

*The Sacred Is the Profane: The Political Nature of "Religion."* By WILLIAM E. ARNAL and RUSSELL T. MCCUTCHEON. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. xvi +240 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-975712-1 (pbk.)

This book is not a monograph, but a collection of essays — which were, with one exception, previously published (or submitted) by one of the “co-authors,” but republished here with some revisions such as changing the “I” to “we.” The earliest piece was published in 2000. The central cluster of claims made in this book can be paraphrased as follows: “religion” is an arbitrary, geographically, and historically specific folk taxon that originally served specific interests; that taxon was subsequently adopted, naturalized, reified, and elevated to an analytic and monolithic category by scholars; this move was misguided; the use of “religion” as a scholarly category should stop; its persistent use is a problem that needs to be analyzed in terms of the work being done with it; scholars should now study the making of the taxon/category and thereby “historicize” it; we should analyze its function in popular discourse; religion does not pre-exist the category “religion”; the latter originated in the context of the emergence of the modern liberal democratic nation state; the study of religion(s) should reinvent itself as a the study of social classification, signification, and identity construction (which are truly universal processes).

Readers will realize that all this is not really new and they will be disappointed if they had hoped that voices critical of these claims would be discussed in this volume. Even the work of scholars who express similar views is addressed only occasionally (but there are some comments on the limits of the post-colonialist narrative). Arnal and McCutcheon lose the opportunity of advancing the discussion.

Since this volume is not a monograph, its argument is not substantiated, nor is it unfolded in a series of logically progressing or mutually complementary chapters that would systematically engage a relevant set of theories and empirical materials. Instead, Arnal and McCutcheon rehearse their argument mainly by exhaustive repetition and versatile application to a variety of rather disparate cases. These include a now dated chapter on the question of the definition of religion (which does not acknowledge any publications on this issue that have come out during the past decade), a review article on companion volumes, and a discussion of the so-called cognitive science of religion occasioned by the publication of one book. Rhetorically, in addition to episodes from US politics, the co-authors/editors repeatedly indulge in commenting on conference papers by unnamed speakers and reactions to them by unidentified students. Across the chapters, the same snippets from the literature

reemerge repeatedly, followed by very similar comments. Jonathan Z. Smith is devotionally evoked throughout the book; also Talal Asad and Maurice Bloch are recurrently quoted as if to confirm the authors' own diagnosis: "Certain names . . . are raised over and over, and the debate more and more takes the form of either approving citation or dismissal of these central arguments" (p. xiii).

In addition to a preface, an introduction, and an afterword, the present volume comprises eight chapters. Out of these, three were originally written by Arnal. These stand out as somewhat different in tone and content from the pieces originally written by McCutcheon. While the latter has manufactured his own niche as a critic of scholarship on "religion," Arnal, who has published on early Christianity and the New Testament, has a record of analyzing data that many persist in calling "religious"/"religion." In the present volume, this happens with reference to Disney World and early Christianity. Immediately, one notes a tension, as the banned category makes its reappearance, a disjunction that has not been domesticated editorially. In the Disney chapter, for example, one learns that "the postmodern aesthetics of spectation or nonparticipation" provide "the conditions that allow for the revivification of religious techniques of identity *without* raising the specter of a positively defined social identity" (p. 68). So, apparently there *are* techniques identified as "religious" by the author(s). Later in this chapter, it is claimed, "In a postmodern world then, religion need no longer function as the repressed 'Other' of civil society" (p. 69); apparently then "religion" as the significant "Other" of scholarship on it has not been suppressed entirely, i.e., the authors have "*not* yet sufficiently dispensed with the category" (p. xiii; emphasis original). In the piece on early Christianity, one is surprised to witness an attempt "to account for one of the central dimensions in that variegated bundle of behaviors we call 'religion,' namely the practices and discourses around what have been variously called spiritual, supernatural, or counterintuitive beings" (p. 162). So, it seems there is a "bundle of behaviors" that we as scholars are entitled to call "religion" after all. And yet, in other parts of the volume such statements would probably be rejected.

Readers who may have turned their attention to this volume in order to find out more about the *political nature of "religion"* (rather than of the discourse about it) and about its "contingent political creation" (p. 112), will need to content themselves with fairly general and repetitive statements. The meaning and nature of politics or the political remain rather vague concepts. The co-emergence of religion and the secular and of both with the liberal democratic state is treated as a fact in several places (e.g., pp. 28–29, 108–109, 118), but is nowhere elaborated upon in a historical or historicist manner.

Arnal and McCutcheon hold that religion is tied to “notions of interiority, autonomy, privacy, individual choice, authenticity, lived experience” (pp. 14–15). This, of course, fits the “political” narrative they are taking for granted. At the same time it is clear that this picture would be seen by others as a gross distortion; for them, religion is equally clearly tied to notions of exteriority, hegemony, and public life — both in emic and in etic terms.

In their discussion of the so-called minimally counterintuitive statements in the cognitive science of religion, McCutcheon and Arnal critique the counterintuitiveness theorem as they find it to be wedded to “a very traditional correspondence theory of meaning” (p. 92). Instead they profess the alternative (holistic) view of “language as a culturally relative and historically dynamic closed system in which each signifier is made meaningful by its arbitrary and infinitely variable relationship to all other signifiers within the system” (pp. 92–93). Given such a view, however, much of their critique of the unstable and apparently indefinable nature of “religion” (p. 128) looks less plausible. They seem to expect of a concept what it cannot deliver (and what they themselves would critique on semantic grounds), namely a correspondence with a clearly identifiable object. While Arnal and McCutcheon seem to be surprised at the apparent ease at which “a discursive object can be treated as a stable fact” (p. 100), one cannot fail to be amazed by their being surprised by this constitutive linguistic ability (especially given their nod to a holistic semantics). At points like these, one still feels some remnants of a positivist dream shining through their pages.

The book offers some glimpses of emerging reflexivity, for example the call not to limit the deconstructivist enterprise “to, alas, ‘religion’” (p. 170). Maybe “the state” or “politics” and other categories consistently invoked by the authors as seemingly more stable and unproblematic signifiers or positive facts will eventually also lose their ontological innocence. While Arnal and McCutcheon “are asking readers to take seriously their own historicity and situatedness” (p. 6), readers will ask the same of the authors. So far, in the Preface (pp. xiii–xiv), this is treated as a promise. One waits eagerly for its fulfillment.

Michael Stausberg  
*University of Bergen*