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CRITICS NOT CARETAKERS

Redescribing the Public Study of Religion

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CHAPTER 8

A Default of Critical Intelligence? The Scholar of Religion as Public Intellectual

> The moment you publish essays in a society you have entered political life; so if you want not to be political do not write essays or speak out.
>
> —Edward Said (1996: 110)

> To exist socially is to be rhetorically aligned. It is the function of the intellectual as critical rhetor to uncover, bring to light, and probe all such alignments. This is part of the work of ideological analysis.
>
> —Frank Lentricchia (1985: 149)

> The historian of religion cannot suspend his critical faculties, his capacity for disbelief, simply because the materials are "primitive" or religious.
>
> —Jonathan Z. Smith (1982: 60)

What is the role of religion in public life? This is the common question asked in a number of books that have recently appeared (see, among others, Cady [1993], Carter [1993], Dean [1994], and Marsden [1994, 1997]). Virtually all of their answers involve an increased role for 'faith' and even theology in the intellectual, social, economic, and political affairs of the state. As suggested in the previous chapter, the destabilizations of objectivity and science brought about by postmodern critiques are the means by which these writers return this religious commitment to public life. As George Marsden argues, given that "many of the original reasons" for excluding religious faith from the academy and matters of public concern have, along with other Enlightenment notions, recently come under severe critique, "is it now time to reconsider the rules that shape the most respected academic communities?" (1994: 8–9). Because the question of religion's role in matters of public concern

is clearly of relevance to such theologically inclined commentators on civil life, some readers may wonder precisely why such books ought to attract the attention of the scholar of religion. In other words, what does this recent spate of books have to do with redescribing the public study of religion?

Books on the resurgent role of religious commitment in public life ought to attract the interest of the scholar of religion precisely because they are evidence of our failure as public intellectuals. Outside of a small number of readers and writers, few members of our own society—and few members of the academy—know what we do or know who we are, let alone are influenced in their public decisions by our scholarship. When one examines the books written by those who advocate an increased role for religious commitment in the affairs of a nation (most often this turns out to be a particular type of liberal Protestant Christian commitment), it is as if the academic study of religion—even its earlier incarnation as comparative religion—had never existed nor made any significant contribution to the human sciences. It is as if we had nothing to add to public affairs whatsoever and that theologians are the only commentators on 'religion' who have a role to play in helping to decide issues of law, justice, and social welfare.

Given the tools that scholars of religion routinely employ in their wide-ranging studies, I believe that we have a vital role to play in public affairs, but, as may be gathered from preceding chapters, it is a role that is rather different from the one championed by many current writers. This chapter is therefore an attempt to outline some of the reasons for our failure as public intellectuals and to argue for a different role for the scholar of religion as public intellectual.

A PROBLEM OF OUR OWN MAKING

In my reading, the very question, What is the role of religion in public life? has so far been the almost exclusive territory of self-identified religious people staking out claims on how their insights into the ways in which nations ought to work can be put into practice. What we should note from the outset is that the very phrasing of the question already presumes that the issue of what exactly religion is has already been settled; for virtually no one in this debate presumes that religion is the result of alienation from socioeconomic relations (Marx and Engels), that religion is an illusory practice of wish fulfillment (Freud), that religious practices and stories symbolically deny the contingency and transience of life and human institutions (Bloch 1994), that religion is but one species of anthropomorphism (Guthrie 1993, 1996), or that religion

is but an evolutionarily developed mechanism (Burkert 1996). If any of these alternative options were seriously entertained, then undoubtedly many people would argue that religion must be kept far from the mechanisms whereby decisions in a culturally, economically, and technologically diverse/complex nation are made. It should be apparent, then, that this unarticulated consensus concerning the self-evidently positive and enriching role that religious commitment can play in political affairs betrays the silence of scholars of religion—a silence that I believe is self-inflicted. So, the question posed at the outset of this chapter, What is the role of religion in public life? might better be phrased, What is, or can be, the role of the scholar of religion in public life?

What I am suggesting is that unlike Stephen Carter's (1993) thesis that so-called elite, liberal, and secular society has actively trivialized and marginalized those with a religiously inspired viewpoint, it is actually scholars of religion, in their very conception of both their datum and themselves, who have trivialized and marginalized both themselves and their own social contributions. The methods most widely used in our field, phenomenology and hermeneutics, both of which happen to be the primary means by which our field was established as institutionally autonomous in the first place, are directly implicated in the absence of critical intelligence in the field. In their insistence that religion is comprised of *sui generis*, nonfalsifiable meaning derived from a private experience of mystery, awe, power, or the sacred that can only be described, intuited, felt, and understood by the outsider, scholars of religion have, to borrow Jonathan Z. Smith's words cited at the outset of this essay, suspended their own critical faculties. By so doing, they have created sufficient conditions for their own political malignment and cultural silence in contemporary public debates.

Ironically, perhaps, our almost exclusive reliance on the phenomenological and hermeneutical methods as the means for securing our intellectual and institutional turf has ensured that scholars of religion have little or no voice in either the university or other public forums. This is the very conclusion reached by Cristiano Grottanelli and Bruce Lincoln over a decade ago:

> There can be no shrinking away from the painful fact: the establishment of an autonomous field has, paradoxically, damaged the study of religion (and of religions) immensely. . . . The consequences of this situation may be summed up by stating that the discipline of "History of Religions" managed to marginalize itself in the name of autonomy. Its connections with history, anthropology, sociology, political science, and other relevant fields are scarce, while its ties with theology—however much they are denied—remain strong, if implicit, covert, and distorted. (1985: 8)

It falls to us to elaborate on this insight by identifying how this self-marginalization brings with it political and not just intellectual and institutional implications.

In constructing a field solely concerned with getting to the deep core, the kernel, or the ahistorical essence, we may have argued ourselves out of business when it comes to developing critical commentary on the mechanisms whereby privileges are bestowed, revoked, and contested in our own society. Although we may have gained personal enlightenment through the use of our hermeneutical skills, as Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade advocated,[1] we end up like the solitary renunciant; we have forgone our name and identity, we do not really have a way of putting it all into words or of communicating anything to our fellows; we have taken refuge from the society in which we live. As Catherine Albanese has rightly—though perhaps unwittingly—observed, "scholars of religion . . . find in the mental worlds they create and construct a *refuge* and *safe haven* from the general assaults of change that come with time's passing" (1995: 222; emphasis added). It is in constructing just such a "safe haven" that we find evidence of our complicity with power.

THE ESSENTIAL MAKEUP OF THINGS AND THE SCHOLAR OF RELIGION

My claim concerning the self-inflicted default of critical intelligence may remind some of Carl Raschke's own criticism of the field (1986). Employing crisis rhetoric, Raschke argues that the spirit of relativism that he claims dominates the field has led to a "fanatical pluralism" where the scholar of religion "fosters a rabid preoccupation with the pluralistic display of religious givens and psycho-subjective ephemera at the cost of more profound ontological probing and analysis" (135). Instead of simply describing a diversity of religious manifestations, he argues that we as scholars of religion "should be able to make certain normative distinctions that reflect our commitment to discriminating analysis and critical intelligence" (136). Our default of critical intelligence, then, is a refusal to accept the role of providing "normative guidance" (137), a guidance that is fueled by on our "ontological probing" and "normative distinctions," both of which are specifically concerned with identifying such self-evident "aberrations of religious thinking and behavior" (136) as, for example, Jim Jones and the Jonestown deaths or the rise of various religious cults. According to Raschke, then, our failure as public intellectuals is in not distinguishing good from bad or normal from abnormal religion (recall Barth's

preoccupation with making such normative judgments).

Although I agree with Raschke that critical intelligence, in part, constitutes "the ability and drive to penetrate beneath the mere surface of things," and, moreover, that our current institutional woes are of our own making, I cannot support his insistence that the scholar of religion can "apperceive [the] . . . essential make-up" of things, nor that our task is to differentiate "the valuable and enduring from the pernicious or inconsequential, the veracious from the merely specious" (136). Accordingly, Raschke and I differ dramatically in our conception of the discursive limits in which scholarship on religion takes place. It is in light of this longstanding but misguided assumption that studying religion provides deep, essential, absolute, or otherworldly insights into the very nature of things that scholars such as Raschke can argue that their scholarship provides normative guidance for a society—this is the same claim made by Eliade's reactionary political program, which goes by the name of the *new humanism*. If anything, and this is indeed the ironic part, the undefended *and* indefensible assumption that there is in fact a real nature to things that lurks beneath the surface (i.e., metaphysical reduction) is for me the primary instance of our default of critical intelligence. Our ability "to penetrate beneath the mere surface of things" is nothing more than the ability to historicize all ahistorical claims. For the scholar of religion as public intellectual, what is most intriguing is that many of our colleagues think there is such a thing as good or healthy religion, as opposed to aberrations of religious thinking and behavior. Contrary to this position, I would build on a Durkheimian tradition in arguing that religious discourses, which are neither good nor bad, are simply a brute fact of social ideologies and rhetorics. Contrary to Raschke's recommendation, then, I see the default in critical intelligence as being the unquestioned acceptance of deep, essential truths.

These may seem to be rather harsh words for a field that recently has experienced actual or at least threatened department closings. Given the current budgetary issues facing administrations, both university and government, it would seem that the last thing on a scholar of religion's mind would be to implicate his or her own field as being responsible, at least in part, for the current problems. After all, "he that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind, and the fool shall be servant to the wise of heart" (Proverbs 11:29). For yet others, this may all sound like I am unjustly blaming the victim. Indeed, this would seem to be the ideal time to circle the wagons, proclaim the important place—even ontological loadings—our work has in the modern university's humanities curriculum, and, like many of our predecessors, leave it up to the sheer self-evidency of our claims to sway our audience. Such a phenomenon has been observed by Warren Frisina: "Committed to the intrinsic value of

our work, especially our research, we continue to be 'productive' and hope that this intrinsic value will sustain us through difficult times. . . . I am concerned when I see this option taken by my colleagues" (1997: 30). By presuming both their datum and their work to have self-evident authority, relevance, and value, scholars of religion have evaded their social responsibility by side-stepping rational argumentation and persuasion; they may have thereby paved the way to their own institutional decline. Sadly, we cannot have it both ways: the study of self-evidencies and intuitions need not be termed "scholarship" and need not be funded by financially troubled governments.

SCHOLARS OF RELIGION AS TRANSLATORS: OUR FAILURE OF CRITICAL NERVE

The absence of the scholar of religion from the ranks of public intellectual is, at least in part, the result of what Donald Wiebe (1984b) aptly described as a "failure of nerve." As I understand this classic article on the field's history, Wiebe was referring to the failure of scholars to carry through with critical, explanatory studies of religion conceived as but one aspect of human cognitive, biological, cultural, and historical practices. Instead, Wiebe saw the field's turn from the late-nineteenth-century attempts to found an explanatory science of religion based on theories of religion (exemplified in the work of such scholars as F. Max Müller and Cornelius P. Tiele) and toward the phenomenologically and hermeneutically based approaches so dominant today, as a failure of scholarly nerve. (For some of Wiebe's more recent views on this problem, see 1994a and 1994c, 1999.)

One of the implications of this failure of critical nerve is that scholars of religion find themselves all but speechless when it comes to debating the so-called religious contributions to be made to making decisions of relevance to the public concern. To be sure, we can describe assorted claims, translate back and forth between sides, try to interpret the sometimes obscure claims made by one or another side in any given debate or controversey, and provide interesting historical and doctrinal background for understanding this or that insider viewpoint. But such is the job of a translator or color commentator, a role that many in the field think should occupy a greater amount of our time (e.g., see Judith Berling's [1993], Martin Marty's [1989], and Robert Wilken's [1989] presidential addresses to the AAR[2]). Conceived essentially as an exercise either in nuanced descriptions or reflexive autobiography, the study of religion has rarely amounted to more than a reporter repeating the insider's unsubstantiated claims, all the while invoking methodological

agnosticism as their justification for doing so. Sadly, such scholars must inevitably remain silent when it comes to matters of explanation and analysis. When it comes to deciding whether and to what extent religious positions that claim ahistorical authority, wisdom, and direction are useful in charting the course of a public school curriculum, a welfare agency, or even a policy for war, translators have no voice and little, if anything, to add.

POLITICAL MARGINALIZATION AND THE AUTONOMY OF RELIGION

It is not just that our almost sole reliance on the *method* of description rules out our public involvement; as already suggested, the very manner in which religion is conceived already rules out our critical contributions. This is a matter of *theory*. From the outset, religion is presumed to be diametrically opposed to, and is in fact the victim of, so-called secular issues such as politics and economics. In other words, our use of the sacred/profane rhetoric, which is itself one of the primary tools used by communities to maintain themselves (recall Richard Roberts's use of such binaries in a previous chapter), is part of the problem that deserves attention. Take, for example, how religion is conceived by one prominent contributor to these debates, Stephen Carter: it is self-evidently personalistic, moralistic, and experiential, and most definitely of the monotheistic variety (rarely do social systems outside of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam figure in these debates). "What does it mean," he asks, "to say that religious groups should be autonomous? It means, foremost, that they should not be beholden to the secular world, that they should exist neither by the forbearance of, nor to do the bidding of, the society outside of themselves" (1993: 34–35). Or, as Carter asserts a little later: "Religions are in effect independent centers of power"; religion is an "independent moral force" and, "at its heart, a way of denying the authority of the rest of the world; it is a way of saying to fellow human beings and to the state those fellow human beings have erected, 'No, I will *not* accede to your will'" (35, 39, 41). It is on the basis of such a suspect understanding of religion that Carter argues for the legal, institutional, and social autonomy—and therefore public authority—of organized religion in America. It is little wonder, then, that Carter's book has been so well received.

Based on such a use of the religious/secular distinction, a distinction that fuels the exceedingly misleading notion of the "separation of church and state," 'religion' is construed as an independent variable occupying the untainted realm of pure and private moral insight that is opposed to,

Jeppe Sinding Jensen and Armin Geertz have aptly labeled the "politics of nostalgia" (1991; see McCutcheon 1997c).

If, instead, religion is conceived as but one aspect of human practices, if "religion" itself is understood to be a second-order category of description (where the first order constitutes the behavior or claims being redescribed by scholars) and not a third-order category of redescription, then scholars of religion will have a significantly different role to play in both the reproduction of authority and in public debates where such authority is legitimized and contested. What I mean by this is that for scholars of religion, the behaviors we name "religion" ought to be the subject of theorizing not appreciation or translation. Our involvement in the public debate is, then, on the higher level of critical, comparative, redescriptive analysis and critique. Whatever else religion may or may not be, it is at least a potent manner by which humans construct "worlds" by which they negotiate not simply their way around the natural world but through which they defend and contest issues of social power and privilege in the here and now (Paden 2000). Religious language, therefore, is a terribly efficient and often uncontested means for abstracting issues, claims, and institutions from the tug-and-pull of historical existence, thereby privileging them, their participants, and one particular view of how reality ought to be constructed. Scholars of religion come upon the scene with sophisticated tools for comparing, analyzing, and critiquing the strategies by which communities decontextualize and marginalize, mythify and deify one side in what is more than likely a complex situation. We call into question the "aestheticization of the political" (Carroll 1995: 15) and the "authority of detachment" (Merod 1987: xi) in the very act of contextualizing and historicizing our data.

As opposed to being what Jerome Karabel labels a "moralist" (intellectuals making normative claims on how the world really ought to work), scholars of religion are in the position of "identifying the conditions and processes that shape the actual political consciousness and actions of different groups"—including members of their own group (1996: 206).[5] Differing somewhat from the moralist stands of such intellectuals as Noam Chomsky and Edward Said, who see the role of the public intellectual as being proactive, of speaking 'truth' to power, exposing lies, and making normative claims (Chomsky 1987: 60; Said 1996: xvi, 85–102), the scholar of religion as critical rhetor instead exposes the mechanisms whereby these very truths and norms are constructed in the first place, demonstrating the contingency of seemingly necessary conditions and the historical character of ahistorical claims.

However, we can at least in part follow Chomsky's lead by consistently exposing the intellectual and material conditions of thoughts and

actions in any given society (1991). When compared to the moralist intellectual, however, the scholar of religion as public intellectual—and as publicly accountable intellectual—is more timid about making pronouncements on what these conditions really should be. Clearly we come equipped with our own assumptions—assumptions that are themselves deserving of scrutiny and analysis—but we have little interest in making normative claims concerning the need for all scholars to do as we do or for all citizens to engage in the never-ending practice of critique. The particular game we play, however, does presume that there are intellectual, social, and material motivations and implications to *all* human behaviors, beliefs, and institutions. To presume otherwise, to presume that mysterious, divine, or other-worldly forces of unknown origin and design routinely come into play when human beings interact, is to play a significantly different game within an institutional context far removed from the public university. Given our presumption that all human actions are historically constrained, such claims to mysterious forces will themselves attract our critical attention.

Perhaps it is the realization of just this potential role for scholars of religion as public intellectuals that explains our absence from the citations of those writers who advocate an increased role for religious faith in the affairs of the state. For, as argued in the introduction, the scholar of religion as critical rhetor comes not to inform the world of how it *ought* to work, but explains how and why it *happens to* work as it does, making such critical scholarship a convenient resource to avoid when making pronouncements on the future of human meaning, the nation, or the world—claims that are either politically conservative *or* liberal, in support of dominant *or* oppositional regimes.

THE SCHOLAR OF RELIGION AS CRITIC

It is in his or her analysis of so-called religious institutions, traditions, myths, and rituals that the scholar of religion can contribute most to uncloaking and laying bare the conditions and strategies by which their fellow citizens authorize the local as universal and the contingent as necessary. We can find in seemingly insignificant gestures and rhetorical flourishes the makings of larger issues in the practice and reproduction of power and authority. In our analysis of the manner in which humans represent the world and their place in it—let alone our analysis of the representations of our colleagues in the university!—we are equipped to scrutinize the ideological sleight of hand that leads to a seemingly perfect fit between the model constructed and sanctioned by the society or group in question, on the one hand, and reality, on

the other—whatever that reality may in fact turn out to be. It is this very sleight of hand, the "institutional imperative," or the refraction of the seeming facts of the case through "the prism of Western ideology" that has attracted the attention of Noam Chomsky's own analysis of mass media (Rai 1995: 28); for what type of reality do we expect to find represented in, for instance, elite media other than the reality tailored to suit the interests of elite producers/manufacturers who finance the media as an avenue for selling products to upper-class consumers? It is through the comparison and analysis of competing representations that the public intellectual juxtaposes competing models of the world and attempts to explain why it is that such-and-such an institution or story accompanies this or that model.[6] Therefore, we are justified to inquire into just what we are selling our readers and students when we uncritically reproduce authoritative accounts in our merely descriptive scholarship.

Accordingly, for the scholar of religion as public intellectual, "religion" is a category that holds little analytical value. As both Pascal Boyer[7] and Jonathan Z. Smith,[8] have suggested, it is a second-order category, and part of the problem to be studied, not a higher-order category that is part of the analysis: it is part of the data to be explained because as they are commonly defined religious discourses remove something (a claim, an institution, a practice) from history, thereby privileging it over all other historically embedded claims and knowledges. What else can it mean to encourage public debates to be settled by "discerning and then enacting the will of God" (Carter 1993: 77)?[9] Such rhetoric is presumed by many in the field to be beyond naturalist or material analysis and reproach. But we must inquire into just what other part of our public debate would sanction a position that is based upon such ahistorical certainty, such undefended and indefensible self-evidency. Even the phrase *We hold these truths to be self-evident* has received its share of critical attention; for it is abundantly clear that only land-owning, free white males benefited from the privileges accorded by those so-called self-evidencies concerning the fact that *all men are created equal.*

Therefore, the scholar of religion as critical rhetor has a crucial role to play in matters of public concern, for who else will question just what sense it makes to talk, as William Dean does, of such abstractions as "a sense of the whole," "transcendence," "religious identity," "ultimate importance," "ultimate meanings," and "implicit religious values." Take for instance Dean's reference to a former U.S. National Security Advisor: "In *Out of Control* [1993], Zbigniew Brzezinski attributed the forthcoming collapse of America's world leadership, not to politics, economics, or the rise of rivals, but to the growing spiritual illness of the

whole American culture" (Dean 1994: xiv). That contemporary writers can so easily talk of such things as the crisis of "American spiritual emptiness," its "spiritual illness," and its "pervasive spiritual impoverishment" as if these were all causal agents (I recall here Martin Marty attributing causality to "religious impulses") attests to the dire need for scholars of religion to enter this public debate. The point is that despite the fact that *empty spirits* is a wonderful metaphor, it is hardly a useful explanatory category; moreover, by marginalizing the explanatory power of political and economic analysis, by presuming that there is such a thing as a "whole" to culture in the United States, not to mention the problematic assumption that indeed the United States *ought* to be an unrivaled leader in world politics, economics, and the military, both Dean and Brzezinski betray their own uncritical acceptance of a rather narrow party line. Simply put, we must question what is implied in reducing empty *stomachs* to empty *spirits* and why it is construed as a crisis if others do not sanction such a spiritualization. The scholar of religion as public intellectual is the one who is capable of identifying the ideological mechanisms working in such efforts to, in Mannheim's words, "spiritualize the present."

Instead of being a translator, or, in his estimation, a caretaker for religion (*caretaker* nicely communicates the role advocated by many AAR presidents), Burton Mack has recommended that we become culture critics. "Culture" is, for Mack, the larger category into which religious practices and beliefs fall when they are correctly understood as being no different in origin or implication from other social authorizing practices. "Since modern societies in the western tradition make such a fuss about keeping religion separate from society," Mack writes, "we need the term culture to cover the phenomenon of values and attitudes cultivated within a society apart from overtly religious inculcation" (1989: 30).[10] Scholars of religion as culture critics agree that religion, religious discourses, and religious practices are part of the descriptive, historical data that requires theoretical study. We find no more succinct statement of the problems that arise when we are anything other than scholars and critics than in the last of Bruce Lincoln's thirteen "Theses on Method." He writes:

> When 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 historian or scholar. In that moment, a variety of roles are available: some perfectly respectable (amanuensis, collector, friend and advocate), and some less appealing (cheerleader, voyeur, retailer of import goods). None, however, should be confused with scholarship. (1996a: 227)

The only role possible for scholars who see religion as a powerful means whereby human communities construct and authorize their practices and institutions (i.e., their "regimes of truth") is that of the critic.

As already noted, and this bears repeating, for scholars *qua* critics, religion is not itself part of the explanation or solution (as it is for translators and caretakers) but is, instead, part of the data to be explained (as it is for virtually all who develop theories of religion). That human beings who normally construct their lives based on often mundane experiences of the material, physical world sometimes invoke immaterial, nonempirical causes and explanations should itself attract our attention as scholars. How is it that they distinguish between when it is, and when it is not, appropriate to invoke such devices as gods, spirits, or fate as part of their understanding of the world at large? It has always struck me as intriguing that readers of "Scriptures" somehow are able to decide, seemingly without any articulated or identifiable criteria, when to read a text as metaphoric or symbolic and when to read it as literal. What varying criteria are being employed, and how do they develop? If scholars of religion wish to make a contribution to the public debate, then perhaps this is one place to begin: developing theories of decision making and the means by which humans represent/manipulate the world at large. For when it comes to public decisions on who should or should not receive welfare, when it is or is not allowable to have an abortion, whether and where the budget should be cut, or when to go to war, then implicit, intuitive, and nonfalsifiable criteria are hardly desirable. In fact, if democracy is desirable at all, it is precisely because the decision-making process must ideally answer in public to the demands of a diverse citizenry. Our critical contributions comprise one component of that citizenry.

Be clear: I am not advocating that the scholar of religion become a politician, nor that she or he is the only critic capable of calling long-established certainties into question. To advance the former thesis would confuse the public role of intellectuals with the possible contributions they may or may not make as private citizens participating in other aspects of a representative democracy. To advance the latter would lead to yet a new turf war and further dangers of compartmentalized professionals. Moreover, I would hope that readers recognize that I am hardly advocating the onetime popular notion of the intellectual as dispassionate, objective observer. Further, I am not claiming that most of the population should abandon their own normative convictions—in fact, given the centrality of using rhetorical, ideological, and normative claims and strategies in constructing and sanctioning the social and political models we live by and within, it would be naive to think that these sorts of claims would ever disappear—hence the epigraph from David Lodge that opens this book. Instead, I am recommending that scholars of religion as public intellectuals should not simply repeat or merely translate uncritically religious claims; instead, they are the ones who accept the challenge of generating critical, scholarly theories *about* normative discourses; they recognize the critical potential of the tools at their disposal. Accordingly, normative reflection is not inherently problematic—one could go so far as to argue that it may actually be inevitable; it just happens to be a type of discourse that we have tools to study. Our scholarship is not constrained by whether or not devotees recognize its value; it is not intended to celebrate or enhance normative, dehistoricized discourses but, rather, to contextualize and redescribe them as human constructs.

MODELS FOR CRITIQUING AUTHORIZING STRATEGIES

I can think of no better example of the critical potential for our field than Bruce Lincoln's *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (1994), especially his analysis of the 1992 attempt of the environmental activist, Rick Springer, to interrupt an National Association of Broadcasters award ceremony in honor of former U.S. President Ronald Reagan. Lincoln's creative and nuanced analysis of the strategies and mechanisms whereby seemingly self-evident authority was contested and reasserted demonstrates that the scholar of religion's tools apply to events and institutions not deemed religion by traditional, essentialist definitions. In fact, the development of Lincoln's work over the years seems to suggest the clear movement away from studying distinct religion (a static noun) to studying the complex relations among authorizing practices (active processes or verbs) that appear in any number of social and historical settings. In other words, his scholarship exemplifies the transgressive role available to the scholar of social authorizing practices.

A second useful example of the kind of work in which we can engage as public intellectuals can be found in Marc Manganaro's own study of authority (1992), a study that examines the particular rhetorical moves that allow scholars of myth to slide so easily from description to sociopolitical prescription (a topic at the very core of Ivan Strenski's well-known critique of myth theorists [1987]). Using Northrop Frye's book, *The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism*, Manganaro identifies how Frye's specific reading of the anti-Vietnam War protestors, as well as the counterculture of the 1960s in general, contains and constrains these events by decontextualizing and representing them simply as repetitions and

manifestations of primordial human desires. According to Manganaro, from the outset such an interpretation effectively minimalizes and marginalizes the very social movement Frye is studying. Whether or not he intended it, by understanding the particular event as but one instance of a timeless universal theme, Frye dehistoricizes and marginalizes the actual event by elevating it (or, should we say, demoting it) to the level of the abstract universal.

Borrowing from the work of the literary critic Fredric Jameson, Manganaro identifies a variety of these "strategies of containment" operating in Frye's text, rhetorical strategies that enable Frye to depict the energy, novelty, and potential for concrete sociopolitical change found in the 1960s counterculture as but eternal returns of the same. Unable to entertain that the protestors may have had a significant, novel, and concrete role to play in contemporary social change, Frye's mythification flattens them and takes off their edge. In the hands of Frye's highly speculative comparative method, "[e]xtremist movements . . . are characterized structurally according to their off-centeredness" and are therefore bracketed within a universal, uninterrupted great tradition (Manganaro 1992: 145). An essentialist method that posits a transcendent manifested in certain discrete historical occasions inevitably reduces particularity to sameness.

As scholars of social authorizing practices, we fail to fulfill our role as public intellectuals when we decline to demonstrate consistently that such a thing as society, text, nation, ethnicity, tradition, intuition, gender, myth, or even religion, is "not a natural or god-given entity, but is a constructed, manufactured, even in some cases invented object, with a history of struggle and conquest behind it" (Said 1996: 33). We are trained to examine the specific sites where human communities construct their enduring representations, representations that function to make it self-evident "that the values one holds are grounded in the inherent structure of reality, that between the way one ought to live and the way things really are there is an unbreakable inner connection" (Geertz 1968: 97). Although some would argue that Geertz's definition of religion is far too wide to be of any analytical use (Asad 1993: 27–54), its benefit lies precisely in the assumption that religion is but one species of the human penchant for universalizing and spiritualizing the local and the particular. As noted by the literary critic Frank Lentricchia at the outset of this chapter, "it is the function of the intellectual as critical rhetor to uncover, bring to light, and probe" all such mechanisms. To uncover—and thereby challenge—the often occluded and disguised mechanisms that carry out these universalizations is nothing other than the *consistent* analysis of ideologies: the means by which slippage from *is* to *ought* routinely takes place.

CONCLUSION: A PERIOD OF SOME SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION

Whether we like it or not, then, as scholars we are public intellectuals already, for we teach, and our work is judged within public institutions. The question is whether we will accept this role or, through our efforts to spiritualize and dehistoricize the people and practices we study—and the students we regularly teach each semester—via such suspect conceptual devices as *sui generis* religion, we will continue to obscure both our data and our social role, thereby contributing to the very authorizing practices we could instead be identifying and questioning. To me, the choice is rather straightforward: whether to reproduce or name the ideological mechanisms and alignments whereby description becomes prescription and the local is represented as universal.

However, there exists a default of critical intelligence among many scholars of religion, scholars who proclaim their apoliticism and, in the very same breath, descriptively reproduce authorized "sacred histories." Through our insistent preoccupation with issues of intellectual, methodological, professional, and institutional turf—in a word, our autonomy—we tie our own hands and gag our own mouths, forcing ourselves to act as if the world passes us by alone, unaffected, and safe. As I have argued elsewhere: "To fail to make explicit the social and political motivations/benefits behind what the apparent majority of 'religionists' yet think to be the *sui generis* quality of religion, its texts, and its language . . . is to fall considerably short of what the academic study of religion could be" (1991: 256).

To accept the role of public intellectual requires us consistently to lay bare these mechanisms of power and control. Our role is not to act as caretakers for religion, trying, along with Raschke, to save "the vitality, as well as the moral and cultural influence, of religion in the world" (1986: 135), but rather our role is unfailingly to probe beneath the rhetorical window dressings that authorize conceptual and social constructions of our own making. To join with the many scholars in our field intent on protecting and caring for religion is implicitly to acknowledge that we have no critical contribution to make to the study of human behavior and institutions and are, instead, simply reporters and legitimizers of essential self-evidencies. As already suggested, however, reporting self-evidencies is hardly deserving of public support. But, given the alternative, even oppositional, role of uncovering, and teaching others to uncover, rhetorical and ideological window dressings—wherever and whenever we may find them—we must be prepared for an adverse reaction from both our colleagues and the wider public: one does not win a popularity contest by pointing out the emperor's

general state of undress. Given our role as critics, we may very well have to come to terms with the fact that questioning self-evidencies might also hardly be deserving of public support. After all, few institutions have built-in self-destruct mechanisms. But given the general intellectual freedom that comes with operating within a cross-disciplinary setting in the public university, some of us will be able to make tactical and local contributions to the analysis of authorizing practices in a surprising number of sites.

It is with deep irony, then, that I now find myself seemingly in agreement with Mircea Eliade when he suggested, in his essay "A New Humanism," that the scholar of religion "is destined to play an important role in contemporary cultural life" (1984: 3). Eliade, however, saw this role as the therapeutic recovery of archaic meanings housed in supposedly timeless myths and rituals. This is nothing other than the regressive—and not transgressive—politics of nostalgia. Instead, I side with Mack and Lincoln in recommending for scholars of religion the role of critic, rather than Eliade's role of savior, for our work is carried out within the material contestations of history rather than in the mists of primordial time. Moreover, far from being "destined" for such a role, we are continually tempted to forsake critical thinking and, instead, to enjoy the spoils and privileges that are routinely awarded to those who accept the less controversial role of reporter, translator, and caretaker—all of which amount simply to being ideological managers. Instead, the scholar of religion as public intellectual and critic of authorizing practices comes equipped with methodologies and theories to identify those homogenizing, ideological strategies so necessary for the manufacture *and* management of human communities—scholarly communities included. For these very strategies are responsible for portraying that which is different as the same, the many as one, the fragmented as whole, the other as aberrant, and, perhaps most important, the religious as sociopolitically autonomous.

With such critical tools at our disposal, how can we *not* have something important to say on the public stage about such issues as the place of religious intuition, insight, and commitment in the academy and the public policy domain? Who, if not the scholar of social authorizing practices and mythmaking, will come forward to identify the slippery logic, rhetorical flourishes, and ideological strategies that, together, drive intellectual, social, and political practice in all its varied guises? Such cultural criticism is slowly taking hold at a number of sites throughout the late-twentieth-century discourse on religion, precisely when the previous rationale for our field is coming under well-deserved criticism; it seems, then, that John F. Wilson's words ring as true now as they did over thirty years ago: "[W]e seem about to enter a period of some significance for the study of religion" (1964: 252).

NOTES

1. For, according to Campbell, our studies comprise an individual quest for personhood; according to Eliade, the history of religions is a spiritual technique meant to recover long-camouflaged and archaic cultural values.

2. The role of translator and mediator is advocated in a surprising number of presidential addresses to the AAR—most recently in Margaret Miles's 1999 presidential address, where it was stated quite openly that the age is over when theology and the study of religion were considered mutually exclusive exercises. For a critical survey of the history of the AAR and its presidential addresses, see Wiebe's *Politics of Religious Studies* (1999), in particular the chapters entitled, "Against Science in the Academic Study of Religion" (1999: 235–53) and "A Religious Agenda Continued" (1997; reprinted in 1999: 255–75).

3. I will return to Eagleton's notion of the intellectual as transgressor in a later chapter.

4. For a useful assessment of the reception of Said's work over the past two decades, see Prakash (1995).

5. Karabel's article is written from this alternative—or what he terms the "realist"—position and is concerned with identifying eight conditions that contribute to the political radicalization of intellectuals. Accordingly, Karabel is in a long line of sociologists of intellectuals dating back to Mannheim.

6. Chomsky's own work in comparing U.S. media coverage of Cambodian (official enemy) and Indonesian (official friend) atrocities in the 1970s is startlingly frank evidence of the way in which representations vary with socioeconomic and geopolitical interests. In *Manufacturing Religion* (1997c) I have used a similar comparative method to examine the differing scholarly and media representations of the so-called self-immolations of Vietnamese Buddhist monks in the early 1960s (chapter 6).

7. "The study of religion is an 'impure' subject [in the chemical rather than the moral sense], that is, a subject where the central or official topic is not a scientific object" (1996: 212).

8. "[T]he term 'religion' is not an empirical category. It is a second order abstraction" (1988: 233).

9. At this point in his argument, Carter tries to reduce (obscure?) the debate on whether or not women ought to be ordained to an essentially religious issue. The full quotation reads: "The answer [to the issue of whether women ought to be ordained] has everything to do with discerning and then enacting the will of God, and nothing to do with the rights of women." What ought to attract our critical attention is not whether a deity desires women to be ordained but how easily writers like Carter abstract this debate from issues of history, power, and gender—and then get away with it!

10. Needless to say, Mack immediately goes on to argue that such a change in datum would require us to reconceive and reorganize departments of religion that are still largely the product of a seminary model. An example of how the study of religion might be effectively reorganized as the comparative study of culture is provided by Tim Fitzgerald (1995, 1997, 1999). For an extremely helpful survey of some of the anthropological arguments concerning the questionable analytical usefulness of the category "culture" itself, see Brightman (1995); see also Eagleton 2000; Lincoln 2000a, Masuzawa 1998, and McCauley and Lawson 1996.