Those who are seriously interested in understanding the world will adopt the same standards whether they are evaluating their own political and intellectual elites or those of official enemies. One might fairly ask how much would survive this elementary exercise in rationality and honesty. (Chomsky 2003: 49)

Frustrated with the way in which some of our academic peers ventured into writing for wider audiences, in hopes of having impact on constituencies beyond the academy, I published in 1997 an essay in which I argued that the scholar of religion qua public intellectual was a troublesome notion. It was troublesome because it was based on the fallacy of misplaced authority: these so-called public intellectuals amounted to people trained in, say, the study of nineteenth-century American history who, because they happened to study an aspect of the social world commonly classified as religion, were presumed to be legitimate authorities on late twentieth-century geo-politics. What’s more, in many cases, the politics advocated in their interventions were simply an updated version of the social gospel movement, indicating that there was much at stake in failing to ask which of the many publics comprised their influence (largely liberal Protestant) and also their intended audience.

I concluded that essay by arguing that scholars of religion who conceived their object of study as an observable (and thus inescapably public) form of human behavior, rather than an ahistorical, private instance of experience, already and always were public intellectuals, insomuch as their work had no alternative but to conform to publicly contestable standards of evidence and argumentation commonly used throughout the modern university. The label “public intellectual” was therefore simply a way of legitimizing a specific type of punditry in what is an obviously competitive economy of experts who think they have something to say.

1 My thanks go to Bill Arnal, Willi Braun, and Tim Murphy for our extremely helpful exchanges on these topics and for their comments on early drafts of this paper (a shorter version of which was presented at the regional AAR meeting in Atlanta, March 2004). Small portions of this essay will appear in McCutcheon 2004.
In a letter to me dated July 15, 1997, Bruce Lincoln commented on this essay, agreeing that our field’s efforts to establish its institutional territory through appeals to the ahistorical and utterly unique nature of its object of study “keeps its practitioners from functioning as intellectuals in any meaningful sense.” In arguing this point in my essay, I had already been significantly influenced by Lincoln’s own work for, in a piece from 1985 co-written with Cristiano Grottanelli, they had concluded that

[...]there can be no shrinking away from the painful fact: the establishment of an autonomous field has, paradoxically, damaged the study of religion (and of religions) immensely, ... The consequences of this situation may be summed up by stating that the discipline of “History of Religions” managed to marginalize itself in the name of autonomy. Its connections with history, anthropology, sociology, political science, and other relevant fields are scarce, while its ties with theology—however much they are denied—remain strong, if implicit, covert, and distorted. (1985: 8)

His letter to me proceeded to put a finer edge on the issue than I had in my essay, questioning what it was that constituted a scholar as a public intellectual: “Is it simply the kinds of issues s/he addresses,” he asked, “or also the way they are addressed, which is itself a function of the kinds of audiences s/he engages?” Elaborating on the distinctive style of their discourse and their intended audience, he added:

I’m inclined to think that as one seeks a broader audience, one has to modify ones presentation, sometimes radically. The basic move is simplification, not just of language but of analysis. To have an effect on a broad public and/or to (re)shape policy, one is virtually forced to make a compelling case, which involves ironing out complexities and nuance, stripping evidence to a few choice bits, suppressing one’s [sic] doubts, deploying metaphors, anecdotes, and conventional platitudes to maximum purpose. To my mind, these are all sacrifices in which the ‘intellectual’ component is offered up for the benefit of the ‘public.’

Having suggested some of the costs required of those who “go public,” he concluded his letter as follows: “Personally, I don’t think it’s worth it, and would prefer just to be a good scholar, who addresses serious issues in serious ways and attempts to make the classroom and the pages of academic journals and books a site of moral reflection and political intervention.”

Although I could begin my essay by pressing Lincoln on the use his letter made of the rhetoric of “seriousness” and “complexity”—asking him to consider how they function to authorize a particular brand of materialist scholarship by juxtaposing it with those whose work is presumably silly and simplistic—I think it far more important to begin by