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REGIONALISM OR PROVINCIALISM?  
THEOLOGY AND THE SEEMINGLY CONTINUAL CRISIS  
IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Being part of an international discipline while located at the physical and cultural margins creates a certain perspective. It is this context, in its geographical, intellectual and institutional variations, that inform my discussion on what, for many, could be terms seemingly interchangeable and innocuous. Yet these terms sit central to the seemingly continual crisis in Religious Studies, a crisis I argue arises from the discipline's 'problem' with theology. My interest in the use of 'regional' and 'provincial' is perhaps more acute than most for I write from the antipodean outposts of cultural and religious theory, from the second-most-southern Religious Studies programme in the world<sup>1</sup>: a tiny but resilient programme of two staff who have recently relocated from originally within - and more recently alongside - an analytic philosophy department, into a new mega-school (relatively speaking) of Social and Political Sciences. In effect this move involves a shift from a location in the humanities which saw religion as an illusion, to a social science location that tends to view religion as just another subset of larger disciplines. The reality is that both contexts see religion as something modernity (and modern people) really should have left behind<sup>2</sup>.

On a national scale, New Zealand is an intriguing place to study religion and teach Religious Studies (the difference between these two activities is a familiar

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<sup>1</sup> Only the programme at the University of Otago in Dunedin is further south. Like us at Canterbury, they are small (2.5 staff) but unlike us they are located alongside a school of theology primarily Protestant neo-orthodox in orientation. In fact, in the whole of New Zealand there is only 15 staff teaching Religious Studies full-time, spread amongst 5 universities. Of these, 8 staff members are located in the largest programme at Victoria University of Wellington.

<sup>2</sup> See Mike Grimshaw, "Notes toward a Loos-ian Theory of Religion in Modernity," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 17.4 (2005), 382-392.

tension for our discipline) in that at the latest census (2006) around half the total population of four million stated that they either had 'no religion' or 'declined to state' any religious identity.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, New Zealand, while never having professed or legislated a state religion, has recently adopted a politically-driven Statement of Religious Diversity administered at a national level by the Department of Ethnic Affairs. Such a location makes clear that in a culture of indifferent secularity, religion is primarily regarded as an ethnic issue: a cultural activity predominantly undertaken either by non-European immigrants [statistics code for non-white] which includes Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh populations as well as 'non-white' Protestants and Catholics, the indigenous Maori population [incorporating Protestants, Catholics, Mormons, forms of Maori Christianity<sup>4</sup> and traditional beliefs and practices] and the large Pacific Island population [Protestant, Catholic and Mormon] who have been a significant part of New Zealand urban life since the 1960s. In such a context scholars of religion become attuned to rich ironies. Theology is only studied in two state universities (Otago in the South Island and Auckland in the North)<sup>5</sup>, both emerging from, and strongly linked into, seminary and confessional traditions that are, within the wider secularity of New Zealand life and society, primarily theologically sectarian and socially conservative. In short this country is the embodiment of one particular modern future for most who study religion and teach Religious Studies. It is a modern society *after* religion [at the very least after 'Christian society' and 'Christian culture'], a society of increasing indifference to religion and yet also experiencing a growth in a sectarian, religiously and socially conservative rump. While the non-religious continue to grow, those who do express a religious identity now primarily identify with the more evangelical and Pentecostal forms of Christianity and also, with a resurgent, conservative Catholicism<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, half of the population of four

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<sup>3</sup> See William Hoverd, "No Longer a Christian Country? - Religious Demographic Change in New Zealand 1966-2006," *New Zealand Sociology* 23.1 (2008), 41-65.

<sup>4</sup> The two most prominent being the Ratana and Ringatu Churches; the former associated with the Twentieth Century prophet Wiremu Ratana and the latter with the Nineteenth Century chief and prophet Te Kooti. Running through Maori society is the concept of *Wairua* (spirit) which enables a complex syncretism to exist up to the highest levels of Maori Christianity. *Wairua* is linked to tribal history and tribal land, Maori identifying themselves collectively as *tangata whenua* or people of the land. In latter years European New Zealanders have also attempted (to various degrees of success) to incorporate and appropriate claims of *Wairua* and identification with the land. For a recent discussion on contemporary New Zealand spiritual identity see the essays and poems collected in the longest-running New Zealand literary-cultural journal, *Landfall*:

*Landfall* 215 (May 2008): Waiting for Godzone [ed. Paul Morris & Mike Grimshaw].

<sup>5</sup> There are only state universities in New Zealand. Theology is studied in seminaries, or more predominantly in what are termed Bible colleges which are non-denominational, protestant evangelical and fundamentalist in focus and theology.

<sup>6</sup> The rapid decline in the once-dominant Protestant denominations means that there is a distinct possibility that within a decade Catholicism will be the dominant religious identity in New Zealand. As Protestant identification has continued to decline over the past century, Catholicism has remained remarkably stable, hovering around 14% of the population.

million who signalled a religious identity in the last census did so within 123 different religious identities. This may be post-modern pluralism, yet done so within a wider modernist 'end of religion'.

In such a context we look to the rest of the world with interest, for what may seem to be 'religion' in a general sense (I won't go so far as to suggest a disciplinary sense) appears deeply problematic. How do we negotiate that path between students wanting the anthropological 'human zoo' tour of religious exotica on the one hand and those who want their beliefs and prejudices confirmed on the other? This occurs in a wider academic context when every other discipline, in an environment of budget stringency and competition for students, seems to both want to claim religion as part of their operations and limit the wider role of Religious Studies (and 'Studies' themselves) as a separate discipline. Here the crisis is not only that of disciplinary identity, it is often that of disciplinary survival and the continual negotiation that religion is something worthy of serious academic study and analysis in the late-modern world; especially religion that is not expressed or believed in by ethnic, exotic or sectarian communities and studied as either a type of anthropology or 'Western ghetto' studies. Furthermore, while Religious Studies in New Zealand may have arisen out of the influence of British Religious Studies, primarily that of Ninian Smart, over the past decade we have turned more to North America, both as a source of staff and also as a source of theory and analysis. One of the infamous *bon-mots* of the cultural historian Griel Marcus (via Leslie Fiedler) is that in a world of American popular culture 'we are all imaginary Americans'<sup>7</sup>; this I believe may also be true of the late-modern scholar, such is the range, impact and influence of the American academic system. While it has become a cliché to describe and disparage the United States as the contemporary Roman Empire, such an analysis makes a certain ironic sense out and down here on the miggins. We may have once been Greek (British) and that remains, but the overlay of *pax Americana* (Rome) is strong and we exist between Greek and Rome; perhaps Greek in our hearts but increasingly *Americana* in our minds, desires and wallets. In such moments we not only look to the 'centre' but also reflect upon it from a secular, Twenty-First century perspective. In this context, we become well aware of what being marginal means, a marginality existing in a variety of experiences: geographical, academic, cultural and societal. Yet such a marginal existence also can make one attuned to the wider debates in different ways and especially to the theoretical varieties, possibilities and implications that stir our discipline. For to think and not just report, to critically engage and not just endorse, to continually have to express and re-express the intellectual, academic and theoretical value of a subject and discipline can result in a critical reassessment of the field, from afar.

So it was one of those little ironies to discover that a Canadian scholar writing from a university in a southern American state would willingly use the term "provincial" to describe their situation and relationship to a perceived centre.

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<sup>7</sup> See Griel Marcus, *Double Trouble: Bill Clinton and Elvis Presley in a Land of No Alternatives* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000).

The irony occurs because as any student of literary and cultural criticism should be aware, for the last 60 years “provincial” is a term no self-respecting southern-based writer or critic would willingly self-employ. At the heart of this irony lies that issue of the seemingly continual crisis of Religious Studies. To be more specific, over the past 20 years (at the very least), there has arisen a crisis of identity, focus, theory and method in Religious Studies. This crisis, which could be termed ontological, is especially so in that section of our discipline as it exists in its modern, non-continental European form. That is, most Religious Studies in a North American, British and Australasian context – and scholars who, having trained in those areas, have either returned to, or relocated to Africa and Asia. In short, this is three-quarters of the known academic world of our discipline. Influenced primarily, either directly or indirectly, by the Chicago School’s study of religion, this means most Religious Studies scholars participate within that form of our discipline which has really only been in existence for 60 years. My argument is that as scholars we are in the comfortable habit of making ourselves and our discipline provincial. The need for the careful designation of ‘modern, non-continental European’ is itself part of the issue and exposes the central issue of the limitations of provincialism. For it is increasingly apparent that this provincial limitation seems to be especially occurring in Religious Studies in the English speaking world – even within those who study religion in the tradition and legacy of *religionwissenschaft*. Of course not all provincialisms are the same, but the New Provincialism, albeit 60 years old, exposes a series of provincial attitudes within the study of religion that must, I argue, be overcome.

Over the last decade in particular, the relocated Canadian academic Russell McCutcheon has waged a provocative and stimulating battle against the influence and legacy of the Chicago School’s approach to the study of religion. McCutcheon is a proud outsider, a Canadian, trained at Toronto who served his time in universities in the southern American states and now is Chair of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. What acted as provocation for this essay was not his continual challenge to the Chicago School (a challenge with which I am in broad sympathy) but rather how, in *The Discipline of Religion* (2003) he categorizes his position as “an extended letter from a provincial.”<sup>8</sup> My discussion begins with the question of whether ‘provincial’ is necessarily the proper self-designation, coupled with whether McCutcheon unwittingly exposes a wider issue at the heart of Religious Studies regarding its own unwitting provincialism? For provincialism, in literary and cultural criticism, has a particular limitation attached to it, a limitation that was contrasted and found wanting to regionalism.

In 1945 the Southern poet and critic Allen Tate published an essay entitled “The New Provincialism.”<sup>9</sup> An analysis arising out of the experience of the limitations encountered in the extension of mid-century modernity in both a local and

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<sup>8</sup> R. McCutcheon, *The Discipline of Religion*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2003): xvi.

<sup>9</sup> A. Tate “The New Provincialism,” 282-293 in A. Tate *Collected Essays* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1959). [orig. *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 1943].

international context, under discussion was the central issue of uniformity or difference and the question of “locality in the sense of local continuity in tradition and belief.”<sup>10</sup> Tate, a Southern agrarian writing from Mississippi is no romantic unaware of the limitations of un-reflexive regionalism. Yet his concern is specifically focused on the rise of an uncritical acceptance of what he termed a ‘New Provincialism’. For Tate, regionalism and provincialism exist in dialectic, but a dialectic wherein the ‘New Provincialism’ acts to negate regionalism. In Tate’s conception, the regional approach is a particular consciousness in a given locality influenced by thought and conduct handed from their ancestors. As Tate noted, “regionalism is thus limited in space but not in time.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast, to become provincial is to be “limited in time but not in space.”<sup>12</sup> Provincialism, for Tate, is what occurs when the regionalist, in ignorance, albeit “admittedly an intensive and creative ignorance, of the world, extends... [their]...own immediate necessities into the world, and assumes the present moment is unique.” Therefore, to be provincial is to cut oneself “off from the past, and without the benefit of the fund of traditional wisdom”. The result is that the provincial approach responds to “the simplest problems of life as if nobody had ever heard of them before.”<sup>13</sup> While, traditionally, regionalism and provincialism had existed in a productive dialectic, operating as critique and challenge to the other, Tate’s concern was that modern “industrial capitalism has given us provincialism without regionalism”<sup>14</sup>.

The challenge of Tate for Religious Studies is precisely because we have become a discipline of ‘provincialism without regionalism’; a situation whereby one of the most provocative and insightful critics of academic provincialism can self-designate his own dissent as that of a ‘provincial’ and so lay it open to an all-too-easy dismissal. For provincialism has another implied designation, that of orientating oneself around a centre perceived as more real and authoritative than where one is. The provincial therefore also takes the perceived self-limitation as normative, a situation that, because of its denial of history and origin, seeks to often become purely descriptive.

Tate’s next point sits at the ‘centre’ of the issue of Religious Studies as a provincial practice, an issue that, I will argue, needs to be overcome so Religious Studies can move past its seemingly perpetual disciplinary crisis. The problem of regionalism and culture is described as:

...regionalism without civilisation - which means, with us, regionalism without the classical-Christian culture - becomes provincialism; and world regionalism becomes world provincialism. For provincialism is that state of mind in which

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 287.

regional men lose their origins in the past and its continuity into the present, and begin every day as if there had been no yesterday.<sup>15</sup>

In what I admit is a deliberately provocative emphasis, the problem is that Religious Studies has become provincial at the expense of the self-reflexivity regionalism demands. For Religious Studies is at heart a regional practice, arising out of the dialectic of Western Judeo-Christian culture and the Enlightenment. The New Provincialism, especially of the past 20 years, wants to make 'the study of religion' a provincialism of the intellect, wishing to claim a new universalist non-origin without the recognition that Religious Studies, and in fact the idea of religion itself, arises as a modernist undertaking. Part of this recognition involves the necessity of religion for the Enlightenment. For the critical study of religion - not the merely comparative or descriptive approach - that is, the critical study of religion from within a rational, reasonable and logical mindset is one major origin of Religious Studies. In short, a central function of Religious Studies is to continue the Enlightenment project by engaging with what I term 'the necessary problem of religion'; that is Modernity and the Enlightenment needed and continue to need religion posited as a 'problem' to react against. The failure to take religion seriously can result in the overturning of secular modernity and the rise of indifferent postmodernity. In this we reach the limit of the New Zealand situation whereby religion is qualified as - and relegated to - the status of an ethnic and cultural expression and nothing more.

McCutcheon, in his self-reflexivity on the continual problem(s) of religion is, on many levels, actually a regionalist arguing against the provincialists, yet in a particular blindness he too becomes provincial. For, as McCutcheon is prone to do, to separate Religious Studies from its classical-Christian culture does result in a particular lack of focus which expresses the lack of a regional basis. So on the one hand, without the stringent critical approach of McCutcheon we do get Religious Studies as a form of provincialism, a provincialism without regionalism. Furthermore, neglecting Tate's warning, as a liberal discipline we often find ourselves tempted to participate in the extension of provincialism without regionalism whereby, "having destroyed our regional societies in the West, we are frantically trying to draw other peoples into provincial orbit, for the purpose of "saving" them."<sup>16</sup> Therefore the first stage of attempting to get beyond the crisis is to pull Religious Studies back to its origin as a central regional activity of the West and the Enlightenment.

McCutcheon, in *The Discipline of Religion* (2003) continues his stringent critique of the *sui generis* claims of religion and the gnosis of "sacred as not profane" represented by the Chicago School of religion. In this he willingly takes on the title of "provincial" because it was originally used by Carrasco and Eliade to dismiss the types of scholarship they disagreed with.<sup>17</sup> In doing so, McCutcheon

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 289.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>17</sup> McCutcheon, xii.

positions himself as representing “the unruly provinces”<sup>18</sup> who view their role as scholars as neither “simply rewording indigenous reports” or in being “a prophet.”<sup>19</sup> Rather he offers what could be termed “provincial scholarship” that “revels in its edginess and is a reaction against the pomposity of the center”<sup>20</sup> - that is Chicago. Against this center’s claims of natural religion and the independent existence and recognition of ‘the sacred’, McCutcheon aims for scholarship and a discipline that studies “religion as part of the historically grounded human sciences.”<sup>21</sup> To this end, two central questions arise: Why is ‘religion’ believed to be ‘natural’ and why do we seem to believe ‘religion’ is interpreted or studied in part to become or make us better people?

In a qualified support for McCutcheon I first wish to position, in a deliberately broad fashion, a claim that religion itself is an interpretative frame that is applied to (and used to create) other interpretative frames. In my analysis, the importance of religion is that it states ‘there is an alternative’ and the grounding of religion in not only the human sciences but also the social sciences arises precisely because of this. We too easily choose to forget that religion is crucial for the self-definition of Modernity. For in religion’s dialectic with Modernity lies the mutually-counter claim: ‘there is an alternative’. If we do not locate our discipline as part of the self-reflexivity of Modernity then we find ourselves in thrall to the *sui generis* and the normative claims in support that arise from Eliade and Chicago. McCutcheon refers to Tim Murphy’s point (1994) that the debates of Eliade are centre to the identity crisis in Religious Studies.<sup>22</sup> Yet, from a distance it becomes clear that while in many ways Eliade and Chicago may be the centres and all those of us who are in forms of opposition find ourselves situated alongside McCutcheon as ‘unruly provincials’, perhaps a better designation would be to rename and relocate ourselves as a series of competing regions. The problem of Chicago’s self-proclamation as centre is, as McCutcheon argues via Gregory Alles, that it “insists upon religious meaning as a *unique, nonreducible* dimension of human life, a sort of meaning that invites us to comprehend it in its *uniqueness* and its *totality*.”<sup>23</sup>

To begin a counter-argument I wish to pursue the idea that religion is actually that which is othered or provincialized by the Enlightenment in that religion is the unruly problem that *became* provincial and not regional. Religion became provincial - or rather Religious Studies became provincial - because, reading via Tate, the regional engages in a dialectical hermeneutic with the Enlightenment as part of Modernity. Sitting at the heart of the issue is the desire of so many in Religious Studies to reduce theology out of religion - and McCutcheon hereby unwittingly self-locates as provincial precisely because of his opposition to theology. The irony is that the desire of Religious Studies to separate off from theology in turn only replicated what it accused theology of being: an irrational

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., xxii.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 61.

*sui generis* claim. While McCutcheon may be happy to locate himself as one of Eliade's dismissed 'provincial dilettantes'<sup>24</sup>, I prefer to offer the counter challenge of the regionalist perspective which is a demand of self-knowledge (and hence modern) on all participating. The problem is that the provincial, lacking self-knowledge and history can too easily become post-modern - which negates the modern. While McCutcheon quotes approvingly James Clifford's aphorism that "'Post' is always shadowed by 'neo'"<sup>25</sup>, I wish to reposition it so that after provincialism and its excesses, we need to restate the neo-modernism of a regionalist discipline and approach; in short via a re-thought engagement with the Enlightenment. In what follows, my argument is likewise post-McCutcheon - which is therefore also neo-McCutcheon: a regionalist discipline that seeks a new enagement with the Enlightenment *and* theology.

In one of those fascinating coincidences, I discovered Jeffrey Robbins can be seen to be working along a similar tangent. Robbin's text *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology* (2003) expresses what I would argue could be regarded as regionalist theology. Robbins links non-dogmatic theology, via the southern writer Flannery O'Connor, into the experience of regional writing. As he approvingly quotes, for O'Connor, "to be a 'regional writer' " was "to declare a limitation, but one which, like all limitations, is a gateway to reality."<sup>26</sup> Robbins' theology develops out of Charles Winquist's distinction between theological study and studying theology. If to study theology "treats the theological tradition as data to be learned, absorbed and comprehended" [in effect a version, I would argue, of *sui generis*], then to undertake theological study "means to think with the desire for a thinking that does not disappoint, to think in *extremis*, to ask what is *real* and *important*."<sup>27</sup>

Therefore to undertake theological study within Religious Studies is to engage with regionalist theology within a regionalist discipline. Central to this is the theological vision that reveals the discrepancy that is the limitation so that, as Robbins argues, "...like the regional writer, the non-dogmatic theologian speaks from a particular perspective, one that owns up to its regional specificity."<sup>28</sup> The regionalist approach, I argue, works from acknowledging the limitations of that gap that self-reflexivity demands, limitations that occur in our self-reflexivity concerning theology, religion and culture (and in this I am increasingly willing to intentionally and creatively misuse Tillich's claim that 'religion is the substance of culture and culture is the form of religion'<sup>29</sup>). This gap, that the Enlightenment creates and demands of itself via religion and theology, results in Modernity and the pluralisation of life. To forget this to become provincial, but to deny this is to

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 78. As McCutcheon notes, those accused of being provincial dabblers and ignorant or devoid of deep passion as championed by Eliade.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, xi. [Orig: James Clifford, *Routes: Travel & Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1997: 277)].

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey W. Robbins, *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology*, (Aurora, Col: The Davies Group, Publishers, 2003), 3. [Orig. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery & Manners*, 54.]

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, xv-xvi.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Tillich, *On the Boundary* (London: Collins, 1967), 69-70.

remain provincial. The provincialist attitude attempts, to paraphrase Robbins, to negate that sense of unease of what to *do* with religion, of what to *make* of religion, of what religion *has* to do with us and what religion *makes* us.<sup>30</sup> The challenge of the problem of theology for Religious Studies is, as Robbins notes, that of “theology’s insistence that knowledge is fundamentally limited by the gap between the known and the real, while at the same time driven by the desire to think the unthinkable and speak the unspeakable.”<sup>31</sup>

Yet theology is itself not a closed system - or of a closed system - but rather (and here I reveal my cultural Protestant regionalism) theology is the self-reflexive critique of both context *and* what is taken to be religion. The problem for Religious Studies is that, as Robbins states “the presupposition of the intelligibility of religion lies at the heart of Religious Studies’ demand for accountability.”<sup>32</sup> Yet theology operates as an internal other to religion, as religion operates as an internal other to theology, with theology operating to expose religion “to its forgotten beginnings in the factually unknown and the structurally unknowable.”<sup>33</sup> In short, I would argue that it is theology that makes Religious Studies regionalist and not provincial. This is because theology is the persistent attempt to overcome that can never finally overcome its tradition<sup>34</sup>; that is theology cannot become provincial and remain theology. Rather, when theology believes it has overcome its tradition it *does* become provincial and the type of Religious Studies that is either *sui generis* and/or anti-theological. This self-reduction occurs because the denial of theology within Religious Studies is the attempt to provincialize religion’s Enlightenment origin; for theology is, from the beginning, the self-reflexivity of Religious Studies. Theology holds the descriptions and claims of religion and Religious Studies to account in stating description and comparison cannot be undertaken without value; that an uncritical description and comparison cannot be undertaken and expressed as normative. For theology deconstructs both the construction of religion and the construction of religion’s *sui generis* claims.

Religious Studies has always tended to have a problem with theology, primarily because our discipline has arisen, in disciplinary terms and often as a specific locational expression, as counter and challenge to theology. To discuss this I want to turn to what is an admittedly controversial text. In *The University Gets Religion* D.G. Hart proposed a certain critique of the role and place of Religious Studies in American higher education<sup>35</sup> that, while on the one hand is culturally specific, also, via the provincialisation of higher education internationally, describes the conditions many of us globally labour under. Central to my reading of Hart’s critique is the question of whether Religious Studies - and its focus on religion [focus being my way to include the debates on ‘subject’ or ‘object’ regarding the

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<sup>30</sup> Robbins, 15-16.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>35</sup> D. G. Hart, *The University Gets Religion. Religious Education in American Higher Education* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

status of 'religion'] - can operate as separate disciplinary matrix or whether it is only ever "a second-order abstraction", as Johnathan Z. Smith provocatively stated at the 1986 Santa Barbara Colloquy "Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone".<sup>36</sup> Hart was referring to an issue of some 13 years prior, while Hart's book is almost a decade old; and yet these central issues continue to be the ones that we as a discipline wrestle with; yet unlike Jacob we never seem to gain the blessing, only the perpetual wound.

A major issue seems to have been that the rise and influence of *religionwissenschaft*, the science of religion as a descriptive and comparative process, was itself part of the new provincialism that sought to negate theology and unwittingly overturn the projects of Modernity and the Enlightenment. The rise of Religious Studies within the programmes of a liberal education and the humanities, in its oft-stated dismissal of theology [understandable given the parochial and sectarian emphasis of much theological study] unwittingly too often became, through lacking the self-reflexive and critical element of theology, the province of exoticism and universal 'values', especially 'spiritual and moral values'.<sup>37</sup> This in turn resulted in the common and understandable critique of Religious Studies from within the humanities and social sciences: that the all-too-often uncritical support and promotion of 'religion' [both *sui generis* and in its traditional, scholarly variations] as a necessary value and good in itself, that is universal in its expression and golden-rule focus [the myth ultimately of *homo religiosus*], locates 'religion' and Religious Studies in opposition not only to the Enlightenment origins of religion but also to the ethos of the modern, research-focused, critical and rational university. This is the crux of the matter in my opinion. Religious Studies is not in existence to support or promote religion as public or private good nor particular religions and/or their claims. Rather we exist, as does any other discipline, to engage in critical reflexion upon our subject/object [religion] and its expression and impact in and upon the world. The varieties of expression and impact that are studied under the rubric *religion* is, in opposition to Hart, not the problem; the problem arises when rather than critiquing and critically engaging with the varieties, disputes, claims and impacts of 'religion', we, as scholars become provincial to religion.

How does this occur? If we return to Tate's definition, we become provincial by forgetting, or more commonly rejecting, the regional basis of our identity in favour of a universal claim of a new identity. The rejection of theology is central to this shift. For theology makes specific claims upon religion as it arose in a particular western context, claims that were often rejected as the discipline sought to extend the regional rubric of religion into a universal redescription of other traditions in other locations. Yet without theology as critical other, religion itself loses its meaning, becoming primarily a descriptive and comparative term that is, as Jonathan Z. Smith critiqued, a "second-order

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 111.

abstraction.”<sup>38</sup> This is where McCutcheon’s oft-stated desire to keep Religion secular becomes ultimately provincial in his fervour to reject theology. His rejection of the regional basis and identity of religion exposes his oversight as to the dialectic of theology and the secular as discussed by Langdon Gilkey in 1967. Gilkey’s article<sup>39</sup>, part of a fascinating discussion in *Daedalus* on Religion in America, reminds us that many of the cultural resources theology seeks to creatively adapt themselves “lie in the religious tradition theology seeks to interpret.” This results in an understanding that the “very creativity of secularity derives in part from its continual relation to autonomous and strong theology.”<sup>40</sup>

I argue this is what McCutcheon overlooks. If he wishes to keep religion secular as a discipline and creative in its endeavours then it needs to be engaged with its own ‘autonomous and strong theology.’ Therefore I want to argue for the need to reinstate theology as a central necessity for the regional identities of Religion and Religious Studies. Such a theology has much in common with continental or European deconstruction, operating as a form of non-dogmatic critical philosophical discourse. Yet what makes this theology distinct is that this is secular theology that arises primarily out of an American context; for just as Religious Studies is, as I have argued, a primarily para-American discipline [in the twin senses of *para* as prefix; both ‘beside’ and ‘beyond’<sup>41</sup>], secular theology is likewise primarily a type of post-European para-American endeavour since the 1950s. Gilkey noted that the on-going intellectual sources for American theology are European to which “the American spirit” has contributed ‘a sense of empiricism, social relevance and a this-worldly secularity’.<sup>42</sup> It is these qualities that make Gilkey’s preferred ‘autonomous and strong theology’. In Religious Studies, secular theology has thus, via its American influence in both disciplines, the “creative role... to refashion for usage in the technical and secular world ideas that have been created inside the European religious establishment.”<sup>43</sup> Therefore, for Religious Studies, theology is secular theology and so is not Christian-specific confessionalism but rather the location for a creative refashioning of European theology and philosophy of religion that seeks, within the discipline, to subvert and reject the provincializing universalizing reductions of, variously, analytic philosophy, phenomenology, comparative religion and *sui generis* religion. While McCutcheon may agree with the rejection of these reductions, his issue with theology becomes obvious when it is understood that secular theology also subverts and rejects the attempt to reduce the secular to a

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<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, “‘Religion’ and ‘Religious Studies’: No Difference at All,” *Soundings* 71/2-3: 233.

<sup>39</sup> Langdon Gilkey, “Social and Intellectual Sources of Contemporary Protestant Theology in America,” *Daedalus* 96.1, (Winter 1967): ‘Religion in America’, 69-98.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>41</sup> The use of ‘para’ raises interesting issues for our contemporary preference for using ‘post-’ when we often seem to really mean ‘para’. In particular the much vaunted ‘post-modernity’ and ‘post-secular’ could be argued to really express, in many instances, a ‘para-modernity’ and a ‘para-secular’. See also: Victor E. Taylor, *Para/inquiry: postmodern religion and culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>42</sup> Gilkey, 84.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

non-dialectic and thus singular norm. For you can reject the provincialism of others and still remain provincial in your own attitudes.

The necessity of theology for Religious Studies as a critical discipline is expressed in the statement Robbins and Clayton Crockett make regarding the role of theology in the work of Charles Winquist: "Theology was a discourse formulation that functioned to fissure other discourses by pushing them to their limits and interrogating them as to their sense and practicality."<sup>44</sup> I want to argue that this function of theology is the hidden, regionalist core of Religious Studies. Such fissuring and interrogation results in what can be called theologyless theology and religionless religion - the difference between what theology and religion could be, and what they are. A regionalist approach acts to push Religious Studies past the merely descriptive and contextual, to push past the merely comparative and experiential. Theology, or rather (para-American) secular theology is therefore the regionalist core of Religious Studies because of the Enlightenment roots of both religion and of Religious Studies as a discipline.

Carl Raschke, tracing a lineage back to Kant argues, "To think intensely what remains concealed in the depths of thought is to think theologically", and yet, because of the Enlightenment, such theological thinking has become "a very difficult, if not impossible, peculiar labor."<sup>45</sup> Yet theology is also in dialectic with deconstruction, whereby in Modernity, theology is now "a thought that has learned to think what is unthought within the thought of itself."<sup>46</sup> Or, as I would state, in Modernity, theology, if not sectarian, is the self-reflexivity of modern thought that thinks the unthought of both secularity and 'religion'. Therefore, the crucial role of what could be termed neo-theological thought in Religious Studies is that it acts as the challenge to the self-closure of both Modernity and 'religion' - and indeed to the self-closure of secularity. The current crisis in and for Religious Studies is part of this wider issue of a desire *not* to engage with theologizing, that is 'thinking studying thinking'; for the challenge of theology is that of a self-reflexivity regarding that which we designate 'religion', 'the sacred and the profane' and 'the secular'. Charles Winquist notes the self-reflexivity of theology- that is thinking about thinking - demands that then "we have to decide why we are calling any particular datum religious".<sup>47</sup> To this I would add the further decisions regarding the designations 'sacred', 'profane' and 'secular' as they have come to be used both in our discipline and wider Modernity. Too often, in provincial mode we operate as if these too are *sui generis* yet Jonathan Z. Smith reminds us "the academic study of religion is a child of the Enlightenment"<sup>48</sup> which is further amplified by Winquist's stating "the generic concept of religion is not innocent of the genealogy of its origination in the Enlightenment."<sup>49</sup> Likewise, Graham Ward has argued in *True Religion* for the

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<sup>44</sup> Robbins & Crockett, 'forward', ix; in Charles E. Winquist, *The Surface of the Deep* (Aurora, Col: The Davies Group, Publishers, 2003).

<sup>45</sup> Carl Raschke, 'preface', xiii; in Winquist.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>47</sup> Winquist, 182.

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith in Winquist, 183. [Orig. Smith, *Imagining religion*, 104]

<sup>49</sup> Winquist, 183.

need of a genealogy of religion to help us understand not only “the trajectory of the history of the social production of religion” but also the “discursive practices” both closely linked to religion and antithetical to “the changing understanding of religion.”<sup>50</sup> These various claims of the need for a genealogy are, in my reading, the stating, in alternative forms, of the need for the regionalist approach that recovers the alliance of theology and the Enlightenment compared to the disavowal of what is in this genealogy that is disciplinary provincialism.

To understand just what a rethought alliance of theology and the Enlightenment might entail, we need to remember that particular engagement of theology and critical theory undertaken by the Frankfurt School. [In an aside, it is noted that the Frankfurt School, in its mid-twentieth century relocation to America as a form of intellectual refugee and political exile contributes to Gilkey’s view of American thought rethinking European ideas]. The Frankfurt School, even though a neo-Marxist movement, recognised the value of theology because firstly, as expressed by Eduardo Mendieta: “...critical theory...is reason criticizing itself.”<sup>51</sup> In contemporary Modernity, theology, once vanquished, and religion, once segregated by the Enlightenment are both being reemployed by critical theory because of their value as self-reflexive, critical tools. In particular theology, in its critique of existence itself, as “reason in search of itself”<sup>52</sup> acts as the self-critical reflexion on both society and religion, because theology operates, regionally, across disciplinary boundaries. To this end, Helmut Peukert declares that both Enlightenment and theology are unfinished projects in that both are continually having to self-reflexively prove themselves anew as critical endeavours.<sup>53</sup> It is important to clarify that theology, as expressed by the Frankfurt School, has distinct similarities to the para-American secular theology that has developed over the past half century in being an “inverse, or negative theology [that] must reject and refute God, for the sake of God, and it must also reject and refute religion for the sake of what the religion prefigures and recalls”.<sup>54</sup> Therefore the return of theology I am arguing for is not theology as commonly understood, but rather a self-reflexive, critical, secular theology that stands as “argumentative discourse”<sup>55</sup> in critique of both the theology rejected by Religious Studies and the rejection of theology by Religious Studies.

Religious Studies therefore becomes provincial when those who work within the discipline either deliberately forget or attempt to negate the origins of both ‘religion’ and the study of religion in the dialectical self-reflexivity of the Enlightenment and theology. While those who situate religion as non *sui-generis*

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<sup>50</sup> Graham Ward, *True Religion* (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK, 2003), viii.

<sup>51</sup> Eduardo Mendieta, “Religion as Critique. Theology as Social Critique and Enlightened Reason”, 1-17, in Mendieta ed., *The Frankfurt School on Religion* (New York & London: Routledge, 2005), 7.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*; 10.

<sup>53</sup> Helmut Peukert, “Theology and Enlightenment as unfinished projects,” 351-370 in Mendieta, ed., *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, 353.

<sup>54</sup> Mendieta, “Religion as Critique. Theology as Social Critique and Enlightened Reason,” 10-11.

<sup>55</sup> Peukert, “Theology and Enlightenment as unfinished projects,” 368.

often remember and acknowledge that religion is a creation arising out the the Enlightenment, many do seek to excise or reject the knowledge that religion is also a creation framed both by and against the Western theological agenda. The twin attempt - by both Chicago and McCutcheon - to erase the self-reflexivity of theology both within and outside our discipline has all too often resulted in Religious Studies becoming that province of exoticicism and utopic universal values. This provincial attitude is most apparent when we forget our origins and become *religious* scholars. Therefore, versus those who would disparage Religious Studies because of its internal variety of areas and topics, the actual problem is when we wish to promote or support religion, rather than critique and critically engage with its varieties, history, claims and impact. In short we become provincial to 'religion'; which is what McCutcheon states without recognizing the regionalist alternative.

As an example of the regionalist alternative, Gabriel Vahanian posits a reengagement with Tillich to articulate a new religious paradigm, in which Tillich's theology of culture is engaged with not only a religious analysis of culture but also in a mutual deconstruction with "a cultural analysis of religion."<sup>56</sup> I think that to extend this further, to get beyond the provincial state, we need what I term deconstructive regionalism whereby a tripartite deconstruction occurs. That is, the role and function of Religious Studies as a discipline is, out of its Enlightenment roots, the place whereby religion, culture and theology deconstruct each other, as part of both Enlightenment and theology as the unfinished projects of Modernity. The problem of provincialism occurs when we variously wish either to stop being modern, exclude theology, reify culture or privilege religion as the supersession of theology and yet the subtraction of culture. This becomes clear when we consider Vahanian's maxim that "in a pluralistic world, it is not religion we have in common. What we have in common is the secular."<sup>57</sup> This, reworked, also holds for Religious Studies. For, in a pluralistic discipline, it is not religion we have in common, but rather the secular critique of religion as problem and challenge. The secular critique arises from the regionalist recognition of theology engaged with, from and within a secular world. For we are a Western-derived, Enlightenment-derived, theologically-derived discipline. At our core is not the sacred, the numinous, or even 'religion', rather it is the problem of religion and religion as problem - the problem of religion for the Enlightenment and religion as problem for theology. To exclude theology is therefore a problem because theology is, or should be the self-reflexivity of Religious Studies. For theology is that which holds religion's claims and descriptions to account, that which deconstructs both the construction of religion and the construction of its claims. To insert another genealogy, if one root of religion is the classical *relegere* - 'to re-read', then theology in its regionalist, deconstructive role is the *relegere* [the re-reading] of not only religion but also the Enlightenment and secularity.

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<sup>56</sup> Gabriel Vahanian, *Tillich and the New Religious Paradigm*, (Aurora, Col: The Davies Group, Publishers, 2005), 21.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

Central to this whole project is Bruce Lincoln's claim in *Theorizing Myth* (1999): "If myth is ideology in narrative form, then scholarship is myth with footnotes."<sup>58</sup> To dispel fears that theology is itself being positioned as a substitute *sui generis*, I want to include theology within *mythos*; theology is a particular type of *mythos*, but *logos* is still always *mythos*. While, as Robbins states, theology "exposes the field [Religious Studies] to its forgotten beginnings in the factually unknown and the structurally unknowable"<sup>59</sup>this I argue cannot be taken to mean that theology itself exists *sui generis* or outside *mythos*. For theology in all its forms is a dialectic between myth and scholarship, operating as para-critique to both - and their re-imagined extensions into religion and its subsequent variety of interpretive frames and forms. What has occurred in Religious Studies is that some interpretive frames become either reified or neglected in the provincial attitude; provincialism too often becomes myth without deconstructive and self-reflexive footnotes - while theology that exists as sectarian to both the Enlightenment and Religious Studies is likewise provincial. It is not forgotten that a post-reflexive Religious Studies, the provincial approach, has within it the seeds of a neo-reflexive approach and discipline; but a discipline with footnotes must be regionalist by including substantial footnotes to both theology and the Enlightenment and engaging in a mutual tripartite deconstruction that always holds within it the ongoing, unfinished project of reconstruction. Therefore neo-regionalism is dialectical.

To understand what this might mean I wish to turn to a critique foreshadowed in 1970 by the New Zealand neo-orthodox theologian Frank Nichol. In New Zealand in the late 1960s, Lloyd Geering<sup>60</sup>, an Old Testament scholar and Principal of the Presbyterian seminary Knox Theological Hall, had, following in the examples of Bishop J.A.T. Robinson and Ronald Gregor Smith publicly demythologized much Christian piety and misunderstanding on the resurrection and the immortality of the soul. This provoked an unprecedented public discussion and outcry in New Zealand, both within the wider Christian churches and the general public, driven in no small part by widespread media discussion and dispute. While publicly tried and acquitted by a church court on two separate charges of doctrinal error (reported as 'heresy' in layman's terms), Geering realized there was little place left for him in the seminary environment. Instead he became the inaugural chair of Religious Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, in doing so establishing the first fully independent Religious Studies department in New Zealand<sup>61</sup>. Writing in *Comment*, a liberal Roman

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<sup>58</sup> McCutcheon, 214. [Orig. Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth* (1999):209].

<sup>59</sup> Robbins, 31.

<sup>60</sup> Geering has gone on to become an influential figure in the popular discussion of religion, both within New Zealand and latterly internationally, via the British-based Sea of Faith network and the American Weststar Institute. A prolific author and public speaker, for alternate views of his life and career see Paul Morris and Mike Grimshaw (ed.), *Prophet of Modernity. The Lloyd Geering Reader* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2007); and Lloyd Geering, *Wrestling with God: The Story of my Life* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2006).

<sup>61</sup> While Religious Studies had been taught at University of Canterbury since the mid-1960s, this was as part of the Philosophy programme. Even when it did become a

Catholic social and political review, in the wake of Geering's trial and in response to this new academic venture, Nichol as a theologian and former colleague of Geering, saw the creation of Religious Studies in a positive light as a place to let into the church a "few bracing, if also chilling, breezes".<sup>62</sup> New Zealand, in a situation similar to the American one previously outlined by Gilkey, was raising the possibility of being a place that rethought European theological ideas in a new secular context - in Geering's case Bonhoeffer, Bultmann and Buber. For in Nichol's view, free of 'churchly captivity', Religious Studies could be the place where the radical, critical questions about humanity and beliefs could and should be asked. Or, as I would term it, this is the regionalist turn for both theology and Religious Studies. It is interesting that in the American context Van A. Harvey was arguing a similar role at the same time. Reflecting on not only his own "zig-zag career - from department of religion

(four years) to seminary (ten years) back to department of religion"<sup>63</sup> Harvey raises the issue of "the possibility and even the relevance of traditional systematic theology in our pluralistic and secular culture."<sup>64</sup> In such a culture, traditional theology strikes "a crisis of credibility" and yet, like Nichol, Harvey sees a new home and possibility for theology in Religious Studies. In particular, for Harvey this includes the possibility of "a new and probably non-Christian theology of some sort" being developed that is "more strictly philosophical and does not at all understand itself as a servant of a church or a tradition."<sup>65</sup> Referencing Victor Preller of Princeton, Harvey terms this a "meta-theology"<sup>66</sup> or "a genuinely secular theology"<sup>67</sup> that is to be thought, critiqued and argued in departments of religion.

However, in my own country Nichol's dream (or so I read it) of Religious Studies as the secular location of radical and/or critical theological thinking and questioning is one that has, I fear been sidelined by the emergence of Religious Studies not as the refuge and discipline for dissident secular theologians (of which I'm admittedly probably the last local example) but rather for relocated anthropologists, phenomenologists, comparativists, inter-faith dialoguers, singular traditionists, historians and textual scholars<sup>68</sup>. In this Religious Studies

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separate programme, it continued as a linked department with philosophy until the end of 2008.

<sup>62</sup> Frank Nichol, "Theology - Into the Open?" *Comment* 42 (November 1970), 19-21.

<sup>63</sup> Van A. Harvey, "Reflections on the Teaching of Religion in America," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 38,1 (March 1970), 17.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>68</sup> These nomenclatures refer to those approaches based in various approaches to the study of religion: phenomenology, comparative religion, those focused on a single faith tradition or the texts of that tradition. Inter-faithers refer to the shift some have undertaken, in the post 9-11 world of focusing their attention and public role in inter-faith dialogue. My point is not to disparage these approaches, for they all make up the vibrant and argumentative tradition of Religious Studies; however many are, as approaches and sometimes as individuals, wary, if not hostile to such arguments of

locally followed international trends that, during the 1970s, saw student interest in non-western traditions reflected in a turn away from western ideas and traditions and a refocusing of many Religious Studies programmes as provinces of the 'exotic' and 'universal values'. While in America it seems, from this distance at least, that secular theology can and is being productively undertaken in some religion departments, it faces a double-barreled onslaught from both the Chicago *sui generisists* and the McCutcheon anti-theologians. For a genuinely secular theology critiques both positions in different ways and exposes them as unconsciously provincial. Furthermore, across the international scope of our discipline, in our provincialism we all too often seek to actively negate our Enlightenment and theological origin and footnotes. The result is that not only has the self-reflexive engagement with radical and critical theology become as marginalized within Religious Studies as it is within Theology, we also increasingly fail to undertake a self-reflexive, critical engagement with both the claims of 'religion' (especially in *sui generis* form) or the religions we study. This has meant, in returning to Nichol's critique, that while Religious Studies is in a different position to Theology in that it is not in churchly captivity, it too often exists in a provincial captivity.

So where to from here?

Both Theology and Religious Studies need to reassert their claims as crucial components of any attempts to understand the contemporary world. Both must throw off the chains of their captivity. Too often Theology lacks a secular and non-sectarian voice and Religious Studies a theological and Enlightenment one. Yet both, as disciplines engaged in critique and analysis as human and social sciences, must not only possess a self-reflexively critical voice but also engage in a mutually dialectical hermeneutic. Therefore, to rework Nichol's challenge, perhaps now, in our current provincialism, we need a critical, self-reflexive, secular theology to let into Religious Studies a "few bracing, if also chilling, breezes". Then as a neo-regionalist, dialectical discipline we can continue to critically engage with those unfinished projects of Modernity: Enlightenment and Theology.

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the central need and role for secular theology in Religious Studies. And, via my wider reading in our discipline, I am aware that my context is not an isolated example, rather more representative of where most secular theologians find themselves.

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