**Debating Critical Religion: A Response to Timothy Fitzgerald**

**By: Galen Watts and Sharday Mosurinjohn**

We would like to thank Timothy Fitzgerald for engaging with our work, and writing a thought-provoking response to it. Not only does he offer us much to reflect upon, but his criticisms of our *JAAR* essay provide us with an opportunity to clarify our original arguments and aims. For this we are grateful.[[1]](#footnote-1) In what follows, then, we will restate the core thesis of our *JAAR* essay, and then demonstrate why we believe Fitzgerald’s critical response to it, rather than undermining our claims, actually supports them. However, before we do this, we wish to respond to a number of Fitzgerald’s recurring comments.

The most central points Fitzgerald advances in his response seem to us the following. First, Fitzgerald takes issue with our use of the term “school” to refer to critical religion and the group of scholars—viz., him, McCutcheon, Martin, and others—we associate with it. Second, he contends that in grouping together these various scholars and their work, we *reify* critical religion, turning it into a “thing with some kind of objective independent reality” (Fitzgerald 2023, 4). Third, Fitzgerald contends that we have failed to engage with all of his relevant scholarship (especially that concerning India and Japan), and as a result have misunderstood and misrepresented his position. Undoubtedly, these claims are interrelated and in some ways are interdependent, but we think it useful to separate them analytically. Let us now respond.

Fitzgerald repeatedly asserts that critical religion (CR) is not best understood as a “school.”[[2]](#footnote-2) He argues instead that CR is, at most, a “broad alliance” (2), or shared “significant *critical tendencies*” (2 emphasis in original), or “a tendency of overlapping interests” (4)—none of which, in the end, constitute “a school like anything in the way Watts and Mosurinjohn have characterised it” (7). This point showed us that both of us can benefit this conversation by making clear what our characterisation of a “school” consists of. First we will reflect on how Fitzgerald defines “school” in his response, as we understand it.

Fitzgerald contests our use of the term “school” on two grounds. First, he suggests that, despite the existence of shared “critical tendencies” and “overlapping interests” across the scholarship of scholars such as he, McCutcheon, and Martin, “there are also divergences” (2). In other words, CR is not a “school” because the scholars we associate with it disagree about many things. We appreciate Fitzgerald’s highlighting diversity among this broad alliance because in our understanding all schools of thought—from the most to the least institutionalised—exhibit internal diversity and internal disagreement. For instance, the Frankfurt School and Birmingham School of Cultural Studies were each rife with internal disagreements (e.g., Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse disagreed profoundly about the liberative potential of the 1960s counter-culture, while Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall held diverging views on mass culture), while the boundaries of less institutionalised schools of thought such as existentialism, neo-Marxism, cultural sociology, and critical race theory are equally contested. We understand the scholars whose interests overlap in CR to exhibit this same sort of mix of uniformity and diversity found in all academic schools.

Second, Fitzgerald contests our use of the term “school” by proclaiming, “we do not have a strategy or any conscious coordination” (3), and, “If this is a school, I do not belong to it” (4). We respect Fitzgerald’s self-description and appreciate how it invites us to think again about an alliance between him and other scholars that had seemed evident to us – and most importantly, the personal stake we academics all reckon with in aligning ourselves with colleagues, with currents of research practice, with certain forms of scholarly expression. One question this rethinking raised for us is: do self-identification and self-conscious coordination constitute necessary criteria of affiliation with a school of thought? Foucault notoriously eschewed the post-structuralist label (among others), yet no one would deny his contributions to post-structuralist thought. And even Marx denied being a “Marxist.” In sum, we think that we and Fitzgerald mean different things by the term “school.” So, respecting his desire to not belong to a school of CR as he sees it, we will explain in greater detail the nature of the alliance that we recognize in the literature and termed a “school” in our previous essay.

The methodological similarity that we picked out to link members in a “school of critical religion” was a commitment to abandoning scholarly use of the term *religion* and instead studying the effects of designating things as “religion,” on the grounds that *religion* as an analytic category results in reification and naturalization, and is unduly normative. This is the definition of a “school” that we operationalize in our essay because we find it usefully helps us to make sense of what we see as a distinctive, if also internally diverse, methodological approach in the academic study of religion.

Of course, it may well be that Fitzgerald does not see his own work captured in our conception of CR as a methodological school. Indeed, in a lengthy section titled, “The Meaning of ‘critical religion’ for Timothy Fitzgerald” (see 9-11), Fitzgerald elaborates on the history of his own use of the term, which he associates with specific conferences and academic texts that he has contributed to in the past. After surveying these contributions, Fitzgerald concludes that he does indeed detect “a distinctive methodological approach” that one “could fairly call ‘critical religion’” (8), but that this does not lend credence to our supposition that it makes sense to speak of something like a methodological school of critical religion. Why? The reason, is that Fitzgerald sees his own approach as radically unique,[[3]](#footnote-3) and thus not classifiable under a more general analytic framework, like the one we propose. It is on this basis that inclusion in CR does not meet his need for autonomy by failing to do justice to the full scope and depth of his arguments.

We think that we have found a place of common ground between Fitzgerald’s stated conception of critical religion and our own: “the critical deconstruction of religion and related categories” (5). Moreover, in this distillation we again see common ground between his own version of CR and that of others. Furthermore, we understand what Fitzgerald is rejecting in our phrase, “the socially constructed and political nature of the category *religion*”: because he views “society” and “politics” as part of the very same “parasitic configuration” (12) as *religion*, he rejects the idea that one of these could be explained by, or reduced to, the others.[[4]](#footnote-5) In our reading, Fitzgerald’s ambition to *critically deconstruct religion and related categories* amounts to two things: (1) a concern with the way terms such as “religion,” “politics,” “society,” and so on derive their meaning, not from facts about the universe, but rather collective human activity. *Pace* Fitzgerald, we find it useful to describe the way terms derive their meaning from collective human activity as the way they are “socially constructed” (see Mallon 2019); (2) the conviction that the social construction of “religion,” “politics,” and “society” matters because the parasitic configuration of these categories has important consequences for the distribution of power in the world. Again, *pace* Fitzgerald, we find it useful to describe this distribution of power as “political.”[[5]](#footnote-6)

So, while Fitzgerald does not identify with the language we have chosen, we offer a way of seeing how much of his work fits within our description of CR, since the “critical deconstruction of religion and related categories” entails the view that *religion* as an analytic category results in reification and naturalization, is unduly normative, and should therefore be abandoned. We also recognize—and indeed spend time discussing in our *JAAR* piece—that those we conceive as CR scholars hold diverging views on particular issues, we find it useful to model a current in the field as something like a methodological school of CR, which, in our modelling, Fitzgerald’s work has made major contributions to.

Does this amount to an act of reification? In attempting to describe a distinctive methodological school, labeling it, and then identifying what we view as some of its key representative figures,[[6]](#footnote-7) Fitzgerald worries we are turning CR into an “objective independent reality” (4) and an “entity with an inside” (19). We appreciate his concern against reification because we agree that maintaining fluidity in our models keeps them moving and alive. With this in mind, we can rephrase what we have done like this: we have tried to spell out what we take to be the common methodological commitments animating the varied projects of scholars such as Fitzgerald, McCutcheon, Martin, and others, and then grouped these under a shared category (i.e., critical religion). Of course, Fitzgerald and others might wish to contest the accuracy or utility of our conceptual schema, but we do not argue that CR holds some kind of ontological status. All we maintain is that, despite their differences, the work of scholars such as Fitzgerald, McCutcheon, and Martin also share important similarities, which we believe can be described in terms of specific methodological-cum-normative commitments. Whether we call those similarities a “broad alliance,” or the existence of shared “significant *critical tendencies*,” or “a tendency of overlapping interests” it is those to which our essay sought to draw attention using analytic abstraction.

We think this is the same kind of analytic abstraction that Fitzgerald uses when he contends that, across the conferences and texts he has contributed to, he can identify “a distinctive methodological approach” that one “could fairly call ‘critical religion’” (8). That being the case, we see another spot of common ground in our shared attempt to conceptualize currents of scholarly thought and practice without reifying them. While hope that Fitzgerald will appreciate this similarity in our approach that we are pointing out here, we take seriously his claim in his response to our *JAAR essay* his concern that our conception of CR is a form of reification, while his is not, and seek to understand it below. As per our original *JAAR* essay, we see this impasse as flowing from three major analytical flaws which we refer to as *inconsistent historicization*, *crypto-normativity*, and *arbitrary abandonment*. Accordingly, in what follows, we restate our core criticisms of CR by demonstrating how they apply to Fitzgerald’s response to our work. In doing so, we hope to clarify what parts of Fitzgerald’s version of CR fit within the broad definition of CR—understood as a methodological school—that we propose.

**a. Inconsistent Historicization**

In our *JAAR* essay we argued that a central feature of CR methodology is *historicization*. Focusing on the work of McCutcheon—whom we view as a key representative of what we called the “historicizing strand of CR” (Watts and Mosurinjohn 2023, 319)—we noted that an important reason why CR scholars eschew using *religion* as an analytic category is that using this term “reauthorizes a specific social world by reifying and naturalizing a discourse that is wholly local” (Watts and Mosurinjohn 2023, 320). In other words, for scholars such as McCutcheon, an important reason why we should avoid using the term *religion* as an analytic category is because it amounts to a form of *reification*. Needless to say, implicit in this view is the claim that *reification is bad and ought to be avoided*.

Would it be fair to say that Fitzgerald espouses a similar view? As we know, Fitzgerald prefers the language of “deconstruction” to that of “historicization,” but is this semantic difference evidence of a fundamentally different approach? We think not. Moreover, it is not hard to prove our point. Consider, once again, one of Fitzgerald’s central criticisms of our *JAAR* essay—that we “reify religion as a Methodological School” (Fitzgerald 2023, 2). This isprecisely the kind of critique we would expect from those we have come to think of as CR scholars, as charges of reification basically serve as the *modus operandi* of this methodological school.

Furthermore, a significant amount of Fitzgerald’s response to our work amounts to historicizing, or, as he prefers, deconstructing what he refers to as the “fictions of modernity” (Fitzgerald 2023, 7). Consider, for instance, the following representative passage:

Religion is not a stand-alone category, but then nor are ‘secular’, ‘society’, ‘politics’, ‘the economy’, ‘the nation state’, ‘culture’, ‘modern’, ‘progress’, ‘nature’, ‘Enlightenment’, ‘liberal’, ‘liberty’, ‘science’, ‘history’ and a string of others…. None of these imaginary abstractions has any essential content, all of them are contested and contestable, none of them refer to anything objective in the world, none of them correspond definitively to anything that can be observed empirically, and yet they all depend on each other to function rhetorically. (10)

We think this quote is sufficient to establish that, much like McCutcheon, Fitzgerald’s interest in what he calls “the deconstruction of religion and related categories” derives from, among other things, a normative concern with reification. Thus, much like other scholars associated with CR, *reification* remains, for Fitzgerald, a move which scholars ought to avoid at all costs.

It will be useful, at this point, to remind readers of the first problem that we argued undermines the laudable aims of CR scholarship: *inconsistent historicization* (or, again, if you prefer, deconstruction). We argued in our *JAAR* essay that, while CR scholars seek to correct their colleagues for reifying and naturalizing specific terms and discourses—such as those related to *religion*—in the very act of historicizing (or deconstructing) they simultaneously reify and naturalize an alternative set of terms and discourses*.*

With this noted, we might ask: can we detect this “bait and switch” (McCutcheon 2006, 745) tactic in Fitzgerald’s work? Indeed, we can—and in no less than his critical response to our work. For although Fitzgerald criticizes us for using terms such as “socially constructed” and “political” naïvely (see above), while constantly reminding us that the myriad modern categories we employ are mere “fictions,” “ideological operators,” “transcendental abstractions,” and “empty signs,” he consistently engages in what he criticizes us for doing. Consider just one example:

…modern liberal secular universities are ritual institutions for the reproduction of a hegemonic conception of world order. At the heart of this conception lie the values of liberal political economy. These include the idea of human nature as ‘naturally’ Individual, competitive, aggressive and self-centered, and a belief in the inalienable right to endless private property accumulation, or accumulation by dispossession. The supposed unassailable right to accumulate without responsibility to the remainder, which is a right that is at the heart of liberal political economy, is the cause of endless wars and the most significant factor in the destruction of all habitats. The most important function of modern, secular liberal universities is to *normalise* the system of categories that legitimate this destruction and violence, and make it look ‘natural’ and inevitable. The ritual practice that is commonly called the academic study of religion and religions is a significant part of this on-going part of normalisation. (9 emphasis added)

Here we find the proposition that, by virtue of institutionalising the religion/secular binary (among other “parasitic” modern categories) *modern liberal secular universities*, and especially *the academic study of religion*, chiefly function to reproduce a *hegemonic world order* (what Fitzgerald elsewhere calls “liberal capitalism” (15)), which is legitimated by a singularly pernicious, all-powerful, and uncontested ideology—*liberal political economy*. Normative problems with this proposition notwithstanding,[[7]](#footnote-10) what we wish to draw attention to is the way Fitzgerald reifies and naturalizes the categories “modern secular university,” “liberal political economy”, and “hegemonic world order” (among others), in a way that really does seem to attribute to them an “objective independent reality” (at least far more than our discussion of CR as a methodological school ever does). Indeed, far from merely proffering a useful typology by which to classify academic scholarship, as we do, Fitzgerald’s account instead proffers a series of essentialisms, which attribute agency to abstract entities. In turn, we see no reason why Fitzgerald’s critique of our work could not equally apply to his own, and so we reflect his phrase back to himself: “None of these imaginary abstractions has any essential content, all of them are contested and contestable, none of them refer to anything objective in the world, none of them correspond definitively to anything that can be observed empirically, and yet they all depend on each other to function rhetorically” (10).

This said, it is important for us to make clear that we do not endorse this deconstructionist critique—meaning, we would not ourselves make it. As we contend in our *JAAR* essay, all interesting and important social theorizing requires some degree of reification, since “one cannot contest authority without, at the same time, reproducing it elsewhere” (Watts and Mosurinjohn 2023, 331). So, we offer this immanent critique simply to demonstrate why Fitzgerald’s normative focus on reification—which, again, we view as a core feature of CR more broadly—is counterproductive, since it places undue constraints on theorizing, and bound to lead to hypocrisy. In our view, the fact that specific categories or concepts are “fictions” is ultimately a red herring; what matters is the extent to which specific discourses are institutionalised, widespread, and hold social consequences (good or bad). The discourse we pursued in our original *JAAR* article and develop here is one that we seek to institutionalise and spread ultimately because we think it holds good social consequences – inviting colleagues, especially emerging scholars, into a “big tent” of critical, constructive scholarly possibilities.

In turn, although we have no problem in principle with the fact that Fitzgerald has reified and naturalized the (local) discourses presupposed by taxa such as *modern liberal secular universities*, *hegemonic world order*, and *liberal political economy*, we do take issue with the empirical accuracy of his analysis. In other words, while we accept that Fitzgerald’s analysis reflects a truth, we also argue it would benefit from adding more detail to its account of “liberal political economy” (basically, classical economics) as the sole and uncontested ideology legitimating our “hegemonic world order,” and that the most important function of “modern secular liberal universities” and “the academic study of religion and religions” in particular is to legitimate and maintain this particular order. Our differences on social reality aside, we believe we have at least demonstrated that Fitzgerald, other CR scholars, and we all engage in a necessary and comparable degree of inconsistent historicization.

**b. Crypto-normativity**

In our *JAAR* essay we argued that a second reason CR scholars believe we must abandon *religion* as an analytic category is because it is “unduly normative,”[[8]](#footnote-11) and yet, these same scholars embed “a cadre of normative assumptions into their interpretations of social life as well as their taxonomies” (Watts and Mosurinjohn 2023, 325). Put another way, we argued that, while scholars such as McCutcheon, Martin, and Fitzgerald often claim to be non-normative—or least *less* normative than others—in practice their work is profoundly normative, albeit in ways that are quite veiled. While the narrow aim of this section was to make clear how CR scholars regularly fall afoul of the methodological standards they impose on others, the broad aim was to spark a discussion of a topic we think will add value to CR scholarship—the role of values in social theory. Thus, drawing from the work of social theorist Isaac Reed (2011), we proposed that normativity in social explanation is well conceived as lying along a spectrum from *minimalist* to *maximalist* interpretations, and that a useful way to think about much CR scholarship is as presenting itself as *minimalist*, while offering *maximalist* accounts wherein *description* and *evaluation* are fundamentally fused.

Fitzgerald’s response to this argument includes some discussion of ways that his work has been crypto-normative; for instance, he writes “Sometimes my views are quite muted. One is vulnerable when one goes against the orthodox mainstream” (Fitzgerald 2023, 16).[[9]](#footnote-12) Yet elsewhere he asserts, “please do not say that I conceal these value judgments” (15). These tensions notwithstanding, we think we have not made our idea clear to Fitzgerald, and wish to clarify it now: we seek to contribute to critical scholarship on religion by illuminating certain normative contradictions in CR scholarship, and also the way the appeal of CR scholars to shared (liberal democratic) moral norms can morally pressure readers into accepting their conclusions. So, while Fitzgerald is willing to list off a number of his “value judgments”—for instance, he asserts, “I think liberal capitalism is a morally bankrupt system” (15), and also shares, “theories of liberal political economy are attempts to make global armed robbery appear reasonable, inevitable and even benign” (15)—we invite him to elaborate more about how these value judgments inform, structure, and shape the specific analyses he proffers, and how they shape the normative grounds of his critique.

To make clearer what we are trying to get at, let us re-examine Fitzgerald’s analysis of the university, which we cited above (and which we cite again below):

…modern liberal secular universities are ritual institutions for the reproduction of a hegemonic conception of world order. At the heart of this conception lie the values of liberal political economy. These include the idea of human nature as ‘naturally’ Individual, competitive, aggressive and self-centered, and a belief in the inalienable right to endless private property accumulation, or accumulation by dispossession. The supposed unassailable right to accumulate without responsibility to the remainder, which is a right that is at the heart of liberal political economy, is the cause of endless wars and the most significant factor in the destruction of all habitats. The most important function of modern, secular liberal universities is to *normalise* the system of categories that legitimate this destruction and violence, and make it look ‘natural’ and inevitable. The ritual practice that is commonly called the academic study of religion and religions is a significant part of this on-going part of normalisation. (9)

Noteworthy about this analysis is the way, in maximalist fashion, it fuses *social description* with *normative evaluation.* That is, much like conservative accounts of the 1960s (see Caldwell 2020), it is basically impossible to disentangle where factual description begins and normative interpretation ends. However, even more noteworthy is the binary moral choice this account implicitly sets up: for accepting Fitzgerald’s analysis *as true* entails, not merely accepting the empirical fact that there exist historical relations between the religious/secular binary, modern liberal secular universities, the academic study of religion, and liberal capitalism, but *also* *the normative assumption* that to continue using *religion* (or any other category belonging to the “parasitic configuration” that Fitzgerald describes) necessarily entails bolstering an ideology that is not only “competitive, aggressive and self-centered,” but is also “the cause of endless wars and the most significant factor in the destruction of all habitats.” In short, if we accept Fitzgerald’s account, the choice is basically between being a dutiful scholar and abandoning religion (and related categories), or being a moral monster.

For those who may be wondering, this passage is not exceptional, for this is a very common trope in Fitzgerald’s (and other CR scholars’) work. In fusing social description and (controversial) normative evaluations Fitzgerald regularly presents his readers with stark binary choices, where one can either choose to side with him or wilfully support injustice. Potential alternatives simply do not exist.

Consider two other examples picked out from his response to our *JAAR* essay. Instead of acknowledging that there exist myriad contemporary scholars who continue to use this configuration of categories, while having spent their lives dedicated to resisting the hegemony of liberal political economy—two prominent examples being Habermas 2006 and Taylor 2007 (but see also Mendieta and VanAntwerpen 2011)—Fitzgerald simplistically avers, “‘Religion’, ‘politics’ and ‘the state’ are power categories, embedded in private property interests and rhetorically deployed to impose a particular kind of order on the world” (7). Similarly, rejecting outright any possibility that modern universities may hold ambiguous relationships to—and even, in some cases, serves as sites of resistance toward—neoliberal capitalism, Fitzgerald dogmatically asserts, “Universities serve the status quo. They used to serve the Christian status quo and now they serve the dogmas of liberal political economy” (9). Again, for Fitzgerald the (binary) moral options are clear: should you not wish to serve the neoliberal status quo, you *must* side with him.

Of course, a moment’s reflection makes clear that the binary moral choices Fitzgerald’s imposes on his readers are false ones. It is simply not the case that *religion* (and related categories) hold the all-encompassing ideological power that Fitzgerald attributes to them. Although he repeatedly reminds us that this “parasitic configuration” of meanings are not stable or natural, Fitzgerald utterly fails to appreciate the implications of this fact. For the meaning of *religion*, *secular*, *politics* and related categories can change, have changed, and will continue to change, over time, and from context to context. In fact, contrary to Fitzgerald’s one-dimensional analysis, there is in fact no single “parasitic configuration” that structures our world order, but rather multiple overlapping and conflicting discourses, whose internal relations are constantly shifting. In other words, the internal and external relations of the configuration of meanings that terms such as “religion,” “secular,” “politics” and so on reflect differ dramatically across the globe, and even within particular national contexts (Modood and Sealy 2022). Ironically, Fitzgerald would have learned this had he actually engaged with the scholarship on liberalism (which is *not*, in fact, reducible to neoliberalism (see Kymlicka 2002)), rather than make sweeping generalizations about it. For, contrary to his outdated perspective, which anachronistically equates the entire liberal tradition with John Locke, contemporary liberal theorists have for some time now been moving away from speaking of *religion* per se, while giving careful thought to what particular rights a pluralistic democracy must enshrine in order to show its morally diverse citizenry equal respect and concern (see Rawls 1993; Maclure and Taylor 2011; Dworkin 2013; Laborde 2020). We would therefore contend that the binary choices Fitzgerald proposes rest on an inaccurate empirical analysis, which fallaciously reduces liberal modernity, the modern university, and the academic study of religion to the worst excesses of neoliberal capitalism.

All of this said, Fitzgerald has every right to offer a normative critique of what he views as an undesirable state of affairs. But we might ask: what are the normative grounds of his critique? We think this is worth asking because Fitzgerald seems to think of himself as holding values radically distinct from us, his colleagues. In fact, one gets the sense from his extended jeremiads against the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism in the modern university that he assumes the vast majority of academics are unconscious disciples of Ayn Rand, Ludwig von Mises, and Milton Friedman. Yet, we would hypothesize that Fitzgerald’s values are probably not so different from ours—and more importantly, *that he knows this.*

What makes us think this? Because the persuasiveness of Fitzgerald’s critique depends considerably upon his successfully appealing to, and thus activating, our shared (liberal democratic) values. That is, were we not to share his values, we would find little reason to heed his moral appeals. In turn, Fitzgerald knows perfectly well that in framing the continued scholarly use of the category *religion* as being wilfully complicit in reproducing “a morally bankrupt system” (15), “global armed robbery” (15), and “the colonial or neo-colonial apparatus” (22), he is appealing to the liberal democratic values the vast majority of us share. It follows, then, that although Fitzgerald may repeatedly express scorn for liberal modernity, whether he realizes it or not, he owes his own normative values to it.

We actually noted this in our *JAAR* essay, where we remarked that reading Fitzgerald reminded us of Nancy Fraser’s (1981) famous critique of Foucault. There we included a brief excerpt from Fraser’s essay, but given that Fitzgerald seems to have missed this, we will quote her in full:

The point is not simply that Foucault contradicts himself. Rather it is that he does so in part because he misunderstands, at least when it comes to his own situation, the way that norms function in social description. He assumes that he can purge all traces of liberalism from his account of modern power simply by forswearing explicit reference to the top-of-the-iceberg notions of legitimacy and illegitimacy. He assumes, in other words, that these norms can be neatly isolated and excised from the larger cultural and linguistic matrix in which they are situated. He fails to appreciate the degree to which the normative is embedded in and infused throughout the whole of language at every level, and the degree to which, despite himself, his own critique has to make use of modes of description, interpretation, and judgment formed within the modern Western normative tradition. (Fraser 1981, 284).

Needless to say, we believe one could swap the name “Foucault” for “Fitzgerald,” and Fraser’s critique would be no less applicable or forceful. For, in much the same way as Foucault, Fitzgerald’s moral reproval of liberal modernity simultaneously disavows and depends upon what Fraser calls the modern Western normative tradition. In our view, then, Fitzgerald’s desperate ambition to purify his language is beset by normative confusions.[[10]](#footnote-13) We analogized this situation in our *JAAR* piece to trying to clean the floor with a dirty mop, but perhaps a better metaphor is to think of Fitzgerald as a fish who hates water.

To sum up: in the section on crypto-normativity in our *JAAR* essay, our aims were basically twofold: first, to highlight the profoundly, if also masked, normative character of CR scholarship, and second, to shed light on the rhetorical strategies and moral tactics that this group of scholars regularly mobilize in order to set the terms of the debate. We noted that we have no problem with normativity in scholarship, so long as “scholars be willing to subject their normative claims to public scrutiny and questioning” (Watts and Mosurinjohn 2023, 326). Thus, what most troubles us about CR scholarship, like that of Fitzgerald’s, is less *that* it is normative, than *the* *particular ways* it is normative. In other words, what we take strong issue with is not, contrary to his claims, Fitzgerald’s moral disapproval of neoliberal capitalism (which we share), nor his concern that scholars should operate with reflexive awareness that terms such as *religion*, *secular*, *politics* and so on have historically been used to legitimate injustice (which are also share), but rather the moral presumption implicit in his analyses that anyone who disagrees with his controversial interpretations of liberal modernity and the academic study of religion, by definition, does not share his values, and is thereby inevitably complicit in reproducing the most inhumane aspects of the status quo.

**c. Arbitrary abandonment**

In our *JAAR* essay we considered multiple arguments advanced by CR scholars to justify abandoning *religion* as an analytic category, and we concluded that none could justify treating *religion* as uniquely pernicious, given the interdependence of *religion* with a whole slew of other modern categories. Our approach was to identify two distinctive strands of CR scholarship—respectively represented by McCutcheon and Fitzgerald—and then use one to critique the other. In his response to our work, takes issue with this. He argues that because he and McCutcheon do not belong to a shared methodological school, pitting them against one another reveals nothing but the fact that they hold diverging views. On this, we must respectfully disagree. The reason for this (implicit in our *JAAR* essay) is because, in our view, Fitzgerald’s project is simply a more *consistent* working out of CR methodological principles than the “moderate” approach of, say, McCutcheon. That is, while Fitzgerald and McCutcheon may disagree about, for instance, the role of the scholar as regards the representation of local practices and discourses,[[11]](#footnote-14) they nevertheless agree about the problematic nature of *religion* as an analytic category. In turn, the fact that Fitzgerald has gradually shifted from seeing *religion* as an especially problematic category, to viewing *all related categories* as equally problematic, suggests to us that more “moderate” CR projects like those of McCutcheon and Martin, which seek to only do away with *religion*, are guilty of what we called *arbitrary abandonment*. Put otherwise: if one begins from the assumption that *religion* is such a deeply polluted category that the mere use of it by scholars—regardless of their attempts to qualify, revise, or adapt its meanings—inevitably bolsters and reproduces neoliberal capitalism and colonialism, among other social evils (which, it seems to us, most CR scholars believe), then we agree with Fitzgerald that consistency demands one follow him to where he ended up—i.e., the view that *all* modern categories are similarly parasitic.[[12]](#footnote-15)

So, to answer Fitzgerald’s question—“Instructive of what?” (9)—we would say, the evolution of his thought helpfully illuminates the tensions that haunt more “moderate” CR scholars such as McCutcheon and Martin. For we would contend that those who seek to do away with *religion* as an analytic category, but *not* other related categories, have not confronted, or sufficiently grappled with, the reasons Fitzgerald ended up where he is. And what is more, that their obsession with the supposedly special depravity of *religion* as an analytic category, is not only arbitrary (in the sense that it arguably reflects personal prejudices more than the consistent application of principles) but also bears striking affinities to those who they have spent so much time and energy critiquing—those “classical” scholars of religion who viewed *religion* as *sui generis*.

Now, none of this serves as a reason in itself to reject Fitzgerald’s deconstructive project. Although beset by normative confusions, at the very least Fitzgerald has striven to apply CR’s methodological-cum-normative commitments to their logical endpoint. There is undeniably something admirable and even noble about this. Thus if one genuinely believes that *religion and related categories* constitute a single “parasitic configuration” that perniciously structures the entire world order, and is singularly responsible for the destruction of most habitats, as Fitzgerald seems to, then his deconstructive project is perhaps the one for you. However, as we noted in our *JAAR* essay, we believe that the logical conclusion of this project is probably something like the abandonment “of the practice of social science” (Watts and Mosurinjohn 2023, 329), for if you genuinely believe that *all modern categories are this morally polluted*, then it seems plausible that you will eventually conclude that the world is best served if we moderns simply stayed silent. Some may not see this as a reason to be skeptical of this project, but we do not count ourselves among them.

**Where We Stand**

Seemingly frustrated by our own lack of normative self-disclosure, Fitzgerald asks, “where do Watts and Mosurinjohn reveal their normative positionality?” (12).[[13]](#footnote-16) To this we must stress that our primary aim, in writing our *JAAR* essay, was to “take seriously” what we understand to be the core methodological commitments of CR, and to examine whether CR scholars themselves have lived up to them. Thus, ours was a paradigmatic attempt at *immanent critique*. Nevertheless, we can appreciate why Fitzgerald would wish to know where, normatively speaking, we stand.[[14]](#footnote-17) So in what follows we will try to summarize our substantive disagreements with Fitzgerald, and CR scholarship more broadly.

First, although we acknowledge that *religion* *and related categories* have historically played significant roles in legitimating injustice—and indeed have learned much from CR scholars about this—we do not agree that this is fated to continue, on the grounds that these configurations of meaning are both plural and constantly subject to change. Second, we believe Fitzgerald’s normative assessment of liberal modernity and the particular discourses (including the *religion*/*secular* binary) it birthed is far too one-dimensional. That is, while liberal modernity has undoubtedly been responsible for legitimating great social evil, it has also been responsible for bringing about great social good. What is more, although modern categories and the configurations of meaning they signal have excluded, disenfranchised, and alienated, they have also animated inspiring and progressive moral and political visions (including Fitzgerald’s own). In a word, liberal modernity is Janus-faced, as are the categories it has bequeathed to us. Therefore, unlike Fitzgerald we are willing to accept that terms such as *religion*, *secular*, *politics*, and so on will never be entirely unproblematic, but that demanding that our terms be unproblematic is asking too much. Third, while we believe CR scholars share our liberal democratic values, we do not come to the same conclusions regarding what these require of our scholarly *taxonomies*. We think, in the vast majority of cases, we ought to place trust in our colleagues to use the terms they see fit, while hoping they do so reflexively and responsibly. Of course, as we noted in our *JAAR* essay, some scholars have argued that we must abandon *religion* as an analytic category on the grounds that it is akin to polluted terms such as *crazy*, *uncivilised*, or *primitive*—words which, given our shared liberal democratic values, we all recognize ought not be used in scholarly research. However, we find these types of analogy specious, if only because no one identifies with these latter terms precisely because they are unilaterally seen as inappropriate, whereas millions of people identify with *religion* (and thus seem not to share CR scholars’ controversial minority view that it is distinctly morally reprobate).

As should be evident, it was our own theoretical, methodological, and normative commitments that inspired us to write our *JAAR* essay. However, something Fitzgerald seems to have overlooked (despite it being implicit in the essay’s title), is the fact that we took strongest issue, less with the existence of CR as one among many other “critical” approaches in the study of religion, than with what we interpret as this methodological school’s “imperial” ambitions—that is, our sense that CR scholars do not view much of the scholarship produced by their colleagues as legitimate. Thus, it is crucially important that we understand CR, as a methodological school, to be chiefly concerned, not with studying uses of the term “religion” in (for lack of a better term) everyday life,[[15]](#footnote-18) but rather with studying uses of this term *by their colleagues*. In other words, what makes CR distinctive, in our view, is its concerted interest in assessing and authorizing *scholarly* *tools*. We feel it necessary to emphasize this because what disturbed us most when immersing ourselves in CR scholarship were the ways that CR scholars—through subtle rhetorical strategies and moral tactics that tacitly frame those who disagree with them as morally wanting—have sought to wrest authority over the academic study of religion writ large. And so we decided to write our *JAAR* piece if only to bring this all to light.

Incidentally, all of this was spelled out in the concluding section of an earlier version of our *JAAR* essay, which was eventually cut in order to conform to *JAAR*’s word limit (the original version of our piece was much longer than the published version). However, given that we were somewhat disappointed that this section was cut, we will end this response by printing it here.

**CONCLUSION: CHOOSING THE RULES OF THE GAME**

In an early essay, McCutcheon (1997a) argued that the academic study of religion is like a game of tennis—that, much like a sport, it is constituted by a specific set of discursive rules. In his view, the game of religious studies should have the following end: to “disturb people’s mental habits” (McCutcheon 2003, xviii) by means of processes of demystification and denaturalization—that is, relentless historicization. Or as he puts it, we scholars, the players of this game, should seek to contest authority rather than reproduce it (McCutcheon 1997b, 451).

While we think the study of religion should probably have a broader mandate than this, we would nerveless agree. However, in our view, one cannot contest authority without, at that time, reproducing it elsewhere. Thus, the key problem with CR is that it denies those of us who wish to be “critical” the ability to engage in productive, rather than deconstructive, critique. For, as Goldstein et al. (2016) observe, critique “can only be counter-hegemonic when it reveals particular interests hidden behind proclaimed universal values” (4).

Furthermore, CR has furtively adopted an agenda of moral pollution in order to rid us of a potentially useful heuristic tool—the category “religion.” That is, in trying to tether “religion,” once and for all, to the polluted categories of “imperialism,” “colonialism,” and “racism” (among others), CR scholars have sought to activate our shared normative frameworks (for who in the academy wishes to be seen as complicit in a “colonial project”?) as a means of covertly pushing forward their own research agenda. In other words, they have used our own folk classification schemas against us, deceiving us into believing that, in rejecting “religion” (and in Fitzgerald’s case, all related categories), we are simply following normal academic protocol, when in fact what we are doing is giving them control over the game, and allowing them to rewrite the proverbial rulebook.

In fact, let’s extend the tennis metaphor further: it seems to us that, if the academic study of religion is akin to a game of tennis, then CR scholars like McCutcheon seek to be both player and umpire at the same time—selecting and enforcing the rules when it serves their ends, while looking the other way when it doesn’t. At the same time, CR scholars such as Fitzgerald seem to hate tennis, and will not be satisfied until we have all decided to stop playing this game, and destroyed all of the institutions that have been complicit in making this game thinkable. We are not attracted to these proposals, because, while critical self-reflection is both morally needed and intellectually productive, we fear that, if taken too far, it can lead to a nihilistic abyss where the actual problems of the world are left unperturbed, and where the only virtue worthy of praise becomes demonstrating one’s superior degree of self-reflexivity.

In our view, to rid ourselves of “religion” is to potentially lose a useful heuristic tool that can aid us, not only in better understanding the social world, but also in identifying and critiquing inequality and injustice. And yet, having said this, we believe that the kind of game the (critical) study of religion should be—what rules we ought to play by—is for us to decide democratically. And so we have sought, as best we can, to lay out what is really at stake in debates about CR—to enable our fellow colleagues to make an informed decision regarding how we should proceed.

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1. While we are aware that our *JAAR* article sparked much debate online, because neither of us spends a great deal of time on social media, the particular contours of these debates have largely come to us via the reports of colleagues and friends who are active on Facebook in particular. Thus, we appreciate Fitzgerald’s willingness to take the “traditional” academic route to engage with our work. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In his blog response to our article, Martin (2022) voices a similar criticism. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Fitzgerald remarks that he consciously moved away from identifying with the term “critical religion” in order to “protect my own distinctive theoretical and methodological way of thinking” (Fitzgerald 2023, 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bizarrely, Fitzgerald charges us with neglecting this argument of his: “I cannot find any discussion of this notion of a configuration or an automatic signalling system, one of the central threads of argument in my work” (Fitzgerald 2023, 11). Yet in our *JAAR* essay we explicitly write, “The later Fitzgerald … no longer sees *religion* as the sole problem, but rather as merely one among many other categories that belong to a configuration of problematic ‘rhetorical fields’” (Watts and Mosurinjohn 2022, 330). Accordingly, just as Fitzgerald has accused us of not reading his work carefully enough, we cannot help but feel similarly about him. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Fitzgerald further supports this understanding of social constructionism when he writes: “It is obvious that an imagined community imposes real restraints and engenders real conditions of existence. I carry a British passport. I pay tax. The contested divisions between imagined communities engender wars in which people suffer and die. The imaginary distinctions between religion and politics has real implications for the way we are allowed to live our lives and so on” (23). We suggest that his term “rhetorical fiction” harmonizes with the social constructionist intuition that what matters is *not* whether something is a “real objective entity” (whatever that means) but whether (to invoke the Thomas theorem) it is *real* *in its consequences.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Our choice to focus on the work of McCutcheon and Fitzgerald was based in important respects on their wide repute in the field. According to Google Scholar (as of May 14, 2023), Fitzgerald’s work has been cited 3941 times, with *The Ideology of Religious Studies* having been cited 1733. Meanwhile, McCutcheon has been cited 5937 times, with his first book, *Manufacturing Religion* having been cited 1534 times. We certainly appreciate that it is totally possible to feel a sense of professional marginalization as both Fitzgerald (2023) and McCutcheon (2023, 269) describe, despite metrics of academic success. Our intention here is to point out that this large number of citations suggests a great deal of attention and influence in the discipline. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. We take these up in the following section. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
8. The concept “unduly normative” is purposefully ambiguous, in that it includes the claim that *religion* itself is a normative category, which the non-normative scholar must therefore eschew, *as well as* the claim that *religion* is a morally unjustifiable category, which modern ethical standards require us to abandon. Although both meanings are endorsed in CR scholarship, scholars vary in terms of which they emphasize more. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
9. The implication here—which recurs throughout Fitzgerald’s essay—is that Fitzgerald’s normative values are in some sense so radical, counter-cultural, and unpopular that he must hide them from his colleagues. We explore this implication in the following section. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
10. The terms Fitzgerald deems problematic in his response to our work include (but are not limited to): *religion*, *secular*, *political*, *culture*, *cultural*, *nature*, *science*, *European* *Enlightenment*, *modernity*, *nation*, *economy*, *market*, *Great* *Britain*, *France*, *Japan*, *United* *States*, *premodern*, *Western*, *non-Western*, and *societies*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
11. Fitzgerald takes issue with our suggestion that he espouses any type of cultural essentialism. Yet, in a lengthy section discussing his work on/in Japan, he writes, “To say that Shinto or Confucianism is ‘a religion’ is a distortion. It may be convenient for publishing textbooks in English and promoting an academic career as a ‘specialist expert’, but it does not properly represent the way Japanese institutions are organised, or the way they are classified in popular practice” (Fitzgerald 2023, 25). Now, Fitzgerald protests that statements such as this do not entail “a claim about an essential, pristine, indigenous identity and form of life” (25), but—notwithstanding the additional qualifiers “pristine” and “indigenous”—we are not convinced. For what does the term “distort” signify if not that a particular representation of “popular practice” is, in some sense, more authentic than other? Furthermore, how does Fitzgerald know what Japanese “popular practice” consists of? Which locals has he selected to be representatives thereof? And why them and not others? Fitzgerald may not like referring to his view as “culturally essentialist,” but we continue to believe this is in effect what it is. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
12. Fitzgerald writes of his own project, “Overall and over the years, there has been a gradual increase of consistency in the critique” (13). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
13. Martin (2022) voices a similar complaint. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
14. Should readers be interested in learning more about our theoretical and normative commitments, they can of course go read our work (see, for instance, Watts 2022a, 2022b). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
15. In our *JAAR* essay, we explicitly distinguish CR from the *discursive study of religion*. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)