

'Religion,' 'the Secular' and the Critical Study of Religion¹

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Abstract: This essay critically engages Timothy Fitzgerald's *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity* (2007), arguing that it takes an important step beyond Fitzgerald's first book, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000) in diagnosing a current malaise of the academic study of religion and in modelling a way past this malaise. Highlighting this valuable aspect of the book, I argue, requires correcting certain problems with its argument. Specifically, there is a tension between two overarching goals: writing "a critical history of 'religion' as a category," and criticizing "modern discourses on generic religion." Once these genealogical and critical projects are brought into more effective alignment, the book models an approach where a properly critical study of religion begins with a contingently and strategically theorized domain of 'religion' and explores its relation to other domains—not only 'the secular.'

Resumé : Cet essai reconsidère d'un œil critique le livre, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity* (2007), de Timothy Fitzgerald. Il soutient qu'il donne un pas important au-delà du premier livre de Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000), dans les faits de diagnostiquer une malaise actuelle de l'étude des religions et de modéliser une piste alternative. Pourtant, pour accentuer cet aspect important du livre, on doit corriger des problèmes logiques avec son argument. Spécialement, il y a une tension problématique entre les deux buts du livre : l'écriture « d'une histoire critique de 'religion' comme une catégorie » ; et la critique « des discours modernes sur la religion générique. » Dès que ces projets généalogiques et critiques sont apportés dans une meilleure alignement, le livre modèle une approche de grande valeur : c'est le travail d'une étude proprement critique du concept 'de religion' de le suivre où il mène, et d'analyser ses relations avec des autres concepts.

Keywords

Timothy Fitzgerald, definitions of religion, secularization, theory of religion, ideology, critical theory

Mots clés

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Timothy Fitzgerald's *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity* (2007; hereinafter *DCB*) is an important book that has had an ambivalent reception.² Its main claims are as straightforward as they are salutary: important modern senses of 'religion' emerged amidst the increasing differentiation in modernity of other social and ideological spheres; and, partly as a result of this development, religious studies isolates itself to a lamentable extent, intellectually and pragmatically, from politics. I argue in this essay that the book's strengths are obscured by problems with its argument.

My negative agenda (diagnosing these problems) is intended to support my positive one (clarifying the book's value). Specifically, I analyze the relation between two agendas: studying the history of the concept of 'religion,' and critiquing its current use by scholars of religion. I argue that clarifying and reorienting the relation between these two agendas leads us in a slightly different direction from *DCB*'s core claims, one still commensurate with its basic critical thrust. Once corrected for certain, primarily logical, problems with its argument, and against the grain of some of its own conclusions, *DCB* offers a valuable model for a critical study of religion. It casts valuable light on the symptoms of a certain malaise in the field of religious studies, and this is even more the case once we clear the logical air to some extent.³

DCB looks at what 'religion' used to mean in order to conclude that it now means 'non-secular': 'the secular' is "defined by its essential *exclusion* of religion"; "it is precisely through the exclusion and separation of ... modern categories such as the state, politics, and economics ... that generic religion had appeared as a distinct and autonomous reality" (2007a: 174, 4). This avoids being an empty circle because the two are characterized in terms of the historical conditions of their co-emergence, with an attention to political and economic functions of their ideological distinction. In a sense, *DCB*'s core claim is that the relation between these two concepts is substantively empty, but that each has an effect sustained by the failure to recognize this fact. The argument is not "a kind of teleological determinism" but a case for "a transition between two analytically distinct paradigms" (2007a: 276). Specifically, *DCB* describes a shift from medieval and early modern "encompassing" religion—"the idea of Religion as the practice of civility (Christian Truth) contrasted with barbarity"—to "privatized," "nonpolitical," and "generic" religion, "something that in principle exists in all cultures and languages in all historical times" (2007b, 2007a: 120, 298, 4). A core claim is that the modern view of 'religion' has only an ideological function, one rooted in its stark opposition to 'the secular.' This argument involves three claims: (i) that this view is false (i.e., there is, in fact, no "essential difference" between 'religion' and 'the secular'; the two are strictly inter-related as categories "reinvented" in the modern west); (ii) that this view has negative effects in terms of the distribution of power in the world (it is "an important constituent part of modernity," exported "as part of the logic of colonial control and global capitalism"; "the construction of competitive capitalism and the idea of self-interested individuals depend ... on these categories"); and (iii) that these first two facts are hidden behind the reification of this ideological distinction (2007a: 11, 67, 26, 278, 6). This leads to the recommendation that scholars should study the 'religion/secular' distinction as a whole (2000: 106, 2007a: 4), and to the critical conclusion that 'religion' should be jettisoned as an academic category: "Religion as a distinct and substantive reality in the world ... is a myth ..., and ... religious studies is an agency for uncritically formulating and legitimating this myth" (2007a: 9, see 2000: 235). That is, we should

study the ideological effects of ‘religion’ (as inseparably related to other domains), but we should stop using ‘religion’ as if it were a category able to separate out a distinct set of objectively existing phenomena to be studied.

I will suggest that we need not abandon ‘religion’ as a category in order to focus on the ‘religion-secular pair’ (and other such binaries). We should study both, and we should consider doing so in light of the sort of ideological critique that, I will argue, is implicit in *DCB*. Against the grain of its own argument, the book itself seems to model such a path: the historical investigation provides potentially valuable conceptual tools for using ‘religion’ as a comparative category in a critical and reflective manner. For example, the idea that “older” and “modern” views of ‘religion’ form endpoints of a spectrum offers potential purchase for comparative studies (2007b: 212). However, this aspect of the analysis is hampered by its subordination to the critique of current uses of ‘religion’ both in religious studies and, more broadly, in other academic fields and in popular discourse.

DCB develops an aspect of Fitzgerald’s earlier book, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, which argued “for deleting the word ‘religion’ from the list of analytical categories entirely and instead treating the category itself, along with its partner ‘the secular’ as an object of historical and sociological enquiry” (2000: 4). This potentially confusing suggestion—that we delete ‘religion’ as a category in order to study the category ‘religion’—manifests an unresolved tension. On the one hand, the point is that we should critique ‘religion’ and not use it. We should stop using the concept uncritically as a tool for examining certain phenomena and subject it to ideological critique, i.e., we should drop the concept but critique its continued use. This would involve examining it in relation to other allegedly autonomous domains, generally lumped under the heading of ‘the secular’ (see 2007a: 232). In part, this is a valuable reminder and elaboration of a lesson well taught by Jonathan Z. Smith and Russell T. McCutcheon: first-order concepts tend to drift uncritically and potentially misleadingly into the secondary literature as second-order comparative terms; and ‘religion’—as a second-order term used to select ‘religious’ phenomena for comparative purposes—tends to drift uncritically and potentially misleadingly into a third-order term (used to theorize whatever it is that all religions have in common) (Smith, 1988, 1996, 1998; McCutcheon, 1997, 2001). On the other hand, although the reminder to subject ‘religion’ to critique is valuable, the recommendation to jettison it as a category used to orient research seems to go too far. Why not continue to use ‘religion’ as a comparative category, doing so more effectively *in light of* the complex relations to other categories that *DCB* so insightfully diagnoses? If there is value in studying ‘religion’ in its discursive opposition to ‘the secular’ (and other conceptual domains), then there is value in studying the phenomena that we label ‘religions,’ even granted the contingent and constructed nature of this and other categories.

Genealogical and Critical Projects

There are two overarching goals in *DCB*: writing “a critical history of ‘religion’ as a category”; and criticizing “modern discourses on generic religion” (2007a: 6-7). My critical claim is that the relation between these two projects needs to be clearer; and my substantive claim is that, once this relation is clarified, *DCB*’s critique is reoriented. The

book's critical implication is that the category of "generic religion" (i.e., 'religion' as a third-order concept) should be abandoned because its implicit claim to refer to "a distinct and autonomous reality" is ideological, i.e., perniciously false (2007a: 4).⁴ The analysis of historical usages supports this claim by casting light on the context in which 'religion' came to take on this role. The argument is that generic 'religion' emerged not by the positive path of picking out some distinct, objectively existing domain but by a negative path of reflecting or shadowing political and economic developments (primarily colonialism and capitalism): 'religion' and 'politics' were "constructed as distinct domains in the very process of separation" (2007a: 172). 'Religion' *appears* to function in the study of religion as a label for a set of phenomena that share certain characteristics. However, this appearance is mistaken: there is no such objectively existing domain; its supposedly defining characteristics ultimately depend solely on relations to other allegedly autonomous domains. When we interrogate the concept of 'religion' we elicit not some religious thing(s); we find derivative, relational concepts, e.g., 'non-political,' 'non-scientific,' 'non-public.' 'Religion' makes no sense apart from "what in shorthand gets called the religion-secular dichotomy," and this dichotomy is "a rhetorical invention" (2007a: 232, 281).⁵

These are insightful and important claims, but the argument for them is weakened by problems with *DCB*'s two agendas and with the way they are interrelated. With regard to the first—the critical—*DCB* overstates the claim that religious studies scholarship is vitiated by its over-reliance on "the modern generic usage" of 'religion' (2007b: 214). The middle ground between abandoning 'religion' and using the concept merely as a heuristic device—which is rightly criticized (2007a: 39, 44, 47, 66)—is to use the concept critically, in the light of explicit theory. *DCB* is too quick to imply that scholars of religion do not (or cannot) do this. In the first place, scholars of religion use a variety of meanings of the term, as Fitzgerald himself recognizes: a "soteriological sense ... is one of the many and various ways that modern scholars use the term"; a "reified" sense of religion as common to all cultures is "[o]ne of the most central modern English-language discourses on 'religions' in religious studies, historiography, and anthropology" (2007a: 120, 213). More to the point, not all scholars of religion use the concept in the problematic and uncritical way that Fitzgerald rightly critiques. At the very least, many scholars of religion work in light of the ideological critiques of Smith, McCutcheon, Talal Asad, Fitzgerald himself and others, in light of the post-colonial critiques of Richard King, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Arvind Mandair and others, in light of the feminist critiques of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Pamela Sue Anderson and others, in light of the nuanced historical investigations of 'religion' by Michel Despland, Peter Harrison and others; etc. There are some very live and kicking babies in the bathwater of 'religion.'⁶

At the same time, *DCB* makes a very important critical point. Scholars who interrogate and use the category of 'religion' in a theoretically and critically informed manner are few and far between. This is a serious problem for the field of religious studies, and Fitzgerald's is one of the most important of recent voices to sound this warning.

With regard to the second of the book's two goals, the genealogical project of tracing the trajectory of 'religion,' the presentation is again too limited. *DCB* presents a sharp contrast between the "older meaning" and "the modern" (2007a: 8, 15, 53, 83-84, 174, 293). The former was that of "encompassing Religion, that is Christendom, or

Religion as Christian Truth” (2007a: 53). This was inseparably related to an analytically distinct sense of ‘religion’: “those collectively recognized, self-identifying performances and cultivations whereby one’s own civilitas is symbolically constructed as against the barbarity of various others”; “if Religion meant Truth in opposition to superstition, it also meant civility as contrasted with barbarity” (2007b: 13, 2007a: 53). ‘Religion’ as “the practice of civility” and as “Christian Truth” are explicitly equated (2007a: 120). *DCB* argues (with special attention to England) that religion changed during the early modern period along a spectrum from “encompassing” to “privatized”: in the former “all practices and institutions are ... legitimized in terms of [religion]”; in the latter, religion is “a private soteriological belief essentially separated from politics” (2007b: 211, 235).

This description of a transition from “the older” to “the modern” sense of ‘religion’ is limited in three ways: the old view is still around; there were other older views; and there are other new views. (The third of these points was addressed above. I will now address the first two.)

With respect to the first point—even setting aside the prominence of hierarchical, encompassing views of religion in Hinduism, Islam and other religions—Fitzgerald himself notes that the two views can be found side-by-side in modern western sources: “encompassing Religion and privatised religions ... [are] entirely different but fundamentally important nuances of ‘religion’ [that] cohabit in a large range of scholarly texts, politician’s rhetoric, and media frenzy” (2007a: 56).

With respect to the second point, scholars of religion who focus narrowly on the historical dimensions of ‘religion’—along with its cognates and its potential translations—produce much more nuanced accounts. These call into question the claim that generic ‘religion’ is a modern, western category. To give two recent examples (published since *DCB*), Giovanni Casadio—based on an extensive review of classical sources—draws out a range of meanings of ‘religio’ and argues that “the categorization of religion is *not only* Christian, *not only* Western ... and *not at all* recent” (Casadio, 2010: 304; original emphasis); and Gustavo Benavides argues that the Manichaean concepts of *den/dyn* and *ekklesia* exhibited comparative characteristics generally ascribed to only Post-Reformation senses of ‘religion’ (Benavides, 2009: 90-91).⁷

DCB’s historical analysis is too narrow. Michel Despland—in a classic work not cited by Fitzgerald—teases out forty distinct conceptions of ‘*religio*’ and ‘religion’ in a review of primary sources from Cicero to Schelling (1979). Despland finds conceptions of ‘religion’ in terms of Revelation and Reason, in terms of public order (grounding the social and political order in a transcendent basis or in contingent national and institutional contexts), in terms of the self (opening onto the true depths of human nature or constraining it through threats and promises), and in terms of culture (as a reflection of God’s one path to salvation, as a facet of national identity, or in terms of the customs and ideals of a given land). A key shift that Despland identifies is captured by his use of the term ‘reification’: in the wake of the sixteenth-century Reformations, the new “polemical context rendered religion more abstract, more intellectual, more codified, more exterior, more depersonalized, in a word more reified, and perhaps more alienating” (Despland, 1979: 371; my translation). It is not clear how Despland’s nuanced presentation of shifting, contrasting, and overlapping medieval and early modern conceptions of ‘*religio*’/‘religion’ fits with *DCB*’s description of a shift from medieval encompassing to modern privatized religion. At the very least, the latter’s genealogical account needs

fleshing out.

There is a useful parallel here to the contrast between two articles—by John Bossy and Peter Biller—both cited by Fitzgerald (2007a: 48, 2007c: 10). Bossy argues, as does *DCB*, for a narrow, linear conception of shifts in the meaning of ‘religion’:

In early Christianity it meant worship, a worshipful attitude.... In medieval Christianity ... the word was only used to describe different sorts of monastic or similar rule, and the way of life pursued under them.... The word, and its earlier meaning, were revived by fifteenth-century humanists ... In ... the sixteenth century ... it must be translated “Christian religion,” not ‘the Christian religion’.... From this unwillingly conceded notion of a plurality of ‘religions’ one passed, principally during the first third of the seventeenth century ..., to an abstractable essence of them, ‘religion’ in general.... (Bossy, 1982: 4-6)

Biller—on the basis of more relevant expertise and a broader, more representative analysis of the medieval literature—finds a much richer, and non-linear, variety of meanings of ‘*religio*’: he concludes that “the picture is much more complex and diverse than the one given by Bossy” (Biller, 1985: 360). The same conclusion applies to *DCB*’s account.

The first lesson that we learn from examining limitations with *DCB*’s argument is that the critical project would be better served by more rigorous genealogy. The book’s account of pre-modern ‘religion’ does not capture the complexity and diversity of usage; and its account of current scholarly uses seems too pessimistic, neglecting critical currents. As a result, there is room to question whether something is missing from the story of how the one led to the other. At the very least, *DCB*’s case for its claim that the generic category of ‘religion’ makes no sense—apart from its relations to ‘the secular’ and its companion categories—is not established beyond reasonable doubt.

Meaning and Circularity

If *DCB*’s primary goal is to critique modern scholarly uses of ‘religion,’ then why does the book spend so much time describing historical uses? The obvious answer is that we can best follow the argument that ‘religion’ is a specious third-order category when we understand how it came to play that role, i.e., how ‘generic religion’ emerged as the ideological shadow of political and economic developments. Again, this is a valuable claim but the argument for it is problematic.

There are three issues here. First, anatomizing usage does not reveal some stable core of meaning, i.e., interrogating a small and somewhat arbitrarily selected sample of primary sources will not reveal ‘the’ meaning of a given concept for a given historical period.⁸ As Terry Godlove notes in his review of *DCB*, “since Fitzgerald’s topic is meaning and illusion, it is ironic that the idea of fixed meaning holds some attraction for him. ... If there is an illusion here it is that any general terms have essential, uncontested meanings” (2010: 305).

Second, *DCB* seems to commit a form of the genetic fallacy. It examines early modern texts in order to help with “understanding the emergence of a modern, privatized concept of religion” (2007a: 268). *DCB* places great emphasis on “origins”: ‘religion’

“and other categories ... are rhetorical constructions, but they are widely used as though they are objective and factual, and thus conceal their own origins” (2007a: 24). However, current uses and meanings are not determined by a term’s origin or by its trajectory of historical uses. The historical project of understanding has, of course, a certain value as a form of consciousness-raising. The missing premise that leads from here to the critical claim that ‘religion’ should be abandoned as an academic category seems to be that there is a necessary (and so irremediable) connection between origin and use. Even granted that current usage is problematic, what is to stop us from reframing ‘religion’ in light of recent critiques of the category, including Fitzgerald’s, and so to transpose religious studies into a more incisive critical key? To use a concept critically, strategically or tactically is very different from using it as a free-floating heuristic device.⁹ *DCB* rightly critiques the latter but is too quick to close the door on the former.¹⁰

Third, *DCB* takes dramatic modern shifts in the context of ‘religion’ to signify a radical, new absence of a certain sort of meaning: ‘religion’ now has a mere ideological meaning, where it presumably used to have a different sort of meaning. Why is a term’s changing or emerging relation to ‘the secular’ interpreted as constituting a radically different type of meaning, rather than a shift in the context of usage? To cite Godlove again, “significant change in semantic context need not be paired with a change in reference, let alone the creation of illusion” (2010: 306). There is a general theoretical lesson here: analyses of usage need to pay close attention to the meaning of ‘meaning’ (see Jensen 2004).

DCB’s critical agenda is weakened by its dependence on a narrow linear genealogy of ‘religion.’ The book presents only those meanings that contribute to its critical project. By focusing on the shift from medieval “encompassing” to modern “privatized” religion (important senses of ‘religion’ in their respective periods, but not the only ones), it highlights the conclusion that the modern sense of ‘religion’ is depoliticized, i.e., that ‘religion’ plays little more than an ideological role, based upon its illusory distinction from ‘the secular.’ Thus, in a discussion of early American public debates on church-state relations, we read that “a critique of encompassing Religion got started. Religion came to be identified with the inner conscience of the individual, and with the idea of the church ... distinct from the state” (2007a: 268).

This seems circular: we are presented with those historical meanings of ‘religion’ that lead to the book’s conclusion. This impression is reinforced by the statement that “a methodological assumption of this book is that we cannot understand what religion means at any given historical point without taking account of what is conventionally termed political philosophy, for the relationship with ‘politics’ is inextricably bound with it” (2007a: 44). If this “methodological assumption” is where *DCB* starts—grounding the entire analysis on the premise that ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ are inextricably related—then we should hardly be surprised at its conclusion: that the “the older” sense of ‘religion’ was inescapably associated with politics and that “the modern” sense is essentially related to ‘the secular’ (the latter fact obscured by a sort of false consciousness).

A related issue arises at the theoretical level. *DCB* recommends analyzing historical material not in terms of ‘religion/secular’ but with concepts that (it is claimed) had greater purchase in earlier periods and that have continuing analytical value today: ‘civility/barbarity’ and—though little developed—‘sacred/profane’ (2007a: 53, 87-88, 105-42). At one level, this makes sense: ‘religion’ can offer little analytical purchase

when it is itself the object of study. However, these concepts are not clarified sufficiently to carry this analytical weight: e.g., the relation between “the practice of civility” and “Christian Truth” is unclear. At points, the two are equated, at others distinguished: “the discourses on civility and barbarity overlap with those on Religion (understood as Christian Truth) and superstition, and rationality and irrationality” (2007a: 120, 13, see 53). The scope of the civility/barbarity distinction reflects a similar ambiguity between a general category (fitting the critical project) and a context-specific one (fitting the genealogical project): *DCB* characterizes “the dichotomy as European, with its origins in Greece”; yet, at the same time, “the general distinction between ‘our civility’ and ‘their barbarity’ may be a near universal”; it “is about who is and who is not properly human” (2007a: 113, 120, 110-11; see Kellison, 2009: 370-371). *DCB*’s critical project requires that ‘civility’ be understood as operating at a higher level of analysis than ‘religion,’ giving it interpretive purchase; however, its relevance is argued for on the basis of the genealogical project, which frames ‘civility’ in terms of its relation to the “older” meaning of ‘religion,’ i.e., a relation at the same logical level. Selected secondary sources are cited to link classic and medieval uses of the distinction (2007a: 116), but there is a slippage here between first- and second-order concepts. *DCB* establishes a specific trajectory of emic usage as a basis for bootstrapping the distinction to the etic level. At the theoretical level just as at the substantive level, describing a trajectory of uses is not a good argument. The analytical purchase of a concept or distinction is warranted by either the prior issue of relation to an overarching theoretical framework or the posterior issue of analytical fruitfulness. The former is not present in any developed sense in *DCB*. The latter bears scant fruit, because, in the end, the book does little with the civility/barbarity distinction featured in its title and even less with the sacred/profane distinction (see Kellison, 2009, 374). The civility/barbarity distinction is said to have played an important role in colonialism, with its relevance likely ceasing in the nineteenth-century (2007a: 11, 54).

The Ubiquity of Ideology

We can now zero in on a core issue, one that will point toward a potential reinterpretation of *DCB*’s ideological critique. The book’s critical project is not fully integrated with its genealogical project. The historical work is used to diagnose ideological dimensions in ‘modern generic religion,’ supporting the book’s critical agenda. However, the book would have been stronger if this support were more symmetrical, i.e., if the historical analysis were more informed by ideological critique. Specifically, a more optimistic assessment of the value of ‘religion’ as a category emerges when we recognize that pre-modern ‘religion’ was equally, though differently, ideological.

DCB’s genealogical story is a fairly straightforward one, from medieval encompassing to modern, generic, privatized ‘religion’; but precisely here, in the relation between old and new, the basic tension becomes a dilemma. The relation of encompassing religion to privatized religion is described both as one between “two ideal ends of a spectrum” and as “a fully articulated paradigm shift” (2007b: 212, 2007a: 145, see 13, 15, 37, 75, 101, 186, 276). “Spectrum” implies continuity at a single logical level, movement along a spectrum of tokens of a single type, contingent changes in one or more characteristics of a single phenomenon. *DCB*’s genealogy is premised upon continuity in

the historical development of ‘religion’: there would be no point in spending so much time discussing ‘religion’ in historical texts if there were no path to trace from medieval to modern. “Paradigm shift,” on the other hand, raises the Kuhnian spectre of incommensurability, of no underlying commonality. This raises a crucial question: are old and new meanings of religion so radically different? If not, this would lead us to reconsider the import of both *DCB*’s genealogical and critical projects.

Fitzgerald states the core critique in revealing terms in the Introduction to his edited collection, *Religion and the Secular*. He describes the modern use of ‘religion’ as a “category mistake” (2007c: 9, 15). The characteristic error of contemporary scholars of religions consists in confusing the “objective” and the “ideological”: “authors reproduce and reconfirm a network of assumptions as though they constitute objective descriptions about what is, rather than ideological discourses” (2007c: 9). This is also *DCB*’s diagnosis of the malaise of ‘religion’ as used today.

Two issues arise here. First, errors can be corrected, leaving open the possibility that ‘religion’ maintains value as a third-order term, especially in light of the broader genealogical accounts mentioned above and in light of the explicit role of theory that I argue for below.

Second, the claim that the modern sense of ‘religion’ commits a category mistake has a corollary: that the older senses of ‘religion’ did not. Let us grant that the modern meaning of ‘religion’ is ideological: i.e., a misrecognized tissue of interested assumptions, as opposed to objective descriptions, that helps legitimize and maintain unequal social relations, especially in the contexts of colonialism and capitalism. This raises a crucial question: *were hierarchical medieval conceptions of encompassing religion any less ideological?* Fitzgerald describes “the older meaning” of ‘religion’ in passages like the following: “‘Religion’ and the ‘Commonweal’ are two different ways of talking about the same thing, which is the divine order of the world” (2007b: 224). This is presented in a descriptive mode, as part of the genealogical project (the way people thought back then); yet comparable descriptions of ‘modern generic religion’ are presented in normative terms, as part of the critical project (fundamentally wrong and demanding action). *DCB* recommends that modern ‘religion’ be avoided because it is ideological; but the intertwining of critique and genealogy produces an odd corollary: pre-modern ‘religion’ was innocuous because it manifested a form of meaning that was, in some sense less ideological and more objective (2007a: 24, 39; 2007c: 9).

The fact that modern ‘religion’ is arguably more ideological—because so many people, especially scholars of religion, exhibit the false consciousness of accepting the illusory, falsely reified meaning that *DCB* critiques—is a difference that makes no difference: ideology is ideology. It is one thing to hold that the modern view of religion—a discrete and privatized sector of social affairs, radically separate from politics—is a tissue of assumptions, a modern construction masquerading as an objective description. It is quite another to imply that medieval *religio*, as an encompassing hierarchy expressing the order of God’s will, was less ideological. It makes perfect sense to insist that ‘religion’ be studied in relation to ‘the secular’ given the ideological functions of their discursive opposition. However, it is misleading to contrast this with the recognition that, in its pre-modern usages,

Religion ... was usually contrasted not with 'the secular' ..., but with superstition. Superstition, however was not the opposite of Religion in the sense that the secular is the opposite of religion in today's usages. Superstition was error in 'religion' It was a state of irrationality and barbarity. (2007a: 171-172, see 53)

This is a straightforward claim insofar as it makes a relative contrast between this more integrated earlier view and the modern one (religion as an autonomous sphere, standing over against politics and the secular world). However, it is misleading in implying a sharp contrast, a paradigm shift. Specifically, it obscures the fact that, in both cases, 'religion' is one pole of a discursive opposition that has ideological, and hence political, implications. The opposition between 'religio(n)' and 'superstitio(n)' performed important ideological functions throughout the classical, medieval and early modern periods, above all refracting "the contrast between the politically legitimate and the illegitimate" (Benavides 1997: 313). In general, those who held the medieval encompassing view of '*religio*'—just as those who hold this same view of 'religion' today—were as guilty of a category mistake (to echo Fitzgerald's idiosyncratic use of the term¹¹) as those who hold the modern, generic view: they confused the objective and the ideological. The fact that 'religion' was opposed to 'superstition' then and to 'the secular' now is a separate issue.

DCB's ideological critique is valuable even granted some problems with the argument for it. The second lesson we learn from looking closely at these problems is that this critique can, and should, apply more broadly.

Reaffirming a Critical Study of Religion

DCB attacks the viability of religious studies as a discipline. Although this critique is less explicit than in Fitzgerald's earlier book, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000), it is inescapable. If we accept *DCB*'s argument, scholars of religion face a dilemma. The book's genealogical project illustrates the viability of a study of 'religion' as a category internal to the history of Christian intellectual culture. Its critical project argues that 'religion' as a generic category, a third-order term, has no substance: it is ideological and relational; it does not refer to an objectively existing domain; rather, it emerged as the shadow of 'the secular.' In conjunction, the two projects imply that scholars of religion have nothing to study (where 'religion' is understood as a general category for a distinct set of human phenomena). Those who study 'religion' *per se* investigate a first-order term and are properly historians of Christianity (or of European/British colonial thought). Those interested in contemporary, cross-cultural phenomena are properly political scientists, sociologists, etc., and they do not study religion *per se* (given that 'religion' does not function as a proper third-order term, picking out a distinct set of phenomena); rather they study the ideological functions of discursive oppositions, in which 'religion' plays a role in opposition to 'the secular,' 'the political,' 'the scientific,' etc.

In light of the problems with *DCB*'s argument, I suggest that this view is rooted in a false dichotomy. *DCB* presumes that either 'generic religion' refers to something objective, in which case the study of religion is viable, or it is ideological, in which case the study of religion is not viable. This is the basis of its view that if 'religion' does not pick out a distinct domain of objects, if it functions only as the occluded other of 'the secular,' then there is nothing to study apart from that discursive opposition itself.

The first step to seeing past this apparent dilemma is to note that *DCB*'s ideological critique should inform its genealogical analysis, exploring the extent to which pre-modern 'religion' was also ideological. To see the critique merely as something that follows from, or is made more plausible in light of, the genealogy misses an opportunity. Placing the two in more effective dialogue opens up the middle ground that shows the dichotomy to be false: we can agree in part with *DCB*'s critique—i.e., that 'generic religion' is ideological—without agreeing with the conclusion that this ideological function is all that there is to study. That is, 'religion' is ideological in the sense that it is often used this way, not in the sense that its meaning is identical or co-extensive with its ideological (ab)use. The study of religion (with 'religion' as a guiding third-order term) continues to be viable in light of the recognition that 'religion' is always an ideologically loaded term, always opposed to other categories.

Debates about the status of religious studies tend to get hung up in simplistic arguments over epistemic criteria (the two most important, and distinct, issues being whether the field has a genuine subject of study and whether it has a distinctive method). These discussions tend to be limited in two ways. First, the existence, autonomy and viability of an academic field do not depend solely on epistemic criteria: each also has distinct cultural and tribal, as well as institutional and organizational, aspects (Engler and Stausberg, forthcoming).¹² Second, these debates often implicitly assume a false epistemological dichotomy: either 'religion' (or 'the sacred' or 'the holy' etc.) must demarcate a distinct and objectively existing domain or there can be no field of study oriented to it. This dichotomy fails for two reasons. There are a host of middle-ground theoretical positions between naïve realism and radical constructionism: i.e., recognizing that 'religion,' as a third-order term, is a contingent, ideological construct does not prevent our using it in the study of religion (Engler, 2004, 2005). In addition, in general terms, the fact that what we say does not refer to independently existing objects does not make our statements false or meaningless.

To develop this latter point, there are many relevant lessons that religious studies has yet to learn adequately from philosophy. One is that we need to pay attention to pragmatic as well as referential uses of language: statements can be true because of what they help us achieve not just as a function of what they point to (Gardiner and Engler, 2010).¹³ Another lesson—according to holistic semantic theories, the most influential among theorists of religion working on these issues—is that meaning is not some 'thing' that inheres in words and sentences; it is found in the relations between those elements and the broad network of others to which they are connected in various ways (Engler and Gardiner, 2010). On this view, that is, we do not aim to uncover meaning, as if it were a real substrate laid bare through etymology and genealogy; we engage in a broad and contextualized exercise of interpreting various forms of intentional human behaviour (e.g., expressed beliefs, texts and rituals). It follows that there is no distinct domain of 'religious' meaning, no distinct 'religious' character or mode of being that is to be found in certain things and not others. Our choice to demarcate part of the web of meaning by using labels such as 'religious,' 'moral,' 'cultural,' 'political,' 'scientific' etc. is precisely that: a *choice* that can be analyzed in terms of its presuppositions, aims, allegiances and effects.¹⁴

Taking these various points to heart allows us to sidestep problems with *DCB*'s argument and to highlight a slightly different vision than the one it presents of the study

of religion as ideological critique. With holistic views of meaning in mind, we can move past the false dichotomy that ‘religion’ either refers to a distinct, objective domain (e.g., what have been called *sui generis* views¹⁵) or is purely an ideological construct of discursive oppositions (i.e., that ‘religion’ only makes sense when read in tandem with ‘the secular’). I agree wholeheartedly with *DCB*’s rejection of the former, but I disagree that the latter is the only alternative. Beyond this negative mode in which ‘religion’ is constructed (through discursive oppositions) there is also a positive mode (through discursive relations). This is obscured in *DCB* by the choice to approach the issue historically, which foregrounds the religion/secular distinction. Again, the way that the book’s genealogical and critical projects are intertwined closes the door on important critical possibilities.

Let me give an example of a middle-ground approach, in which ‘religion’ continues to have value as a generic term, even recognizing its inescapable ideological dimensions. *DCB*’s critique of relations between ‘religion’ and colonialism points out a direction to work with ‘religion’ as a generic category in cross-cultural studies. However—again placing too much weight on the view that origin and trajectory determine use—*DCB*’s post-colonial critique ends where it should begin: by pointing to the modern, western ideological dimensions of ‘religion.’ The issue that must be addressed here is less the particular western ideology of ‘religion’ than the processes of transmission, reception, appropriation, negotiation and resistance that lead to its having particular effects in particular contexts. ‘Religion’ demarcates a set of phenomena that must be analyzed not just through that concept’s relation/opposition to other western categories (the legacy of the colonial marginalization of the other) but also through tracing new linkages between that concept and indigenous categories. Anything less denies the agency of those who negotiate the category of ‘religion’ outside the largely European context that *DCB* describes. Recent critical work on the ‘translation’ of ‘religion’ and other western categories (e.g., Chakrabarty 2007; Mandair 2009) is a model of the kind of ideological critique that *DCB* recommends, but it also goes further by analyzing how ‘religion’ is refigured in these post-colonial semantic relations (through what Mandair calls a process of ‘co-figuration’ [2009: 90-92, 100, 150, 194]). *DCB*’s intertwined genealogical and critical projects are valuable where they point to the ideological and relational nature of ‘religion,’ but at other points they go too far in implying that ‘religion’ is *only* framed in opposition to certain modern, western categories. That is a key part of picture, but not the whole.

A hypothetical counter-argument here, in defence of *DCB*’s analysis, would note that, in the previous paragraph, I beg the question of how ‘religion’ is to be delimited at the start of such a study. It is fine to talk of comparing religious discourse to that of other conceptual domains, colonial or indigenous, but how does one delimit the ‘religious’ material to begin with? This is one thrust of *DCB*’s argument: if ‘religion’ does not refer to an objective domain, then the concept picks out nothing that can serve as an object of study. All that remains is to learn the genealogical lesson that ‘religion,’ as a generic category, means nothing more than ‘non-secular,’ ‘non-political,’ etc. ‘Religion’ only *seems* to denote a separate sphere because it labels part of a larger whole, only apparently distinct from its inseparable partner, ‘the secular.’ Where then do I propose to ground the non-objective generic sense of ‘religion’ that I claim still has validity?

The answer is to begin with a theory or definition of religion (arguably a non-essentialist one). This opening move marks a domain of ‘religion’ that allows one to begin tracing semantic relations within and across the boundaries of the contingently constructed domain that results. The work of defending a given theory or definition is, of course, a separate issue.

An example will be useful here. In my own work on religion in Brazil, I work with a contextualized prototype theory. Like Benson Saler (1993), I define as ‘religious’ whatever has a substantial subset of a list of characteristics (none necessary or sufficient in itself) that is developed on the basis of a set of prototypical examples. Unlike Saler, I do not take western monotheistic religions as prototypes; my prototypes are the three religions central to my fieldwork (popular Catholicism, Kardecist Spiritism, and Umbanda). The advantage of this approach is that it begins with a set of phenomena broadly recognized as religious, in a specific context, and by both scholars and non-scholars.¹⁶ (An additional theoretical and meta-theoretical advantage of this approach is that the choice to begin with non-standard prototypes provides a potentially valuable stance from which to reflect on the category of ‘religion.’) Given that we cannot ground ‘religion’ in some set of things that *are* objectively religious, it makes sense to ground it in things *said* to be religious. This is especially so when we see meaning in holistic terms.

What is important is not to argue for a specific theory of religion but to recognize the necessary place of *some* theory. This is the obvious middle ground between rejecting the idea that ‘religion’ refers to a distinct, objective domain and falling back to a position that the concept should only be studied in relation/opposition to ‘the secular’ and other such categories.

DCB does not explicitly theorize the issue of defining a generic concept of religion, but it effectively proposes a definition of ‘religion’ as, broadly, ‘non-secular.’ This results in a list of various characteristics: e.g., private, individualized, apolitical, non-scientific, etc. Ironically, this could serve as the basis for a middle ground approach. Even revealed as the ideological shadow of ‘the secular,’ ‘religion’ has substantive content. We could begin here to trace relations to other semantic domains. Granted that ‘religion’ came to have a certain generally accepted meaning—a contingent semantic domain—through certain historical relations to co-emergent conceptual domains, the fact remains that it *has* this set of meanings. That this range of meaning is not rooted in some fundamental ontological or semantic category does not change the fact that it has real effects in the world that are worth investigating.¹⁷ Religious talk and action mean what they mean *in relation* to other semantic areas, not just *in opposition* to certain historically related categories. *DCB*’s own definition offers a potential starting point for a broader range of studies than it proposes (i.e., studying ‘religion’ in relation to its modern, western ideological partners).

DCB’s emphasis on a narrow view of ideological critique, to the exclusion of other approaches, reflects two ways in which its critical project is related to its genealogical project. First, as noted above, the trajectory of historical uses is given too great a weight in constraining current theoretical options. Second, despite the fact that the spheres of ‘religion’ and ‘the secular’ are said to have emerged together, *DCB* makes religion the dependent variable. There is a materialist emphasis here, as in Fitzgerald’s earlier book: the fact that religion is hived off as an allegedly separate sphere is read in functional terms, as supporting capitalism and colonialism, which are presented as the

motors of this development. This is certainly an important part of the story, but one could argue the opposite. Mark Cauchi, for example, finds

the conceptual and cultural conditions or sources of modern secularization in the Abrahamic traditions (Yahwism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). ... The removal of God from the immediacy of the world enacted in Abrahamic monotheism is ... the possibility of a purely humanly-oriented world or a world-oriented world, a human, all-too-human world, and thus the possibility of the secular... (Cauchi 2009, 19, 22)

We could, of course, draw on other examples. For example, Charles Taylor's genealogy of relations between Christianity and 'secularization' in *A Secular Age* (2007) also frames the secular as more the shadow of religion than the reverse; and Arvind Mandair emphasizes "the ontotheological continuity between secularism and religion" (2009: xiii).¹⁸ If we clarify these views as arguing that Christianity (not religion) is the key historical factor, they would be consistent with the view that 'religion' and 'the secular' emerged jointly in modernity. The resulting emphasis would be on the religious side of that co-emergence, rather than on the material and secular side, as is the case with Fitzgerald. Such complementary perspectives highlight to a greater extent the value of defining and theorizing religion, even granted an inseparable relation to the secular domain. As Talal Asad notes, "Any discipline that seeks to understand 'religion' must also try to understand its other" (2003: 22). However, we should not abandon the category of 'religion' when it is far from obvious that it played merely a secondary or derivative role in historical relations with 'the secular' and 'secularism': e.g., the possibility that, "[o]nce its rational-legal mask is removed ... the modern state will reveal itself to be far from secular" (Asad 2003: 22-23).

This section has argued, *in a sense*, that business as usual is a viable alternative for the academic study of religion, despite *DCB*'s argument to the contrary. *DCB* proposes a false dichotomy for scholars of religion: accept either an untenable essentialist view of 'religion' or the book's vision of ideological critique, i.e., interrogating 'religion' only in relation to 'the secular.' I argued that the book does not rule out a broad range of middle-ground positions (theorizing or defining 'religion' as a first step in exploring that categories' contingent, even ideological, relations to other domains). I say "in a sense" because *DCB* succeeds very well in reminding us that critical attention to theory and ideology is necessary. Proceeding on the basis of naïve adherence to implicit essentialist theories is irresponsible at best.¹⁹

Religious Studies as Ideological Critique

This section seeks to develop *DCB*'s argument for paying attention to 'religion' as an ideological category. That is, I suggest that Fitzgerald has paid a signal service to the field in pointing a way toward an important path beyond business as usual. The book's core claim—that 'religion' is ideological—does make a difference, but it is a different difference than the one asserted: it provides not a reason to avoid the category of 'religion' but a call for scholars of religion to do their job more critically and reflexively. Forms of ideological distortion differ, e.g., between the pre-modern

‘religion/superstition’ and modern ‘religious/secular’ distinctions. The challenge of making sense of how ‘religion’ works in each case remains the same. The ideological dimensions of a historical concept are easier to hold at arm’s length, and those of a current one are more difficult to critique; but this just underlines the need for greater critical acumen—and better training in the art of critique—in the academic study of religion.

The confusion between old ideology and new arises in part because *DCB* collapses several distinct aspects of current uses of ‘religion’ (modern, private, generic, apolitical, non-scientific, non-secular) into a somewhat amorphous conception, in order to argue that this usage is ideological. This contextualization is precisely what is lacking in *DCB*’s analysis of “the older meaning”: the ideological dimension of medieval *religio* as hierarchical and encompassing is obscured because the historical work is subservient to, rather than informed by, the critique.

Fitzgerald’s ambivalent relation to Louis Dumont illustrates this well, and it also suggests a way forward. He states that he has “been considerably influenced by Louis Dumont’s thinking,” though his “own general position does not concur with his in every respect” (2007a: 314).²⁰ He closely echoes Dumont in filling out the relevant sense of ‘encompassing,’ the key technical term borrowed from the French thinker:

[the] encompassing religion ... model of religion is hierarchical, and all things that exist have their proper place and function within the teleological whole. Individual persons exist in so far as they find their proper subordinate place in this context of hierarchical relationships. (Fitzgerald, 2007b: 234-35)

DCB links the emergence of modern, privatized religion to the increasing importance of individualism: its “story is about the development of modernity as a new all-embracing paradigm underpinned by ‘secularisation’, the privatization of religion, individualism, and the rise of capitalism in the context of colonialism” (2007a: 13, see 20, 38, 85-6, 102, 108, 140). With reference to nineteenth-century Britain, for example, we read that “insofar as an ideology of individualism and economic class existed ... it was still subordinated to an encompassing hierarchical ideology until quite recently” (2007a: 103).

For Dumont, however, this hierarchical conception of encompassment characterizes holistic societies, his case being Hindu India, not individualistic European societies. When Fitzgerald points to “the early stirring of modern individualism” in a sixteenth-century English text, this stands in sharp tension with Dumont’s argument that individualism has its roots in early Christianity (Fitzgerald, 2007a: 192; Dumont, 1981, 1982). Dumont’s story is one of east vs. west, and Fitzgerald’s is one of medieval/early modern west vs. modern west. Given the core appeals to ‘encompassment,’ ‘hierarchy’ and ‘individualism’ in both analyses, we must conclude that these concepts are used in different ways, but the nature of the divergence remains unclear. Crucially for *DCB*’s project, the equation of encompassing religion and the practice of civility is not sufficiently clear. The analysis would likely have been better off sticking closer to Dumont, whose analysis of ‘religion,’ religion and the study of religion has many more points of resonance than Fitzgerald acknowledges. For Dumont (as in a sense also for Durkheim), individualism is the characteristic ideology of the west, and the category of ‘religion’ is distorted by our failure to recognize this. Arguably, taking Dumont more

seriously would lead us to rethink the study of religion as the project of studying the nature and impact of such encompassing values as individualism in the modern world (Strenski, 1989).

Realigned or revised, Fitzgerald's work, as a whole, converges on a more general critique of ideology. I mean by this not a hermeneutics of suspicion, uncovering the hidden and pernicious meanings of concepts of 'religion' and 'the secular.' Nor do I mean "ideological critique" as Ivan Strenski defines it (2004: 271): "delving into the biographical, religious and ideological presuppositions shaping the theories of leading thinkers in the study of religion for the purpose of understanding those theories and bringing them to the bar of criticism"; though this is part of a broader engagement with ideology. I mean something much more like what Strenski himself proposed in a 1989 article on Louis Dumont: "we ought to study those things which share a common *function* with religion, properly understood ... [i.e.,] the encompassing values—those norms that establish the hierarchies by which our social life is ordered in a general and serious way" (1989: 28, original emphasis). The key to drawing this sort of vision of the field from *DCB* is to explore the middle ground that it denies: between 'religion' as referring to a distinct, objective domain (a view it rightly rejects) and 'religion' as only making sense in relation to opposing categories, above all 'the secular' (the view that it recommends as the only available alternative).

I believe that an approach along these lines emerges from *DCB*, once we correct for the distorting relation between its two projects. It reminds us that we cannot take for granted that religion is distinct from (or has any other predetermined relation to) politics, economics, and other spheres that are held to be autonomous in modernity. With genealogical and critical projects in more effective alignment, *DCB* models an approach where properly critical study begins with a contingently and strategically theorized domain of 'religion' and explores its relation to other domains—not only 'the secular.' On this view, most *sui generis*, essentialist and other definitions are limiting precisely because they accept as a premise that religion has no links to other 'separate' domains. If we *begin* with such hidebound and parochial preconceptions of what religion is—limiting it by fiat to a predetermined domain—then we rule out from the start the possibility of discovering valuable connections beyond these bounds. One of *DCB*'s most important contributions, notwithstanding some of its own claims, is to point out the value, and the intellectual probity, of walking this path.

Conclusion

DCB's analysis is hampered by a problematic relation between its two distinct goals: tracing part of the western history of 'religion'; and criticizing the way that this concept is used today. For this reason, the book has not convinced me of its key claims: (i) that classical, medieval, and early modern conceptions of 'religion' and related concepts were radically different from modern ones; (ii) that the generic category of 'religion' has no value for humanist and social scientific studies today and, as a result, that "the proper study of 'religion' is the category itself in its discursive relationship to 'state,' 'politics,' 'secular,' 'sacred,' 'profane,' 'civility,' and 'barbarity'" (2007a: 312).

Regarding the first point, *DCB* offers an important analysis of the conditions under which a generic conception of religion became prevalent in the modern west.

However, a broader review of genealogical work suggests that this development was neither uniquely modern nor uniquely western; and a broader review of current uses of 'religion' make two things clear. First, the 'old' encompassing view of religion continues alive and well in the world today. Second, many scholars are doing important critical work with the category of 'religion.' Given that pre-modern 'encompassing religion' was, in its way, just as ideological as 'modern generic religion,' and that it also functioned through conceptual oppositions, *DCB*'s suggestion that we *turn to* ideological critique obscures the fact that much critical scholarship on 'religion,' past and present, is already there.

Regarding the second point, *DCB* imposes a false dichotomy: either 'religion' refers to some distinct, objective domain or the category is empty of any content worthy of study, apart from its ideological opposition to other modern, western categories. These are both valuable points, but I argue that there is an important middle ground between them. In effect, this is where most work in religious studies takes place. 'Religion' continues to be a category of great value, not because it is rooted in some objective domain, but because it does real work through its relations with a wide variety of other concepts, in various domains of discourse. The key to taking up this middle ground critically and reflexively is to recognize that our use of 'religion' as a generic category is always contingent and ideological.

I suggested three implications of this view. First, theory and meta-theory of religion are crucial for establishing initial concepts of 'religion' and 'religious' on which studies must be based. Second, religious studies needs to foster a greater degree of critical skills and self-awareness, in both research and training. Third, and here *DCB* stands as an extremely valuable model, recognizing the contingent and ideological nature of 'religion' as a category prompts us to rethink religious studies in a more critical light.

Having added his voice to those that remind us of the need to be more critically conscious of our categories, Fitzgerald highlights the value of reframing religious studies, in part, as ideological critique. *DCB* focuses on aspects of the particular ideological role of 'religion' in modernity, especially its links to colonialism and capitalism. Generalizing beyond this important set of themes, it offers a valuable model of a critical approach to the study of religion. This is a salutary program and one that should be taken very seriously by scholars of religion. Fitzgerald's story is an extremely important one, even though, in my view, he seems to draw the wrong moral from it: he seems to want to abandon 'religion' and religious studies, rather than leading a charge on the bastion of theoretical complacency that towers over the field. One warrant of *DCB*'s value is that a vibrant sense of the latter project can be whittled from it, at times against its grain.

In the end, I hope that some readers, at least, conclude that my diagnosis of the malaise of religious studies (a lack of critical and theoretically-informed framing of research) and my prescription for its cure (heads-up use of theory and meta-theory and, in certain contexts, ideological critique) is ultimately not that different from Fitzgerald's own vision.²¹ Other readers might conclude that the conception of critique that I argue for is no longer *DCB*'s. It would be nice to think that I am being so original. However, we generate our ideas always in dialogue with those of our colleagues. A certain line of thought may well have been prompted by reading Dumont (and Strenski on Dumont); it has certainly been fine-tuned by reading Fitzgerald, among others. In continuing to think through these issues, I found *DCB* to be one of the most instigating and valuable

conversation partners that I have read. Its value was greater because I was forced to think long and hard about where it went wrong, in order to learn from where it is very right.

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¹ I would like to thank Francis Landy and *SR*'s two anonymous reviewers for their comments, suggestions and corrections, as well as Bryan Rennie, Michael Stausberg, Gustavo Benavides, Mark Gardiner and Kocku von Stuckrad for helpful critical comments on previous drafts. Throughout this work, I use single and double quotes to mark use and mention respectively: e.g., religion, with no quotes, marks my direct use of the term; 'religion' draws attention to the use or definition of that term; and "religion" indicates that I am quoting someone's use of the term. Single quotes are also used for quotations within quotations.

² The following citations from published reviews illustrate the ambivalence. I present them in order to underline that my ultimate assessment of the book is more positive and productive. "The topical inferences Fitzgerald draws from his study are sometimes weak"; the "book is annoyingly repetitive"; and it "gives no attention to the possibility of cumulative or replicable knowledge"; at the same time, it is "stimulating" and its "chapters leave a strong impression and should sensitize any reader of anglophone historical texts on religion to the risks of anachronistic and ideologically loaded assumptions" (Benthall, 2009). *DCB* "ignores or misreads ... [the] Platonic (i.e., historical) ground" of its core distinction, because it "pays no attention to recent work done on the social and cultural impact of philosophy"; at the same time, its thesis is "not overly contentious" (Hughes, 2008). "It never seems to occur to Fitzgerald that significant change in semantic context need not be paired with a change in reference, let alone the creation of illusion"; at the same time, "It is to be hoped that the community of historians will give ... [its] thesis close attention" (Godlove, 2010). *DCB* lacks the necessary "textual dexterity" for its subject; its approach is "scattershot" and characterized by "idiosyncrasy of documentation"; the reader "has to squint to see what Fitzgerald sees"; "Telling us that we are using something uselessly *is* potentially productive. Doing so with such resistance to its realities of practice is not very disciplined, nor ... terribly revolutionary"; at the same time, "At its most successful, this book offers a history of religion in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England" (Lofton, 2009; original emphasis). "There are several problems with Fitzgerald's argument about" the civility/barbarity distinction; "the book seems to lack clear organization and continuity"; at the same time, "Fitzgerald presents at least two helpful arguments.... [:] that separate domains of "religion" and "the secular" were invented in a very particular time and cultural context[; and] ... that the colonial project was aided by a certain discursive strategy.... Awareness of each of these arguments is certainly helpful to the scholar of religion.... However, both of these arguments have also been made before.... It is clear that Fitzgerald *wants* to do something new in this book, illuminating the connection between these two historical processes. Unfortunately, in this work, he has yet to convincingly describe the nature of this relationship" (Kellison, 2009: 370, 362, 377).

³ Fitzgerald notes that, squeezed between other demands and a looming deadline—and without a hoped-for sabbatical—he did not have time to produce the book that he would have wished: he saw fit to "beg some indulgence" in this regard (2007a: viii). His candour on this point underlines the value of working critically past the book's weaknesses in order to bring its strengths into clearer focus. In addition to *DCB*, I draw also on two other texts in which Fitzgerald developed the same arguments (2007b, 2007c), effectively treating these as part of the same analysis. At points, my references to "*DCB*" have this broader sense.

⁴ Ideology has both epistemological and political dimensions, the former often a category mistake and the latter related to domination (Faber 2004). Throughout this essay, I work with the following definition (influenced by Gramsci). Ideology is a belief or system of beliefs with three characteristics: (i) it is held by members of one or more social groups to be true in a manner that is obvious, natural, real, legitimate,

and/or divinely sanctioned, etc.; (ii) from the perspective of critics, it is false, logically inconsistent, conceptually confused or otherwise offers a mistaken view of reality; and (iii) belief in its truth plays a role in establishing and/or maintaining unequal material relations between social groups. On the one hand, point (ii) begs the question of the grounds upon which one group can judge the views of another to be ‘mistaken.’ On the other hand, though ideology need not be false, but the issue of truth is less central than that of political function: “An ideology is ... not necessarily ‘false’ ... since what really matters is not the asserted content as such but *the way this content is related to the subjective position implied by its own process of enunciation*. We are within ideological space proper the moment this content ... is functional with regard to some relation of social domination ... in an inherently non-transparent way: *the very logic of legitimizing the relation of domination must remain concealed if it is to be effective*” (Žižek 1994: 8, original emphasis).

⁵ Fitzgerald’s stance seems, at times, to be a case of what Michael Stausberg calls ‘reverse-*sui-generis* rhetoric’: ‘When one tacitly talks about religion as if it were an inherently more problematic concept than others, indeed an anomalous one, one therefore tacitly claims that religion is unique while on the surface denying such a claim. ... [T]he logical implication must be that religion is inherently different from all other categories, because it is clear that *all* concepts used in academic language are constructed, contextualized, fabricated, invented, selective, part of schemes of classification, and what else. Furthermore, all concepts ... that operate on a similar level of abstraction are to a greater or lesser extent ‘contaminated’ by their entanglement in political and other social processes. Religion is not different in this respect’ (Stausberg 2010: 364-365).

⁶ Even granted the prominence of the particular conception of ‘religion’ that *DCB* critiques, it is not shown to be as universal as the argument would seem to require. A more rigorous analysis of work in the field is needed to substantiate the claim that this particular view of ‘religion’ is so dominant that the concept should be abandoned entirely. Minimally, it would seem essential to review the relevant literature in English, French, German and Italian in constructing a critique that goes beyond its putative topic of “English-language concepts” in order to take issue with an “assumption ... embedded in the writing of perhaps the majority of scholars in religious studies and more widely,” one that “permeates the humanities and social sciences,” and in order to diagnose fundamental problems with “an academic discipline called religious studies or the science of religion,” further extending this critique “across the humanities” and even to “the contemporary rhetoric of academics, politicians, community leaders, corporate bosses and the media” (2007a: 43, 4-5, 2007c: 5, 2007b: 214, 36; see Benthall 2009: 666).

⁷ Benavides pointed this out in discussion and kindly supplied a copy of the chapter.

⁸ Reviewers further underline *DCB*’s reliance on secondary sources (Hughes 2008; Lofton 2009).

⁹ Fitzgerald uses ‘heuristic’ to mean the following: “which we use at our leisure to make our own meanings”; “which we can choose or not to use for organizing our data”; “neutral ... uses, as though they are merely one useful way of organizing scholarly data”; “as though it is merely available for the scholar’s personal decision as to what it will mean” (2007a: 39, 44, 47, 66-67). Several distinct critiques are blended here. His critique of *arbitrary* and *personal* uses of categories is valuable. The critique of *neutral* uses as “merely” a conceptual tool presumably recues to his argument that it is an ideological category with deep interrelations to ‘the secular.’ On the other hand, the usual sense of ‘heuristic’—an experience-based problem solving technique—could indicate a valuable strategic use of ‘religion’ as a suitably critical category. In addition, heuristic research design—an exploratory, open-ended, self-directed, experiential methodology that emphasizes tacit knowledge and intuition—would arguably be suited for work on some religious themes, though open to epistemological critiques.

¹⁰ It is possible to imagine a pragmatic argument to the same conclusion: e.g., experience teaches us that scholars of religion—not to mention non-scholars—are so caught up in the ideological discourses of ‘religion’ that they would be unable to critically rethink its usage in sufficient number to salvage the concept. In the first place, that is a separate argument than the one that *DCB* makes. In the second place, the same argument counts against the likelihood of the religious studies (or any other) community taking up any recommendation to drop the term ‘religion.’

¹¹ Gilbert Ryle’s famous example—as he coined the term in the first chapter of *The Concept of Mind* (1949)—is of a visitor to Oxford who asks, after being shown all the buildings on campus, “But where is the university?” Fitzgerald’s use of ‘category mistake’ is not technically correct: the distinction between “objective descriptions” and “ideological discourses” is not a categorical one (nor is that between “multivalent terms” and “simplistic” uses of them) (2007c: 9, 15). There may be an epistemological issue (believing to be true that which is false), but this is not a category mistake. This lack of precision does not

undermine the point, but it does underline the neglect of ideological dimensions of pre-modern uses of 'religion.' Arguably, *DCB* itself commits an inverted form of the same error by treating pre-modern and modern conceptions of 'religion' as distinct, only the latter being ideological. In fact, they differ not in that sense but in three others: in terms of one being more clearly a generic term; in terms of the particular concepts to which 'religion' stands opposed; and in terms of the theoretical and methodological challenge that they present (it being harder to critique the ideological underpinnings of one's own historical and social location). *DCB*'s argument could be elaborated here by clarifying contemporary confusions between religions, 'religions,' 'religion,' 'theories of religion(s)' 'meta-theories of religion(s)' etc.: on these issues, the religious studies literature offers many examples of genuine category mistakes.

¹² The relevant portions of the joint article were written by Stausberg.

¹³ The study of religion continues to suffer great confusion from naïve readings of the map-territory metaphor as a model for how we talk about our subject matter (Gardiner and Engler, 2010).

¹⁴ "Semantic holism explicates meaning by reference to positions or roles in a vast web of interconnected points whose portions do not admit of discrete dissection. Understanding the claim that Yahweh called to Moses from a burning bush blends items from traditionally different subject matters, e.g., Jewish scriptural tradition, botany, and pyrogenics. The meaning of each those nodes is given by relation to still others, and so on.... To assert that the subject matter of this claim is specifically *religious* indicates one's basic focus or interest on some subset of the semantic network, but it does not identify some fundamental semantic or ontological category." (Engler and Gardiner, 2010: 281)

¹⁵ This is, of course, only a sub-set of 'sui generis' views. Such views of 'religion' hold that religion can be characterized in non-reducible terms. These might be to a specific type of referent (i.e., the existence of a distinct, objective domain), but may also refer to, for example, a distinct category of behaviour. For more on the relative place of sui generis views of religion see Engler (2004).

¹⁶ This is not to suggest that this starting point offers an objective or definitive definition of 'religion.' It offers a point of entry into the ongoing, recursive and contingent project of generating a list of putative characteristics of 'religion' and checking these against both data on the field and relevant theoretical issues. My theoretical choice to take both scholarly and non-scholarly views into account is based on a view that (for semantic reasons) there can be no distinctly 'religious' type of meaning and no radically different types of theories regarding religion (Engler and Gardiner 2010). My point is that agreeing with *DCB* that 'religion' has no essential referent is not a reason to walk away from the concept; it is a challenge to roll up our sleeves and dive into the messy business of staking out a position, one that does justice both to the context of our specific subject matter and to our own cultural and disciplinary location. As Kocku von Stuckrad notes, "definitions of and approaches to religion are intrinsically—even if not entirely—linked to the episteme and the discourse of the time which form parameters of research that we are often enough not even aware of, but that significantly limit and influence our theories. ... Our object of study is the way religion is organized, discussed, and discursively materialized in cultural and social contexts. 'Religion,' in this approach, is an empty signifier that can be filled with many different meanings, depending on the use of the word in a given society and context" (2010: 158, 166).

¹⁷ In other words, the way 'religion' is used matters, even granted that it is a mistake to reify the distinction between 'religious' and 'non-religious' as one of subject matter (i.e., that religious beliefs are *about* some distinct sort of domain or things). This (mistaken) reification is generally either ontological (there is an ontological or categorical difference between the objects of religious and non-religious beliefs) or linguistic (the type of meaning attached to religious belief is different from that attached to non-religious belief). Ontological attempts may be sui generis (there is a fundamental and irreducible difference between the objects of religious and non-religious belief) or reductive (the objects of religious belief reduce to those of non-religious belief as in cognitive theories of religion, or arguably vice versa). Linguistic views take a variety of forms, generally correlating 'religious/non-religious' with various semantic distinctions, e.g., mystical/ordinary meaning, metaphorical/literal meaning, sacred/mundane meaning, evocative/assertoric meaning, etc. [These clarifications stem from my joint work with Mark Q. Gardiner, e.g., Gardiner and Engler (2010); Engler and Gardiner (2010).]

¹⁸ More is going on in these examples than a rehearsal of Weberian ideas of rationalization as disenchantment, and even more so from the secularization debates. However, even here, it would be possible to suggest that these processes inform the emergence of the joint categories of 'religion' and 'the secular' in modernity.

¹⁹ At the same time, it is quite difficult to find any scholar of religion who actually adheres to the sort of easily critiqued essentialist view of religion that is often misleadingly labelled 'sui generis' (see Engler 2004: 306-309). Such views are more common in theology, of course.

²⁰ For a valuable introduction to Dumont's work as related to the study of religion, see Strenski, 2008.

²¹ Though this essay has focused on theoretical and meta-theoretical issues, I would add that a more heads-up and well-informed approach to method is also a crucial need in the field (see Stausberg and Engler 2011).