

## Chapter 3

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# The study of religions: the last 50 years

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In one sense, the study of religions is as old as religion itself, or at least as the first human beings who looked at their neighbours or themselves and wondered what they were doing when they did what we have come to call religion. In another sense, in most parts of the world the study of religions in a narrower, more technical sense, as the non-theological study of religion in the context of higher education, did not begin in earnest until after the Second World War. In the same period, the academic study of religions expanded greatly in Europe, which already had firm if small traditions of such study. In those parts of the world that had traditions of teaching theology, such as North America and colonial Africa, the development of the study of religions was largely a shift in emphasis from examining the world through a lens shaped by religious conviction to examining it through one shaped by perspectival pluralism, religious uncertainty, or anti-religious naturalism, usually an uneven mixture of all three. The shift rarely satisfied everyone. In other parts of the world, such as East Asia, it involved building an academic enterprise around an imported foreign category, 'religion'.

Although the expansion and internationalization of the study of religions began in earnest after the Second World War, an exact starting point is impossible to determine. As the preceding chapter demonstrates, the academic study of religions had a long prehistory and history in Europe, and the global move to study religions academically had neither a single founder nor a founding moment. Nevertheless, it is clear that as Europe and Japan rebuilt, as Europe gradually divested itself of its colonies, as much of the rest of the world tried its hand at self-government, and as the Cold War divided up the world between two and later three great powers vying for influence, the United States, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China, universities and colleges in many parts of the world instituted programmes for the study of religions.

From the point of view of history, it is just becoming possible to assess the earliest of these events. Their lasting significance – the significance that makes people in later periods want to remember them and transmit them to succeeding generations as history – will not be apparent until those later periods come into being. At the same time, one should not ignore them, even if it is tempting for older generations to dismiss some developments as retrograde. They are the movements that shape the study of religions today.

### **The study of religion in context**

There were probably many reasons for the expansion and internationalization of religious studies after the Second World War. Some of them were truly global in scope.

One reason was the vast expansion of both the world's population and of tertiary education. In 1900 the world's population was 1.65 billion (10<sup>9</sup>). In 1950 it was 2.5 billion; by 1999 it was almost 6 billion. With all other factors constant, the number of scholars studying religions worldwide should have increased four-fold during the course of the twentieth century, most of the growth taking place after the Second World War. Other factors did not, however, remain constant. After the Second World War, countries in Europe and the European diaspora generally shifted from elite to mass universities, giving a much higher percentage of their populations access to higher education and employment within it. Furthermore, in both the de-colonizing world and in nations attempting to demonstrate the viability of an alternative political ideology, such as the People's Republic of China, the establishment and promotion of tertiary educational institutions allowed governments to stake claims to quality. A government that fostered a system of universities and colleges deserved loyalty and respect. Under such conditions even a field of study that loses a moderate amount of market share will actually expand (cf. Frank and Gabler 2006).

Such statistics alone do not, however, explain the expansion and internationalization of the study of religions after the Second World War. Significant global technological and cultural developments probably played a role, too. Among them one might mention infrastructural factors such as the introduction in the late 1950s of commercial jet aircraft – the de Havilland Comet 4 and the more successful Boeing 707 in October 1958, the Douglas DC-8 in September 1959; and the launch of communication satellites – Sputnik 1 in October 1957, Project SCORE in December 1958, Telstar in July 1962. Commercial jet air transportation gave increasing numbers of people, including scholars, ready access to more distant parts of the world. Satellites enabled the transmission of higher volumes of auditory and visual communication throughout much of the world. Both had the effect of stimulating curiosity about places elsewhere, creating demand for knowledge about religions, among other topics, and providing affordable means to meet that demand. At least in some people, they also had the effect of undercutting older, locally defined loyalties, including assertions of exclusive claims to religious Truth associated with traditional approaches to theology.<sup>1</sup> For the pluralists, the space programmes of the 1960s and early 1970s, especially images of the earth from space, such as the earth rising over the moon shot from Apollo 8 in 1968 and the whole-earth view shot from Apollo 17 in 1972, provided visual icons. There is also some evidence that the events of the Holocaust and the Second World War themselves made parochial definitions of Truth seem more untenable within an academic context (Frank and Gabler 2006: 67).

In addition to global factors, local factors probably also contributed to an expansion in the volume of the study of religions as well as to a shift in its emphases in various parts of the world. For example, in the 1950s, during the Cold War against godless Communism, religiosity and, in some circles, religious plurality became markers of identity for the United States. (Significantly, the study of religions had very different trajectories in nations under the influence of the Soviet Union.) In 1963 the US Supreme Court noted in a ruling that although government institutions could not teach students to be religious, they could and probably should teach students about religions (*School District of Abington v. Schempp* 374 US 225 [1963]). As the Vietnam War and public opposition to it intensified, interest in Asian religions grew, because the experience of the war and its aftermath provided more intimate contact with what often seemed strange religions; consider the impact of Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation on June 11, 1963. That interest also grew because religions like Buddhism and Hinduism could be promoted as alternatives to a seemingly stifling and

bellicose Christianity. In 1965, the United States also changed its immigration laws, allowing limited numbers of Asians, previously barred, to enter the country, eventually creating a new religious demographic.

## Expansion and internationalization<sup>2</sup>

These factors and others as well combined in the decades following the Second World War to create a general shift toward a more pluralistic conception of religious studies as well as the establishment of new academic units and positions. Until the 1960s many state universities in the United States had largely avoided the study of religions. In the 1960s state universities began to found academic units for it. The most significant of these was the department of religious studies at the University of California–Santa Barbara, established in 1964. Although Friedrich Max Müller (1867) had announced the birth of the science of religion while working at Oxford, the United Kingdom had lacked academic units devoted to its study. That changed, too, as Great Britain began to institute such programmes, especially in its new universities. The way was led by Ninian Smart, who founded the first British department of religious studies in Lancaster University in 1967. Earlier, in 1960, the fifth section (*Sciences religieuses*) of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in Paris expanded to include 29 chairs. It has since grown to roughly twice that size and is the largest single unit devoted to the study of religions in Europe. In orientation its work has tended to be more exactly historical and philological than is often the case in religious studies departments in other countries.

At the other end of the Eurasian land mass, the People's Republic of China founded the Institute for World Religions in Beijing in 1964, although the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) severely disrupted its work. In Korea and Japan the study of religions was promoted through academic appointments and the establishment of new academic units, such as the chair of religious studies at the University of Tsukuba, founded in 1973. In New Zealand (Aotearoa), the University of Otago established a chair in the phenomenology of religion in 1966; Victoria University, Wellington, established a chair in religious studies in 1971. The Universities of Queensland and Sydney, Australia, established Departments of Studies in Religion in 1974 and 1977, respectively. Meanwhile, in Africa, especially those parts of Africa formerly under British rule, programmes in religious studies were founded as newly independent African nations established national universities. Nigeria was and remains particularly active in the study of religions, beginning with the founding of the department of religious studies at the University of Ibadan in 1949. In addition to local African professors, African programmes in religious studies have benefited from the services of many leading scholars of European and, less frequently, North American origin, such as Geoffrey Parrinder, J. G. Platvoet, James Cox, Rosalind Hackett, and David Chidester.

Scholarship involves more than academic units in universities. It also involves professional associations and other structures that facilitate scholarly communication and research. These structures, too, map the growth of religious studies during the last fifty years. Among the new professional associations founded after the Second World War were the International Association for the History of Religion (established 1950), followed (or in some cases preceded) by the founding of national associations in many European countries, the American Academy of Religion (the new name given to the National Association of Bible Instructors in 1963), the Korea Association for Studies of Religion (1970), later revived as the Korean Association for the History of Religions; the Society for the Sociology of Religion (a Japanese association founded in 1975; the Japanese Association for Religious Studies has

been founded in 1930); the Australian Association for the Study of Religion (1975); the New Zealand Association for the Study of Religion (1978); the [mainland] Chinese Association of Religious Studies (1979), and the African Association for the Study of Religion (1992). Similarly, a host of new journals came into being, including, to name only a few: *Numen* (journal of the IAHR, 1954), *Przegląd Religioznawczy* (Poland, 1957), *History of Religions* (US, 1961), *Temenos* (Finland, 1965), *Journal of Religion in Africa*, *Religion en Afrique* (Africa, 1967), *Religion* (UK and North America, 1971), *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (Japan, 1974), *Shijie Zongjiao Yanjiu* (China, 1979), *Jongkyo Yeongu* (Korea, 1986), *Journal for the Study of Religion* (Southern Africa, 1988), *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* (North America, 1989), *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* (Germany, 1993), *Religio. Revue pro Religionistiku* (Czech Republic, 1993), *Archaeus: Studies in the History of Religions* (Romania, 1997), and *Bandue* (Spain, 2007). Space does not permit mentioning the many book series and text books, reference works, and anthologies that appeared, but one might note the publication of two editions of two major encyclopaedias in this period: *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (1957–1965, 1998–2005) and *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987, 2005).

It would be misleading to suggest that after the Second World War religious studies emerged equally in every part of the world. In the Soviet sphere of influence, the study of religions was under severe political pressure, and some scholars, such as Kurt Rudolph, an expert in Gnosticism and Mandaeism at the University of Leipzig, left for the West. Since the fall of European Communism, vigorous programmes in religious studies have arisen in places such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, with recent promising beginnings in Russia itself. Aside from Israel, universities in the Middle East still tend to teach 'theology', or rather, Islamic law, although a non-theological study of religions has begun to emerge in some countries, such as Turkey. In South America, other academic units, such as history, anthropology, sociology, and psychology, generally study local religions. In South Asia there are very few programmes in religious studies, but sociology, introduced into Indian universities in the 1960s, has produced very fine scholarly work on religions, such as the work of T. N. Madan (1976, 2004, 2006).

## Theoretical beginnings

Despite the wide geographical expanse of the study of religion, theoretical work in the field has tended to be done in Europe or countries associated with the European diaspora. That hardly means, however, that only people of western European ancestry have been theoretically influential. A dominant influence in the first part of the period under review was the 'Chicago school', associated above all with the names of three professors at the University of Chicago, none of whom was western European in the common usage of the term: Joseph M. Kitagawa, Charles H. Long, and Mircea Eliade.

In many ways the Romanian-born scholar, Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), defined the study of religions throughout much of the period under consideration. That is true both for his admirers and for his many critics, who reacted by deliberately contrasting their work with his. Although Eliade is closely associated with the name 'history of religions', the designation was in some sense a relic of Romanian and French terminology as well as of earlier terminology at the University of Chicago. Rather than history, Eliade's thinking represented perhaps the last grand flourishing of the phenomenology of religion. Rejecting approaches that sought to explain religion in terms of something that was not religious, such as society or the human psyche, he attempted to develop what he called a morphology of the sacred. That is, he

wanted to identify the basic forms through which the sacred manifested itself in human consciousness. He was particularly interested in cosmogonies (myths of origin) and their ritual re-enactment, which he interpreted as an attempt to return to the time or origins and live in close proximity to the sacred. He developed these ideas in full form in *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1949b; Eng. trans. 1958) and *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1949a; Eng. trans. 1954), then repeated them tirelessly in a series of more popular books. He was also particularly known for his studies of yoga (1954; Eng. trans. 1958) and shamanism (1951; Eng. trans. 1964).

Ninian Smart (1927–2001) had a different background and a different approach to the study of religions. He also occupied a different sphere of influence. A Scotsman, he read philosophy and classics at Oxford. As noted above, he founded the department of religious studies at Lancaster University in 1967. Eventually he also took a position in the United States at the University of California–Santa Barbara. While Eliade's notion that the sacred manifests itself as a structure of human consciousness can be read in a religiously committed sense, Smart (1973) insisted that scholars of religions needed to adopt a methodological agnosticism: as scholars they should be non-committal in the matter of religious truth. Instead of developing a grand theory of religious content, as Eliade did, Smart identified six, later seven, dimensions constitutive of religion: doctrinal, mythological, ethical, ritual, experiential, institutional, and material. He also famously noted the similarity between Marxism, for example, and more traditional religions and suggested that the study of religions is properly the study of worldviews (Smart 1983). Like Eliade, he, too, was a popularizer, but in a broader range of media. A notable example was his series 'The Long Search' on BBC television (Smart 1977).

One final figure anticipated much work in the study of religions that was to follow, the Canadian Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2001), a professor at Harvard, among other universities. An Islamicist who taught in Lahore prior to Pakistani independence, Smith (1963) critically interrogated the central category on which religious studies is based, 'religion' itself. The term, he contended, was a modern invention that did not correspond to what was found empirically throughout most of human history. He recommended replacing it with the terms 'faith' and 'cumulative tradition'. In addition, he objected to an objectivizing, 'us' and 'them' mentality, which he saw underlying religious studies. He envisioned a time when the peoples of the world would come together to talk with each other about themselves (Smith 1959: 34). If Smart advocated a methodological agnosticism and Eliade provided a grand statement of the content allegedly underlying all religions, Smith took a different approach and eventually moved *Towards a World Theology* (1981).

These three thinkers were not the only leading figures in the study of religions at the beginning of the period under consideration. There were many other important scholars as well. Arguably those who did careful historical and philological work contributed just as much if not more substance to the study of religion than these three figures did. Among such scholars one might name, to include only a few, Hideo Kishimoto (1903–1964) and Ichiro Hori (1910–1974) in Japan, P. V. Kane (1880–1972) in India, Raffaele Pettazoni (1883–1959) in Italy, Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003) in Germany, Henri-Charles Puech (1902–1986) and Marcel Simon (1907–1986) in France, S. G. F. Brandon (1907–1971) in the United Kingdom, and Okot p'Bitek (1931–1982) in Uganda, generally known for his contributions to literature but also important for his contributions to the study of African traditional religions. Nevertheless, the prominence of the institutions with which Eliade (Paris, Chicago), Smart (Lancaster, Santa Barbara), and Smith (Harvard, Dalhousie) were

associated gave them unparalleled importance for scholars of religions who aspired to be more than philologists or historians in the strictest sense of the words. They served to define three major sub-communities within the study of religions.

## Second thoughts

Figures like Eliade, Smart, and Smith provided starting points for the study of religions during the last fifty years. It is striking, however, how little of the work that has been done has directly developed their ideas. Most theoretical directions in the study of religion have been set from the outside as scholars reacted to the writings of Eliade, Smart, and Smith, especially Eliade. Although some have wanted to see the study of religion as a discipline, defined by a particular method, in practice it has been an undisciplined, polymethodic field largely planted with seeds from elsewhere. Many heirloom cultivars – ideas of earlier scholars such as Émile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, and Max Weber – have continued to produce rich crops. Among the most important sources of new seeds have been anthropology, literary studies, cultural studies, and in recent days, the social sciences.

## An anthropological turn

A central claim in Eliade's theory of religion was that 'archaic' peoples were the prime representatives of *homo religiosus*, religious humanity. It should not come entirely as a surprise, then, that in the last fifty years scholars of religions have turned to the field that once took such 'archaic' peoples as its object of study, anthropology. Initially they used anthropology as a means to assess and critique Eliade's claims. Then they returned to it repeatedly as a well from which to draw the freshest methodological waters. This is not the place to recite the history of anthropology over the last fifty years, but some names are unavoidable.

While Eliade had sought to identify the content of religious thought, the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss took a different approach, articulated in several books from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s (1955, 1958, 1962a, 1962b; Eng. trans. beginning 1961). Under the inspiration of structural linguistics, he tried to describe the logical patterns according to which the mind worked, along with their implications. The resulting structuralism, which made heavy use of binary oppositions to identify the language underlying religious 'utterances' rather than the meaning of the utterances themselves, became a major movement within the study of religions. Lévi-Strauss himself applied the method at length to the elucidation of myth. Wendy Doniger, who studies Hindu mythology, applied it to good effect in her early work on the god Śiva (1973). Hans Penner (1989, 1998) has continued to be a vigorous spokesperson for the possibilities of structuralism.

Other anthropologists also exercised profound influence on the study of religions beginning in the 1960s. The American, Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) sought to effect a paradigm shift in anthropology away from a structural-functionalist anthropology that sought causal explanations toward a hermeneutical anthropology that sought to understand the meaning of symbols. Among his most influential contributions to the study of religions are his programmes of 'thick description', identifying local knowledge, and 'reading' culture as a text, as well as his account of 'religion as a cultural system' (Geertz 1973, 1983). Another important anthropologist from the same period, Victor W. Turner (1920–1983), adapted Arnold van Gennep's analysis of rites of passage to many other cultural areas, exploring the anti-structural phase of 'liminality' in activities such as pilgrimage (Turner 1967, 1969,

1974). Mary Douglas (1921–2007) rose to prominence because of her book *Purity and Danger* (1966), which, inspired by structuralism, argued that dirt and pollution were not the result of natural experiences but rather reflected an inability to fit certain items into established categories. Each of these anthropologists was extremely influential on work in the study of religions. For example, Victor Turner is in some ways a founding figure for the later field of ritual studies.

The names Geertz, Turner, and Douglas hardly exhaust the anthropologists from the 1960s who had an impact on the study of religion. Among his many writings, the structuralist Edmund Leach (1966) published a harsh critique of Eliade. One might also mention Melford Spiro (1970) and Stanley Tambiah (1970, 1981), who worked on Burmese and Thai Buddhism, respectively. Spiro has been particularly important for a definition of religion that he published at the same time that Geertz published 'religion as a cultural system': religion is 'an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings' (Spiro 1966: 96).

Eventually this new generation of anthropologists came in for harsh criticism. Their successors found them vulnerable on a number of grounds, including an overly systematic view of culture, an inattention to the political dimensions of cultural activity, and a propensity to over-interpret the data. For scholars of religions, however, they had the effect of calling important paradigms into question, especially those associated with Eliade. Specifically, a grand synthesis of religious content such as Eliade and the other phenomenologists had attempted to provide seemed untenable and irresponsible to the complexities of cultural data.

Within the study of religions itself this kind of critique is probably best represented and furthered by a younger colleague of Eliade's at Chicago, Jonathan Z. Smith (1978, 1982, 2004). A specialist in Greco-Roman religions who has been more a writer of essays than of monographs, Smith has been particularly interested in issues of definition, classification (taxonomy), difference, and relation. A careful reader and relentless critic, Smith anticipated much future criticism by seeing Eliade's views as reflecting an overly conservative political orientation, emphasizing locative, normative aspects of religion while ignoring utopian, radical dimensions. Among Smith's other distinctive ideas is the claim that definitions should not be rooted in essential features, as in Spiro's definition mentioned above, but 'polythetic', loose bundles of features any one of which might not be present in a specific instance of religion. He has also insisted that the study of religion consists in translating the unknown into the known and of redescribing the original in terms of other categories. His favourite example of such translation is Émile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, which translates the religious into the social.

Inspired in part by Smith as well as the anthropological turn, scholars of religion have largely abandoned the older phenomenological enterprise and turned instead to detailed studies informed by theoretical issues but carefully delimited in terms of geographical, temporal, cultural, and linguistic extent. They have also felt less comfortable than a scholar such as Eliade did about discussing religions of communities whose languages, history, and culture they do not themselves have a good working knowledge of. Such reluctance led Eliade and others with similar sentiments to lament the loss of the *grande oeuvre* and the fragmentation of the field into a great variety of subspecialties. From the other side, such limitations seemed a prerequisite for responsible scholarship.

## Critical modes

Smith's work intersects with anthropological theory, but it intersects with more work as well. It also addresses issues of interest to various modes of critique that became common in the 1970s and 1980s. These modes – postmodern, post-structural, post-colonial, feminist – are most closely associated with literary and cultural studies. A number of French thinkers from the late 1960s were influential in their development, among whom the most famous are Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) and Michel Foucault (1926–1984). In some quarters these approaches are quite controversial.

### *The postmodern*

Derrida's work is notoriously difficult, but perhaps one may say that it explores the limits of human speech and, implicitly, human conceptualization. For Derrida, human attempts to make definite utterances always ultimately fail; indeterminacy is implicit within them. If the goal of one kind of academic discourse is to construct meaningful accounts – or in Smith's terms, to translate the unknown into the known – the goal of an alternative kind of discourse is to deconstruct such accounts, to show that, ultimately and irredeemably, they miss out. This can often be done through creative rhetorical means that call into question the pretensions of the discourse at hand, for example, by responding to earnest attempts at precise definition by deliberately playing with words, blurring their boundaries and obscuring their meanings. Although Derrida's brilliance at such deconstruction is readily acknowledged, it is not clear that some of his epigones have not devolved into silliness.

The major impact of postmodernism has been not so much on the study of religion in the narrow sense as on theology. This makes sense, both because postmodernism rejects the 'modernist' project that an 'objective' study of religions would seem to presume, and because contemporary naturalist discourse often seems entirely at odds with theological claims. (Recently theologians and scientists have begun to explore a possible merger of the two.) In vulgar terms, if God can no longer be found in rational accounts, as in the days when philosophers of religion claimed to be able to prove God's existence by reason alone, perhaps intimations of God can be found in the inevitable limitations of naturalist discourse. Leading post-modern theologians include John D. Caputo, John Milbank, and Mark C. Taylor. Within the study of religions more narrowly, perhaps the best representative of this approach is Tomoko Masuzawa (1993, 2005), who has reread the history of the study of religion from a postmodern perspective.

### *Post-structural, post-colonial, and feminist currents*

Many postmodern thinkers have tended to concentrate on language. For some of them, language in fact creates the world, and there is no world outside language. Such an orientation does not necessarily preclude social and ethical reflection, but other critical modes, post-structural, post-colonial, and feminist, arose with a more distinct orientation toward social criticism. Perhaps the leading thinker for this line of thought was Michel Foucault.

Among other concerns, Foucault examined the manner in which knowledge and power are mutually implicated. Powerful institutions and persons create knowledge in such a way that it perpetuates and extends their power. At the same time, those who possess knowledge also possess power. Power-knowledge exercises its governance through defining the marginal



and controlling it in a number of ways. Foucault pursues the theme through the examination of institutions such as psychiatric treatment, hospitals, and prisons, as well as by looking at how what counts as knowledge, the various conditions for knowledge, have changed over the centuries. Although Foucault himself did little with religion *per se*, it should be fairly apparent that these ideas provide a rich set of possible themes for the study of religions to explore. Parallel currents of thought particularly important for the study of religion were post-colonialism and feminism.

Derrida and Foucault largely thought within the horizons of Europe. In her well-known article, 'Can the Sub-Altern Speak?', the Indian thinker and translator of Derrida, Gayatri Spivak (1988), famously re-directed his line of thinking in a post-colonial direction to talk about the marginalization of colonized people, especially women. Even larger was the impact of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which in some ways extended Foucault's project beyond the European frontier. The book examines the various ways in which Orientalism as a discourse, including the academic field known by that name, has imagined the people of the Middle East. According to Said, these imaginations are not accurate representations so much as the creation of images of an 'other' to the European self that serves the European self's own ideological purposes. Simultaneously, many women, who had largely been excluded from higher education prior to the twentieth century, began to examine the many ways in which academic discourse, including academic discourse about religions, had been narrowly centred on men. Once identified, such discourse easily appears as an instrument of control. Linking all of these approaches together is a perspective on human activity that emphasizes the social construction of reality and identity, political dominance and cultural hegemony, and society as a location for suppression, appropriation, and exploitation.

Post-structural, postcolonial, and feminist thought each had enormous impact upon the study of religion. It is fairly obvious that religion has served to subordinate and exclude women. For examples, one need only consider the hiring practices of almost all churches prior to the feminist critique or of the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox synagogues still today. Many early feminist thinkers addressed issues of religion directly. Many of them also worked within Christian institutions or in explicit rejection of those institutions, and they were often theologians as much as scholars of religions. Among other names one may note Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983, 1992), Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1983), and, on the more radical side, Mary Daly (1973, 1978). Feminism has not, however, been limited to Christianity, and in many religious communities important women thinkers, such as Rita Gross (1993) in Buddhism and Judith Plaskow (1990) in Judaism, have emerged to criticize androcentrism and patriarchal authority, to re-read inherited traditions, and to reformulate their communities' teachings and practices. Their work has also had a salutary impact on the study of religions. If at the beginning of the period under consideration it was acceptable to equate men's religious activity with the religious activity of the entire community, it is no longer so today. A large number of publications have appeared devoted to women's religious lives. In addition, steps have been taken to encourage women's full participation in the academic community. One example is the Women Scholars Network of the International Association for the History of Religions, organized by Rosalind Hackett and Morny Joy.

Like feminism, post-colonial thought has had a major impact upon the study of religion. Said's *Orientalism* unleashed a reconsideration and critique of traditional representations not only of Arabs, Islam, and the Ancient Near East but also of people in Asia more generally. Similar dynamics can be found in writing about religions throughout the world. Writing on Islam and Christianity, Talal Asad (1993) famously critiqued Clifford Geertz's notion of

religion as a cultural system as being too rooted in a particular historical context to be useful cross-culturally. Others have examined the ways in which colonial administrators in South Asia allied with certain elements of the Indian population to construct a religion known as Hinduism. Donald Lopez (1998), as well as others, has talked about the ideological needs which the Western imagination of Buddhism fulfils. Bernard Faure (1991, 1993) has made much use of Foucault in the study of East Asian Buddhism. The American scholar Sam Gill (1987) suggested that the notion that Native Americans worshipped Mother Earth was largely an academic creation.

In one way or another, all of these moves represent the introduction of the realm of the political into the study of religions. The Chicago scholar Bruce Lincoln (1989, 1994, 2007), influenced as much by Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci as by post-structural, post-colonial, and feminist thinkers, has produced a body of work interrogating, among other topics, authority, power, politics, and ideology in both religion and the study of religion, including the work of Mircea Eliade. Beginning with Ivan Strenski in 1987, it has become common to criticize Eliade on political as much as on theoretical grounds. A host of scholars, among them Adriana Berger, Steven Wasserstrom, Daniel Dubuisson (1993; Eng. trans. 2006; 2005), and Russell McCutcheon (1997) have not only criticized the political implications of Eliade's theory but have attempted to link that criticism to Eliade's activities on behalf of the fascist Iron Guard in 1930s Romania. Furthermore, in something of a continuation of the claims of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the very category of 'religion' itself has also come in for intense scrutiny, and some, including Timothy Fitzgerald (2000, 2007), Daniel Dubuisson (1998; Eng. trans. 2003), and Russell McCutcheon, have advocated abandoning the category altogether. Others, including Jonathan Z. Smith and Bruce Lincoln, have maintained that it continues to have limited utility. Although scholars in other parts of the world, such as Southeast Asia and China, have weighed in on these issues, their voices have not yet been incorporated into discussions by European and North American theorists. The major exception has been S. N. Balagangadhara, but he teaches at the University of Ghent, Belgium.

## New fields of study

In a review of the work of Bruce Lincoln, Brian Pennington (2005: 1) has written, 'The declining hegemony of phenomenology and theology in the study of religion and the rise of critical methodologies in the wake of post-structuralism, postmodernism, and post-colonialism have contributed to a discipline that is far more attuned to the production of knowledge and the authorization of power'. True enough. These movements have also had at least two other major effects on the study of religions: the opening of new fields of study and of new methods of representation.

The present chapter is probably not the best place to discuss new fields of study. These are represented by the rest of the chapters in this book. Nevertheless, it is important to note that as a result of various modes of criticism that became common during the 1970s, the study of religions has changed tremendously. Some important shifts have already been noted, such as the move to include women's experiences and voices within the study of religions. Another shift concerned sources and methods. As it had developed in Europe, the study of religions was heavily oriented to the examination of texts, especially texts that somehow counted as 'classic', and their historical contexts. Today scholars of religions are as likely, if not more likely, to give significant attention to many other data sources, including many contemporary media of communication, such as radio, television, the internet, and even comic books.

Furthermore, scholars previously operated, and often still do operate, with the notion that there is an 'authoritative' or 'correct' version of a given religion, whether that religion be Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, or some other. In one sense, scholarship was an effort to discover the 'correct' form of the various religions. Today there is a widespread recognition that such 'correct' forms only represent plays for power and domination. For example, ordinary Buddhists may practise Buddhism in quite different ways from what one would expect from authoritative texts and teachings, and their ideas and practices need equally to be taken into account. Such recognition of plurality has led some to speak in the plural of Christianities, Judaisms, and Buddhisms. It has also led some to focus on individual performances rather than normative structures for any given ritual.

Finally, during the course of the last fifty years scholars have begun to examine topics connected with alternative conceptions of religion. One important source of such topics is dissatisfaction with a Cartesian style dualism that makes religion a matter for the mind or spirit. Scholars have explored ways in which religion involves the human body as well as the human mind – corporality, sexuality, food, and so on—and material reality as well as thought. In Japan, Europe, and North America there has also been considerable interest in studying not just religions in their classical definitions but in new religious movements.

## Representations: crisis and response

If the new critical modes opened the doors to new topics, they also sparked a crisis of representation. If a scholar wishes to write, but writing in the scholar's field is inevitably an exercise either in meaninglessness or in cultural appropriation, imperialism, and on the most radical views, violence, what is a scholar to do? This crisis was by no means limited to the study of religion. The term 'crisis of representation' is taken from the anthropologists George Marcus and Michael Fisher (1986: 7), who wrote about a 'crisis of representation in the human sciences'.

Scholars in religious studies have responded in at least two ways that might be mentioned here, interreligious dialogue and autobiographical narrative. Both have the effect of inserting the scholar into the narrative and so undercutting an us/them dichotomy between the writer and the person being written about.

Strictly speaking, neither interreligious dialogue nor autobiographical narrative is simply a response to the crisis of representation in religious studies. Interreligious dialogue arose for a variety of reasons. In some sense it continues the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, but its current is both deeper and wider. Its recent precedents include the 1893 Parliament and less well-known efforts by Rudolf Otto to create an 'interreligious League' in the 1920s, but it can look back to discussions in the Mughal emperor Akbar's *Ibādat-khāna* and before that to discussions in medieval Spain between Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Furthermore, interreligious dialogue is not simply an academic activity but one in which religious bodies themselves engage. For example, the Vatican II document, *Nostra Aetate*, recommended dialogue as the most appropriate way of dealing with people who practise other religions, and there is now in the Vatican a Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, once headed by the important African cardinal Francis Arinze. Among scholars of religion in the narrow sense active in interreligious dialogue is the Harvard professor of comparative religion, Diana Eck (1993).

Despite being represented among academics who study religion, interreligious dialogue is most closely associated with theologians. Another strategy which scholars have employed

to negotiate the crisis of representation is to write not about others, or only about others, but to write about themselves. Again, autobiographical reflection is hardly new to scholars of religions. Religious autobiography has a history that goes back, at least in the Christian context, to Augustine's *Confessions*. It is also a topic on which scholars of religions have done considerable work. Before television made experiences overseas more visibly accessible, scholars, including theologians and scholars of religions, often recounted their experiences abroad to a wider audience. In addition, a scholar as influential as Mircea Eliade wrote his autobiography at some length (Eliade 1981, 1988).

Nevertheless, under the impact of the crisis of representation, some scholars have abandoned the once standard divide between their scholarly work and their autobiographies. They have used autobiography as a presentational mode within their academic writings to a variety of rhetorical effects, one of them being to interrogate the authoritative gaze of the academic expert. In her study of Mama Lola, a Vodou priestess in New York, the American scholar, Karen McCarthy Brown (1991) provided an account not only of her own conversion experiences but also a fictionalized account of her subject's biography. While not exactly a work in religious studies, Amitav Ghosh's semi-autobiographical *In an Antique Land* (1992) contains much reflection on religion while reconstructing the geography of the Indian Ocean in medieval times. Robert Orsi, a recent president of the American Academy of Religion, has written an account that interweaves personal autobiography and family narrative with reflections on his situation as a scholar of religions studying the Catholicism in which he grew up (Orsi 2005). Autobiographical and other narrative forms have proven extremely useful for elucidating 'lived religion'.

## Science returns

From their beginnings the social sciences have studied religions, but their interest in religion has waxed and waned. Perhaps twenty years ago psychologists found many other topics much more interesting than religion. Today there is considerable work being done on the psychology of religion from a variety of perspectives. Such work, however, is usually housed in other academic units than religious studies. It often does not make its way into the 'study of religions' narrowly conceived.

Within the study of religions more narrowly, science has occupied a tenuous place, in part because to some extent the field grew from theological roots. A standard trope, which received much impetus from Mircea Eliade, was the insistence that the study of religions should be hermeneutical, that is, an attempt at understanding other people's meanings, not explanatory, that is, engaged in providing reductive causal explanations of religion. Nevertheless, throughout much of the period under discussion, a few voices have championed the need for reductive explanations. They include Hans Penner and Edward Yonan in an important article from 1972, Robert Segal (1992) in an open debate with Daniel Pals, and Don Wiebe (1981, 1998).

Beginning in the 1990s, two scientific currents have begun to grow within the study of religions. The first seeks to explain religion in the terms of rational decision making, especially as employed in economic thinking. Bearing some resemblance to Adam Smith's discussion of religion in *The Wealth of Nations*, this direction began theoretically with Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge's *A Theory of Religion* (1987). It is most widely associated with the work of Rodney Stark and younger colleagues such as Laurence Iannaccone and Roger Finke (Stark and Finke 2000). Stark *et al.* tend to address sociological topics, such as

religious reaffiliation and conversion (explained by combining network theory with religious capital theory) and the positive effects of a free religious 'market' on religious practice. Other scholars, such as Ilkka Pyysiäinen in Finland and Joseph Bulbulia in New Zealand, are beginning to approach the economics of religion from somewhat different perspectives.

A second scientific approach to religion is beginning to receive widespread international attention: cognitive science, a burgeoning subject in many fields at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and a popular one as well. Some scholars have investigated the ways in which physiological processes in the brain lead either to mystical experiences or to notions of God. Among them are Michael Persinger (1987), who has explored the relationship between temporal lobe epilepsy and religious experience, James Austin (1998), who has analysed brain states among Zen practitioners, and Andrew Newberg (Newberg, d'Aquili, and Rause 2001), who has developed a theory of how intense meditation and prayer unusually arouse certain systems within the brain. Another approach works on the level of concepts, among other topics exploring the alleged competitive advantage that religious concepts have as 'memes'. Leading representatives of this approach include Pascal Boyer (2001), Robert McCauley and Thomas Lawson (2002), Justin Barrett (2004), and Harvey Whitehouse (Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2007).

Some popular authors, such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, have employed a cognitive-scientific emphasis in explicit, high-profile attacks on religion. Nevertheless, both economic and cognitive-scientific analyses have been of great interest to some theologians as well as to scholars of religions. Indeed, some leading researchers in the field, such as Andrew Newberg and Justin Barrett, have explicit theological agendas.

At the time of writing, scholars of religions seem to be divided between two camps, one camp favouring critical cultural studies, the other favouring more scientific approaches. Although there have been some attempts to synthesize these two orientations, they are in their very beginning phases.

## Final reflections

In her award-winning novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai (2006: 269) notes that we still inhabit a world 'where one side travels to be a servant, and the other side travels to be treated like a king'. The words 'servant' and 'king' are rather harsh, but the disparities that they point to are very real. The current chapter divides into two parts. The first part, the contextual, discusses the internationalization of the study of religion. The second part, the theoretical, reads as if the study of religion were mostly something undertaken by people living in Europe and the countries of the European diaspora, most notably, the United States and Canada. In part this division reflects the inadequacies of the author, whose primary base is in the United States. That inadequacy may itself reflect, however, certain realities about the study of religions today.

Compared to their colleagues in the natural sciences, scholars of religions in Europe and the countries of the European diaspora are very poorly funded. Compared with their colleagues in other parts of the world, particularly Africa, they have a wealth of resources at their disposal. Scholars from the rest of the world frequently do advanced study in Europe and the United States; the reverse is not often the case, and when it is, those scholars often find it difficult to get their degrees recognized at home, unless they also come with other degrees in hand. The theories that scholars most cite tend to be European and North American. For example, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese scholars have been actively discussing the work

of, for example, Mircea Eliade and Jonathan Z. Smith. By contrast, many scholars from Europe or European diaspora countries who are not China experts might find it difficult to name a single Chinese theoretician who has been important in their work. Similarly, throughout the world, publication in the United States or Europe is often taken as a mark of professional quality. Publication in journals or with presses located elsewhere is generally less highly valued, and often results in less visibility. Gifted scholars from other parts of the world often jump at the chance to teach in Europe or the United States. Among many possibilities are, from Africa, the Nigerians Jacob Olupona (Harvard) and Afe Adogame (University of Edinburgh), and from India, where there are few programmes in religious studies, many members of the subaltern studies group: Ranajit Guha (UK, Vienna), Partha Chatterjee (Columbia, but also Calcutta), Gyan Prakash (Princeton), Dipesh Chakrabarty (Chicago), Sudipta Kaviraj (Columbia), and Gayatri Spivak (Columbia). In other words, when scholars from other parts of the world are taken seriously in the so-called West, they often move there.

Inasmuch as these disparities reflect disparities in wealth, access to resources, and political and social power, it may be difficult to change them through direct action within religious studies alone. They may change only as other parts of the world assume prominence on the global stage, as China appears to be doing. One also suspects that changes in theoretical hegemony within the study of religions are not leading but lagging changes. That is, they will occur only as a result of, and therefore after, shifts in social, political, and economic power. At the same time, the study of religions continues to globalize. At the 2005 Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions in Tokyo, Japan, new societies from Greece, Romania, South and Southeast Asia, and Turkey affiliated with the international body.

There are several tensions within the study of religion today. One has already been briefly noted, the tension between those who favour critical cultural studies and those who favour natural science. Another concerns the tired but apparently unavoidable division between theology and religious studies. As the preceding survey indicates, not all who count as scholars of religions have refrained from religious reflection in their work. As new scholars enter discussions within the study of religions, whether from other parts of the world or from other parts of the academy, such as the neurosciences, the question of the place of religious commitment and conviction within academic work continues to resurface. Indeed, some scholars have adopted that ultimate harbinger of contemporaneity, the prefix 'post-', and begun to speak of a 'post-secular' age. The issue of religious commitment becomes especially important when religiously committed people with access to significant amounts of private money attempt to direct research in directions that they find attractive. This has happened in the case of the social and cognitive scientific study of religion (Templeton Foundation) and the study of Hinduism (Infinity Foundation).

Another location of tension is in the relationship between scholars of religions and the broader public. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is often easy to forget just how contentious work in the study of religions once was in Europe. The historical-critical study of the Bible is a good example. In 1839 David Friedrich Strauss received a chair at the University of Zurich, but his *Life of Jesus* was so controversial that he could never assume it. In recent years, committed religious practitioners from other traditions have begun to pay attention to what scholars of religions are saying about them, and they are not always happy. The most notorious case may be the criticism by traditional Hindus, led by Rajiv Malhotra, of scholars who use Freudianism to examine Hinduism, notably Wendy Doniger, Paul Courtright, and Jeffrey Kripal (Ramaswamy, de Nicolas, and Banerjee 2007). There

have, however, been other instances of tension between tradition-minded, politically active Hindus and scholars of Hinduism, as well as between scholars and practitioners of other religions, such as Sikhs and Native Americans. Unfortunately, these debates have not always been conducted according to the norms of academic, or for that matter non-academic, civility. They have at times led not only to threats of violence but also to physical assault and caused scholars either to switch specializations, as Sam Gill has done, or to abandon academia altogether.

There is yet another reason why relationships between scholars of religions and the broader public would seem to be crucial at the beginning of the twenty-first century. With the shift from elite to mass universities came a shift away from cultural education rooted in the humanities towards advanced technical training rooted in the natural and social sciences. University students from privileged backgrounds once had the luxury of studying art, poetry, and religion. Now students all over the world enter higher education looking to improve their job prospects. The place of the humanities in this setting is precarious, and the study of religions perhaps more precarious than other fields. At the same time, events at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries would seem to indicate that even for persons with limited interest in higher education as an end in itself, an understanding of religions is useful. Such persons may, however, find that usefulness in political and commercial purposes to which academics themselves object.

In any case, scholars of religions have begun to take serious steps to address audiences outside the academy. They have served as expert witnesses in courts of law. They have consulted for news agencies and the communications media. They have begun to give significant attention to the ways in which religion is studied in primary and secondary education. They have even begun to wonder why governments do not consult them more often. It is too early to tell what the eventual outcome of these various activities will be.

## Notes

- 1 Liberal theologians had already abandoned such exclusive claims, while others were still able vigorously to assert traditional religious loyalties, as they began to do in the 1970s.
- 2 For specific information in this section, readers might consult the various chapters of Gregory D. Alles, ed., *Religious Studies: A Global View* (London: Routledge, 2008).

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## Suggested reading

- Alles, G. D. (ed.), *Religious Studies: A Global View*, London, Routledge, 2008.  
An attempt to map the study of religions worldwide.
- Antes, P., A. W. Geertz, and R. R. Warne (eds), *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2004.  
Recent chapters on the study of religions, with several on the history of the study of religions in different parts of the world.
- Doležalová, I., L. H. Martin, and D. Papoušek (eds), *The Academic Study of Religion during the Cold War*. New York, P. Lang, 2001.  
Especially important for its detailed accounts of the study of religions in parts of Europe under Soviet influence.
- Strenski, I. *Thinking about Religion*, Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2006.  
A good historical, contextual account of the study of religions, although mostly devoted to the period before the Second World War.

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# The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion

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Second edition

Edited by John R. Hinnells

 Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

2010