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# *The Academic Study of Religion in the United States: Historical and Theoretical Considerations*

Luther H. Martin

The academic study of religion is - or should be - a field of study like any other field of study in the university. Like other modern fields of study, its possibility was established during the European Renaissance and shaped by the Enlightenment as a consequence of the new humanistic organization of knowledge. In fact, "humanities", was a word coined in the sixteenth century to express this epistemological innovation precisely in contrast to the medieval hegemony of the "theologies".

Despite the well-known American constitutional principle of the separation of church and state, itself born of Enlightenment principles, the United States Supreme Court only gave formal sanction to an academic study of religion in public schools and universities in connection with the Schempp-Murray decision of 1963. While properly rejecting religious practices, such as prayer and Bible reading, in the public arena as necessarily sectarian, Mr. Justice Clark, writing for the Court, found that:

the history of man is inseparable from the history of religion... [Consequently] it might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion.<sup>1</sup>

Although religious study, in some sectarian orientation or other, primarily Christian, has almost always been a part of the curriculum of American colleges and universities, this juridical opinion established, for the first time, the possibility of systematically shaping an academic field of religious studies informed solely by the concerns of humanistic inquiry. I should like, first of all, to offer a few reflections on the fate of this possibility over the last thirty years.

## I

The decision of the United States Supreme Court proscribing the practice of religion in the public schools but encouraging its academic study was handed down at a time of unprecedented growth by colleges and universities in the United States, and a consequent expansion of their curricular offerings. One of the new "disciplines" that was now added to virtually all public

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1) David E. Engel (ed.), *Religion in Public Education*, New York: Paulist Press 1974, 12-19.

institutions was "religion". The availability of this new field of study during a favorable time of university growth and development in North America gave rise to an active "politics of religious studies" that focussed on two issues: personnel and curriculum.

**Personnel.** As job openings proliferated in the new field of religious studies in North American colleges and universities, numerous scholars of the "history of religion", as the field was beginning to be called, suddenly appeared to fill these newly established positions. This surfeit of candidates had three sorts of academic training: first, was the expanding program associated with Mircea Eliade at the University of Chicago. This comprehensive program, whatever one might think in retrospect of its theoretical foundations, did have legitimate claim to academic credentials, and was instrumental in defining the new field. Secondly, established specialized programs, such as those in biblical studies, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, were well situated to lay claim to some sub-field of the new religious study. While strong academically, these narrowly-focussed programs offered little training in, and often had less interest in, the place of its specialty in a larger field of "religion" and the issues that might arise from this expanded contextualization. Finally, a number of self-proclaimed "historians of religion" materialized, I fear, from the ranks of surplus theologians that had been produced during the 1950's out of the genuine intellectual ferment of post-war thought in this area. Although many of these "instant" scholars were well-versed in the exciting currents of twentieth-century theological thought, most had no academic background or competence in the larger area of religious studies. Hired, nevertheless, by credulous deans, they were then in a strong position to help give further definition to the growing field.

It must also be remembered that, until the late 1970's, the pursuit of graduate education in any area of religious studies in American universities normally involved a preparatory detour through theological education because of the virtual absence of any rigorous academically oriented undergraduate religion programs in the country. And the graduate programs in religion were, like that at Chicago, generally situated in or affiliated with university based divinity schools. Consequently, most of the new Ph.D.s tended to operate out of, at least personal, theological agendas. The theological proclivities of most of these products of American higher education in the 1960's and 1970's have increasingly dominated both graduate and undergraduate religion programs in the United States and Canada, as well as the agendas, and increasingly the directions, of our largest professional societies.

**Curriculum.** A number of religious studies departments had their origins as interdisciplinary programs with elements of their curriculum consolidated from existing course offerings throughout the university; others were founded initially as autonomous departments. All necessarily begged

the question from the beginning, however, of exactly what was to be understood by "religion". Impelled more by enthusiastic student responses and academic trendiness than by any clear theoretical understanding of the nature of the discipline, curriculae were pieced together on the basis of availability, of "who could teach what". This improvised nature of the field has resulted in a complete absence of any common disciplinary discourse of the sort that characterizes other academic fields of study. The vaunted *sui generis* definitions of religion were, in other words, less intellectual theories than political constructs of academic self-justification for the benefit of deans, provosts, and the tax-paying public.

And yet, the future looked bright as legions of enthusiastic young teachers and scholars in a newly invented field set out to construct a curriculum appropriate for the secular university and to give implicit academic definition, thereby, to this field of study. There were few models. The seminary model, focussing on biblical studies, church history and systematic theology, was rightly rejected as, at worse, sectarian and, at best, ethnocentric. The European traditions of *Religionswissenschaft* or *Religionsgeschichte* offered a better model, but their typical location in the theological faculties made them, too, suspect; and the requirements of adapting these often misunderstood traditions of European scholarship to the American context diminished their influence.

The first American programs, consequently, tended to emphasize an "objective" study of religion by concentrating on the religions of "others" - *From Primitives to Zen*, in Eliade's well-known formulation - at the expense of the Western traditions. What was counted as "religion" among these "others" was established, of course, by the religiocentric criteria of what counted as religion in the Western context, that is, by those features characteristic of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Eventually, however, as these new departments became accepted by their respected - and respectable - colleagues and gained in confidence, it was decided that, if theory and method were sound, Christianity could be dealt with as "objectively" as were Hinduism or Buddhism. But precisely here, on the hitherto neglected issue of theory and method, is where the screw of disciplinary construction began its downward spiral.

Many new departments of religion, for example, simply adopted the questionable pedagogical principle, formulated in the the first part of this century by the influential American philosopher, John Dewey, that one "learns by doing", a notion that has come to dominate American education generally. This notion that experience precedes knowledge gave rise, in a number of undergraduate religious studies programs, to "experiential" education, so-called, attempts to teach religion by means of a kind of generic religious practice in which vaguely defined goals of "personal growth" took precedence over traditional academic goals defined by the production and

transmission of knowledge. I should like, therefore, to turn now to a brief theoretical consideration of this methodological position.

## II

One of the most pervasive modern views of religion, and that which tends to dominate in the United States, holds that all religious phenomena are based upon individual religious experiences, the paradigm of which is mysticism (For example: E. Underhill, W. Stace, R. Jones, F. Schuon, W. James, A. Huxley, R. C. Zaehner, N. Smart, and, to some extent, M. Weber.).<sup>2</sup> The first significant *theoretical* attempt to argue this essentially Reformation position was by the American Puritan divine, Jonathan Edwards, in his "Treatise Concerning Religious Affections", published in 1746. Written in defense of the "Great Awakening", that first example of large-scale revivalism which, beginning in the 1720's spread throughout the American colonies, Edward's treatise has been judged by at least one scholar to be "the most profound exploration of the religious psychology in all American literature".<sup>3</sup>

"True religion", Edwards wrote, "consists so much in the Affections," - a Puritan expression for feelings or experiences - "that there can be no true Religion without them".<sup>4</sup> The primary "objective ground" for these experiences is, he argued, "the transcendently excellent and amiable Nature of divine things, *as they are in themselves*" (emphasis added).<sup>5</sup> For Edwards, in other words, religion was based on a pure, *unmediated*, personal experience of the sacred. This primary emphasis on individual experience relegates such social religious practices as doctrine or ritual to outward - and secondary - expressions of that inward grace so cherished by Protestants.

A "Second Great Awakening", directed against the rising influence of American Deism, swept the country at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This revival, associated interestingly with Edward's grandson, Timothy Dwight, was reinforced by the influence, especially on American Evangelical religion, of a popularized form of German Romanticism which had its own agenda of feeling and experience.<sup>6</sup>

At about the same time, Romanticism in Germany was producing a similar experiential view of religion that may be traced from Friedrich Schleiermacher's speeches *On Religion*, first published in 1799, to its most

- 2) See Steven T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, New York: Oxford University Press 1983, 3 and 52, n. 2.
- 3) Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, New York: W. Sloane Associates 1949, 177.
- 4) Jonathan Edwards, "A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections", in: H. Shelton Smith - Robert T. Handy - Lefferts A. Loetscher (eds.), *American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation with Representative Documents*, 2 Vols., New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1960/1963, I, 342.
- 5) Jonathan Edwards, o.c., I, 345.
- 6) Ralph H. Gabriel, "Evangelical Religion and Popular Romanticism in Early Nineteenth Century America", *Church History* 19, 1950, 34-47.

influential theoretical articulation in Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), which opens with reference to Schleiermacher.<sup>7</sup> Independently of Edwards, Schleiermacher, wrote similarly that "the sum total of religion is to feel that, in its highest unity, all that moves us in feeling is one";<sup>8</sup> "the true nature of religion is... [this] *immediate* consciousness of the Deity" (emphasis mine).<sup>9</sup> And like Edwards, Schleiermacher concluded that religious knowledge and organizations are but a secondary manifestation of this experience of unity with the Infinite.<sup>10</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the American philosopher, William James, defended essentially the same view of religion that had first been argued by Edwards - no longer in the discourse of theology or Romanticism, however, but now in that of science - the newly defined field of psychology that James was so instrumental in popularizing. In his classic Gifford Lectures on *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James wrote that religion consists of "the feelings... and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine",<sup>11</sup> a definition of religion appropriated also by the philosopher, A. N. Whitehead.<sup>12</sup> For James, as for Edwards and the Romantics that preceded him, "personal religion will prove itself more fundamental than either theology or ecclesiasticism. Churches, when once established", he asserted, "live at second-hand upon tradition; but the founders of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their *direct* personal communion with the divine" (second emphasis added).<sup>13</sup> Consequently, in the conclusion of James, "personal religious experience has its roots and centre in mystical states of consciousness".<sup>14</sup>

According to the recently published *Encyclopedia of Religion*, little theoretical advance on the subject has been made since James. In the article on "Mysticism", Louis Dupre, after expanding on the characteristics of mysticism offered by James sixty years earlier, concludes that:

all religions, regardless of their origin, retain their vitality only as long as their members continue to believe in a transcendent reality with which they can in some way communicate

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- 7) Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. J. W. Harvey, New York: Oxford University Press 1958, 9. Otto also wrote an introductory essay for the reprint of the first German edition of *Über die Religion*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1926, English trans. in edition cited.
- 8) Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. J. Oman, introduction by Rudolf Otto, New York: Harper and Brothers 1958, 49-50.
- 9) Friedrich Schleiermacher, o.c., 101.
- 10) Friedrich Schleiermacher, o.c., 60-61, 101, 155-156.
- 11) William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York: The Modern Library 1929, 31-32.
- 12) Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1926, 6.
- 13) William James, o.c., 31.
- 14) William James, o.c., 370.

by *direct* experience.<sup>15</sup>

A dominant popular as well as theoretical explanation of religion is thus based in the Reformation affirmation of a faith that is confirmed in an *unmediated*, individual experience of grace, a view based in a culturally disseminated and psychologized theology of revival.

However one may elect to evaluate the American cultural history that continues to infuse a theological bias into its academic study, the validity of any unmediated and therefore universal experience, mystical or otherwise, has been soundly challenged from several quarters - in my opinion, successfully. One might refer, for example, to Heidegger's concept of *Vorverständnis* (Being and Time, Sec. 32), or to H. Penner's argument concerning the mediated character of *all* human expression, including the mystical,<sup>16</sup> or the findings of contemporary cognitive research,<sup>17</sup> - not to mention Calvin, himself, who opens his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, not by reference to experience, but with a discussion about what is prior, *knowledge* of God or *knowledge* of man (I.1). Yet, it is at this murky, culturally defined intersection of theory and method, on the one hand, and residual theological concern, on the other, that the reality of religious study in the American academy was finally constructed.

### III

In 1983, a section of the American Academy of Religion devoted to the "comparative study of religion" met to address, in the now trendy ecumenical spirit of "inter-religious dialogue", the issue of "Theology and History of Religions: Is Dialogue Possible and Useful" (1983 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion). Since, however, the theoretical object of study for theology is also its own explanation, it should be clear that theology remains at base, confessional and of a different order of inquiry than an academic study of religion. No matter how sophisticated its trappings of modern scholarship or how learned its practitioners, theology does not share with scientific inquiry the principle of the disconfirmability of assumptions - indeed, it cannot. Whatever its place in society, theology is simply not constituted as an academic field and is, therefore, an inappropriate pursuit in an academic context. Rather, as the ideational *practice* of religion, theology is a religious datum to be studied academically.

The organizers of the American Academy of Religion panel on theology and the study of religion assumed, nevertheless, a positive relationship between the two, an assumption that was a harbinger of the emerging

15) Louis Dupre, "Mysticism", in: Mircea Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York: Macmillan 1987, 10:246.

16) Hans Penner, *The Mystical Illusion*, in: Steven T. Katz (ed.), o.c., 89-116.

17) Thomas E. Lawson - Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990.

direction of religious study in the United States and Canada during the last decade: the presidential address to the 1992 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, for example, is entitled "Religious Studies and Theological Studies". On the basis of such persistent efforts overtly to retheologize the academic study of religion, I recently concluded that:

the promise to realize a new paradigm for religious studies remains largely unrealized because of a theological inertia that continues to characterize the study of religion in the [North] American cultural context.<sup>18</sup>

There are, however, several positive directions, here and there, that are being taken in the field, largely by individual scholars. I should like, in conclusion, to indicate two, both of which involve orientations that challenge the conventional barriers erected between the "humanities" and the "social sciences". First of all, the theories and methods of the social sciences, which were once excoriated by historians of religion as "reductionistic" - itself an aspect of the defensive strategy against any explanatory incursion by other fields upon the allegedly *sui generis* nature of "the sacred", and upon the privilege of academic employment that was held to be consequent upon this disciplinary autonomy - are increasingly being taken over into the study of religion. A recent regional conference of the International Association of the History of Religions even called for aggressive research by religious scholars that might actually contribute to, in addition to borrowing from, such social-science study.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, a new concern with religion is emerging among those historians who have integrated anthropological and ethnological theory with their historical research. Unfortunately, this historical concern is still restricted largely to historians and has yet to have a major influence on the "history of religions", a methodological orientation that, in the United States at least, ironically refers to an ahistorical method.<sup>20</sup>

So what might the future hold? It is perhaps naive to hope that such an emotionally volatile reality born of such culturally specific histories as religion will ever become subject to academic agreement, much less consensus, in an intellectual and cultural context as diverse as the United States. And now, we are beginning to see a similar blurring of theology and the academic study of religion in countries of Eastern Europe and in the former republics of the Soviet Union as new authoritarian religious ideologies rush to fill the void of a discredited political ideology, and freedom of religious practice becomes confused with political and academic freedom. And yet, one might

18) Luther H. Martin, "Fundamental Problems in the World-Wide Pursuit of the Study of Religion", in: Michael Pye (ed.), *Marburg Revisited: Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religion*, Marburg: Diagonal Verlag 1989, 28.

19) Witold Tyloch, *Studies on Religion in the Context of Social Sciences: Methodological and Theoretical Relations*, Warsaw: Polish Society for the Science of Religion 1990, 8.

20) Douglas Allen, "Eliade and History", *The Journal of Religion* 68, 1988, 545-565.



hope for the emergence of a truly academic study of religion, free of the ideology of its practice, that might begin to explain why religion seems to be a social and historical fact of virtually all peoples, and that we might join, thereby, with our colleagues from throughout the university in a common pursuit of humanistic knowledge.

## RESUMÉ

### Religionistika v USA. Historické a teoretické aspekty

Religionistika patří, resp. měla by patřit k těm oborům moderní univerzity, jež se na základě renesanční racionality vymezily vůči středověké epistemologické hegemonii teologie jako „humanitní vědy“. Nicméně na amerických univerzitách religionistika stále vykazuje vlivy přetrvávající „kulturní teologie“, o čemž svědčí jak převážně teologicky orientovaná příprava profesorského sboru, tak teoreticky nevyvážené studijní programy.

Pojetí náboženství, které je v USA nejrozšířenější a nejčastěji se také prosazuje, v podstatě vychází z protestantismu - profilovaného a šířeného americkou evangelikální tradicí duchovní obnovy (počínaje Jonathanem Edwardsem) a umocněného vlivy německého teologického romantismu (Schleiermacher, Otto). Toto reformní pojetí se opírá o názor, že všechny náboženské fenomény jsou založeny na individuálních náboženských zkušenostech, jejichž společným paradigmatem je mysticismus. Přes teoretické výhrady k oprávněnosti požadavku bezprostřední zkušenosti pronikl tento teologický pohled nejen do samotného studia, nýbrž ovlivnil i výstavbu a činnost největší profesionální společnosti zabývající se v USA studiem náboženství.

Je zřejmě naivní doufat, že se emocionálně tak proměnlivá realita, jakou představuje náboženství, vzešlé z kulturně specifikovaných „historií“, někdy stane předmětem akademické dohody, tím méně konsensu, v natolik kulturně a intelektuálně rozmanitém prostředí, jaké reprezentují Spojené státy. V současnosti lze však podobné zaměňování teologie s vědou pozorovat i v zemích východní Evropy a bývalého Sovětského svazu, kde se nové autoritativní náboženské ideologie snaží zaplnit prázdný prostor po zdiskreditované politické ideologii a zamlžují tak rozdíl mezi náboženskou svobodou a svobodou politickou či akademickou. Přesto lze snad doufat v postupné uplatnění skutečně vědeckého studia náboženství, nezávislého na jeho ideologii a praktickém působení, a schopného přispět k objasnění otázky, proč se náboženství jeví jako sociální a historický fakt všelidského rozměru. Mohlo by se tak připojit - spolu s našimi kolegy ze všech univerzit - ke společnému pěstování humanitního vědění.

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