

**CSCH Presidential Address 1998**

**“Give me that old-time Religion”:  
The Postmodernist Plot of the Theologians?**

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I feel I must begin this paper with an apology for using the “p-word” in my title, so hackneyed has the term “postmodern” and its derivatives become in the 1990s, in the academy, in North America. But I risk embarrassment, I think, for a good reason. I do so not because I regret never having seized the opportunity to put the word in a paper I have read (though I have not had cause, till now!), but because the term is central to the argument of an essay to which I propose to respond this afternoon. And I also address the term because behind my little argument lies a fundamental problem worth our joint contemplation, a problem upon which the postmodernist controversy continues to shed light.

So much for my formal apology. Let me now try to convince you that the postmodernist issue is still worth our corporate attention after years of being bandied about. What captured my attention some months ago was an off-hand footnote in a recent article by Russell McCutcheon, of Southwest Missouri State University, in which he describes the award-winning historian of religion, George Marsden, as a “theologian.” In any technical sense, of course, McCutcheon’s comment is defenceless. Marsden’s work is noted by the historical community for the academic rigour he has applied to the study of religion in his *Fundamentalism in American Culture* and subsequent monographs.<sup>1</sup> It is true that Marsden’s

historical work is admired by many (including some theologians one would assume) who are outside the historical community – but within the academy. But none I have encountered would dream of calling Marsden a theologian.

In light of McCutcheon's overarching argument it would seem that he feels justified in calling Marsden a theologian because of the kinds of remarks Marsden makes near the end of his very long *Soul of the American University*,<sup>2</sup> though McCutcheon refers to this monograph without citing it. "Conventional standards of objectivity based on scientific models no longer have any prospect for claiming universal authority," says Marsden, "[we have] no intellectually valid reason to exclude religiously based perspectives that have strong academic credentials on all other grounds."<sup>3</sup> "Pure naturalism," Marsden concedes, is a "useful methodological premise," but it is not any more objectively provable in an epistemological sense than a manifestly religious assumption.<sup>4</sup> In his article: "My theory of the brontosaurus': Postmodernism and 'theory' of religion," McCutcheon sums up his response to such arguments in this way: "Using the multiplicity of the postmodern world as a means for smuggling a foundationist perspective back within the academy strikes me as a giant step backward."<sup>5</sup> This "foundationalism" strikes McCutcheon as the "old-time religion" of explicit Christian presuppositions. The academic machinations of scholars with such a religious weakness, he would suggest, amount to nothing but "the postmodernist plot of the theologians" – or so McCutcheon's complaint seems to me to be best paraphrased.

It is not within the scope of this paper to defend George Marsden's historical reputation – he hardly needs it, so well does Marsden's own historical writing play by the rules of scholarly engagement McCutcheon feels are being abandoned. (This does not mean I necessarily agree, at the level of theory, with Marsden's particular justification of "religious perspectives" in the academy.) Most importantly perhaps, it is not my task to enter into the extended argument McCutcheon has with Garrett Green (of the Department of Religious Studies of Connecticut College) about the advisability of including Karl Barth's writings in a "religious studies" course as an academic example of "theories of religion."<sup>6</sup>

Rather I see my task as more fundamental: to question the assumptions McCutcheon and others make about the nature of what he calls the "academic study of religion," and to suggest the fruitful role historians of religion might play in the postmodernist controversy he raises by moving

beyond his assumptions, and the assumptions of those who approach religion in a manner similar to his. It is the particular argument of this paper that, ironically, McCutcheon's own assumptions about scholarly theory are best described themselves by the old evangelical hymn to which I have just referred: "Give me that old-time Religion." His "old-time religion" is a species of what I would call an "omniscient scientism," a worn and tired "foundationalism" no longer serviceable in the study of religion. So the paper will proceed in three sections: first, a summary of McCutcheon's lament; second, a critique of the assumptions he makes and an attempt to explain their persistence in the scholarly community; and third, a brief inquiry into the role historians might play in moving the study of religion beyond the limitations of "omniscient scientism."

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At the outset, McCutcheon's complaint seems straightforward. He contrasts the analysis of religion based on what he calls "its historical, economic, psychological [and] sociological causes" with the attempt to use postmodernism to "relegitimize theological discourse in the academy"(4). In other words, what he calls "anything goes" postmodernism(7), is a ruse used by confessional Christians (he seems to target Christians for the most part) to return to a pre-scientific view of humanity, in which theological convictions about God, humanity, history, absolute truth and so on, become the starting place for what pretends to be contemporary, civil, scholarly inquiry. The theological barbarians are past the gates, he seems to be saying, and can be found even in departments of religion. Their disguises must be named, before we descend to the pre-critical, religious, tribal loyalties that discouraged academic enlightenment for so long. (It hardly needs to be said that acquaintance with the Protestant and Catholic historical polemics that extended into this century has surely convinced all of us of the folly of a return to such genuine tribalism under the guise of postmodernism or any other theological or theoretical agenda.)

But McCutcheon's criticism is not nearly so straightforward as this. What he means by "theology" as opposed to "theory" and by "modernism" as opposed to "postmodernism" reveals his deeper anxieties about what he feels are current "suspect" tendencies – as they are labelled in the summary at the head of his article – in the minds of some scholars of religion. First, what is meant by "theology" and "theologians"? At points McCut-

eon seems simply to equate the work of “theologians” with the work of those whom he calls “religious devotees”: they speak from “outside” the realm of the scholarship, “where our claims (i.e., the claims of “scholars of religion”) must be open to public criticism and debate” (21). So theologians have no public, academic significance, they have meaning only within their religious, that is confessional, communities. They are “outside” the work of what he calls the true scholar’s “inside” or academic work, whose nature I will summarize in a few moments. Though no sustained definition of theology beyond this is attempted, several of McCutcheon’s asides en flesh this skeletal assumption.

Put cautiously, theology and theologians “presume a normative standard that is not available to the student of the academic study of religion” (20). McCutcheon comes cleaner when he remarks that theologians “claim as their basis of authority some kind of inspiration from beyond history” (8), that is they resort to “grand narratives” or what postmodernists call “meta-narratives” – what others have called “world views” – which by definition exclude the claims of other religions. His analysis of Karl Barth, whom he sees as the prototypical theologian is clearest: Barth makes, “bold rhetorical, metaphoric, and totalized claims that are firmly based on the Christian perspective intent on demarcating ‘true’ from ‘false’ and ‘revelation’ from ‘religion’” (19), thus removing religious truth from the kind of public, academic criticism to which McCutcheon feels genuine religious scholarship must be submitted.

On the other hand, McCutcheon says this of those he believes are genuine religious “theorists”: “Because we can describe, compare and analyze . . . we can engage in the meta-theoretical critique of scholarship itself” (21). So theorists, as opposed to theologians, are able to free themselves not only from “grand narratives,” but from the theoretical limitations of their own discourse. How is this possible? It is because of the double-barrelled nature of “theory as explanation” and “theory as critique.” What is explanation? “While most everyone has assumptions, a system of ideas, or a world view,” claims McCutcheon, “not everyone’s world view entails the attempt to investigate whether there are any regularities in casual relations among observable events that the researcher finds interesting or curious”(13-14). This raises the theorists’ critique above “first order experiences of the world” to provide what he describes as “a rational, explanatory account for [first order experiences] . . . observations and events *that we as scholars deem important, puzzling or*

*curious*”(15). Such explanations, moreover, must be capable of empirical verification and predictive accuracy. Who would disagree? But on closer examination, McCutcheon’s understanding of “theory as critique” is complex and somewhat confusing. He says that the function of this “higher order” effort is to criticize the “maps” or “models” of reality proposed by “theory as description” (15-17). Yet the examples given of the categories of “class, race and gender” as critique, suggest that by “critique” McCutcheon is referring only to a slightly more self-conscious “map-making,” not to theory in the sense of a truly deconstructive “critique.” This is confirmed, I think, by his assertion a few paragraphs later that religious “practices, beliefs and institutions” must be understood as nothing more than “dynamic historical, cultural, discursive artifacts.”

So how do “modernism” and postmodernism” fit into this debate? Here the argument departs from the distinctions that one might expect. For McCutcheon, “modernism” (and he has very little to say about it), hangs on to the ineffable, the transcendent in religion, and is dependent on “the scholar’s apparently direct experience (or empathetic re-experience) of what they are studying (22). Thus modernists claim to avoid the reductionism of purely materialist explanations, and thus they lack “defensible theories,” it would seem, of both the explanatory and critical kind. As far as postmodernism is concerned, McCutcheon wants to press it into service for the scholarly study of religion. So he claims that it “demystifies” religion, or lays bare the assumptions of theologians which rest on the authority of meta-narratives (10). From here, McCutcheon moves on, with the use of the postmodern vocabulary to which we have become accustomed in the past decade or two. He argues that scholars who call for the inclusion of theories of religion which depend on meta-narratives, are scholars who have missed the point of postmodernism: “the promise of postmodern theorizing, therefore, is to be found in the continual, self-critical . . . movement between [theory as explanation and theory as critique]” (16).

This non-foundational, self-critical process McCutcheon does not define, further than his portrayal of explanation and critique would allow us to speculate. But as he has taken pains to point out that “theologians” cannot theorize, he does go on to argue why in a postmodernist universe they cannot be scholars of religion. Quite simply, the “demystification” task of postmodernism helps separate the claims of legitimate scholarly “games,” from those of “games” which can never be scholarly. So,

“[Postmodernism] allows us to describe some [claims] as theological (those that presume essential, ontological status to their constructs) and other to be naturalistic (those that acknowledge the constitutive role of the theorist and the theory)”(11). Given that there is both a scholarly game of religion and a very different theological game, why does only the former deserve a role in the academy? It would seem so because the academy is public, and funded by public money, and must be above the capriciousness of “first order experiences” which are apparently not in the public interest.

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This construction of the proper sphere of the scholar of religion is, I believe, open to serious criticism. Most problematic is its general understanding of postmodernism and its specific understanding of theory in the academic study of religion. The problem with the type of approach taken to postmodernism is not so much the summary of postmodern theory offered, as with what McCutcheon forthrightly calls, “appropriating postmodernism”(11). It is true, as Keith Jenkins points out in his *Post-modern History Reader*, that postmodernity is more an historical condition of society and scholarship in which we all find ourselves, than simply one choice in the marketplace of late twentieth-century ideologies. It is quite right to say with Jenkins that postmodernity is due to the failure of the two-hundred and fifty year-old experiment to solve intractable social and political problems by the application of reason and science,<sup>7</sup> and for us to name a “shrinking globe” and a host of other factors in this recognition. Yet with Jenkins we do make choices and commitments about how to serve the public interest, however we might define “public,” even if we define it as our confessional community or communities amongst a host of others. How does McCutcheon fare in his choice, in “appropriating post-modernism”?

Though his article cites a number of postmodernist theorists, McCutcheon does several times credit Pauline Rosenau’s *Post-modernism and the Social Sciences* as formative of his conception of postmodern theory. In documenting the “game playing” analogy used by postmodernists to relativize all epistemologies and to reduce them all to closed systems of religion, McCutcheon seizes on Rosenau’s conclusion that postmodernists do not however see all epistemological games as equally valuable (15). But Rosenau herself cannot, nor can postmodernists in

general do as McCutcheon does, and move from such an observation to the necessary exclusion of “foundationalist” or “religious” theories in the academic study of religion, and to the uncritical inclusion of approaches McCutcheon names variously as “social scientific” (4), “humanistic” (4), “rationalist” (4) and “naturalistic” (11). Such approaches are in fact deemed “modernist” by Rosenau. “Sceptical postmodernism,” she says, calls such strategies “ideological and rhetorical, although claiming to be scientific.” In this perspective, put bluntly, McCutcheon’s or any one else’s “theory” is “impossible.” Or, speaking of “affirmative postmodernists” (the perspective with which McCutcheon identifies his critique), Rosenau says: “[Affirmative postmodernists] generally deny the truth claims of theory and annul its privileged status,” and “they de-centre theory and substitute everyday life and local narrative.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, the academic study of religion, if it continues in the mood which McCutcheon would have scholars or religion adopt, misses the whole point of postmodernism. “Meta-narratives” are as problematic in the modernism which McCutcheon denies (but in fact espouses), as meta-narratives are in the “foundationalism” which Karl Barth happily admits. As Keith Jenkins puts it: “We can now see how both upper and lower case histories, being ‘metahistorical constructions,’ are, like all constructions, ultimately arbitrary ways of carving up what comes to constitute their field.”<sup>9</sup>

This misappropriation of postmodernism is evident in a closer examination of McCutcheon’s theory construction. Though true scholars of religion, we are told, speak of adopting the theoretical “critical play” espoused by affirmative or “soft” postmodernists, McCutcheon’s two levels of theory are not what postmodernists have in mind. For as his argument goes, “theory as critique” makes “explicit the assumptions, internal logic and sociopolitical preconditions” of theory as explanation (16). This is promising, though obviously it must move beyond a “higher order” critique based on McCutcheon’s examples of class, race, and gender analysis (16). More seriously and more unfortunately, nowhere does his argument openly admit the myth, the dearly held meta-narrative beyond which scientific religionists will not move, the claims of “omni-scient scientism.” This belief assumes the possibility of a rational subject-object distinction, specifically the objective separation of the scholar from what is being studied. It posits an independent, detached observation on the part of a scholar who can rise above “meta-narratives,” even his own. But the whole notion of the “unified subject” (whether author or reader)

dissecting a discrete object (whether text or phenomena) is in fact at the heart of the postmodernist controversy.<sup>10</sup> Dominick LaCapra, in his famous, ferocious *American Historical Review* exchange with Russell Jacoby in 1992, describes such “scientism” as the “extreme objectification of the other wherein the status of the researcher as subject is itself occluded or at least not posed as a problem.”<sup>11</sup>

So McCutcheon’s argument, then, is clearly modernist in the eyes of genuine postmodernists, though it is an argument which sees the benefits of post-modernism as applied to the “foundationalism” of the “theologians” he critiques. The social science he would apply to the study of religion he deems capable of precisely the kind of detached objectivity postmodernism denies is possible. We might say that McCutcheon has simply reinforced a slightly more introspective form of “that old-time religion” modernism. Thus we might ask why a sizable group of scholars in the various branches of the academic study of religion (which is not restricted to the spectrum of methods found in “Departments of Religion” as McCutcheon sometimes seems to assume) – why a sizable group of scholars of religion continue to resist the insights of genuine post-modernism.

Worth mentioning in passing at least, and worth in fact future serious study, is the observation that a very significant minority among current scholars of religion are ex-fundamentalist Christians whose hard-earned modernism is not likely to give way quickly to radical postmodern critiques of scientific method, or postmodern proposals about the irreducible, paradoxical nature of reality and the like. More demonstrable is the inordinate attention McCutcheon gives to “boundaries,” both theoretical and professional. In saying at the outset of his article that “demarcation – methodological, theoretical and institutional”(5) is under threat, he betrays the anxieties of many scholars who know, as he puts it, that “the very future of the academic study of religion as an institutionally viable practice” (22), is under threat. Hence he is keen, first, to keep separate the various discursive “games” and keep their rules intact (10), and, second, to claim that the social scientific rules of the academic study of religion are in the best interest of the public who fund the academy, whereas the rules of the theologians are not (6-8,10-12,22). This can I think be described in appropriate postmodernist terms as an exercise in hegemony, though an understandable exercise, and one from which none of us can pretend to be more than partially exempt – though not to try to

resist it should strike us as cynical. But perhaps more useful for this discussion than the risky business of probing motives is a brief consideration of what historians, as one species of scholars of religion, might contribute to scholarship in a postmodern era.

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It would be pretentious, after such a discussion, to assume any one of us or any academic discipline were above a similar critique. Even if we wanted to acknowledge the realities of a postmodern world with a postmodern theory none of us could claim with confidence any sort of overarching theory or even systematic approach. So let me simply put forward several observations and suggestions for our general discussion. I believe that historians of religion, in spite of sharing the modernist limitations we do with McCutcheon, have some advantages in postmodern religious scholarship simply by being historians. I am not suggesting the possibility or advisability of the complete “de-centring” of religious history: such postmodern attempts are I think impossible, and inadvisable. As Eric Hobsbawm has recently affirmed about the academic study of any “other”: “it is the nature of writing about other cultures that it has to explain what needs no explanation at home . . . [there can be] only one voice and one conception, the author’s.”<sup>12</sup> But I would like to suggest that we as religious *historians* can benefit from the postmodern project in ways that the mood of modernist “omniscient scientism” cannot allow us.

I start with the suggestion that historians have had their epistemological and methodological certainties undermined for some time. This has had several causes. In terms of the evolution of the academy, history (and to a large measure religious history) has retained a generalist tone (even in his last century) at the same time that many new specialist fields of enquiry have come into existence, and many traditional disciplines have sub-divided. I am not suggesting that historians have retained the a critical “bird’s eye view” while “lower” forms of explanation (scholarship) have not. But I am suggesting that the barrage of new approaches that have seeped into general historical discourse has undercut notions that religious history – to use our case – can be done competently within easily definable parameters or easily described games with obvious rules. Thus all who claim the name of historian have at least had to acknowledge the proliferation of types of history, and often have been obligated to interweave the

findings of at least some of them into their particular field of enquiry, whether economic or political or social or religious history.

The ideal of “interdisciplinary history” has proved of course to be almost impossible almost from the beginning, and it is by no means immune from charges of “omniscient scientism” brought by postmodern theorists. But while theoretical self-critique has not dominated history as much as it has literary studies (whence comes most postmodernist theory), the field of history has sustained considerable criticism from key historians who have been predisposed to respond to the postmodern challenge by the multi-faceted breadth of the historiographical discipline. History is still a discipline which often sees itself as a clearing house for a variety of approaches, though caving in, often it is true, to the specializing tendencies of more carefully delineated disciplines built on the scientific model, such as those practised by some theorists within departments of religion. But historians have an advantage (which they have too often spurned as many one dimensional studies have clearly shown), an advantage in the study of religion.

As far as the matter of what deserves historical study: historians have often not responded graciously to the undermining of their assumptions by popular calls to broaden the canon of the texts and movements which they are willing to consider. But this call from the social margins has nonetheless yielded significant results. Few who teach introductions to the history of Christianity, for instance, can escape the need to be more inclusive, especially if forced to by the astonishing social, racial, sexual, economic, diversification of those they teach. As historians we have every reason to be more radical in our appreciation of the consequences of this. We must listen to more and more dissonant voices from the past, and cannot be content with revision of theories alone, or only with critiques of current forms of religion. The combined weight of decades or centuries of contradictory voices provide a powerful corrective to those of us tempted by unjustifiably privileged European canons. Such weight can also serve as a corrective to the European positivism that has supported the scholarly enterprise. These new, but very old voices, if heard, are bound to affect any theory we bring to bear on old or new canons. The challenge, of course, is to actually hear them.

This brings me to one other observation about the relation of historians of religion to the texts they study: I say texts and not “artifacts” – as McCutcheon prefers – for the same reason that LaCapra advocates

“the elaboration of theory that is not self-contained.”<sup>13</sup> Historians must more easily admit the interdependence of reader and text, than do some scholars of religion the interdependence of “social scientist” and “artifact.” This is not a matter of moral superiority or conscious choice. Historians, historians of religion, even – dare I say it – theologians, have had to continue to play with religious works or phenomena in a way that “science,” because of its very nature, has avoided. To broaden the matter: whether historians in general owe their slight reverence towards texts to their predecessor’s convictions that Augustine or Voltaire actually had something of value to say which could shape the scholar, is moot. Many historians (as many literary scholars) have at least felt obligated to elucidate the inner coherence of the texts they study, before classifying the social scientific functions of bits and pieces of the discourse of the historical actors under examination. It would seem to me that one exciting avenue for historians of religion is to investigate the dialogue between their own interdisciplinary method and the interpretive key promoted by the texts themselves. This may promote messy varieties of explanations dependent on the texts under study, but it is “totalizing” explanations (as McCutcheon says) we want to avoid as much as possible.

So why should we not seek solace in “omniscient scientism”? However we want to regularize it, with scientific or social scientific or quasi-scientific theory, the world and with it religion, grows messier and more complicated for all scholars, as for all other human beings, every year, for reasons with which we are well acquainted. But it is only as we admit the increasing insignificance of our own dominant voices, and the increasing significance of hitherto hidden or ignored or suppressed voices that we can consciously admit this messiness. It is a choice to acknowledge the reality of a postmodern world, a significant choice. As Rosenau says of this trajectory: theory must become “unsystematic, heterological, de-centred, ever changing, and local.”<sup>14</sup>

This is the promise of postmodernism for historians, and historians of religion. Perhaps it is time to actively *hear* the voices which an omniscient scientism would only have us “explain” and “critique” – and it is time to hear more carefully those scholars who speak from outside our boundaries, even outside the boundaries of social science. This is above all things a genuinely public project, regardless of the politics of public funding and the ideological control of departments of religion. And it is a project, we would hope, that will not succumb in the age of shrinking

public government, to the panicked privileging of one form of scholarly discourse over another in the matter of religion.

### ***Endnotes***

1. *Fundamentalism in American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).
2. George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Unbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
3. Marsden, *American University*, 424.
4. Marsden, *American University*, 431.
5. Russell T. McCutcheon, “‘My theory of the brontosaurus’: Postmodernism and ‘theory’ of religion,” *Studies in Religion* 26, No. 1 (1997): 22. The page numbers of all further citations of this article will be cited in parentheses within the text of this paper.
6. See Garrett Green, “Challenging the Religious Studies Canon: Karl Barth’s Theory of Religion,” *Journal of Religion* 75 (1995): 473-486.
7. Keith Jenkins, “Introduction: on being open about our closures,” in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins (Routledge: London and New York, 1997), 3-4.
8. Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-modernism in the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 81-83.
9. Jenkins, “Introduction,” *Postmodern History Reader*, 8.
10. See Rosenau, *Post-modernism*, 25-61.
11. “*AHR Forum: Intellectual History and its Ways*,” *American Historical Review* 97 (April 1992): 429. For Russell Jacoby, see his article in the same issue, “*AHR Forum: A New Intellectual History*,” 405-424.
12. This is found in the chapter entitled, “Postmodernism in the Forest,” in *On History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), 196.
13. LaCapra, “Intellectual History,” 439.
14. Rosenau, *Post-modernism*, 83.