

## The Reinvention or Degradation of Religious Studies? Tales from the Tuscaloosa Woods

*Donald Wiebe*

**The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric**, Russell T. McCutcheon, Routledge 2003 (0-415-27490-7), pp. xxiv + 317, Pb £19.99

Russell McCutcheon's *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric* comprises 12 essays divided into three groups of four under the not entirely perspicuous titles 'Genealogy of Credibility', 'Techniques of Dominance', and 'Reworking the Residue from Our Imperfect Past'. (Readers will no doubt also note his penchant for the playful and idiosyncratic in his chapter titles, as well as his love for distinctive and unconventional vocabulary and turns of phrase.) Although we lack the provenance of three of the essays (Chapters 3, 11 and 12), it appears that they were all written within the last decade. The essays are preceded by a Preface, Acknowledgements and Introduction, (and followed by an 'Afterword') – each a mini-essay – whose prefatory concerns largely overlap and blend into each other. Despite McCutcheon's belief that prefaces are the most important part of any book (p. 220) I shall look first at the substance of his essays and only then turn to the import of the 'mini-essays'.

The book's first chapter – 'Form, Content, and the Treasury of Devices' (2000) – is essentially an introduction to the major themes of the volume. In this chapter McCutcheon points out that the book's title is an explicit (though unoriginal) *double entendre* and that his attention will be focused on the 'discipline of religion' not only in the sense of

---

Russell McCutcheon is Chair of the Department of Religion at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. My thanks to Luther H. Martin for a critical read of the penultimate draft of this review essay.

the institutionalized academic study of religion but also as a rhetorical technique in which 'religion' plays a role in the production and maintenance of social identities (p. 17). As he puts it, '*The Discipline of Religion* . . . connotes both an institutional site of intellectual toil as well as the practical effects of the concept itself, effects that make possible certain forms of political organization and self-constitution' (p. 18). Because the academic study of religion takes place in the university setting it must do more than simply represent the self-reports of the religious devotee vis-à-vis the meaning of life (the meaning of the world) (pp. 23, 30), which would make it a religious or theological rather than a scholarly activity. It is not that McCutcheon eschews meaning as a proper focus for scholarly attention; he maintains, however, that it is the theorizing of the role of religion (and 'religion') in '*the production of seamless meanings and identities*' (p. 22) as ordinary cultural products that is the task of the discipline as one of the human sciences (p. 31). Although distinguishing the study of religion from religion, McCutcheon does not accept what he calls 'the rhetoric concerning the utter uniqueness of the ivory tower' (p. 30). For the most part, however, these matters are asserted rather than argued, unless one considers McCutcheon's comments on his perception of the US Memorial Day celebration and his meditations on the production of meaning connected with Bruce Springsteen's 1984 hit 'Born in the USA' and Malvina Reynolds's 1960s song 'Little Boxes' to constitute evidence.

Chapters Two and Three – 'God's People Defending Their Ivory Towers: Reassessing the Study of Religion's Emergence in the U.S.' (1993) and 'Autonomy, Unity, and Crisis: Rhetoric and the Invention of a Discipline' (n.d.) – constitute McCutcheon's effort at accounting for the state of the academic study of religion up to the Second World War and its redevelopment in the university context after the War. The first task is 'accomplished' by way of a review of Robert Shepard's *God's People in the Ivory Tower: Religion in the Early American University* (1991), and the second by way of an analysis of the prefaces to three volumes of essays on methodological issues in the academic study of religion (in 1959, 1967, and 1985) sponsored by the University of Chicago history of religions programme. McCutcheon faults Shepard for failing to recognize that the early development of Religious Studies in the USA involved a power struggle over the rhetoric of 'religion' (p. 42); over who got to decide what counted as academic discourse about religion (p. 50). And he maintains that Shepard's account of the field fails to help us understand it properly because he failed to 'theorize' it (p. 47). The same message is delivered in the second of the two 'historical' papers: focusing on representing the essence of the devotee's religious experience creates a discourse on *sui generis* reality that blocks all possible theorizing of the religious phenomenon. The prefaces to the methodological papers, McCutcheon maintains, dehistoricize, essen-

tialize, and universalize religious experience and thereby create the conditions for the invention of the discipline of religion (pp. 64, 71). Like Shepard, the authors of the prefaces (Jerald C. Brauer and Joseph Kitagawa) are not sufficiently self-reflexive to recognize the socio-political character of the scholarship in which they are engaged (p. 80). McCutcheon's commentary on 'The American Academy's Research Interest Survey' which he entitles 'Classification and the Dog's Breakfast' (1997) brings Part I of the book – 'Genealogy of Credibility' – to a close. Careful examination of the survey, he claims, indicates that our political interests determine the nature of the field and its subject matter; that we 'use the taxon "religion" to classify and distinguish' behaviour we find interesting rather than as an indicator of some elusive reality greater than ourselves (pp. 88, 94).

'The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Looking Past the Violence of Cults and Fanatics' (1997) is the first of four essays under the rubric 'Techniques of Dominance', and was inspired largely by what McCutcheon considers unacceptable treatment of the Heaven's Gate 'cult' by scholars in the media. Accounts of them, he maintains, were oversimplified caricatures because they failed to bring theory to bear upon their interpretations of what he calls the strange oppositional beliefs of the group (p. 109); indeed, the assumptions on which the interpretations of the scholars in the media were based functioned to reinforce the status of the dominant religious groups in society. McCutcheon therefore insists that what is needed if a more accurate understanding of such groups is to be achieved is a theory of self and social formation that is 'capable of discussing far more than supposedly spiritual matters' (p. 122). Scholars, that is, should be 'theorizing the world of competing passions, making them known and knowable human behaviours that are no more exotic than their very own web spinning activities' (p. 124). And if they do this, McCutcheon goes on to claim, they will be not only academic students of religion but 'social theorists' and 'engaged intellectuals' (p. 101), which he argues should be an essential aspect of being an academic student of religion. The second essay, 'Alienation, Apprenticeship and the Crisis of Academic Labour' is essentially a diatribe against the way graduate students and younger academics are treated by the profession – not just in the field of religious studies but in the university as a whole. McCutcheon may be right in claiming that senior professors block the emergence of new waves of scholarship by means of a 'rhetoric of apprenticeship' that is simply a cover for the exploitation of a cheap pool of academic labour, but he has not made a solid case for the claim. Nor do I see how this bears on the claim that such exploitation indicates that the field needs to be reconceived in theoretical terms (although I do not disagree with the claim that the importation of theory into Religious Studies would do it a world of good). Further, that there is an ideology of Religious Studies inherent in the

processes of decontextualizing and dehistoricizing the data of religion, and that that ideology accounts for the present woes in the academic job market (pp. 140–41) are claims that in my judgement are left unsubstantiated, but this may not be the point McCutcheon is attempting to make. Such a reconception of the field can hardly do better with respect to interdisciplinarity than the current dominant model of Religious Studies that sees itself as polymethodic in developing new conversation partners in the academy. Nor do I see why correcting the shortcomings of the academic job market necessarily entails that the student of religion becomes a critic of culture as McCutcheon maintains (p. 141). The third essay in Part II, “‘Like Small Bumps on the Back of the Neck . . .’: The Problem of Evil as Something Ordinary” (2000), contrary to expectation, is not primarily about evil, but rather reflects on intellectual treatments of the problem of evil in an attempt to illustrate how students of religion ought to reconceive their own field of intellectual endeavour. McCutcheon contends that theodicies are not mere intellectual exercises but rather political ones in that they are used to justify particular ‘ways of life’. A proper redescription of theodicy, therefore, changes it into a sociodicy; that is, a secular theodicy (p. 161). In the same fashion, he argues, we need to redescribe – that is, theorize – ‘the indigenous account of extraordinariness, privilege, and authority [of religion] as being ordinary, rhetorical efforts that make extraordinariness, privilege, and authority possible’ (p. 146). Scholars of religion, therefore, do not study religion (which does not exist [p. 149]) but only forms of human behaviour (p. 149). Implicit in this refusal to endorse religion by simply re-presenting the devotee’s presentation of it, according to McCutcheon, is a social criticism of these rhetorics of power that transforms scholars into ‘active and public culture critics’ (p. 154). ‘The Jargon of Authenticity and the Study of Religion’ (2000) closes Part II and like the essays that precede it, argues that students of religion ought not to be in the business of reproducing the social worlds it studies (p. 169) but rather that they should examine ‘the mechanisms that enable people to imagine themselves as part of coherent groups’ (p. 176). The essay – perhaps better, meditation – arises out of McCutcheon’s ruminations about his Canadian identity while a participant in an international congress of the International Association for the History of Religions held in Durban, South Africa in 2000, and his concern that the congress seemed to embody the study of religion as a process of reproducing the social worlds of the people being studied. These comments, and other digressions on the significance of modern communications (deriving from the military-industrial-university complex) and the performance of the Shembe at the closing banquet of the Congress are connected to the main themes of the essay but do not, in my judgement, amount to evidence or constitute arguments in support of McCutcheon’s claims.

A miscellany of personal issues are presented in the essays in Part III on 'Reworking the Residue from Our Imperfect Past'. In 'Methods, Theories, and the Terrors of History: Closing the Eliadean Era with Some Dignity' (2001) McCutcheon responds to the criticisms of those who criticize Eliade's work in the field of Religious Studies and censures those who adopt Eliadean methods uncritically. Carl Olson's *The Theology and Philosophy of Mircea Eliade* (1992), David Cave's *Mircea Eliade's Vision for a New Humanism* (1993), and Bryan S. Rennie's *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (1996) are the main works under review and are seen by McCutcheon as essentially sympathetic exegesis and commentary rather than works of analysis and critique. These authors, he argues, marginalize issues of power and conflict and therefore simply perpetuate the structures they examine (p. 201). In order to explain those structures, he goes on, they will require a change of perspective that will permit them to see religion as a set of socio-rhetorical techniques of world-building (p. 194). 'The Perfect Past and the Irony of Narrative: Bruce Lincoln's *Theorizing Myth*' (2001) is a somewhat odd essay – a kind of meditation on Lincoln's personal disclosures in the Preface to the book, that McCutcheon thinks not only announces but realizes Lincoln's historical project which shows all classification schemes to be human products (p. 228). To understand this, McCutcheon suggests, is to understand how meaning works and that the construction of meaning involves contests of power that result in the production of ideologies. Of particular interest here is McCutcheon's claim that this also applies to the meaning of science: that is, that science as a kind of god's-eye view of the world is simply not possible. As McCutcheon puts it: 'Taking seriously that scholarship . . . is a human activity, driven by specific, historical interests and thus just as much part of this changeable, contestable world, means dropping the pretence of being above the fray and it means no longer portraying self-disclosure as self-indulgent' (p. 219). In '"Religion" and the Citizen's Unrequited Desires: Chips from the Religion Industry's Workshop' (n.d.) is essentially a critique of Ivan Strenski's view of the possibility of a science of religion of the god's-eye view variety. For McCutcheon, Strenski is 'intent on manufacturing an external realm of normal, objective, professional, verifiable scientific truth, a realm which brings with it their self-identity and social authority' (p. 245), and fails to recognize that the project is a futile one because it is based on the false assumption that religion is somehow 'out there' (p. 237). Given that religion is a constructed reality, the 'truly "scientific" attitude' in the study of it is that represented by Lincoln, for only on 'redescription' of religion by means of social theory does it show its true nature as a set of authorizing practices and, therefore, as an ideology (pp. 236, 248). The final essay of the section and the book is entitled ' "Religion" and the Governable Self' (n.d.) and is an exploration of

sorts of the implications for the study of religion of what Foucault may have meant by the term 'governability'. Central to that exploration is a clarification of the meaning and implications of tolerance which McCutcheon thinks will assist the reader to see that the study of religion must be undertaken as a socio-rhetoric that makes selves/citizens (p. 261).

I find myself in agreement with many of the substantive positions McCutcheon espouses in these essays, but there are equally many of which I am not persuaded. Moreover, McCutcheon often seems to espouse positions that are incompatible and make it difficult to understand exactly his intellectual commitments and objectives. I concur, for example, with his claim that the academic study of religion must do more than simply re-present the beliefs and experiences of the religious devotee (Chapters 1 and 11); that the growth and development of the academic study of religion (Religious Studies) is not free either of religious or political influence (Chapters 2, 3, 5, 7, 8 and 12); that classification schemes and academic disciplines (including the natural and social sciences) are social (human) constructions (Chapters 2, 4 and 10); and that 'religion' does not indicate the existence of a transcendent (spiritual) reality beyond, and independent of, the confines of the natural, everyday world (Chapters 1, 2, 3, 8, 9 and 11). I differ from him, however, on the claims that the category of religion (i.e., 'religion') is merely a disciplinary rhetorical technique to create a new social group (Chapters 1, 5, 7, 8 and 11); that the field of Religious Studies is – necessarily so – simply an extension of the phenomenon of religion itself (Chapter 2, 3 and 4); that scholarship and science are world-building – i.e., mythic – activities and therefore indistinguishable from ideology and religion (Chapters 7, 8 and 10); that students of religion must be active, engaged, public intellectuals (Chapters 5, 8, 10 and 12); and that students of religion are essentially 'anthropologists of credibility' (Chapters 7 and 10) by which he means engaged scholars who are critics of the world views created by human communities.

McCutcheon's merging of the roles of scholar-scientist and socio-cultural critic (public intellectual) is just one of several 'logical' inconsistencies and tensions in his essays – although it is one of major significance for the Religious Studies community to which I will give more attention below. Others, however, include the ambiguities in his use of the terms religion and 'religion' that leads him to the conclusion that religions do not exist and cannot be the object of scholarly examination (pp. 94, 149); ambiguities in the nature of the relationships among description, theory, and redescription (*passim*); the failure to distinguish (lower-case) 'historians of religion' and comparativists from (upper-case) 'Historians of Religion' who are engaged in radically different enterprises; and the implicit judgement that those who act as

social critics are engaged scholars or public intellectuals while those who endorse current structures rather than seek social transformation are not – that only the latter are ‘self-interested’ (pp. xv, 122, 162, *et passim*).

Of more importance than these inconsistencies, agreements, and disagreements, however, is the matter of how one might approach working through the problems they present. Not only is McCutcheon’s style – largely literary – problematic here, but so also are the fundamental assumptions upon which he seems to proceed. With respect to assumptions, for example, McCutcheon – despite a few brief positive comments about the place of the social sciences in the modern university – rejects the modes of logic and argument that characterize the natural and social sciences as if they were a species of myth. According to McCutcheon, therefore, science in general is no less ideological than the social structures for which the student of religion seeks an explanation and consequently does not provide a meta-language within which to discuss the nature and function of religion; it makes both ‘religion’, (whatever that is for McCutcheon), and ‘the study of religion’ species of ideology and therefore, ‘theoretical’ rivals. It is not surprising therefore that McCutcheon does not argue the validity of his position with regard to the aim of achieving scientific knowledge of religions and religion; that would be buying into a form of rationality that he sees as ideological. Rather, he simply invokes the ‘authority’ of Michel Foucault as support for his position and in the process presumes the academic study of religion to be a purely political undertaking concerned with issues of ‘governability’ (Chapters 7, 8, 10 and 12). Foucault, he tells us, has ‘persuaded’ him that ‘discourse is an inevitable violence that we do to things, suggesting that no discourse will ever be any closer to “the way things are” [than any other discourse]’ (pp. 173, 256). Thus, he writes: ‘the rhetoric concerning the utter uniqueness of the ivory tower [and the privileged epistemic character of the sciences] has struck me as misleading and self-serving’ (p. 30). Consequently, according to McCutcheon, scholars ought to recognize that their explanations and theories are purely a function of their interests and, therefore, that they ought to be aware of the socio-political character of all scholarship (pp. 80, 153, 226); scholarship, that is, is not about knowledge but rather about the quest for power (pp. 42, 49). Thus, for McCutcheon, scholars (scientists), like everyone else, are myth makers (pp. 153, 226) – especially about the character of their own disciplines which they present as objective and neutral (p. 227). The *fact* that such a claim is incoherent because it must of necessity include itself, however, seems not to bother McCutcheon; he seems to think that abandonment of the claims of science (scholarship) to objectivity, and of the claims regarding the special nature of the institutions

that house it, and switching to a more personal genre of discourse (to which I shall give attention below), exempts him from the force of logical criticism. Thus he writes: 'With a tip of the hat to reflexive anthropologists, I thus accept that claims to knowledge are tactical and conditional and that they are based on perspective, on viewpoint, on interests; the 'close' reader will have already seen that I do not fear using the first person singular pronoun' (p. 33).

In fact, McCutcheon positively affirms a style of writing that he acknowledges is 'literary' rather than scholarly or scientific (p. xx) and he cares not whether they are 'op-ed pieces, travelogues, rants, or . . . dispatch[es]' (p. xx), as long as they help to undermine a view of Religious Studies as a scientific undertaking in the traditional sense (pp. xx–xxi). In fact, McCutcheon sees the attitude attached to this type of non-traditional discourse to be more scientific than that which characterizes the traditional sciences which operate from a god's-eye point of view (p. 162, see also p. 227). Thus he writes: 'Taking seriously that scholarship . . . is a human activity, driven by specific, historical interests and thus just as much a part of this changeable, contestable world, means dropping the pretence of being above the fray and it means no longer portraying self-disclosure as self-indulgent' (p. 219). But this, surely, is a self-serving bit of discourse because it takes oneself as sufficient authority to legitimate one's own approach to understanding 'religion' as the only truly scientific approach to the study of religion and 'religion'. McCutcheon seems to be aware of this, and he attempts to avert or deflect such criticism in advance, as the following passage in the Introduction indicates: 'Although the autobiographical voice appears here and there throughout the following pages – my opening anecdotes are an instance of this – it would be a disservice to the thesis being argued to hear this voice as self-authorizing or as speaking some sort of pristine truth or authenticity that resides deep within "me", the privileged author' (pp. 6–7). And yet this is precisely what his rejection of logic and scientific argument in favour of a more subjective style of writing amounts to despite his claim that '[n]othing could be further from the point being argued' (p. 7). In my judgement, McCutcheon inserts himself into his writing at the expense of solid critical analysis and systematic argumentation, and he fuses analytical and personal genres of writing in a way that confuses the issues rather than providing a framework for thought within which they might be resolved. Tipping his hat to the anthropologists and inserting himself into his analyses do not constitute grounds for the claim that it is impossible to espouse the notion of objective facts and beliefs without also espousing a notion of science as a god's-eye perspective on the world. However, before bringing this review to a conclusion it is worth asking whether McCutcheon brings more clarity and coherence to his views of religion and 'religion' in the prefatory materials to the volume

than the readers might find, on their own, so to speak, in the essays themselves.

In the Preface and Introduction to this volume McCutcheon attempts to provide a framework within which the reader might see the unity he, in hindsight, thinks characterizes these occasional writings, although he puts it somewhat ambiguously in saying that 'some of these essays strike me as all exploring a common issue' (p. x). (In this he resembles, at least in part, the editors of the volumes of methodological essays discussed in chapter three, which he subjects to criticism.) Nevertheless, he proceeds to tell the reader what he does and does not think the book is attempting to accomplish. It is not, he claims, 'a description or interpretation of any particular religious thing, and it is not an attempt at building an explanatory theory of religion' (p. 6). It is concerned, rather, with 'an attempt to write a political theory of "religion"' (p. 6) which requires an examination of 'how it is that we as students, scholars, and even citizens come to form ourselves into just these specific selves by means of certain rhetorical styles and conventions' (p. 6) which also involves 're-describing and thus historicizing the "rules and recipes" that enable certain of us to classify various forms of human praxis *as* religious or spiritual or devotional or authentic, and the practical outcomes of such classifications' (p. 9). Thus, he claims, these essays apply 'a theory of social formation to an academic discipline in order to understand the role played by various rhetorics in creating and sustaining seemingly coherent social identities' (p. x); that is, they use the same socio-rhetorical approach used to theorize religion to theorize 'the rise and maintenance of an academic discipline' (p. xvi). He also maintains that in addition to trying to identify those rhetorical devices, it is necessary to deflate the rhetorical devices of the current dominant structure of the discipline (p. xx); to subject the dominant model of the study of religion to critique; (apparently only because it is the dominant structure). Those devices, he asserts, are 'more akin to a liberal practice of religious pluralism than a species of the human sciences as practised in the public university' (p. xv), making the student of religion something of a spokesperson for religion (p. xv). McCutcheon finds this rejection of naturalism as unjustifiable and so sees himself as speaking from the margins of the field against this 'pomposity of the centre' (p. xvi) in an effort 'to help establish an alternative [naturalistic] object of study, constitutive of an alternative "we"' (p. xvii). But that alternative 'we', despite McCutcheon's reference to the human sciences in the public university, is not that of the social scientific student of religion (whether historian, sociologist, psychologist, or anthropologist) working within a naturalistic framework and represented by such groups as the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR) or the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), but rather that of the 'social critic' who is

concerned with the transformation of society rather than the production of objective knowledge. And in his haste to justify the social critic model for the academic study of religion McCutcheon inappropriately – that is, without analysis or argument – lumps the traditional naturalistic approaches to the study of religion represented by the NAASR and IAHR together with the religio-theological approaches that pre-date the establishment of the field of Religious Studies as a secular enterprise in the modern university and that still finds itself ensconced in most modern departments of Religious Studies and in organizations like that of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). His claim in Chapter 11 that Ivan Strenski is ‘intent on manufacturing an external realm of normal, objective, professional verifiable scientific truth’ (p. 245) for political and social rather than scientific reasons, even if correct, is simply insufficient to make his case. McCutcheon here shows a total lack of interest in what might be called the ‘scientific impulse’ and the differences (not merely the similarities) between science and other social institutions (constructions). But his wish to replace the religio-theological students of religion and their ideological agendas with the engaged, public intellectual is, so far as I can see, simply to pit a new ideological agenda over against the old. Calling this ‘redescriptive scholarship’ simply does not differentiate McCutcheon’s ‘redescriptive scholars’ (p. 128) from the currently dominant religio-theological scholars in the field since neither group of scholars is primarily concerned with gaining objective knowledge about the (religious) world. However, it does distinguish him from Sam Preus’s naturalistic model for the study of religion he invokes positively in chapter two in his critique of Robert Shepard. In any event, McCutcheon does not provide a detailed, systematic account of what he means by redescriptive scholarship. And where he does comment on the import of such redescription, it appears that all he means by it is that the academic study of religion must not merely describe what religious devotees claim to experience and believe, and how they behave, but must also explain why they do so (pp. 140, 146, 201). Given that for McCutcheon the explanations must be formulated within a naturalistic framework, it is understandable that he sees his explanations as incompatible with religio-theological accounts of religion. But, given his own sociological theory of religion as a form of world-making, it seems that his redescriptive (theoretical) scholarship is indistinguishable from that espoused by traditional social scientists. However, if that redescriptive scholarship is different from traditional science in that it is, as McCutcheon maintains, nothing more than another instance of world-making that sets the so-called student of religion against the religious devotee on ideological grounds (pp. 80, 153, 219, 226), then it is indistinguishable from the religio-theological study of religion McCutcheon thinks it ought to replace. Little wonder then that

McCutcheon, in the prefatory material to this volume, maintains that his critique and reconstruction of Religious Studies will require something other than systematic analytical work, and that he attempts to provide justification for his more literary style of expression in these essays. His style of writing, he tells the reader, 'can somehow help . . . to move some of us toward an effective critique . . . [and] help to recreate a new sense of "us" . . . along with a new sense of our object of study' (p. xxi). Unfortunately the 'somehow' is never persuasively demonstrated, nor is the scientific character of this new 'us' clearly differentiated from the non-scientific character of the communities McCutcheon wishes to study.

In my judgement, then – drawing on McCutcheon's terminology quoted above – there is a sense in which his scholarship, as well as his style of presentation, is anecdotal, for he seems to balk at providing careful, systematic analyses of the problems characteristic of the academic study of religion he delineates, or well-honed, logically consistent arguments for the positions he espouses (or logically consistent critiques of those he rejects). McCutcheon, therefore, is less concerned with the 'Discipline of Religion' as an academic exercise or scientific pursuit, than with making it a context for a different kind of intellectual undertaking, namely that of social critique. And that, in my judgement, amounts to a degradation of Religious Studies as a modern academic undertaking for he extends to the entire field what is characteristic of only a sub-set of scholars within it, namely the liberal humanist scholars who – as he puts it in the new preface to the Greek translation of his first book, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* – 'systematically re-present, classify, and study human behaviour as if certain of them were informed by or directed toward some unseen power, charisma, or lure' (p. 5; typescript of the English version supplied by the author). As I have noted, however, McCutcheon provides no justification (short of invoking the philosophical 'authority' of Foucault) for lumping all scholars of religion into his mutually exclusive ideological groups of 'Caretakers' (perpetuators of traditional society) and 'Critics' (transformers of society) – *tertium nihil est!* (See his *Critics Not Caretakers: Redefining the Public Study of Religion* [2001] which comprises 13 essays very much in the same vein as those reviewed here.) In my estimation, then, McCutcheon's *The Discipline of Religion* is in no way an account of either the nature or the history of the field of the study of religion as a modern, scientific undertaking and is, therefore, of little methodological value to those interested in understanding the scientific character of this field of study.

My critique of his work notwithstanding, McCutcheon represents a new generation of Religious Studies scholars who raise issues that – whether one agrees with their judgements or not – require more atten-

tion than they have received to date. His critical assessments of earlier generations of scholars in this and related fields are often insightful and force scholars in the field to rethink their methodological commitments and the institutional structures within which they function. He has been a positive catalyst for 'scholarship on scholarship' – as he might put it – and he will no doubt continue to press the Religious Studies community to be more critically reflective with respect to its fundamental assumptions and presuppositions.

Donald Wiebe is Professor of Philosophy of Religion and Dean of the Faculty of Divinity at Trinity College, University of Toronto.