetic, though they cannot be separated. Both are given their first and most explicit expression in Schleiermacher's addresses on religion."[36] In order to examine these, Proudfoot sets out on a lengthy discussion and critique of Schleiermacher's theory of religion.

Schleiermacher, in response to what he saw as the taming of religion by Kant, set out to uncover a core of religion that is independent from rational and ethical propositions. Schleiermacher makes a distinction between theory and practice in the realm of religion. Although theoretical concepts are not abandoned, for Schleiermacher they are secondary to the active aspect of religion, namely, piety. "The contemplation of the pious is the immediate

[36] Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 75.

consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things, in and through the Eternal."[37] Such contemplation, however, is not accomplished by rational analysis but rather only through "immediate feeling."[38] In Schleiermacher's eyes, religion at its core is a distinct form of awareness than knowledge, which is based on rational propositions. Schleiermacher, as we find later in James, posits the core of religion in a private and subjective pole of experience. Unlike we find it in James, Schleiermacher does not limit his thinking in this regard to mysticism but sees the subjective and private experience of piety as the core of religion as such. An important aspect of Schleiermacher's thought here, and one that would play a significant influence on later generations of scholars, is the thesis that the sphere of feeling is prior to and unmediated by rational thoughts and judgments. For Schleiermacher, feeling is prior to the division of reality necessary for the sake of knowledge. It is in the sphere of feeling that we directly experience the primal unity of reality and thus feeling, rather than concepts or ethics, is where the true meaning of religion can be found, not through knowledge but contemplation.[39] In the religious feeling of piety or dependence "Schleiermacher claims to have identified a religious moment of consciousness which is never experienced in its pure form but accompanies all other moments and can be described only by a process of abstraction"[40] precisely because it is a moment that touches reality purely and prior to rational judgment.

Proudfoot's criticism of Schleiermacher rests in what he discerns as an incompatibility in his thought. The core of Schleiermacher's piety is absolute dependence, which he describes as "the self-consciousness which accompanies all our activity, and therefore, since that is never zero, accompanies our whole existence, and negates absolute freedom" in that "the whole of our

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[37] Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers,* trans. Richard Crouter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 36.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., 35-9.
[40] Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 157.

spontaneous activity comes from a source outside of us."[41] For Schleiermacher this source is God and it is his understanding of God that lends cogency to his theory of piety and religion. However, as Proudfoot makes clear, Schleiermacher's view lacks internal consistency. Proudfoot distinguishes Schleiermacher's position as incorporating two components, in that Schleiermacher first "contends that ideas and principles are foreign to religion and that piety is a matter of feeling, sense, or taste distinct from and prior to concepts and beliefs. Second, he identifies piety as a sense and taste for the infinite, an identification that requires reference to God, to all, or the universe."[42] The problem in this arises because the "identification of a moment of feeling as religious assumes not only reference to God or the infinite as the object of the feeling but also a judgment that this feeling is the result of divine operation."[43] God is the ground of all existence and, thus, it is through reference to God that the feeling associated with piety accesses that which is always prior to conceptualization.

Proudfoot, however, contends that "[p]iety cannot be independent of concepts and beliefs and at the same time an intentional state that can only be specified by reference to objects of thought and explanatory claims."[44] Although Schleiermacher's language varies, it is crucial to his theory that the religious feeling be, either, caused by God, or, that the devotee believes that it is caused by God.[45] The first of these relies on the reality of the religious object, the second relies on a prior concept, something that Schleiermacher's theory is meant to preclude. Schleiermacher is not ignorant of this and takes pains to maintain that the conceptual connection does not run from a previous concept of God that is then identified as the ground of

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[41] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 2nd edn., trans. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 16, quoted in Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 116.
[42] Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience,* 15.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid., 14.

the religious experience but *vice versa*. The religious feeling identified as absolute dependence moves one to realize that the individual agent cannot be the ground for all spontaneous action but, rather, that there must be some other, non-contingent force, on which all actions of the agent depend. This force is then given the name "God" only after the fact. Proudfoot may be correct in assessing this argument as a new version of the cosmological argument, which of course opens it up to the same well-known criticisms leveled at the traditional version of this argument.[46] However, even if one is willing to grant Schleiermacher's claim that the prior concept of God is not necessary for his view, problems still remain in labeling the original experience as pre-conceptual. As Proudfoot rightly points out, the feeling of absolute dependence holds within itself weighty concepts. Proudfoot explains that "[t]o say that the religious person is conscious of being absolutely dependent is to attribute to him or her the concept of dependence and that of complete dependence. The concept of dependence is not only a sophisticated one but one that is concerned with casual explanation."[47] Thus, although Schleiermacher characterizes the moment of piety as a feeling in order to bypass intellection, the particular feeling involved is too complex to accurately be understood as prior to any conceptualization.

Although Proudfoot agrees with Katz in rejecting the ineffability of religious experience based on some notion of pure experience unmediated by concepts, like Katz, Proudfoot attests to the preparation and concepts that inform and shape the experience of the practitioner. He sees the rhetoric of pre-conceptual experience as a protective strategy on the part of both religious devotees and pietistic thinkers like Schleiermacher. According to Schleiermacher, "thought can

[46] Some classical examples can be found in David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Indianapolis: Hackett. 1980) and in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1998).
[47] Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 19.

only embrace what is sundered,"[48] meaning that the intellectual operation always involves a process where the primal unity of religion is divided up into categories necessary for intellection. Thus, any moment of the religious experience that one can focus on intellectually is not the actual moment of religious experience as that "moment is, by definition, one that underlies and precedes our reflective consciousness."[49] However, defining the moment in this way is not a purely descriptive claim but holds within it an important strategy to protect the religious object from analysis. The criticism, which Proudfoot applies equally to Schleiermacher, Rudolf Otto, and William James, is that "[t]he rules have been drawn up so as to preclude any naturalistic explanation of whatever feeling the reader may have attended to in his or her own experience. Such restriction guarantee ineffability and mystery."[50] Proudfoot insists that such restrictions were shaped by the conflict between religion and science, starting during the Enlightenment. Thinkers like Schleiermacher, wary of the encroachment of scientific explanation on the domain of religious piety strove to distance religious practice and belief from naturalistic explanations. To this end, "Schleiermacher's claim that religious experience is independent of concepts and beliefs functions as a protective strategy. It precludes any conflicts between religious belief and the results of scientific inquiry or any other beliefs we might acquire in other connection."[51] The popular acceptance of ineffability as a marker of mystical experience demonstrates that this protective strategy seems to have been quite effective in informing the direction of religious scholarship. Like Katz, Proudfoot here presents a strong case for abandoning ineffability as a real constituent of religious experience. However, unlike Katz, Proudfoot does not reject its connection to religious experience altogether.

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[48] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 41.
[49] Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 40.
[50] Ibid., 118.
[51] Ibid., 233.

Proudfoot notes that, if many mystics attest to the ineffability of their experience, it is incumbent on scholars to take these claims seriously in some way. This does not mean that the scholar should, as we have seen is the case in much scholarship, accept that the experience is *in fact* ineffable and in this way grant ontological existence to some idea of a "holy" or ultimate ground which transcends language and concepts and to which the mystic has access. Instead, Proudfoot presents a method of looking at ineffability by examining the operative logical rules of the language of mystical experience. He writes, "If it is to be an identifying characteristic of mystical experiences that they are ineffable, then the rules that govern the use of the concepts that inform those experiences must be such as to preclude the experience being captured in words."[52] Here one can see the difference in emphasis between Proudfoot's view and those expressed by the scholars quoted above. Here the experience is not ineffable because it is too profound or unlike anything thus far experienced. Rather, ineffability is built into the rules of the experience. In other words, in order for a mystical experience to be considered true, it *must* be incommunicable. In this way "the experience is constituted, in part, by an implicit rule or operator prescribing that for any symbolic system the experience is ineffable in respect to it."[53] Viewed in this way ineffability is "prescriptive and evocative rather than descriptive"[54] in that every mystical experience, to be considered as such, must be *taken to be* ineffable.

By focusing on the function of ineffability, Proudfoot once again underlines the protective strategy at play behind the rhetoric of experience in the phenomenological tradition. By taking claims of ineffability seriously, he brings out an important aspect of religious language. His assessment of ineffability opens the understanding of the protective strategy as structurally built into the language of mysticism and religious experience. Religious language,

[52] Ibid., 127.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid., 128.

on this view, works in a way to forestall analytical analysis of the religious grounds of the given faith. This analysis importantly moves beyond a critique of scholarly work on religion, although such a critique is certainly present. Proudfoot is clear that religious experiences are not in fact pre-conceptual, unmediated experiences of some absolute reality. However, the devotee must accept it as such in order to stay within the limits of religious practice. Ineffability creates a limit point beyond which the devotee is not able to plumb analytically while staying true to their tradition. Beyond this point it must be accepted that descriptive language fails, leading to a vocabulary of metaphor and evocative language meant to gesture toward the substance of the experience.

Proudfoot's analysis is significant for the study of religion because it marks out an important distinction between religious practitioners and religion scholars. Although, practitioners are limited by the operative grammatical rules of religious language, scholars are not, and should not, be so. By accepting ineffability as a true aspect of religious experience, scholars have erred by taking a formal *grammatical* aspect of religious language as an *ontological* marker of the religious experience itself. In this way, scholarship on religion may have produced work that gives insight into the way that practitioners relate to their own traditions. However, by artificially limiting the sphere open to inquiry, such scholarship has failed to provide adequate analysis of religious experience. The important point made by Proudfoot is that scholars, in their professional work, are not themselves mystics. The protective strategy of insisting on immediacy and ineffability *within* a religious tradition deserves scholarly attention. Analyses like Proudfoot's shed light on the ways that religious traditions function to maintain mystery. However, importing this same strategy into the realm of scholarship, as phenomenologists of religion have done, does not aid in analysis, and in fact

obscures the various ways in which concepts, beliefs, and expectations fostered by religious preparation work to shape the experiences understood as mystical or religious.

Politicizing the Critique: New Materialism

The work of Katz and Proudfoot has, in recent decades, become influential in many sectors, in line with what has come to be known as the 'turn to language' within scholarship. The phrase encapsulates the idea that thought and language are contemporaneous. For New Materialism, these authors' criticisms of unmediated experience and Proudfoot's elucidation of the protective strategy that such rhetoric employs, has been programmatic. Russell McCutcheon, for example, cites Proudfoot in support of the claim that the rhetoric of experience and *sui generis* religion function as a strategy to legitimize the professional interests of religion scholars who wish to carve out a protected area of scholarship to which only they could lay claim.[55] Influences of these two thinkers can also be seen in the work of Robert Sharf, whose essay "Experience" appears in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies,* the work in which Chidester discerned the first strains of what he termed New Materialism.

The Rhetoric of Experience: Robert Sharf

Throughout his essay, "Experience," Sharf takes on the rhetoric of experience in ways very reminiscent of the positions of Katz and Proudfoot. Like Proudfoot, Sharf makes the connection between the rhetoric of unmediated experience and the conflict between science and *religio*, maintaining that the rhetoric served as a useful tool for theologians to forestall scientific inquiry. Such a strategy was just as useful for secular scholars of religion who, by

[55] Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*: *The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 25.

differentiating religious experience from all other forms of human activity, were able to maintain a privileged area in which they could claim expertise. In this way Sharf echoes Proudfoot in maintaining that the rhetoric of experience functioned as a protective strategy but expands the sentiment in terms of "legitimiz[ing] vested social, institutional, and professional interests."[56]

Throughout the piece, Sharf takes aim at what he broadly labels the perennialist position, which sought to find within the immediate experience of mystics the core of all religion as such. Sharf begins his chapter by immediately drawing attention to the difficulties inherent in defining the term, quoting Hans-Georg Gadamer to claim experience as "among the least clarified concepts which we have."[57] As the piece continues, it becomes quite apparent that Sharf's goal is not to bring clarity to the concept, but rather to leverage the lack of clarity in the concept in order to abandon the term entirely. Sharf does this by first attending to the way in which the category has been seen to function within the academic study of religion. Sharf points to the centrality of experience in many theories in which "[t]he meaning of many religious symbols, scriptures, practices and institutions is believed to reside in the experiences they elicit in the minds of practitioners."[58] Referring explicitly to the tradition of phenomenology of religion, founded in many respects on the theories of Schleiermacher, Otto, and James, Sharf also notes the way in which "collective experience" has been used to "overcome cultural bias" in that "[i]f we can bracket our own presuppositions, temper our engrained sense of cultural superiority, and resist the temptation to evaluate the truth claims of foreign traditions, we find that their *experience* of the world possesses its own rationality, its own coherence, its own

[56] Robert Sharf, "Experience," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 96.
[57] Ibid., 94.
[58] Ibid.

truth."[59] In his argument, Sharf sides with Katz in the assertion that there are not, nor can there be, any unmediated experiences. Additionally, relying on Proudfoot, Sharf points to the relatively recent use of experience as a category of scholarship, maintaining that "it is thus incumbent upon us to reject the perennialist hypothesis insofar as it anachronistically imposes the recent and ideologically laden notion of religious experience on our interpretations of premodern phenomena."[60] The influences here are clear. Yet Sharf goes further than either Katz or Proudfoot, to argue for the rejection of experience as an analytical category altogether.

Turning to a modern example, Sharf considers the reported cases of alien abduction. Scholars have historically attended to accounts of mystical experiences in ways that have granted some level of legitimacy to the originary event, which is said to occasion the experience. The scholars cited at the start of the chapter all accepted ineffability based on the notion that mystical or religious experience connects one to some ground of reality that is so profound as to make articulation impossible. However, with the case of alien abductees, Sharf points out that, although the subjects are certainly sincere, people generally do not have a problem in refusing to grant the existence of the originary event. In such cases, as with mystics, there is certainly some cause for what the subjects view as their experience. But in both cases scholars can look to a variety of psychological, social, or other explanations rather than give credence to a real originary event that occasioned the experience. Ultimately, Sharf concludes that "experience is, in essence, a mere placeholder that entails a substantive if indeterminate terminus for the relentless deferral of meaning"[61] and thus "whatever epistemological certainty experience may offer is gained only at the expense of any possible discursive meaning or

[59] Ibid., 94-5.
[60] Ibid., 98.
[61] Ibid., 113.

signification."[62] Rather than lend credence to such claims, and attempt to anchor meaning in something as ephemeral as experience, Sharf maintains that scholars should look at the materialities of religion, to "texts, narratives, performances, and so forth"[63] as their proper objects of study.

Sharf demonstrates the negative impact this over-emphasis on the role of experience has by turning his eye to Western study of Eastern traditions. Sharf notes that there has been a prevailing understanding in the West that sees Eastern traditions as organized around specific mystical or meditative experience as opposed to doctrine and belief. This understanding is so prevalent that, for many, the term Buddhism is almost synonymous with meditation. In "Experience" Sharf chides scholars for uncritically accepting a view of Eastern religious traditions as uniquely focused on mystical practice and attainment of mystical experiences. In fact, Sharf contends that such a reading of Eastern traditions fails to give adequate attention to the actual practice and historical trajectory of these traditions, ultimately producing a picture that is a distortion of actual teaching and practice.

This approach presents a common thread throughout many of Sharf's works. Both "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism" (1993) and "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience" (1995) explore the category of experience within Sharf's personal area of specialization: Zen Buddhism. The popularity of associating the essence of Zen with some form of mystical meditative experience can once again be linked to Japanese nationalists from the Meiji period (1868-1912). As the reformation of Buddhism progressed and New Buddhism began to arise, a group of Japanese intellectuals took it upon themselves to serve as mouthpieces for the new movement. Perhaps the most famous of these is D.T. Suzuki (1870–

[62] Ibid., 114.
[63] Ibid., 111.

1966), but others like Nishida Kitaro (1870-1945) and Hisamatsu Shin'ichi (1889-1980) also played significant roles. It is significant that the intellectual figures so instrumental to spreading Zen Buddhism to the West were more commonly laypersons rather than practicing monks. At the same time, they had been educated in a very Western system and were well acquainted with Western philosophy, and "were naturally drawn to the European critique of institutional religion—the legacy of anticlericism and antiritualism of the reformation, the rationalism and empiricism of the enlightenment, the romanticism of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, and the existentialism of Nietzsche."[64] They saw in this philosophical tradition a means by which to recast Buddhism as a thoroughly modern and empirical tradition, free of the ritualistic trappings of institutional religion. Key to this recasting was a focus on meditative experience with its implication that the true tenets of Buddhism were not superstitious dogma, but a practical and empirical means of reaching a verifiable awakened state. The focus on elucidating the 'pure experience' engendered by meditative practice was central to the work of Nishida, who, in the work of Schleiermacher, Otto, and James, found a useful rubric in which to couch this experience in terms both palatable for and popular in the West.[65] Nishida's work was picked up by his friend D.T. Suzuki, who championed this pure experience as the very heart of Zen. While this focus on meditation squared well with the European intellectual tradition, it also served as another means to assert Japanese cultural superiority.

The focus on experience was, according to Sharf, closely tied up with the rhetoric of *nihonjiron* (Theories/Discussions about the Japanese), which attempted to demonstrate the uniqueness of the Japanese mind. Much of this rhetoric, as witnessed in the works of Soen Roshi (1907-1984) and Nishida, strives to elucidate the inherent differences between Oriental

[64] Robert H. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," *History of Religions* 33, no. 1 (1993): 4.
[65] Ibid., 21.

and Occidental mentalities. *Nihonjiron* ideas play an important part in Nishida's work when, for example, he takes pains "to characterize Japanese culture as a culture of 'pure feeling', which is more emotional, more aesthetic, and more communal than Occidental cultures."[66] The implication in much of this rhetoric is that the Japanese, due to their unique intellectual capacities, are better suited to experience the mystical states which form the heart of Zen practice. Suzuki also participated in such rhetoric, arguing that "Japanese culture predisposes the Japanese towards Zen experience, such that they have a deeply ingrained appreciation of the unity of subject and object, human being and nature"[67] In this way, Zen was touted as a true cosmopolitan tradition whose central tenets were empirically verifiable. At the same time, Japanese nationalists were able to insist that Japan was in a unique position as the natural guardians of this tradition.

Sharf's analysis of Zen Buddhism sheds light on important elisions occasioned by an over-emphasis on experience. The protective strategy imbedded in the rhetoric of experience insists on an anti-reductionist approach in which religious experiences are set apart from all other forms of human activity. However, as Sharf shows in the case of Zen Buddhism, the rhetoric of experience can have implications that are not limited to a realm of religion. By accepting the emphasis on meditative practice as the heart of Zen Buddhist teaching, scholars unwittingly participated in the promulgation of a Japanese nationalist project that was craftily "sold" to the West. In this case, the focus on experience is far from innocent and, not only does it fails to provide adequate analysis of the tradition, but it also has serious political implications. Thus, Sharf struggles to shift the conversation from an exclusive focus on interior private experience. By historicizing this category and exposing the complex political, social, and

[66] Ibid., 23.
[67] Robert H. Sharf, "Experience," 101.

professional interests at play behind its scholarly acceptance, Sharf seeks to unseat experience and methodologies that privilege it. In the place of experience, Sharf places the material expressions of religion as the proper objects of study. Keeping with his anti-perennialist position, Sharf does not attempt to present a competing category that can serve as the working essence of all religion as such. Rather, his critique aims at undermining the desire to impose an artificial "essence" onto the varied field of phenomena broadly termed religious. As with the case of the category of experience, such a project runs the risk of whitewashing important differences of practice and belief. Furthermore, the broad and often indeterminate nature of an "essence," which can serve to cover such a wide variety of phenomena, ultimately leaves scholars with a central focus that is incapable of providing the basis for proper analytic work

Setting the Problematic

Although Sharf's complete discarding of experience may go beyond Katz and Proudfoot, it can be seen as a politicized extension of their positions, one that leverages the scholars' critique to lay out a programmatic stance for the future of religious studies. By arguing for the impossibility of immediate experience, Katz and Proudfoot ushered in a serious problem for the way the study of religious experience and mysticism had been approached for much of the twentieth century. Furthermore, Proudfoot's elaboration of ineffability and the focus on feeling, rather than intellection as a protective strategy, complicated the category of experience further. Although Proudfoot's analysis sheds light on a possible reason for the use and emphasis on ineffability within religious traditions, it presents a strong argument against the acceptance of ineffability as an interpretive category from a scholarly standpoint. There is a significant difference between appreciating ineffability as a grammatical function of religious

language, as Proudfoot suggests, and granting ineffability ontological standing as an actual marker of the experience. Accepting Proudfoot's assessment of a protective strategy suggests that scholars who use ineffability as a marker of religious experience merely perpetuate religious protectionism within the academic sphere, in this way stymieing rather than enriching understanding of the experiences in question. This problematization of popular methodologies focused on unmediated experience, initiated as it was from within the field, could accurately be termed a self-problematization of religious studies. Regardless of one's particular views regarding Katz's and Proudfoot's assessments, their criticisms are weighty enough that they require some response and cannot be simply ignored.

Possible responses could take on one of two forms—either one strives to conceptualize experience in ways that take into account critiques, or else one shifts the focus of discourse and scholarship in a direction that abandons the problematic terminology of experience entirely. The former response may in fact be closer to Katz's and Proudfoot's approaches. Both scholars focus the brunt of their attack on the supposed ineffability and immediacy of religious experience. There is little to suggest that these two scholars find no value in assessments of religious experience; however, their method of analysis is focused on the way these experiences are mediated and shaped by teaching and preparation internal to various traditions. On their view, the analysis of experience could be productive as a way to bring out this connection. At the same time, one could see how experience from this perspective takes on a sort of second order importance. Rather than the experience being seen as formative of the beliefs and practices of a tradition and, thus, the primary moment of importance in analysis of religion, under Katz's and Proudfoot's views, the relationship is reversed. For Katz, the experience becomes derivative of the beliefs and practices that occasion it and the substance of the

experience is better studied through these, rather than through accounts of the experience itself. Proudfoot's view, although allowing for a more integral relationship between ineffability and religious experience, is equally insistent on attending to the material and linguistic context of given traditions rather than treating religious experience as separate from them. Not doing so fails to further scholarly understanding as accounts of the experiences are always clouded by the grammatical rules that guarantee ineffability. Regardless of the response to the problem, in both instances material concerns come to the fore. Sharf's more politicized extension of the critiques opts for the second response noted above regarding self-problematization. Recognizing that the rhetoric of experience plays a detrimental role in the understanding of the field of religion, Sharf prefers, evidently, to discard the terminology of experience altogether. Stephen S. Bush, more recently, begs to differ. In a response to Sharf, Bush suggests ways in which the understanding of experience could be reconfigured so as to abandon claims of immediacy and adequately account for the material conditions at play.[68]

Bush believes that the experiences that religious practitioners undergo can still be of interest to scholars but sees these experiences as connected to social, economic, and political realities. In his example of ecstatic experiences of Pentecostal women, Bush writes that

> A woman's belief that she is in an intimate, personal relationship with God and the religious experiences that she has bolster her own sense of efficacy and significance, transform her interpretation of and orientation toward tragedies and difficulties in her life, and motivate her to actively care for and receive care from others, importantly, other women. It is the experiences themselves, and not merely discourse about experiences, that orient the women to their social and religious world in these ways.[69]

In such cases, Bush maintains, the vocabulary of experience is necessary to adequately analyze these women's participation in their own tradition. Despite Bush's insistence on

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[68] Stephen S. Bush, "Are Religious Experiences too Private to Study?" *The Journal of Religion* 92, no. 2 (2012): 199-223.
[69] Ibid., 221.

the vocabulary, however, it is clear that his interest is markedly different from the type of rhetoric of experience criticized by Katz and Proudfoot. Bush does not look to the experience in order to gain insight into the absolute reality to which it refers. Rather, his interest is in the ways that social, political, and material conditions shape such experiences and how those experiences move the women to action within their communities. The vocabulary of experience in this regard does not forestall inquiry into such material concerns but acts in such a way as to organize and contextualize discussion of issues that bear directly on the public sphere. In contrast to Sharf, Bush attempts to salvage the terminology of experience rather than to discard it wholesale. But Bush does so in a way wholly consistent with Katz's and Proudfoot's positions by shifting discussion from experience as private, unmediated, and separate from other realms of human activity, to experience as a public and observable phenomenon.

Conclusion

It is clear that the attack on private unmediated experience ushered in by Katz and Proudfoot has taken strong root within the discipline. Thinkers under the umbrella of New Materialism, influenced by these two thinkers, strive to reposition Religious Studies in the light of their critique. Whether, like Sharf, this repositioning abandons experience entirely, or, as with Bush, brings experience out into the light of public analysis, the end result is similar. New Materialism takes seriously the criticisms of unmediated experience, urging scholars to shift their focus away from private, unmediated experience as the core of religion and, thus, study of religion. Scholars like Sharf, Bush and McCutcheon write in the context of what they see as a field that has been compromised by methodologies which, in their fervent desire to discover a core of religion distinct from other realms of human activity, have imported a protectionism

specific to religious language into the field of scholarship. The renewed focus on what Sharf refers to as "the materialities of religion," as well as political, social, and economic motivations and implications of religious language and concepts, can be seen as a reaction to the types of scholarship that have preceded it, and as a corrective measure against the ideological motivations guiding it. Ultimately, these authors see that, in accepting a *religious* concept of religious experience, past scholars have allowed pietistic concerns to define the terms of the debate. The works of the past, from Schleiermacher and James to Smart have led to a scholarly environment where the academic study of religion became almost indistinguishable from theology. Although the exact contours of what constitutes proper religious studies may vary, one thing on which New Materialism insists is the distinction and opposition between religious studies and theology, which I develop in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND THEOLOGY

In the preceding chapter I provide an understanding of the New Materialist program against the background of debates regarding the role of experience as an interpretive tool within the academic study of religion. In this way New Materialism comes to be understood as part of a larger discussion that strives to shift the focus of discourse from an emphasis on private, ineffable experience to material (social, political, economic) concerns. One aspect of this discussion that has not been fully explored is the way that methodological models that focus on private experience wrongly blur the line between academic religious studies and theology. This chapter will strive to further contextualize the New Materialist program within a larger discourse regarding the proper situation of religious studies. In order to do this, I examine here the work of Donald Wiebe who posits an antagonistic and incompatible relationship between two competing discourses: (confessional) theology and secular religious studies and the methodological positions these relative discourses call for. This relationship and relative place of each discourse will provide a frame from which to examine New Materialist critiques of one of the more prominent figures in twentieth century religious studies: Mircea Eliade. The incompatibility of confessional approaches with the goals of the academic study of religion brought out by Wiebe and Ivan Strenski present a problem for religious studies. In the latter portion of the chapter I examine the work of Robert Segal and Russell McCutcheon in order to present the New Materialist response to the problematic.

Secular Studies in Crisis: Donald Wiebe and Confessionalism

One of the guiding principles in the New Materialist movement, as well as in much contemporary religious studies, is that academic religious studies and theology are wholly distinct and incompatible fields of inquiry. The distinction is generally premised on the idea that, as Ivan Strenski puts it, theology is the doing of religion whereas religious studies is properly studying it. Theology is the domain of study that is a religious practice in itself by being "the intellectual interpretation of the life of a religious community within the changing historical context in which it finds itself."[70] Armin Geertz and Russell McCutcheon highlight the importance of this distinction for scholars in their criticisms of Ninian Smart's proposal in 1990 that The International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) attempt to foster ties with a wide range of "committed and non-committed scholarly organizations."[71] McCutcheon and Geertz find it unsurprising that this proposal met with a luke-warm reception as it "conflates both theories with data, and etic comparative analysis with emic description."[72] For scholars like McCutcheon, believers and committed organizations, as well as their own self-descriptions, make up the pool of data at the scholars disposal. The issue at hand is mirrored by United States Supreme Court decision of *Abington Township vs. Schempp* (1962), which paved the way for many religious studies departments in the United States. The ruling in this case codified the type of religious education that could be conducted in public educational institutions, drawing a distinction between permissible teaching *about* religion and impermissible teaching *of* religion. The latter could be more generally seen as theological, as

[70] Ivan Strenski, "The Proper Object of the Study of Religion: Why It Is Better to Know Some of the Questions than All of the Answers," in *The Future of the Study of Religion: Proceedings of Congress 2000*, ed. Slavica Jakelić and Lori Pearson (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 149.
[71] Ninian Smart, quoted in Armin W. Geertz and Russell T. McCutcheon, "The Role of Method and Theory in the IAHR" (*Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 12, no. 1 (2000): 33.
[72] Armin W. Geertz and Russell T. McCutcheon "The Role of Method and Theory in the Study of Religion," 34.

well as proselytizing, in aim and content, and as such conflicting with secular aims of public education. However, teaching *about* religion was envisioned as a way of introducing students to religious traditions in a manner which does not assume the actual truth of the traditions. This latter avenue opens the door to inquiry that is acceptably scientific to fit comfortably into a system of public and secular education. Although the professional division between scholars and religious leaders, and thus between proselytizing theology and scientific study of religion, is in principle a guiding methodological presupposition in departments of religion, this may not always be the case in practice. In the present chapter I aim to demonstrate the way in which the New Materialist movement stands as a reaction to what thinkers within the movement see as an impermissible encroachment of theology into the purportedly scientific study of religion. In the eyes of writers such as Donald Wiebe and more recently Russell McCutcheon, theology and religious studies represent two distinct and conflicting discourses which cannot coexist within the properly academic study of religion. Furthermore, in the eyes of these writers, the academic standing of religious studies is imperiled by the fact that the distinction has not been adequately respected by scholars.

Donald Wiebe, in his influential essay "The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion" (1984) strongly upholds the distinction between theology and religious studies. Wiebe notes that it is helpful to distinguish between confessional and non-confessional theology, the former accepting the actual existence of God or a transmundane reality, the latter accepts this only as a *cultural* reality. In this way a non-confessional theological stance leaves room for reductionist accounts of religious data and can be truly scientific as long as it holds God or the Ultimate as an issue of faith. Non-confessional theology, then, is compatible with religious studies as a scientific enterprise, but this is not the case with *confessional* theology.

Wiebe distinguishes further between "Confessional theology", which is explicitly embedded in a religious institution, and "confessional theology", which, although taking place in a secular institution, accepts the ontological perspective of a given tradition. In Wiebe's view, both these stances are incompatible with the proper aim of religious studies.

Wiebe presents a short overview of the history of the academic study of religion from its Enlightenment roots. Key to this history is the 'de-theologizing' of the study in which the study of religion is approached in the same manner as all other human phenomena, without bringing in the scholar's religious commitments. Despite this desire, Wiebe argues that the study has not lived up to its goals, showing a failure of nerve in allowing a confessional theological agenda to slip in. Ironically, this agenda has been aided by the very methods instituted to shield religious studies from Confessional interests. In the hopes of excluding the scholars own religious commitments and presuppositions, phenomenologists have adopted the practice of *epoché*, which involves "bracketing" questions of metaphysical truth to focus on more general religious matters. The aim of the practice, as Wiebe imagines it, is to avoid conflict with religious authorities or the individual religious commitments of various scholars.[73] Wiebe argues that the practice of *epoché,* although effective in ridding academic study of Confessionalism, it also contains "several methodological corollaries that suggest that such a study of religion… is yet heavily influenced by a religious/theological commitment."[74]

One such corollary is what Wiebe refers to as the "descriptivist doctrine." This view proscribes the proper study of religion as a descriptive enterprise that seeks to accurately portray the values and metaphysical commitments of the believer. This includes a concomitant claim that "the study of religion must remain free of theory and forego explaining the religious

[73] Donald Wiebe, "The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion," reprinted in *Failure and Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion* (Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2012), 14.
[74] Ibid.

phenomena under consideration."[75] Explanation binds one to the claim that the religious phenomenon is either true or illusory, the very thing *epoché* excludes. However, Wiebe argues that to bar explanation from the outset goes against the purportedly scientific position of the study of religion. A scientific study of religion, Wiebe insists, must be able to move beyond pure description to the domain of explanation. The fear inherent in allowing explanation into a secular study of religion is the view that that "to explain" is always "to explain away." However, to bar the possibility of such explaining away from the outset is to evidence a theological position which, in refusing to allow discussion of religious truth, sets this truth beyond scientific analysis. In doing so it in fact grants the religious reality an ontological status, one that is vouchsafed by its exclusion from the proper area of investigation. The avowal of such uniqueness through the championing of *epoché* amounts to a position of religious studies that is decidedly theological. The call to do nothing but describe religious phenomena without the development of theory and explanation, Wiebe suggest, amounts to granting it a level of ontological reality. If the academic study of religion is to be distinguished from theology, it must leave the religion's metaphysical claims as empirically problematic and equally open to investigation as any other human phenomenon.

Although Wiebe argues that confessional (as opposed to Confessional) commitments have been in this way present in religious studies since the inception of *Religionswissenschaft,* his paper further argues that this confessionalism has become more pronounced in recent years. Wiebe catalogues two general trends that have recently served to expose more clearly the theological implications of religious studies which both argue for the complementarity of scientific and theological approaches to the study. These two are what Wiebe refers to as

[75] Ibid.

"incremental complementarity" and "incorporative complementarity."[76] The first of these, presented by such thinkers as Benjamin Ladner, Charles Kegley and Bernard Meland, argues that the scientific and objective study of religion can be "'increased' by theology as, say, physics is exceeded by chemistry."[77] In this view, scientific (explanatory) perspectives are inadequate to fully account for religious phenomena. Theology, as a different mode of knowing from science, is necessary in order to present a full picture of religious phenomena, and thus "the student of religion cannot remain detached in an information gathering exercise but must rather share in the religious experience of the devotee."[78] Such a position clearly goes beyond that of *Religionswissenschaft* in which, following Wiebe, the devotee's point of view holds only a negative obligation. The practice of *epoché* may have set high importance on the believer's standpoint. However, the methodological importance of the view is purely negative: the student is impelled to use *epoché* as a limiting factor for his study. The position of "incremental complementarity" goes beyond by not simply respecting theological discourse's space but by positing theology as significant to the actual work of the secular student of religion.

Both models of complementarity are interesting, and in Wiebe's eyes alarming, as they can be seen as regressive. Phenomenology of religion and its concurrent methodological tool of *epoché* may have worked to conceal and license underlying confessional agendas. However, such a study portrayed itself as an independent discipline that purported to provide a scientific understanding of religion separate from that undertaken in a seminary. In contrast, the more recent trends that Wiebe points out explicitly champion the place of theology within religious studies. For a scholar like Wiebe, for whom the position of phenomenology of religion was not divorced *enough* from theology and confessionalism, such a move can do nothing but sound

[76] Ibid., 18-19.
[77] Ibid., 18.
[78] Ibid.

alarm bells. Wiebe's analysis of the state of religious studies has had a profound effect on the discipline and has been programmatic for the development of New Materialism. The rooting out of confessionalism begun in Wiebe has continued on more recent writers as Russell McCutcheon[79] with the defense of the boarder between academic religious studies and confessional theology. To see such criticism at work it will be useful to examine a specific critique of Mircea Eliade and his unique type of phenomenology of religion.

Confessionalism in Action: Ivan Strenski on Mircea Eliade

The background of the religious studies and theology divide will help to contextualize the criticisms of Mircea Eliade, seen by some as the founding figure of phenomenology of religion and the study of religion in the United States. Indeed, his important contributions are commonly identified as comprising the Chicago School approach. Despite Eliade's great influence, his legacy and academic standing has suffered harsh criticism, especially following his death. Eliade is often seen as a cypher for the way religious studies had been done, and attacks of Eliade and his methodology form a common point of intersection for New Materialist thinkers. Such attacks can be found in the works of Robert Segal,[80] Russell T. McCutcheon,[81]

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[79] See for example Russell T. McCutcheon's *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). For examples of other scholars for whom such rooting out plays major importance, see William Arnal and Willi Braun, "The Irony of Religion," in *Failure and Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion,* eds. William Arnal, Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2012), 230-238, and Terence Thomas, "Political Motivation in Study of Religion in Britain," in *Perspectives on Method and Theory in the Study of Religion: Adjunct Proceedings of the XVIIth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Mexico City, 1995* (Boston: Brill, 2000), 74-90.

[80] Robert Segal, "Mircea Eliade's Theory of Millenarianism" in his *Religion and the Social Sciences: Essays on the Confrontation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 43-56.

[81] See especially Russell T. McCutcheon's chapter "Ideological Strategies and the Politics of Nostalgia" in *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia,* 27-50.

Donald Wiebe,[82] and many other scholars that might fall under the label of New Materialism.[83] Most of the criticisms follow similar lines of attack. Thus, it will be sufficient here to focus on one. A particularly detailed and sustained attack on Eliade from a New Materialist perspective can be found in Ivan Strenski's *Thinking About Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion* (2006).

Strenski begins his analysis of Eliade by maintaining that Eliade rejects the naturalism of previous theorists and thus attempts a "'super-naturalist' study of religion."[84] Such a vision of Eliade's method may be surprising when one considers Eliade's avowal that he is engaged in a project of *Religionswissenschaft*, which Eliade translates in terms of "History of Religions." The understanding of this appellation, however, becomes problematic when Eliade discusses the enterprise of history. Strenski quotes Eliade as stating that he, Eliade, is not opposed to history as a means of ascertaining "the true value of this symbol, *as it was understood and lived in a specific culture.*" However, such an understanding is distinct from the meaning contained in "the *whole* of the symbolism."[85] Such a view is consistent with Eliade's claim that a scholar of religion can only do meaningful work when they have "passed beyond the stage of pure erudition—in other words, when, after having collected, described and classified his documents, he will also make an effort to understand them *on their own plane of reference."*[86] An understanding of this kind, according to Eliade, is not completed merely by bringing out "the

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[82] Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).
[83] See, for example, Jeppe Sinding Jensen, *The Study of Religion in a New Key: Theoretical and Philosophical Soundings in the Comparative and General Study of Religion* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2003); Richard Cohen's chapter "The Anthropology of Enlightenment" in *Beyond Enlightenment: Buddhism, Religion and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2006). Although Cohen's book does not focus on Eliade, he takes time to criticize Eliade's "crypto-theological vocabulary" (130).
[84] Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 311.
[85] Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols* (London: Harvill, 1961), 63, quoted in Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion,* 312.
[86] Mircea Eliade, "History of Religions and a New Humanism," *History of Religions* 1, no. 1 (1961): 4.

chronological sequence of a religion" nor by an investigation into "its social, economic, and political contexts."[87] The historical incidents of a given religious symbol and the social and political contexts in which they are actualized, may be important to the work of the scholar, yet they are mere stepping stones to the final goal of understanding its *whole* meaning.

The strong distinction between historical investigation and investigation into the "*whole*" meaning, however, Strenski contends, would strike most historians as false. It has long been acknowledged in the discipline of history that "[h]istory proper only begins when chronicle has been superseded by the interpretive art of making an interpretive whole from the raw facts of the chronicle."[88] To assert, as Eliade seems to, that the project of history is mere data gathering without any attempt at interpretation is patently false. Eliade's remarks on this topic lead Strenski to conclude that Eliade, rather than a historian of religion, is in fact, following an observation made by Guilford Dudley[89] years before, an "anti-historian of religion" who "tries to hide his own reasons for being so under the cover of weak arguments diminishing the status of historical inquiry."[90] The true reasons for Eliade's anti-historicism have to do with his ontological commitments. Strenski writes of Eliade that,

> [h]e mistrusts "historical" *methods* of treating religion because he believes religion itself transcends the ontological category of "historical" *being*. Since, for Eliade, the object of the study of religion (for instance, God) is *beyond* historical reality, the student of religion must reflect that transcendence by adopting a method that also transcends history – an *ahistorical* method.[91]

In Strenski's reading of Eliade one can easily see echoes of Wiebe's criticisms of phenomenology of religion. Although, unlike traditional phenomenologists as van der Leeuw or

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[87] Ibid.
[88] Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion,* 312.
[89] See Guilford Dudley, *Religion on Trial: Mircea Eliade and His Critics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977).
[90] Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion*, 312.
[91] Ibid., 313.

Chantapie de la Saussaye, Eliade is clearly concerned with more than fact gathering, his methodology seems to grant an autonomous ontological status to the religious data. In the eyes of Eliade, religious symbols necessitate an approach wholly different from other human phenomena because the reality to which they refer is actually wholly different.

In the opening chapter of "History of Religions and a New Humanism" (1961) Eliade compares the history of religions with developments in psychoanalysis because both consist of encounters "with the 'foreign', the unknown, with what cannot be reduced to familiar categories – in short with the 'wholly other'."[92] As Strenski points out, this analogy between the two disciplines was a common move by Eliade. It served to show that the historian of religion plumbs below the surface of manifest reality to lay bare the hidden structures that operate behind this reality. What Freud did with the mind, Eliade hopes to accomplish in the realm of religion by bringing out the religious meaning of symbolic structures. However, in Strenski's view the comparison displays more than simply this conjunction of focus and approach. Freud, as one of the commonly acknowledged "masters of suspicion" along with Nietzsche and Marx, "intended and in large part succeeded in planting the 'worm of doubt' into theism."[93] Regardless of the subsequent success or lack thereof of Freud's theories the connection made in his work between religious consciousness and the "powerful influence of childhood memories cannot cavalierly be dismissed."[94] Freud's work thus served to destroy a certain degree of innocence in religious understandings of the world and destabilized the religious consciousness of many religious adherents. Eliade, by adopting a tie to the psychoanalytic approach, attempts to turn the destabilizing character of Freud's work onto the secular sphere. Strenski writes that "Eliade in effect asks, if the Freudian 'scientistic' breakthroughs *against* religion have

[92] Mircea Eliade "History of Religions and a New Humanism," 3.
[93] Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion*, 318.
[94] Ibid., 319.

destroyed the 'official religious world,' so to speak, why should not he engineer a religious 'destruction' of the confidence of *secular* consciousness?"[95] To this end, Eliade casts his particular approach of "creative hermeneutics," as "more than instruction, it is also a technique susceptible of modifying the quality of existence itself" that "ought to produce in the reader an … awakening."[96] The "creative" character of Eliade's work lies precisely in its desire to "re-enchant" the secular sphere by drawing attention to the unconscious religious dimensions of even the *secular* world. Whereas Freud may have convinced many that their religious convictions actually stem from secular sources thus turning them away from religion, Eliade hopes to "convert todays nonbelieving secular people into profoundly religious people" by convincing them "to *realize* that they are *already* religious."[97] He does this by elaborating the meaning of religious experience and showing the persistence of such experience in the realm of the secular world.

Strenski examines the way that Eliade's treatment of human experience in the most general and ever-present categories of time and space serves to accomplish his "theological" task. Both these aspects of human experience are shown in their religious aspect through a connection with divine creation, which for Eliade forms "the archetypal religious event"[98] In the sphere of space, religions in their essence involve the work of creating specific spaces that are imbued with a heightened level of value. The most valued action is divine creation that Eliade ties to religion's special orientation by way of a persistent theme in his work, namely, that of the 'center.' Divine creation orients the world around a focus of value which is imbued with special meaning. This centering of value is then mirrored in the spatial orientations of religious

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[95] Ibid.
[96] Mircea Eliade, "Crisis and Renewal" in *The Quest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 62, quoted in Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion*, 318.
[97] Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion*, 319.
[98] Ibid., 323.

communities in centers of worship and central points of cosmic importance like the Ka'aba in Mecca. This work of centering is not merely one possible aspect of religion for Eliade. It is part of the very essence of religion.[99] The work of religion as such is essentially bound to its work of creating sacred space out of profane matter. This creation is a mirror of the original divine creation as both create a center of meaning from which being radiates.

The connection between religion and space, however, flows both ways. The act of choosing one space over another, whether this choice is made on grounds that are explicitly religious or not, is essentially always a religious act. By assigning particular value to a given space one participates in the same enterprise that lies at the center of religious experience. This is why Eliade writes, "for religious man, every existential decision to situate himself in space in fact constitutes a religious decision."[100] Even for the non-believer, on Strenski's reading, "[t]o make this decision to value some places and spaces more than others, is to participate in the radical distinction between the sacred and the profane—and on the side of the sacred."[101] By explicating the religious work of centering, Eliade here clearly attempts to show the religious dimensions of human action in general and "if he can persuade modern secular people to see in any of their centering, orienting, or organizing activities the expression of such religious nostalgias for the freshness or purity of the absolute divine beginnings of things, he would have succeeded in transforming secular consciousness."[102]

Explicating the sacred aspect of time as expressed in religious experience forms the other side of Eliade's "theological" program. He does this through a study of myth, although Strenski cautions his reader to attend to the specific way this term is used by Eliade. Just as

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[99] Ibid., 322.
[100] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1957), 65, quoted in Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion,* 320.
[101] Ibid., 320.
[102] Ibid., 322.

sacred space is made meaningful by its reference to divine origins, sacred time is given meaning by this same connection. Although Eliade often uses a fairly neutral definition of myth, according to Strenski, the stories that Eliade selects as examples of myths are always creation accounts, meaning that "[h]e has in effect *defined* myths as creation stories from the very start."[103] Strenski is certainly correct in maintaining that the connection of creation and myth held paramount importance in Eliade's thought as Eliade himself writes: "all myths participate in some sort in the cosmological type of myth—for every account of what came to pass in the holy era of the beginning . . . is but another variant of the archetypal history: how the world came to be."[104] Thus every myth contains within it at least a taste of the timeless time of creation and when one becomes fully absorbed in a myth one can reconnect with this timelessness. This, in the eyes of Eliade, is the true value of myth; that it allows one to escape the flow of profane time and return to an eternal beginning, to live that moment of creation of which the myth speaks. This value plays well into Eliade's goal of re-enchanting the world, especially when one considers that for Eliade the religious realm, although an autonomous realm of human knowledge and understanding, is always suffused throughout profane reality. This then means that the "transport" effected by myth is not limited to traditional myths but extends to all narrative to the extent that even modern secular people participate in the religious act effected by myth when they engage in such mundane acts as watching a film or reading a book. Eliade writes that "cinema, that 'dream factory,' takes over and employs countless mythological motifs" and that "[e]ven reading includes a mythological function… because,

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[103] Ibid., 323.
[104] Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* (London: Harvill, 1968), 15, quoted in Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion,* 323. For further evidence of the importance of 'creation' in Eliade's definition of myth, see also Mircea Eliade "The Structure of Myth" in *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 1-20.

through reading, the modern man succeeds in obtaining an 'escape from time' comparable to the 'emergence from time' effected by myths."[105]

At this point the careful reader may detect a slight inconsistency in Strenski's critique. On the one hand, Strenski seems to fault Eliade for working with an artificially limited criterion for what he accepts as myth, limiting his definition to only those narratives with a focus on creation. It is by this limiting that Eliade can support the thesis that all myths contain an element of a creation account, and thus serve to effect the type of escape that Eliade promotes as lying at the core of the religious experience. The implication made by Strenski is that Eliade's conclusion only has a chance at validity if one accepts such a confining definition of myth, a definition that, Strenski is quick to point out, is not uncontested.[106] As Strenski brings his criticism around to the topic of Eliade's "theological" agenda, on the other hand, the problem seems to reverse itself. Here the problem is that Eliade moves from too narrow a definition of myth, to one that is overly broad. In attempting to show the religious dimension inherent in the life of even the most secular of humanists, Eliade must associate the "escape from time" with absorption into all manner of narratives, not only those presented in a narrowly defined category of cosmological myth. However, this move on Eliade's part can serve to alleviate the earlier portion of Strenski's criticism. If it is the case that the effect occasioned by myth can also be attributed to other types of narrative, which do not explicitly detail creation accounts, then it is not clear that it is necessary for Eliade to be as limiting in his definition of myth as a whole. All that is necessary is that Eliade show that *enough* myths contain cosmological elements, that this element can be seen to form an essential aspect of the character of myth, a possibility to which Strenski seems open. Such an understanding changes the meaning of

[105] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 205, quoted in Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion,* 325.
[106] Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion,* 323-4.

Eliade's assertion that "all myths participate in some sort in the cosmological type of myth." This is not to say, as Strenski implies, that myths, to be treated as such, must exhibit cosmological elements. Rather, it means that all myths, cosmological or not, carry within them the essential element of myth, that of cosmological and "existential centering" [107] inherent in a creation account. To take this view entails, not as Strenski suggests, an overly determined view, but rather, a neutral view of myth as 'story.' Strenski's reading, which argues that "if the story is not about creation—in the rich and analogical way Eliade speaks of creation, as we have seen—it is not by definition, something we should or could call a myth,"[108] is only true if one has no intention of attempting Eliade's next (theological) step. If one limits the definition too much from the outset it becomes impossible to apply the term to cases that have not even made the *initial* cut. This would suggest that it was never Eliade's intention to *define* myth in the narrow way suggested by Strenski, but rather to define its *essence*. Defining the essence of a category does not limit the expansion of the elements of the category as does the definition of the category. If the essence of myth is creation, or the center, or escape from time this does no longer limit the form of what is allowed entry.

For how, in fact, does Eliade believe the types of stories exemplified in films and novels can be classed as myth? Is it, through the co-opting of narrative elements and tropes as implied from the first quotation selected by Strenski, or is it through the experience that they evoke or embody? Which of these is more instrumental in bringing about the "nostalgia for the center" at the root of Eliade's program of "reminding" the secular person that he or she is religious after all? If it is the structural elements that permit the entry of activities such as movie watching or reading, this does not seem to carry the weight that Eliade needs in order to be convincing.

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[107] Ibid., 323.
[108] Ibid.

Clearly there are many products of popular culture that do not exhibit manifest cosmological elements necessary for their acceptance into the corral of 'myth.' If the key is the *experience* evoked, on the other hand, then it becomes difficult to argue against the inclusion of *all* films and books, because the methodological guidelines for measuring such an experience do not easily present themselves. At the same time, it may be this moment that explains Eliade's inclusion in the tradition of phenomenology of religion.

Eliade, understood in the way I suggest, requires, as in the tradition of phenomenology of religion, an appreciation of the experiential side of religion. Structural elements of narrative can be analytically assessed and judged, experience can only be understood through some manner of "intuitive" process. The process of *epoché* would naturally suggest itself within the phenomenologist program, yet here we get a bit of Eliade's "mercurial" nature. For Eliade, the process of bracketing is a necessary first step in order to view the symbol in its own frame of reference. However, ultimately Eliade's program requires a further self-reflexive step: one must attempt to step back and appreciate the way one *oneself* experiences. It is exactly for this reason that Eliade, as Strenski insists, should be viewed more as a theological psychologist than a "historian of religion." Ultimately, what Eliade attempts through both his discussion of time *and* space is to make "modern man" reflect on his own experience and see that it is in fact religious. This is true in both the cases of sacred space and sacred time. Eliade writes, "[w]hat matters for our purposes is the *experience* of space known to modern man" and to show that in his *experience*, "[t]o whatever degree he may have desacralized the world, the man who has made his choice in favor of a profane life never succeeds in completely doing away with religious behavior."[109] It is this focus on one's own experience and the aim of the study to affect a change in the consciousness of modern humankind that exemplify quite clearly Eliade's

[109] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 23.

"theological" and proselytizing agenda. Traditional phenomenology may have its pitfalls, yet its goal is to develop a scientific understanding (at least in theory) of its subject matter. Data collection and research are embarked upon in order to draw conclusions regarding the nature of the phenomenon under investigation. The neutrality of the conclusions is ensured by the method of *epoché*. In Eliade's brand of phenomenology, however, the objectivity granted by *epoché* is used to legitimize his proselytizing motivations.

Eliade emerges, then, as a strong example of a type of study that, although attempting to present itself as a secular and scientific enterprise, fails to adequately respect this boundary. Although I have suggested a different way to understand Eliade's definition of myth than that proposed by Strenski, this is not enough to save Eliade from Strenski's criticisms. Ultimately, Eliade's motivation and his focus on intuitive understanding do not respect the boundaries between doing and studying religion. The distinction between Confessional and confessional types of study, clarified by Wiebe in his aformentioned paper is helpful in bringing out this charge. Wiebe's point is that a study does not need to be explicitly couched within the language or perspective of any one given religious tradition in order to qualify as theological in its intent and/or understanding. It is clear in Eliade, who goes to great lengths to show the common meanings of symbols and practices between various traditions, that there is no explicit privileging of one religion above others. However, due to the proselytizing and "spiritual" aims that his study attempts to affect, brought out by Strenski, there is still reason to charge Eliade of a theological agenda, although confessional rather than Confessional.

The New Materialist Way Forward: Reductionism as Protective Bulwark

The criticisms brought out by Wiebe present a problem for the future of religious studies. Wiebe's strong position regarding the division between theology and the academic study of religion, carried forward in Strenski's criticisms of Eliade, presents a call for change in the way that religious studies is to be carried out. Methodologies like phenomenology of religion, including those of Mircea Eliade, put strong emphasis on avoiding reductionist accounts of religion. Much of this revolves around the descriptive doctrine in phenomenology, which sees as the goal of the study to accurately depict religion and religious phenomena the way it is understood by the believer. The importance of the insider point of view and the insistence on "treating religion as religious" preclude accepting approaches which strive to understand religious phenomena by reducing them to other spheres of human activity, be they economic, social, or political. As has been said in the preceding chapter, a shift of focus on such material aspects is precisely the goal of New Materialist writers. In this regard, New Materialism takes Wiebe's critique as a point of departure to cast reductionist approaches to religion as the most secure path to safeguard the academic standing of religious studies against the intrusion of theology. New Materialists find support for their shift in focus in Wiebe's contemporary Robert Segal who has consistently championed reductionism as the most fruitful approach open to secular religious scholars.

Robert Segal's article "In Defense of Reductionism" (1983), created heated debate in the religious studies community. In this article, and in many other articles,[110] Segal argues that secular scholars cannot hope to ever understand the believers "point of view" and that, due to

[110] See, for example, Robert Segal "Have the Social Sciences Been Converted?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 24, no. 3 (1985): 321-324; "The Social Sciences and the Truth of Religious Belief," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48, no. 3 (1980): 403-413.

this, reductionism is the only avenue open to them. Segal begins his critique by pointing out a trend within the study of human phenomena in which researchers have tried to study the insider's point of view. Taking the insider seriously entails that the researcher adopt non-reductive methods of analysis that do not supplant the insider's understanding by preferring descriptions and explanations that are foreign to his or her perspective. Specific to religious studies, non-reductive approaches are thus seen as the only appropriate means by which the researcher can approach such studies. In this way the researcher does not undermine the religious understanding of the devotee. Although Segal seems to believe that such approaches may be possible in other fields of human phenomena, this is not the case in the study of religious phenomena. The reason for this is the nature of the points of view specific to religious believers.

Segal points out that in reference to God, key to the believer's point of view is the insistence that God exists. The question then arises: in attempting to appreciate religion, *what* exactly is a nonbeliever meant to appreciate? In some sense at least, appreciating the believers understanding of his or her faith would require one to appreciate this faith as a response to the divine. However, for a nonbeliever such an understanding is logically barred. The nonbeliever qua nonbeliever cannot seriously accept the existence of the divine.[111] This is not to say that the nonbeliever cannot understand the meaning of religion for a believer. What he or she cannot do, however, is appreciate the meaning *in the believer's own terms*. Segal then goes on to consider what it means to "appreciate" the believer's points of view, insisting that, for the believer, appreciation of their position requires accepting its truth.[112] The use of *epoché* or imagination cannot bring the nonbeliever closer to appreciation of the believer's point of view because part

[111] Robert Segal, "In Defense of Reductionism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51, no.1 (1983): 109.
[112] Ibid., 109-110.

of the believer's point of view is the acceptance of the truth of a religious understanding. A nonbeliever cannot accept this truth without losing his status as nonbeliever. If the nonbeliever is to have any hope of understanding religious phenomena while remaining a nonbeliever, then one must *reduce* that understanding to something else. Religious beliefs are different than other human phenomena due to their unbreakable connection with truth. Segal compares the attempt to understand religious belief from the believer's point of view with the attempt to do the same with a follower of a different economic system. In the latter case, one is only assessing the *utility* not the truth of the system.

Reductive explanations contravene the truth of religious experiences to the degree that believers appeal to the sources of these experiences as justifications for their belief. Segal writes that there is a commonly held belief that a social scientific or the so-called hard scientific explanation of religious belief does not contravene the truth of this belief. Scientists can at best explain *why* a believer believes, not *what* they believe. To do otherwise would be to commit the genetic fallacy in which the cause of a phenomenon is thought to directly determine the content.[113] However, Segal points out that (social) scientific explanations do not take into account such acts as, for example, divine revelation. Thus, in cases where the believers justify their belief on the basis of its divine revelation, social scientific explanations directly contravene this truth.[114] Thus, Segal argues, the common-held view that social scientific explanations of religious phenomena cannot have any bearing on the truth of religious positions simply cannot hold.

Although Segal's and Wiebe's vocabulary differs, both critiques focus on the methodological issues inherent in accepting the insider's point of view as programmatic for

[113] Robert Segal, *Religion and the Social Sciences: Essays on the Confrontation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 77.
[114] Ibid., 80-82.

academic study of religion. Both writers see the way in which an insistence on purely descriptive analysis of the insider's perspective leads the academic study of religion into adopting a confessional stance. Segal's conclusion is that if researchers have any hope of understanding the phenomena of religion they must reduce their meaning to some system of understanding other than the religious. Such understandings will, of necessity, contravene the understandings proffered by believers. Just as a nonbeliever cannot accept the believer's point of view, so too is the reverse impossible. The believer, while remaining a believer, must accept the truth of their beliefs on the basis of the divine, and the nonbeliever can only accept those understandings that refuse this basis. Thus, it is incumbent on scholars within the study of religion to accept reductionist explanations as these are the only ones open to non-confessional scholarship. Although Wiebe does not champion reductionism as explicitly as Segal,[115] his insistence on the necessity for the scholar to accept the possibility of explanation, which goes beyond the insiders point of view as a necessary portion of a properly scientific approach to religious studies, easily squares with Segal's critique. These two theorists' concerted attack on the emphasis on the insider's perspective and insistence on the strong divide between theology and academic religious studies forms an important theoretical underpinning for the New Materialist movement.

[115] See Donald Wiebe "Beyond the Sceptic and the Devotee: Reductionism in the Scientific Study of Religion." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52, no. 1 (1984). Here Wiebe takes issue with what he sees as Segal's claim that reductionist theories of religion have an *a priori* claim to validity over religious theories.

A Contemporary Development: Russell McCutcheon and Redescription

Russell T. McCutcheon explicitly lists both Strenski and Segal as influences in his work.[116] Theology necessarily accepts the ontology of the tradition in which it is embedded and theologians, by working within the traditional framework, act, in the language of McCutcheon, as caretakers of their traditions. In this way, theological discourse is always a stabilizing and apologetic discourse which, whatever else it might accomplish, always serves to support the truth of its tradition. Such a position is diametrically opposed to that of the secular scholar who must either suspend judgment about, or, in the eyes of Segal, reject, the ontological truth of the tradition. In McCutcheon's eyes, the secular scholar must be able to view the material and social forces at play behind the believers' understandings of their faith. In doing this, the scholar acts as a critic rather than as a caretaker, not limited by the ontological commitments of the believer. Ultimately, it is the acceptance of the truth of the religious ontology that bars theology from a proper scholarly position and distinguishes it from the properly academic study of religion.

McCutcheon follows Segal in delineating a strong distinction between devotee and scholar. Regarding theology and the academic study of religion, he writes that "conflating these two domains of inquiry . . . is evidence of the theoretical bankruptcy of the modern study of religion."[117] In McCutcheon's view, the problem lies in "the general confusion of phenomenological *description* with social scientific *analysis.*"[118] This is not to say that phenomenological description is unimportant. It is to say that it does not form the proper end and resting point in the scholarly endevour. Thus, depicting religious systems as based in

[116] Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia,* viii-ix, 16.
[117] Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers*, 22.
[118] Ibid.

"special, authoritative, and private experiences" may accurately depict the view of the believer. However "we must never fail to understand such *purely descriptive* scholarship as incomplete until it *redescribes and historicizes* (in a word, *theorizes*) such claims of sociohistorical autonomy and privilege."[119] In other words, for McCutcheon, the student of religion must take theologically based description, as well as those who produce such descriptions, as data for the academic study of religion proper. Scholars who, instead, accept the ontological truth of these descriptions, confuse "data with colleagues"[120] by mistakenly viewing theologians as fellow religious studies scholars. In so doing, these scholars confuse theological piety with academic analysis.

Key to much of McCutcheon's work is a binary vocabulary. The scholarly enterprise is consistently characterized by binaries of insider/outsider,[121] caretaker/critic,[122] and emic/etic[123] where the latter of each of these is the only appropriate position for the academic scholar of religion. Like Segal, McCutcheon sees the position of secular scholar and religious devotee as wholly incompatible. The religion scholar is, thus, faced with a choice: either accept the truth of emic description and give up claims to academic analysis, or maintain one's "properly academic" credentials by using the insider perspectives as data to be analyzed using properly academic language. And so, for scholars of religion to engage in academic work it is necessary that they move beyond merely descriptive work to that of analysis that strives to explain emic perspectives in etic, and so publically available, terms. It is not difficult here to discern in McCutcheon's position echoes of both Segal and Wiebe. For McCutcheon the only acceptable

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[119] Ibid., 6.
[120] Ibid., 22.
[121] See, for example, Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Insider/Outsider Problem In the Study of Religion* (New York: Cassell, 1999).
[122] See, for example, Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).
[123] See for example, Russell T. McCutcheon, "Redescribing 'Religion' as Social Formation: Toward a Social Theory of Religion," in Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers,* 21-40.

approach to the academic study of religion is one in which the borders are drawn in a way to preclude the entry of both Confessionalism and confessionalism into the analysis, and the proper way to ensure this is through an analysis that reduces theological meaning to social scientific explanations.[124]

McCutcheon does not generally utilize the language of reduction, opting instead for that of "redescription". Redescription, which McCutcheon borrows from the work of Jonathan Z. Smith, "sums up the complicated work of scholarship" in which "we need to redescribe or, as Smith might say, rectify, a number of our key categories so that, as [Marvin] Harris suggested, their usefulness is based in the vocabularies of scholarship rather than the vocabularies of the communities we study."[125] In short, the work of redescription takes as its guiding principal that the terms and point of view of the insider must be translated into outsider vocabularies in order to be of scholarly value. Although the wording is different, this perspective is very much in line with Segal's position on reductionism. Although McCutcheon insists on a methodological pluralism in religious studies, the bounds of this plural discipline are kept clearly limited to social scientific approaches as "*the premise that makes the human sciences possible in the first place is that human behaviors always originate from within, and derive their culturally embedded meanings from being constrained by, historical (i.e., social, political, economic, biological, etc.) entanglements."*[126] In McCutcheon's estimation, it is "[b]ecause the methodological pluralism that justifiably characterizes the field also includes such obviously 'spiritual methods' as Eliade's new humanism, a long-standing crisis of identity has

[124] McCutcheon, although perhaps most insistent on the strong divide between religious studies and theology, is not alone. The importance of this distinction is given voice in the recent volume that McCutcheon co-authored with William Arnal, *The Sacred is the Profane: The Political Nature of "Religion"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). See also Willi Braun's introduction to the *Guide to the Study of Religion* (New York: Cassell, 2000), which McCutcheon co-edited, and Bruce Lincoln's "Theses On Method*," Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1996): 225-27.
[125] Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers*, 23.
[126] Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers*, 6-7; italics in the original.

characterized the scientific study of religion."[127] His answer to this crisis, which forms a central tenet of New Materialism more generally, is that the study of religion must focus on theoretical and methodological models that eschew 'spiritual methods' in favour of the social scientific. Such redescription is the best safeguard for the future of religious studies, and can only be accomplished once "we have shaken off earlier theological and dialogical models."[128]

Conclusion

Wiebe charges that, through associations with church and seminary institutions, the academic study of religion has thus far failed in its mission of a secular and scientific study of religion. McCutcheon and Geertz make similar charges against the AAR and WCR.[129] They claim that, in the interest of accepting differing viewpoints and perspectives, these organizations have fostered research relationships with bodies that are explicitly theological in the capital C sense of Confessional. Such relationships undermine the secular and scientific basis proper to the academic study of religion. For scholars such as McCutcheon, theologians and theological perspectives should fall into the pool of data open to scholars of religion. However, this is decidedly different from accepting such positions as the *products* of religious studies. As a result, the New Materialist position emerges as a reaction against theological or religious thinking within the study of religion. This reaction finds a ground by looking at the methods and focus of the study that in themselves hold theological aspects. Taking as a given the antagonistic relationship between theology and religious studies, premised on the distinction between practice and study of religion, these scholars delineate a methodological agenda that is able to guard against the entry of theology.

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[127] Armin W. Geertz and Russell T. McCutcheon, "The Role of Method and Theory in the IAHR," 8.
[128] Ibid., 35.
[129] Ibid., 34-7.

CHAPTER 3

DOORS OPEN/DOORS CLOSE: THE ADVANTAGES AND PITFALLS OF NEW MATERIALISM

The previous chapters have attempted to trace lines of argument that inform the New Materialist position in the academic study of religion. This discussion has lent shape to the movement as a reaction to previous trends in scholarship. New Materialism sets itself against phenomenology of religion and other methodologies that emphasize irreducible or private experience as key to the study of religion. This opposition is further connected with concerns of C/confessionalism and theology entering into the academic study of religion, which I outline in chapter 2. New Materialism shifts the focus from the insider perspective towards a study that reduces or redescribes such perspectives into etic, social scientific terms. In both discussions, New Materialism adopts a strong emphasis on social scientific study of religion as a corrective to problematic aspects inherent in the way that religious studies has been previously done.

The current chapter will shift from a theoretical investigation of the New Materialist position to an analysis of the results of the New Materialist program in more recent scholarship. The chapter will examine the work of Bruce Lincoln and David Chidester in order to assess the way in which New Materialism has created fresh and important avenues of research. Discussion will then shift to the work of some contemporary critics of New Materialism. To this end, the chapter will examine the work of Tyler Roberts and Clayton Crockett who argue that the New Materialist program may be too limiting in its scope. By examining both sides of the New Materialist movement, I pose the question in this chapter of whether, in attempting to guard the

place of religious studies in contemporary academic discourse, New Materialism may limit the study too much.

Doors Opening: The New Materialism of Bruce Lincoln and David Chidester

Bruce Lincoln and Christianity in Guatemala

The Preface of Lincoln's book *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars* begins as follows. "This is not a religious book. Rather, it is a book about religion."[130] With this simple statement Lincoln recalls the debate of the previous chapter, firmly situating himself in the study, rather than practice, of religion. This statement in itself is not groundbreaking, as testifying to one's academic, rather than theological, credentials may be something of a necessity in a post-Eliadean American academic climate. However, Lincoln's position within New Materialism has been reasonably clear since the mid nineties when, while teaching at the University of Minnesota, he pinned his "Theses on Method" (1996) on his office door. Throughout these theses, Lincoln lays out a methodological view of religious studies consistent with New Materialism. Lincoln begins by pointing to the methodological program implied in the name "History of Religions," which implies an object (religion) and a method (history). Lincoln pointedly defines these terms. Religion, he states, "is that discourse whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal." [131] As for history, it serves as "the sharpest possible contrast;" it is "that discourse which speaks of things temporal and terrestrial in a human and fallible voice while staking its claim to authority on rigorous critical practice." [132] Lincoln's definition leaves

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[130] Bruce Lincoln, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), xi.
[131] Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on Method" (1996), in Bruce Lincoln, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars*, 1.
[132] Ibid.

open a number of approaches to religion providing they maintain a critical stance focused on the realm of human affairs. Throughout the majority of the theses Lincoln characterizes the proper student of religion as a critic and interpreter of differing cultural forms. Although Lincoln espouses a certain level of methodological openness, there are definite approaches that Lincoln's position bars from the outset. For example, Lincoln cautions that those who view cultures as static and discrete entities, stressing continuity and integration while erasing historical and social conflicts, tensions and turbulences, make of their study "a religious and not a historical narrative: the story of a transcendent ideal threatened by debasing forces of change"[133] and thus forfeit entry into a "History of Religions" properly defined. Here one can clearly discern echoes of the New Materialist critique of theology as a stabilizing discourse that the scholar is to critically assess from a wholly different perspective. Likewise, Lincoln strongly distances himself from any attempts to understand religion from an insider's point of view, explaining that "[w]hen one permits those whom one studies to define the terms in which they will be understood, suspends one's interest in the temporal and contingent, or fails to distinguish between 'truths,' 'truth claims,' and 'regimes of truth,' one has ceased to function as a historian or scholar."[134] Ultimately, the methodological program necessitates a social scientific approach that critiques and redescribes theological conceptions as facets of shifting political, economic, and linguistic landscapes comprising human culture.

Lincoln's work serves as a powerful argument of the fruitful direction a New Materialist program can take. As one example, one can look to the chapter "Religious and Other Conflicts in Twentieth-Century Guatemala" in the aforementioned *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars.* In this piece Lincoln demonstrates the way that a sensitivity to shifting political and

[133] Ibid., 2.
[134] Ibid., 3.

cultural conditions can aid in the understanding of religious myths. In order to show this, Lincoln examines three religious narratives—a creation account, healing ceremony, and vision of a saint—from three different time periods in Guatemalan history. For the purposes of this paper, it will be sufficient to focus on two of these—the creation account and the healing ceremony—to explore the way that Lincoln's methodology brings a fresh perspective to the study of religious narratives. The first of these is a creation account originating from Santiago Chimaltenango, a village in the western highlands. In the account, the first *naturales* (Indians) Father José and Mother María Santissima and their son, Jesús Cristo, participate in the creation of the world. Throughout the narrative Jesús Cristo establishes the day/night cycle and creates mountains from the previously flat land. This latter act, although celebrated by the *naturales*, angers the "people of the Devil," (later referred to as "Jews") who view the mountainous land as a hardship and set out to kill Jesús. Jesús manages to elude his pursuers for forty days before they finally succeed in crucifying him, after which, predictably, Jesús's body disappears. It is at this point that the narrative parts from its Christian roots. After Jesús's death, he summons a lightening storm that kills all the "people of the Devil" except for those that manage to hide underground. These last become "Guardians of the mountains … rich, powerful spirits of the wilderness who are as remote as they are capricious."[135]

Lincoln effectively draws out themes from this narrative that display ties to the political situation of this time. As Lincoln notes, the account creates two important dichotomies: mountains/valleys; Indians/"Jews." The mountain/valley division is significant as the urban centers, whose population was more densely made up of the Europeanized social and economic elite, where typically located in coastal, low-lying regions. In contrast, the mountainous regions were generally home to the indigenous population. By associating the Indians with Christians

[135] Bruce Lincoln, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars*, 98.

and the Jews with "that group most antithetical to the Indian community: the Europeanized ladino elite,"[136] the narrative reverses the colonial missionary dynamic in which typically the label of "Jews" was used for followers of indigenous religions "whom they [missionaries] constituted as enemies, not just of imperial conquest and colonial domination, but of the church and Christ himself."[137] In this way, the creation account here mirrors and subverts the reigning political and economic power structures in Guatemalan society.

Furthermore, these Jews are later turned into Guardian's of the Mountains who "frequently lure naïve Indians into Faustian bargains." These bargains often result in the Indians being bound into working inside the mountains to pay off debts they incurred.[138] This latter fact Lincoln connects to the exploitive labour practices of the ladinos, noting the resemblance of the Guardians in one particular account "to the three labor recruiters who visited Chimaltenango each year and used loans, drink, and other stratagems to entrap Chimaltecos in seasonal labour contracts, committing them to work under truly appalling conditions on the large coffee plantations of the Western coast."[139] The antagonistic role taken on by the ladinos in the creation account, and their association with the more malevolent Guardians, becomes even more understandable when one considers the political climate at the time the creation narrative was recorded. As Lincoln explains, "in 1934, the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico (r. 1931-44) introduced measures devastating to Indian interests."[140] These included "'vagrancy laws' that obliged men with land holdings of below a certain level (and this included 43% of Chimaltecos) to work on ladino coffee plantations for a minimum of one hundred days each year,"[141] as well

[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid., 98-99
[139] Ibid., 99.
[140] Ibid., 100.
[141] Ibid.

as a subsumption of Chimaltenango into a hamlet of San Pedro, a move seen as a blow against the village's independence. In such a climate, the connection of the rich and powerful ladinos with malevolent spirits and the armies of Rome becomes more clear. The symbolism and employment of the creation narrative aptly mirrors the economic and political situation of Chimalteco Indians.

The attitudes present in the creation narrative are to some degree contrasted by those expressed in the second narrative that Lincoln examines, that of a healing ceremony. This second account originates roughly a decade later from a village in which Europeanized ladinos made up 35% of the population and owned 70% of the land.[142] The narrative recounts a healing ceremony performed on an Indian woman that had fallen ill after a quarrel with her husband. Accepting the help of a local *curandero,* a traditional healer, she is told that evil forces have stolen her soul. The *curandero* subsequently takes her out of the village one night and performs a healing ceremony in which he summons the soul-stealing spirits and negotiates for the return of the woman's soul. Significantly, the "devils" responsible are clearly depicted as ladino; bearing ladino names, depicted as wearing ladino fashion, and addressed in Spanish rather than the local Indian tongue in which other parts of the ceremonies where conducted.[143] At this stage, one can see a repetition of the first narrative, in which ladinos are shown as evil spirits threatening to steal the souls of oppressed Indians. However, as the story continues the *curandero* is able to, despite their alien nature and great power, fruitfully negotiate with the spirits using a mixture of "flattery, cajolery, and bribery (i.e. the use of gifts to call forth reciprocity) as well as extreme politesse."[144] Furthermore, and significantly, is the *curandero* choice to address the spirits as *compadre* (literally co-parents, or godparents of ones children).

[142] Ibid., 101.
[143] Ibid., 102-3.
[144] Ibid., 103.

The institution of "*Compadrazgo*," Lincoln explains, "is one of the few instruments that serve to integrate Indian and ladino into a single civic and moral community."[145] In this way, through a polite, yet insistent, invocation of a ceremonial kinship bond, the *curando* was able to create an obligation on the spirits that aided in the return of the woman's soul.

The more approachable nature of the spirits that serve as cypher for the ladino elite can to some degree be explained by the fact that the village in which it took place was one in which ladinos were a more central and constant presence than the village of the creation narrative. However, Lincoln goes further to suggest that "[t]his was the local result of national events."[146] 1944 saw the end of Jorge Ubico's reign and the rise of the government of Juan José Arévalo. As part of his platform Arévalo was committed to improving the conditions for Guatemala's Indian population, and his party successfully rallied Indians in many towns to oust ladino leaders and install Indian ones. The government also passed a series of reforms meant to actively integrate Indians into the national culture that included legalization of previously prohibited practices like the traditional healing ceremony described in the preceding paragraph. In a time when Indians began to hold more political power and flatten out the unequal relations with their ladino countrymen and women, it is understandable that such a change of circumstance would have repercussions in religious spheres of life. Whereas a decade prior the ladinos held a power that was beyond negotiation, by this point in Guatemala's history the tables had, perhaps not turned but, shifted enough that negotiation and the invocation of kinship bonds became a possibility in the collective imagery of ladino/Indian relations.

Despite their differences in geographic location and relative political situation, both the creation account and the healing ceremony share similarities. As Lincoln explains, both these

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[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid., 104.

cases represent examples in which the indigenous groups represented "their immediate situation with a narrative or performance in which they represent themselves as 'good Christians,' while depicting adversaries as their religious and moral antitheses."[147] Both of these accounts symbolize encounters between Christians and Indians and each narrative could be picked apart to decipher which aspects originate from Catholic tradition, and which from indigenous Maya practice. However, Lincoln sees little value in "such a crude analytic, which characterized much of the pioneering ethnography."[148] The goal for Lincoln is not a classification of cultural origin, but rather the use to which the religious symbols and plots are put. Lincoln opts for "a dialectic model that acknowledges the extent to which both parties have been transformed by their encounter." This leads to an appreciation of the way in which "the sacred practices, discourses, and institutions of Mayans and Spaniards, ladinos and *naturales* have served as battlefields, instruments, and stakes of a struggle, the results of which are anything but conclusive."[149] Every narrative and performance mirrors and subtly revises shifting power relations of the material sphere.

Lincoln's approach, by viewing religious language and practice of one portion of a larger whole of human activity, allows him to bring a level of coherence to the shifting and complex network of cultural forms displayed in the Guatemalan accounts he investigates. His drawing of associations between political and economic situations and religious practice stands in stark contrast to methodologies that seek to understand religion *only* as religious. Lincoln does not take into account an insider perspective, nor does he attempt to plumb into the depths of the narratives to discover their essential core. Such endeavours are foreign to Lincoln's approach, and a static view of religion that focuses on the private experience of the subjects

[147] Ibid., 107.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid.

would likely reach very different conclusions interpreting these two accounts. However, such methodologies, by refusing to examine non-religious aspects of religious practice, would necessary miss facets of the narratives that are uniquely Guatemalan. Lincoln's essay is short and there is still much more work that could be done in drawing out the relations that Lincoln discerns between Guatemalan religious practices and narratives and socio-political conditions. For example, the dialectic relationship Lincoln emphasizes could be more fully explored to see whether, along with socio-political conditions having religious effects, the causal flow also moves in the other direction. Such questions present new avenues of research and further testify to the positive impact a New Materialist program can have in supplying fruitful new directions for scholarship. Lincoln's New Materialist approach clearly stands as an example of such possibilities.

David Chidester and the Religion of Coca-Cola

David Chidester, whose review of *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* occasioned this study, is another scholar whose work displays the positive impact of a New Materialist program. Chidester's *Authentic Fakes* (2005) explores the religious dimensions of popular culture, encompassing in its scope everything from Coca-Cola to Tupperware to New Age spirituality. Chidester's guiding thesis is that, although American popular culture is full of fake and fraudulent claims regarding ultimate concerns, "these religious fakes still do authentic religious work in and through the play of popular culture."[150] To understand what Chidester has in mind it is necessary to examine his use of terms, specifically what is meant by religion and religious work. Chidester explains, "[s]ituated between the state and the market, between

[150] David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), vii.

political power and economic exchange, religion is an arena of human activity marked by the concerns of the transcendent, the sacred, the ultimate—concerns that enable people to experiment with what it means to be human."[151] The reader should immediately be struck by Chidester's vocabulary. Terms like "the sacred" and "the ultimate" hearken back to the essentialist language of thinkers like Schleiermacher and finding them in the writings of a New Materialist appears incongruous. Significant in this case is the fact that Chidester does not employ these terms in quite the same way as may have been done by past, more pietistic, thinkers. Throughout the book, Chidester looks at the way in which "transcendence, the sacred, and the ultimate are inevitably drawn into doing some very important things that happen in and through popular culture: forming a human community, focusing human desire, and entering into human relations of exchange."[152] In this way, "traces of transcendence seem necessary for instilling a sense of continuity with the past … traces of the sacred seem necessary for establishing a sense of uniformity with the present."[153] Chidester does not ascribe ontological reality to these terms; he does not examine religion or popular culture to uncover the essential elements of some transcendent reality operating throughout. Rather, the vocabulary of transcendence is utilized as a cultural reality connected to a plethora of other cultural, social, and economic facets of human activity. The inquiry does not set out to explicate the nature of a sacred reality but, rather, looks at the way conceptualizations of such ultimate concerns function within material human relations. A potent example of Chidester's approach can be seen in his analysis of the "religion" and "fetishization" of Coca-Cola.

Along with McDonalds and Disney, Coca-Cola represents one of the most recognized symbols of American economic expansion. Lincoln notes that recent analysts of global business

[151] Ibid., 1.
[152] Ibid., 2.
[153] Ibid.

have specifically used the term religion "to capture the meaning and power of these multinational corporations, suggesting that they have assumed symbolic, mythic, and ritualized forms that approximate the forms and functions of world religions."[154] As multinational corporations expand to new markets, the process "draws upon sacred symbols, myths and rituals that operate just as religion does."[155] Drawing upon Mark Pendergrast's *For God, Country, and Coca-Cola* (1993), Chidester notes religious language used by company executives, from the founder's viewing the product with "almost a mystical faith" and his "initiation" of his son into the formula as if it was the "Holy of Holies," to the 1920's bottler's references to Coca-Cola as "holy water," to an executive's claim that Coca-Cola has "entered the lives of more people than any other product or ideology, including the Christian faith."[156] Beyond the language utilized by those within the ranks of the Coca-Cola leadership, Chidester sketches a history of Coca-Cola's religious role in the popular imagery of the American consumer. In Chidester's narrative, Coca-Cola is implicated in the production of the "orthodox image of Santa Claus" in their 1931 advertising campaign, the creation of sacred time for soldiers during WWII as the "pause that refreshes," and the promise to "build a better world in perfect harmony" in the 1960s.[157] In this way, Chidester quotes editor William Allen White's 1938 statement to argue that "Coca-Cola became a potent symbol of the 'sublimated essence of America.'"[158] As the corporation has spread to the global marketplace, it has often become symbolic of the American dream, capitalizing on the creation and maintenance of a desire that goes far beyond the carbonated liquid in a bottle or can.

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[154] Ibid., 135.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid., 40-41.
[157] Ibid., 41.
[158] Ibid.

Throughout its expansion, the corporation has successfully perpetuated the "myth of Coca-Cola as the supreme icon of modernity."[159] At the same time, in becoming multi-national Coca-Cola has needed to translate its myth of religious desire to a varied global audience. In this way "Coca-Cola trades on the translation of information, imagery, and desire among vastly different cultural contexts all over the world."[160] The power relations at stake in such an endeavour mirror those in other "colonial situations of Christian missionary intervention" and thus "Coca-Cola marks fundamental oppositions, signifying the slash between primitive and civilized, tradition and modern, communist and capitalist."[161] As a powerfully charged symbol of American economic expansion, "the sacred object of Coca-Cola stands at the frontier of competing religions in a global contact zone."[162] As examples, Chidester notes a widely reproduced image of Muslims bowing towards Mecca but also, inadvertently facing a lit up Coke vending machine, as well as Tibetan Buddhist monks awestruck visit to the World of Coca-Cola. Perhaps even more poignant, Chidester points to the idea that, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, "Coca-Cola operated as a sacred icon not only of modernity but also of a kind of religious initiation into global markets that promised to transform people from 'primitive' communism to 'modern' capitalism."[163] With this last example, I am reminded of an episode in my own life when, discussing my native Poland, I tried to explain the galvanizing effect Pope John Paul II's 1983 visit had on the Solidarity movement. My interlocutor, a lapsed Irish Catholic, scoffed and replied, "It wasn't the Pope that toppled Communism, it was Coca-Cola." The episodes and images above, Chidester maintains, "in different ways, reinforce stereotypes that have elevated Coca-Cola to the position of a crucial sacred object in a frontier zone of inter-

[159] Ibid., 136.
[160] Ibid., 135.
[161] Ibid., 137.
[162] Ibid.
[163] Ibid.

religious relations."[164] As a significant player on the global stage of inter-religious contact and relation, Coca-Cola has transcended a purely economic character and taken on the aspect of a religious, missionary symbol of modernity.

Chidester is not insensitive to the fact that many may reject his thesis, arguing that the trends he pinpoints have nothing to do with religion. They merely represent a long running and very successful advertising campaign. He counters such arguments by maintaining that "[i]n the symbolic system of modern capitalist society, which advertising animates, commodities are lively objects. Like the fetish, the commodity is an object of religious regard."[165] Drawing upon the work of Constance Classen (1996), Chidester places Coca-Cola in a global symbolic economy of "surreal consumerism" in which products "are touted by their advertisers as an eruption of the extraordinary into the everyday."[166] The promises of Coca-Cola's advertising campaigns to build a world of perfect harmony, and the sacred space creating "pause that refreshes," are indicative of such a "transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary" and in this way they are "representing a kind of heirophany, or manifestation of the sacred."[167] At the same time, in denoting Coca-Cola as a fetish of capitalist culture, Chidester draws upon the instability inherent in its power and association. As a fetish, Coca-Cola falls alongside "those collective subjectivities—the imagined communities, the invented traditions, the political mythologies—that animate the modern world" and just like all these others it is "made, not found."[168] Thus, Coca-Cola as a fetish "represents an unstable center for a shifting constellation of religious symbols" which, although inspiring religious devotion, "is constantly at risk of

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[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid., 42.
[166] Constance Classen, "Sugar Cane, Coca-Cola, and Hypermarkets: Consumption and Surrealism in the Argentine Northwest," *Cross-Cultural Consumption: Global Markets, Local Realities,* ed. David Howes (London: Routledge, 1996), 52, quoted in David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, 138.
[167] David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, 138.
[168] Ibid., 43.

being unmasked as something made and therefore as an artificial focus for religious desire."[169] The work of the scholar in such a case revolves around negotiating this instability to explore and explicate "the ways in which such 'artificial' religious constructions can generate genuine enthusiasm and produce real effects in the world."[170]

Whereas Lincoln utilizes the perspectives of social science to bring clarity to obviously religious phenomena, Chidester utilizes the scholarly vocabulary surrounding the study of religion to bring out a heretofore ignored aspect of economic relations in a global context. Both scholars, Lincoln and Chidester, move beyond insider perspectives and phenomenological description to draw fresh associations between religious sensibilities and various aspects of human activity. Their work maintains an interdisciplinary character, at various points encompassing elements of historiography, semiotics, sociology, psychology, economics, and cultural studies. In both cases, they present ways of examining religion not possible under methodological strictures to analyze religion religiously as this has been historically construed. At the same time, by bringing out socio-political dimensions of religious conceptions and religious dimensions of global economic exchange respectively, they pursue lines of thought that suggest new ways to understand existing phenomena, as well as open new avenues of research and inquiry.

Doors Closing: New Materialism as New Protectionism

The scholars discussed above present fruitful avenues of research and stand for us as examples of the positive impact New Materialism can have for the future of academic religious studies. However, just as New Materialism opens new doors, so too does it close other doors.

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[169] Ibid.
[170] Ibid.

New Materialism, as a reaction to previous approaches to religious studies, has the potential to become reactionary. To support such an assessment this section will examine an important criticism made by Tyler Roberts regarding some of the presuppositions that guide New Materialism as seen in the work of Russell McCutcheon.

Tyler Roberts argues that the New Materialist program, specifically as envisioned by McCutcheon represents a new protectionism within the study of religion. Roberts notes that McCutcheon's rhetoric trades very heavily on the binary opposition between terms like "insider/outsider," "emic/etic," as well as the discourses of "theology/religious studies." While Roberts's primary focus is McCutcheon, his piece also includes discussion of figures as Bruce Lincoln, Donald Wiebe, and Ivan Strenski (discussed in the previous chapter). In this way it is apparent that his critiques of McCutcheon can be extrapolated to include guiding principles of New Materialism more generally. As has been noted in the preceding chapter, this type of strong division forms a common core of the general movement of New Materialism. Roberts raises important questions regarding the totalizing manner in which such oppositions are drawn, especially in the case of the supposedly competing and incompatible discourses of theology on the one hand and religious studies on the other. Roberts is sympathetic to McCutcheon's critique of *sui generis* religion as well as his call for methodological pluralism. He agrees that,

> scholars of religion should welcome methods and explanations grounded in the social sciences and should not be constrained by the vocabularies and claims of "insiders" when it comes to examining and explaining the political and social effects of religious behavior and religious intellectual activity.[171]

At the same time, Roberts argues that "McCutcheon constantly slips from these relatively modest and constructive claims to prescriptions for the field that are anything but pluralistic,"[172]

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[171] Tyler Roberts, "Exposure and Explanation: On the New Protectionism in the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no.1 (2004): 146.
[172] Ibid.

to the point that Roberts concludes that McCutcheon's "call for methodological pluralism is, in fact, a prescription for a new protectionism"[173]

In the eyes of McCutcheon and other New Materialist writers, theology is the "other" of proper academic study of religion. For these writers it "is not just the 'object' of academic discourse—data—it helps define academic discourse: theology is that which must be excluded for academic discourse to be what it is."[174] Such an understanding is largely premised on the type of authority associated with the discourses of religious studies and theology respectively. To examine this position, Roberts points to the recent *Guide to the Study of Religion* (2000), co-edited by McCutcheon and Willi Braun. In the opening essay of this collection Braun cites Lincoln's *Theses on Method* (1996), mentioned earlier, to maintain that "the desire to speak with 'transcendent and eternal' authority is a key to the 'rhetorical propensity' of religion."[175] Braun goes on to contrast "the 'uncensored curiosity' of scholars of religion with the 'confessional' and 'apologetic' constraints placed on theologians by 'knowledge frameworks of religious structures.'"[176] Theology is thus seen as a discourse that is always stabilizing, never free to move beyond the restrictive frameworks established by religious institutions, and always subject to a posited authority that transcends the human realm in which data is gathered. This framework, discussed in more detail in the previous chapter, forms an important theoretical ground for New Materialists, providing support for a social scientific and reductionist (or redescriptive) approach to the study of religion. Roberts, however, questions whether such a division is fair. In the work of Braun and McCutcheon, Roberts "looks in vain for the kinds of careful description and theological work that could ground the sweeping redescriptions of

[173] Ibid.
[174] Ibid. 149.
[175] Ibid. 148.
[176] Ibid.

religious discourse they offer."[177] The lack of such leaves Roberts to conclude that these scholars' "view of research … renders reality docile to the theoretical gaze by 'forcing' the world and its inhabitants to intelligibility."[178] To counter such a "forcing," Roberts offers examples of recent Christian theologians, including Kathryn Tanner, Rowan Williams, and Charles Winquist, who "explicitly acknowledge the immanent, historical, and therefore fallible character of religious discourse in general and of theology in particular."[179] By completely ignoring such trends within theology, critics as McCutcheon set up a straw-man in order to forward their own ideological and professional interests.

One might also supplement Roberts's criticisms by questioning the simplicity of the division between theology and religious studies as premised on a neat divide between the secular and religious in human activity. Recent theologians and theorists like Clayton Crockett, informed by continental thinkers as Deleuze and Derrida and inspired by a seeming resurgence of religiosity, have seen new opportunities for the return of theology into public and academic discourse. In the introduction to his book *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics after Liberalism* (2011), Crockett argues that the "distinction between religious and secular is breaking down, so that it is no longer possible to consistently and rigorously oppose the sacred and the profane."[180] "Western modernity," Crockett maintains, has been premised on the notion that the religious and the secular can be neatly divided, but in recent decades the possibility of a secure secular sphere is less supportable. The public sphere consists of private individuals who cannot simply abandon their religious character when they enter. In such a climate it becomes more difficult to distinguish political philosophy from political theology as "we possess no

[177] Ibid., 150.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Ibid. 150-151.
[180] Clayton Crockett, *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics after Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 2.

absolute or certain criterion by which to claim that any phenomenon is theological as opposed to nontheological."[181] Crockett is careful to make clear that by theology he "means theoretical reflection about religious phenomena in general rather than a specific tradition or set of truth claims."[182] He calls for a political theology "which grapples with important concepts such as sovereignty, democracy, and the role that they play in our current postmodern intellectual and cultural situation."[183] Such a theological project does not speak with a transcendent authority, nor is it *sui generis* and separate from other spheres of human activity. Rather, as Crockett explains elsewhere, drawing upon the work of Talal Asad—who advocates a form of religious studies that resembles New Naterialist thinking—political theology appreciates that the "entanglement of religion with secular and political issues of power is so radical that it is not possible to 'save' secular politics by liberating it from religious phenomena."[184] Thus, it takes as its point of departure the interplay of various human cultural, political, and economic forms with religious understandings and sensibilities.

Jeffery Robbins, contemporary of and sometimes collaborator with Crockett, in a recent piece published in a 2008 CSSR bulletin takes a similar stance. Also citing recent scholarly critiques of the so-called "secularization thesis," Robbins suggests ways in which theology could and should be seen as a legitimate contributor to the academic study of religion. Robbins maintains that if secularization means "a diminishment of religious belief or the fading away of religion from the public's consciousness," then it is safe to say that this is "yesterday's incorrect vision of the future."[185] However, for Robbins there is another way to understand secularization

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[181] Ibid.
[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid.
[184] Clayton Crockett, "Secular Theology and the Academic Study of Religion," *The Council of Societies for the Study of Religions Bulletin* 27, no. 2 (2008): 37.
[185] Jeffrey Robbins, "Theses on Secular Theology," *The Council of Societies for the Study of Religions Bulletin* 27, no. 2 (2008): 33.

as "the altered epistemological, cultural, and political terrain in which religion is practiced, believed, and studied, even in the midst of today's post-secular world."[186] Such an understanding opens up questions that theology can help address. By "post-secular" Robbins does not mean simply the return of religion or a rise of religiosity, rather "post-secular" indicates a position in which a historical trajectory which sees the gradual decline of religious belief has been brought into question, providing "opportunities to rethink the role of religion within the public sphere or the proper relation of religion and politics, and the private and the public."[187] The theology that Robbins advocates is what he terms a "secular theology," which is altered from its confessional roots by virtue of the obligations inherent in its situation within an academic institution. Thus, it "thinks differently (non-dogmatically) while still maintaining itself within a certain tradition of inquiry and while still valuing a certain demand for ultimacy."[188] In order to flesh out the concept of a secular theology further, Robbins presents four guiding theses: 1. *A secular theology is an immanent theology*; 2. *A Secular theology is profane theology*; 3. *A secular theology is a weak theology*; 4. *A secular theology is a political theology*.

Rather than treat each of Robbins's theses sequentially will be most beneficial to bring out some important aspects across these theses that bear directly on the current discussion of New Materialism. To begin, utilizing the concept of the "plane of immanence" taken from Deleuze and Guattari, Robbins's secular theology holds that "transcendence might be reimagined from the vertical to the horizontal, from the transcendent to an immanent realm."[189] In this way, secular theology sidesteps Wiebe's criticisms of methodologies that grant

[186] Ibid.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid., 31.
[189] Ibid., 34.

ontological reality to the sacred by attempting "to think transcendence without a transcendent signifier."[190] Robbins goes on to explain the profane character of secular theologies by contrasting an Eliadean perspective with that of Jonathan Z. Smith, who is another important figure of New Materialist leanings. The former, although claiming religious neutrality, was actually motivated by essentialist theological presuppositions. That of Smith, in contrast, proceeds from no essential structure other than the insistence that religion is a human means of creating meaning. Here Robbins, significantly, maintains McCutcheon's dichotomy by insisting that "instead of simply accepting the inherited meanings associated with a religious phenomenon or as told by religious authorities, scholars must accept their outsider status, which by virtue of this altered perspective, allows for the generation of new and different meanings."[191] Such a recognition means that secular theology "does not advance a particular confessional perspective and it is independent of, and not answerable to, religious authority."[192] Ultimately, "secular theology is the notion that theological thinking may function independently from religious control or authority, and its focus is on this world, here and now."[193] Robbins directly addresses the issue of redescription by noting that the modern liberal strategy of the "containment of religion" has forced "the religiously faithful into translating their beliefs into a purely secular idiom."[194] The result of such an imperative of redescription can, Robbins argues, be seen in resentment and the rise of the religious right in the United States, but more importantly it "cheapens the transformative potential of our democracy as a constant work in progress."[195] Secular theology counters such "containment of religion" without at the same time

[190] Ibid.
[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Ibid., 35.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid.

forwarding essentialist and dogmatic religious conceptions. It "begins with the recognition that no single perspective gets the final word or speaks from a place of privilege" while at the same time recognizing that "there is the urgent need for a politically engaged theology that enters into the fray by articulating its own conceptions of justice and goodness."[196] It is this engagement that marks secular theology as a political theology.

Such a political theology as articulated by Crockett and Robbins, clearly distances itself from traditional models of theology that New Materialism finds objectionable. Premised on the impossibility of securely untangling the secular from the religious, such positions ironically find support in academic work like that of Chidester.[197] It is precisely because, as merely one of many forms of human culture, religion is interwoven with, and finds expression in, the 'secular,' that Chidester is able to analyze American popular culture the way he does. This brings up another criticism leveled by Roberts regarding the protectionism he discerns in McCutcheon. Roberts notes that McCutcheon argues, in a way reminiscent of the writers discussed in the first chapter, that terms like *religious experience* and *religious impulses* coupled with *sui generis* understandings of religion, "obscure the actual motives and behaviors of human beings."[198] In this way, they lead to discursive rules in which religious impulses can explain aspects of human behavior but the reverse can never be true. Although Roberts applauds McCutcheon's rejection of such discursive rules, he finds problematic McCutcheon's solution. McCutcheon simply "*reverses* the relationship, contending that religious feelings (or

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[196] Ibid.
[197] This is evidenced as well as in the recent work of several theologians. See, for example, the essays by Linell E. Cady, Paula Cooey, and Sheila G. Davaney in the volume *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain,* ed. Linell E. Cady and Delvin Brown (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002).
[198] Tyler Roberts, "Exposure and Explanation: On the New Protectionism in the Study of Religion." 155.

experiences, beliefs, motivations, etc.) should *never* be used to explain aspects of human behavior."[199] Roberts responds to this move on McCutcheon's part as follows:

> It is one thing to agree to the importance of studying the social and political *functions* of religion and to acknowledge that there are social and political *causes* of religion, but it is another to exclude from the start the possibility that there might be something academically significant to say about "religious" causes of behavior or about the limits of historicism.[200]

McCutcheon defends such a move by speaking of "scale," in that being academic necessitates sticking with a scale that maintains that non-observable phenomena have no explanatory value. However, as Roberts argues:

> There is no consideration here of the possibility of the scholar working in terms of multiple scales. In particular, there is no reflection on the possibility that a useful approach to critique might emerge from thinking across scales and employing critically—in an academically viable way—the language of religion.[201]

Despite any claims that McCutcheon might make to post-modernism, the presuppositions that inform his position seem decidedly modern and positivistic in that theology is always and only "'obscurantist' and the study of religion is precisely the means by which we can uncover theology's, and religion's ideological strategies."[202] Ultimately, Roberts concludes that McCutcheon's strong division of theology and religious studies "is less a matter of conceptual and discursive clarity than a matter of protecting the study of religion from the infectious exposure to theology."[203] This is to force "theology" into a very limited and essentialist frame. Such forcing, and the various discursive rules and strong dichotomies that McCutcheon employs are based, not on a careful appraisal of current academic trends and theological

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[199] Ibid.
[200] Ibid.,156.
[201] Ibid.
[202] Ibid.,158.
[203] Ibid.

positions, but on a desire to preserve the purity of social scientific study of religion by keeping "the 'data' from talking back."[204]

This strong thread of protectionism running through McCutcheon's work has kept him from appreciating the truly post-modern and deconstructive potential of other, specifically theological, approaches to the study of religion. McCutcheon, along with other theorists considered in this work such as Wiebe, Segel, and Sharf, sees theology as *always* saddled with the baggage of religious authoritative structures, as *always* apologetic and confessional. Such a view makes theology, and the rhetoric of experience[205] with which it has often been associated, incommensurate with the goals of religion scholars as critics of religion and culture. However, the theological perspectives of Crockett and Robbins in particular suggest that such a strong distinction does not fully appreciate the range of approaches that might be grouped under the derisive label of theology, nor does it take into account the critical role theology can play.

Roberts argues that theology, as the study of 'singularity' is inherently disruptive. He explains, "the 'too much' of singularities resists our efforts to maintain clear boundaries, a resistance and disturbance of our identities that we generally defend ourselves against by asserting clear boundaries ever more strongly. Thus, for all free thinkers, singularity is traumatic and religion is a discourse of trauma."[206] In this vein, Roberts draws a connection between theology and continental traditions by insisting that "theology shares with 'critique' the effort to examine critically the bonds of ideology and identity from a perspective of a self-consciousness that recognizes the futility of searching for an identity free of such bonds."[207]

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[204] Ibid., 154.
[205] See Robert Sharf, "Experience," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
[206] Tyler Roberts, "Exposure and Explanation: On the New Protectionism in the Study of Religion," 163.
[207] Ibid., 165. The connection between singularity, identity, and religious studies is further highlighted by Jim Kanaris who, in a recent blog post, places singularity of the self as central to his concept of enecstasis as "one's own intellectual, moral, religious, and political horizons become an explicit means to arbitrate an objectified

The destabilizing effect of theology, not only for religious authority, but for the presuppositions of the academic study of religion itself, is highlighted by Robbins's characterization of secular theology that "finds itself in a field of study that has no absolutely determinant referent, no uncontested methodology, and no single over-arching theory."[208] As a portion of this field, theology "complicates the field by its perpetual questions that know no final answer as long as Religious Studies pertains to religion."[209]

The irony of a New Materialist protectionism is evident when one considers the motivations that inspired the movement. New Materialism, as it has been characterized throughout the preceding chapters, stands as a reaction to pietistic and protectionist trends within the academic study of religion. New Materialism objects to the drawing of the lines of scholarship to commensurate with the understandings forwarded by religious authorities. The insistence on viewing "religion religiously" and the insistence on an emphasis on private religious experience is seen as a protective strategy to insulate religion from other spheres of human activity and obscure the political, economic, and social motivations operating behind religious conceptions. New Materialism, as a movement, bucks this trend within scholarship by highlighting religion as a discourse and field of human activity that is inherently intertwined with other spheres of human activity. Thus, New Materialism firmly counters the protectionism of earlier approaches by advocating an interdisciplinary approach that explicitly licenses the redescription of religious phenomena into the terminology germane to social scientific inquiry. Such an opening of the field should be applauded. However, thinkers like McCutcheon take this

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relationality of concerns: text to self, politics to self, transcendence to self, alterity to self" ("What Does Philosophy of Religion Offer to the Modern University?" http://philosophyofreligion.org/?p=443953). A book-length treatment will be released soon by the State University of New York Press entitled *Personalizing Philosophy of Religion: An Enecstatic Treatment*.

[208] Jeffrey Robbins, "Theses on Secular Theology," 31.

[209] Ibid.

opening to a point where a pietistic protectionism is merely supplanted by an equally protectionist social scientific position. The new protectionism of New Materialism, although paying lip service to an interdisciplinary approach, more or less arbitrarily closes doors to certain academic approaches that can still produce new and critical work within the field of religious studies. In this way, in the hands of scholars as McCutcheon, New Materialism, in its desire to unseat essentialist and determinist theories of religion, is in danger of merely replacing one essentialist conception based on private experience and religious authority with another based on a modern secular social scientific view. Religion, on this reading, is not only *open* to reduction and redescription, but actually cannot be considered in any other way.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have intended to show the positive and negative impact that New Materialism can bring to the academic study of religion. The works of Lincoln and Chidester stand as good examples of the way that New Materialism can open productive new avenues of research. At the same time, New Materialism, as viewed through the work of McCutcheon, can be seen to close important doors just as it opens others. It is important to note that this negative side of New Materialism was primarily focused on McCutcheon, who, although an important figure in the New Materialist movement, is not necessarily representative of the movement as a whole. Criticisms of McCutcheon are not limited to scholars outside New Materialism. Ivan Strenski, for example, finds McCutcheon's combative divisions unproductive and maintains that, although he agrees with McCutcheon's naturalistic approach, accepting McCutcheon's "naturalistic ontology" does not in itself grant any more clarity about religion, and scholars "are

still left with no other choice than to study religion as we find it."[210] Strenski, although avowedly naturalistic and materialist in his approach, tends to judge the success or failure of theories of religion based on their abilities to generate fresh and novel avenues of inquiry. This chapter has attempted to follow such a criterion by presenting such avenues as regards New Materialism, while cautioning against the possible directions into which the movement could be taken.

[210]Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion*, 340.

CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters have attempted to give shape to the movement that David Chidester christened "New Materialism." Throughout the study, it has become apparent that New Materialism has emerged as a response to previous trends within the academic study of religion. By examining the history of the field and the guiding methodological principles of phenomenology of religion, it has been possible to discern the shape of the New Materialist movement in a negative sense. New Materialism, firstly, sets itself squarely against studies of religion premised on private and incommunicable experience. The New Materialist position in this regard can be seen as a continuation of a debate within religious studies dating back at least to the late 1970's. The criticisms of the rhetoric of ineffable experience as the core of religion put forth by Steven Katz and Wayne Proudfoot form an important theoretical underpinning of the New Materialist position. Building on the work of these two scholars, New Materialist writers see approaches that favour experience as the irreducible core of religion, as forwarding a protective strategy whose goal is to safeguard the religious meaning of particular traditions. Such a protective study is a direct importation of religious values into a secular academic enterprise. By accepting this core, scholars have supported an essentialist view that stems, not from proper scholarly analysis, but rather, from pietistic motivations. In this way, scholars have been guilty of misrepresenting religious traditions by refusing to see the social, political, and economic motivations and consequences that lie behind religious conceptions. The New Materialism, in response to the popularity of this type of methodology, strives to shift the academic focus of religious studies away from such a methodologically suspect, interpretive

category as experience. Instead, New Materialism favours a view of religion that avoids essentialist definitions. In doing so, it pushes for religious studies as a poly-methodological discipline that, by drawing on understandings from a variety of social-scientific fields, seeks to bring greater understanding of the political power relations, social functions, and economic motivations that operate behind and within religious understandings. Such a position creates a strong and secure division between proper religious studies and theology, which New Materialism sees as the arch-rival of the academic study of religion.

New Materialism's antagonism towards methodologies premised on internal experience can be further contextualized within discussions surrounding the proper relationship between religious studies and theology. New Materialism takes seriously the division between the two fields, insisting that theology, as a quintessentially religious activity, is at odds with the proper goals and positioning of religious studies. As a mode of discourse, theology seeks always to stabilize and protect the central tenets of the tradition with which it is associated. New Materialism extends critiques as Donald Wiebe's against phenomenology of religion into a blueprint for scholarship in religious studies. Wiebe's concern, as an example of this tendency, revolves around what he sees as the confessional underpinnings of the academic study of religion. Along with Robert Segal, another important representative, Wiebe criticizes scholars for their insistence on respecting the insider's perspective and providing purely descriptive analyses of religious phenomena. In order for religion scholars to scientifically examine religious phenomena, both writers insist, the question of truth and explanatory analysis must remain open. Segal goes further to argue that the believer's perspective is unattainable for the non-believer and thus, in order to make religious phenomena coherent, the non-believing scholar has no choice but to reduce the language of religion to a secular, social scientific

vocabulary. This wing of New Materialism proceeds from the methodological stances represented here by Wiebe and Segal to provide a social scientific program of study that utilizes reduction or, in McCutcheon's words, "redescription," to guard against the entry of C/confessional theological interests into the properly academic study of religion.

In both the case of experience as well as the larger discussion regarding theology, New Materialism proceeds from criticism of past methods in order to offer a programmatic blueprint for the future of religious studies. The politicized nature of New Materialist discourse may go beyond the initial critiques from which New Materialism takes much of its motivation, especially those of Steven Katz and Wayne Proudfoot. When one reads Russell McCutcheon's *Manufacturing Religion* or Bruce Lincoln's *Theses On Method* one has the sense that New Materialists do not simply point out particular errors of scholarship but rather, insist on a far-reaching and radical redefinition of the field itself. Especially in the hands of McCutcheon, the programmatic of social scientific scholarship to the exclusion of all other approaches takes on a very politically charged and belligerent character.[211] McCutcheon's insistence on binary oppositions between religious studies and theology, or outsider/insider, brook no compromise nor middle ground upon which scholars from differing positions might meet.

Gary Lease's article "The Rise and Fall of Religious Studies at Santa Cruz" (1995) may shed some light on the motivation behind New Materialism's uncompromising position regarding the proper object and method of study for the discipline of religious studies. In this piece, Lease recounts the history of the relatively short-lived department of religious studies at UC Santa Cruz, a department with which he was involved from 1973 to its eventual dissolution. Lease writes about how, as the initially very small department expanded, "a deep inability on

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[211] Although McCutcheon is often the most vocal, the same politically charged language can be seen in William Arnal, *The Sacred is the Profane: The Political Nature of "Religion"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) as well as Willi Braun's introduction to the *Guide to the Study of Religion* (New York: Cassell, 2000).

the part of the religious studies faculty to reach unanimity concerning the program's academic identity quickly surfaced."[212] This split, according to Lease, was premised on a division between "those who viewed a religious studies program as also directed towards the development of each individual student's religious growth and sensitivity, and those who considered such a program to be concerned only with making intelligible what people claim as religious experience."[213] Lease himself firmly sided with the latter group. This split had a powerful and negative effect on the department especially as it "manifested in the lack of a planned and coherent curriculum dedicated to commonly shared goals."[214] With a lack of cohesion the department rapidly declined until, at the behest of external reviewers, the dean finally disestablished the program in 1980.

Lease notes three "pathologies" which in his eyes led to the inevitable demise of religious studies at Santa Cruz, pathologies that echo quite clearly the New Materialism of the present piece. Firstly, there was the insistence on the primacy of individual experience which, given that it "is dependent upon the fact that experiences themselves are always embedded in a network of language, beliefs, practices, and shared actions."[215] What this meant is that within the department there could be "no common vehicle for study, or a curriculum, but only exposure to experiences."[216] Secondly, there was the insistence of the *universality* of religious experience that confused a "*model* for patterns of experience for reality."[217] Finally, there was what Lease suggests as the more "theological" pathology of "defining religious studies as a discipline, and thus substituting a particular substance of religious expression for religion as a

[212] Gary Lease, "The Rise and Fall of Religious Studies at Santa Cruz: A Case Study in Pathology, or *The Rest of the Story,*" *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 7, no. 2, (1995): 316.
[213] Ibid.
[214] Ibid.
[215] Ibid., 321.
[216] Ibid.
[217] Ibid.

whole."[218] In Lease's eyes, it was these three "self-explosive constitutive elements"[219] that led to the demise of the religious studies unit. It fostered a sense that the unit's identity was devoid of content or substance.

Lease's article can be regarded as a cautionary tale of what can befall a scholarly enterprise if it lacks a coherent guiding thread of discourse, or commitment to one consistent methodology—or at least a network of methodological commitments that are not incongruous with the overall aim of studying the whole of the religious phenomenon rather than part of it. The worry over the future of religious studies as an independent unit within the academy may shed some further light on the appearance of New Materialism in the academic landscape. This connection might seem ironic to Charlotte Allan who, in the article that began the present project, writes that the scholarly agenda of writers such as Wiebe "would likely put out of business most of the 1,236 undergraduate theology and religious studies programs at U.S. colleges and universities."[220] Allan's blithe statement might have some truth as regards New Materialism in its quest to root out confessionalism and confessional approaches within the study. It is clear that, if the New Materialist program were to become the guiding paradigm for the academic study of religion, many programs, especially those with strong scholarly ties with theology departments, would have to be significantly altered, if not done away with wholesale.[221] However, in the eyes of New Materialists, such a culling of the field may be a necessary step, not to remove religious studies from the academy, but rather to strengthen the field by providing a strong methodological backbone for what some might see as a fragile

[218] Ibid., 322.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Charlotte Allan, "Is Nothing Sacred?" *Lingua Franca* 6 (1995): 31.
[221] The religious studies unit at McGill, which has sister theological colleges, is a direct example of such a program. However, the status of religious studies as a School, rather than as a Department, ensures a place of the colleges in the overall academic mission of the University.

discipline in the current academic climate. The guiding assumption behind New Materialism's politicized discourse regarding acceptable scholarship seems to be that the "pathologies" that Lease discerned must be negotiated, or fully eradicated, for the health of religious studies.

This is not to suggest that New Materialism proceeds merely from a cynical desire to protect professional interests. Indeed, such a charge would be ironic given McCutcheon's attacks on phenomenology and the discourse of *sui generis* religion as motivated by scholars' desire to fence off an area of study to which only they would have access.[222] New Materialism, it would seem, is sincere in its desire to do away with unwarranted protectionist strategies in order to open the field to a larger diversity of approaches. Thinkers as Sharf are also sincerely concerned about the distortions to which scholars are led by an over-reliance on the rhetoric of experience. At the same time, Lease's account of the situation at UC Santa Cruz, coupled with criticisms of such a leading figure of past religious studies as Eliade, present a situation in which it is not unreasonable to be concerned about the future of religious studies in the academy. By bringing the academic study of religion under the wing of the social sciences, and insisting strongly on this positioning, New Materialism suggests a more secure way forward for religious studies.

This solution to the precarious position of religious studies might indeed help to secure its future in the academy. However, it is crucial that, in attempting to "save" religious studies, scholars do not go so far as to impoverish the discipline. Tyler Roberts suggests that, in the hands of McCutcheon, the New Materialist program may ultimately function as a new form of protectionism. Both Roberts and Clayton Crockett insist that New Materialism's characterization of theology is not accurate and that religious studies and theology need not be

[222] Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 65.

as incompatible as New Materialism insists. Rather than always functioning as a stabilizing discourse in service to religious authority, theology, according to both thinkers, can accomplish destabilizing work that brings new meaning to light. The criticisms of New Materialist positions by these authors need not bring one to champion the reconciliation of theology and religious studies. However, they should raise questions about the limits of strictly defining religion as to bar approaches from discussion on a rich and varied field of human activity.

Ultimately, New Materialism is productive in bringing scholars' attention to problems in the way religious studies has been approached in the past. The category of unmediated private experience at certain times seems to function as a protective strategy that does little to aid the type of understanding that scholars seek. Perhaps more important, as Sharf makes clear, an over-reliance on the notion of "religious experience" has led scholars to severely distort the traditions they study, as in the case of Asian religious traditions. Furthermore, the protectionism inherent in the stricture to study religious phenomena *only* as religious, without ever explaining or reducing the terms to the language of any other discipline, puts unwarranted limits on the field of study, blocking productive avenues of approach that David Chidester and Bruce Lincoln showcase. In this regard, New Materialism is right in calling for acceptance of a wider range of approaches.

However, as previously discussed, New Materialism's call for poly-methodology is limited to methodologies drawn from the social sciences. This fact brings the focus around to one of the primary questions raised in the opening pages of this piece, namely what definition of religion is occasioned by the New Materialist program of study. A clear and exclusive insistence on social scientific methodologies suggests its own definition of religion, a definition that Lease sums up well in the final pages of the article cited above. Lease writes that religion

should be viewed as "one cultural program among others, as an artifact, if you will, which is employed strategically to distribute power and authority within a particular society and culture" and that its proper study should be "designed as the attempt to re-cover the dynamics, motivations, and goals which prompt a particular society, as cultural product, to make up this or that religion, to privilege this or that set of experiences as 'religion.'"[223] Although such a definition and program of study is certainly valuable, by insisting on it and *only* it, New Materialism draws the borders so close that other approaches, like those suggested by Roberts, Crockett, and Robbins, which are arguably equally valuable, are denied entry. In this way, New Materialism, in fighting protectionism, runs the risk of simply substituting one kind of protectionism for another.

New Materialism is correct in its recognition that scholars' role is to make religion intelligible. Reduction in the aid of intelligibility for which Segal argues is valuable to the study of religion as it presents new ways to understand the subject matter. The insider's perspective should not form the boundary of acceptable scholarship, especially not in a protective move that serves to obstruct intelligibility. An outsider's understanding of a specific tradition can bring out new meaning for both insiders and outsiders. However, the outsider perspective need not, and should not, be championed in a way that merely reverses pietistic protectionism. In this regard, New Materialists would do well to heed Strenski's criticism of McCutcheon in recognizing that the creation of binary oppositions like insider/outsider or religious studies/theology is not productive. Strenski writes that McCutcheon's position "represents a reversion to the *theological* discourse of many of the founders, albeit as their mirror image."[224] This same sentiment is echoed by Donald Wiebe, who worries that McCutcheon's "wish to

[223] Gary Lease, "The Rise and Fall of Religious Studies at Santa Cruz," 322-3.
[224] Ivan Strenski *Thinking About Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 340.

replace the religio-theological studies of religion and their ideological agendas with the engaged, public intellectual is, so far as I can see, simply to pit a new ideological agenda over against the old."[225] It is good to see that New Materialism contains such division and self-critique. It is important to remember that what has here been referred to as the movement of New Materialism is a loosely bound group of scholars connected by an adherence to a specific methodological stance regarding the study of religion. However, as a relatively new and loose movement, the details of the political implications regarding the methodological program are neither firmly set nor, as Wiebe's and Strenski's criticisms of McCutcheon show, universally agreed upon. It is important, going forward, that New Materialism proceeds in a way as to maintain discussion between scholar and, in the words of McCutcheon, "data," understanding that that data can also have a voice in the discussion.

[225] Donald Wiebe, "The Reinvention or Degradation of Religious Studies? Tales from the Tuscaloosa Woods," *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 11 (2004): 12, quoted in Strenski, *Thinking About Religion*, 340.

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