

Topic One: Theology and Religious Studies, Insiders and Outsiders, and the Definition of 'Religion'

Perhaps the best way to begin a study of Religious Studies theory and methodology is to dive right in and explore one of the most contentious issues in the field: the distinctions and boundaries between 'Religious Studies' and 'Theology' as fields of academic enquiry. Inextricably intertwined with this question is the problem of 'outsiders' studying the religions of 'insiders', and indeed the definition of 'religion' itself.

THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES: NEVER THE TWAIN?

What is the difference between Theology and Religious Studies? While this question is not as straightforward as it may appear (as we shall see), there are certain theoretical assumptions that help to define each field. Generally speaking, we can say that Theology is the *insider* (i.e. a member of the religion in question) studying what he or she believes to be *religious truth*. As such, it is faith-based, meaning that it begins and ends from the position of individual belief. Any questions asked of the religion (or answers given about it) are predicated by the fact that the person *believes* in the religion being studied.

Theology is also more overtly and consistently concerned with the issue of religious 'truths', and with upholding particular doctrines. Degrees in Theology are often related to getting jobs in the ministry or other religious occupations (including teaching Theology!). Theology can, of course, be done from the perspective of any religion: if you are a Muslim studying Islam or a Hindu studying Hinduism *from the perspective of your faith*, you are not doing Religious Studies, but Theology. Nor can one be a theologian full-stop – one must be a Christian theologian, a Jewish theologian, a Buddhist theologian etc. – or even a pluralist theologian. In their introduction *The Study of Religion*, Chryssides & Geaves (2007: 39-40) summarize:

The theologian is of necessity the 'insider', who attempts to make sense of the key doctrinal features of his or her faith.... the theologian addresses

questions of religious truth, and does so in two ways, first by belonging to a tradition where he or she presupposes the truth of its key doctrines, and second by devising explanations that are themselves believed to be true.... The theologian writes theology on *behalf* of his or her tradition, since he or she gathers up the tradition and purports to explain it.

What, then is Religious Studies? If we can distil the essence of 'Theology' down to a single word – 'insider' – we can also distil 'Religious Studies' down to a single word: 'outsider'. Religious Studies is essentially taking the perspective of someone *outside* the religion he or she is studying, attempting to be as objective as possible. The operative word here, though, is 'attempting', for it is important to realise in any academic subject no one can ever be 100% objective – we are all influenced by religious or non-religious beliefs, as well as by our upbringing, our culture and society, and the presuppositions and opinions we form throughout our lives. In other words, everyone is an 'insider' to something, whether it is religion, culture, academic orientation, or whatever. This understanding is one of the most important contributions of *postmodernism* to Religious Studies (and indeed to the humanities and social sciences in general). According to postmodernist thought, since no one can be truly objective (because no one is a blank slate without culture, history, etc.), we must therefore be *reflexive*; that is, maintaining an awareness of our own academic/cultural/social/historical contexts. This does not, however, mean that one cannot strive to be as objective *as possible*, and this is one of the main differences between Theology and Religious Studies: being faith-based, Theology does not strive for objectivity (and makes no apologies for this). Religious Studies scholars, on the other hand, do not always believe in the religions they study (and in fact, probably rarely do in practice) – and even if they do, they attempt to consider the religion *apart from their faith*.

The objectivity sought by Religious Studies also includes an impartial openness to the varieties of diverse religious belief, expression, and experience. Taking a critical approach to studying religions does not mean that we are being critical of the religion itself (i.e. judgmental) – in fact, ideally it means just the opposite. Religious Studies is generally characterised by a perspective that all religious traditions are legitimate, and that they can and should be considered on equal terms. This stance is called *relativism*: religions and religious values, truth,

morals, etc. are not objective or absolute; they are *relative* to the religion's cultural, social and historical contexts, not ours; and thus and 'we' do not make value judgements about 'them'. Put simply, Religious Studies looks at religions in their own contexts, and with an awareness of ours.

Of course, the reflexive consideration of these positions reveals that they are no more 'neutral' or genuinely 'objective' than Theology, for they also are contingent upon a certain set of assumptions. In practice (almost by definition), Religious Studies is a very liberal, secular humanist field, and Secular Humanism is, of course, but one particular perspective.

In any case, when we are doing Religious Studies and not Theology, arguments based on faith or personal experience (as opposed to critical reasoning) are unacceptable. For example, statements like: 'The Hebrew Bible demonstrates that evil exists in the world because Adam and Eve ate fruit from the Tree of Knowledge'; or 'Buddhist scriptures prove that one is repeatedly reborn until achieving *nirvana*'; or 'Krishna's supernatural ability is demonstrated by the fact that he lifted Mt. Govardhan to protect his people from flood'. The degree to which you find these kinds of arguments sublime or ridiculous depends entirely upon your faith and your lack of faith. Such statements presuppose many things – not least of which is the existence of these allegedly divine beings, and a faith-based adherence to the unproven/unprovable narratives surrounding each. In other words, they are meaningless to anyone who is not a member of the religion in question. To the outsider they are myths; to the insider they are truths.

We *can*, however, engage with any of these subjects from a Religious Studies perspective. We could, for example, explore social and historical reasons for differences in ideas of theodicy in the three Abrahamic faiths. We might look at the Vedic Indian context for the emergence of the Buddhist concept of reincarnation. We can compare the significance of the story of Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhan for modern-day worshippers of Krishna in India with those in the UK.

The boundary between Religious Studies and Theology is, however, not as clear as it may seem. For example, if one has personal motives for studying religion (e.g. looking to enhance their own spirituality or religiosity) does this mean they are doing Theology, even if they are adopting Religious Studies perspectives and

methodologies? To what degree can a believer of any faith be impartial and reflexive enough to remain critical and not argue from the position of their faith?

More importantly on a practical level is the issue of whether certain questions should be cut off from Religious Studies enquiry because they concern religious or metaphysical truths, and are thus seen to be 'theological': questions such as why we are here, where we came from, if there is a god, why evil exists in the world, if there is such a thing as objective morality, what happens when we die, and so on. Because such things are currently unknown (if not unknowable), accepting theories about them requires some kind of faith. Does this mean they are automatically outside the realm of Religious Studies? This is a particularly important question when we consider that many attempts to explain religious beliefs and experience in social, psychological, environmental, biological, or any other materialist terms are not proven *facts*, but *theories* (and sometimes as equally unprovable as a metaphysical explanation).

It is, of course, possible to look at questions of religious truth from a non-religious perspective, as in the philosophy of religion (discussed in Section II, below). One might also adopt an interdisciplinary theoretical agnosticism (that is, not being confined to a single theory, but remaining open to various types of theories) which allows for the possibility of an 'unknown' or metaphysical component. The fields of parapsychology, psychical research, and near-death studies attempt to apply scientific methods and standards to precisely these kinds of questions, essentially trying to prove or disprove what religions tell us – about the existence of the soul, the survival of bodily death, 'paranormal' abilities, the efficaciousness of prayer and meditation, etc. Thus, while an argument such as 'My own out-of-body experience is evidence of the reality of dualism' may not be acceptable, a scientific investigation into reports of out-of-body experiences as evidence of dualism may be. Such research does not require the kind of unsubstantiated pre-existing beliefs we saw with the examples of theological questions above. They may ask questions *about* beliefs and experiences, but they are not in themselves *beliefs*.

The problem remains then, on what grounds are particular questions – and answers – excluded and others allowed? Who decides the criteria for what is

acceptable Religious Studies and what is not, and on what basis? Luther Martin (2000a: 53-4; see Section IV below on Comparison) writes that

Although the scientific comparison of religions has made remarkable progress since its nineteenth-century origins, metaphysical (i.e. theological) concerns... continue to *infect* generalizations about religion.

He adds that the solution is to disregard such theories and simply accept 'naturalistic' ones (and in the process, he advocates one type of assumption over another). Approaches such as cognitive religion, neurotheology, sociology, anthropology, and psychology are acceptable because they are reductionist (i.e. they explain any and all religious phenomena in wholly scientific terms). The moment we allow for the possibility of a genuine spiritual reality, of dualism, of an afterlife, of anything 'supernatural' or metaphysical (so the argument goes) we are then doing a theological exercise, and not proper Religious Studies.

That fact that one of the defining elements of Religious Studies is to look at religions within their own contexts adds another dimension to the problem: by ignoring metaphysical-type questions, are we doing a disservice to the religions, perhaps even being ethnocentric? By adopting an *a priori* atheistic or reductionist stance, does that mean we're *judging* them by our own Western academic standards, looking at them on our *own* terms rather than on theirs? Are we, in effect, looking at them out of context? In their own cultural contexts, religions are belief systems based upon faith in something unseen, divine or supernatural. Religious Studies reductionism 'reduces' them to merely social or cultural phenomena, with the objects of belief and faith often abstracted from them, and even seen as irrelevant. This secular approach loosely based on scientific enquiry and the value of *reason* over feeling, speculation, or experience is not the only way, and is not even objectively the best way.

INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS

This raises another fundamental question: are secular academics better qualified to study religions and make statements about them because of our

outsider, supposedly objective status? Or are we missing the point of the religions we're studying for the very fact that we're not insiders who are 'privileged' with direct, experiential knowledge of the tradition? In your reading on this subject you will encounter another way of expressing this distinction: with the terms *emic* and *etic*. These terms essentially distinguish culturally-embedded meaning from (ostensibly) culturally-neutral meaning – that is, *belief* versus *interpretation*. The types of accounts, explanations, and even descriptions of religious phenomena (including behaviour, belief and experience) will differ widely between emic and etic perspectives (and of course, there will be great variety among emic accounts, and among etic accounts!).

Does this mean one is 'better' or somehow more accurate than another? Not necessarily, for both have their advantages and disadvantages. For one thing, the outsider cannot know what it is like to truly believe in a religion of which he or she is not a member, and therefore cannot genuinely understand how it is experienced by insiders or the meanings it holds for them. The *feeling* of being a part of the religion is inaccessible to the outsider. The insider has a personal familiarity with the religion, and will almost intuitively be able to read its meanings through codes, symbols, rituals, etc. which may not be immediately accessible to the outsider. The outsider is also conducting his or her research with a particular audience in mind – academic peers who will be scrutinising and evaluating his or her work. This can immediately situate the outsider in a critical position in which the religion is a set of data rather than a source of spiritual meaning. Finally (as referred to above in reference to postmodern thought), the types of questions and arguments which concern the outsider may not be culturally relevant to the insider.

On the other hand, the insider's perspective is limited by his or her own personal experience meaning that it is potentially difficult to provide the 'bigger picture' of religion – to see it as a whole, in its social and historical contexts. The insider may represent only a particular strand of a religion (e.g. Catholicism), and inaccurately generalize about the religion as a whole (e.g. the multitude of forms of Christianity). Insiders also have a more overt lack of objectivity. They cannot 'step outside' the religion and answer questions to which outsiders seek answers, for a faith-based answer is irrelevant to an outsider (except as data regarding what

people believe). The outsider is (generally) less emotionally connected with the religion, meaning that his or her observations and interpretations will be potentially more detached and less inherently biased.

It is also worth noting that the outsider depends upon the insider for providing him or her with data, i.e. religious phenomena to study. It could therefore be argued that the insider should be given at least some priority since that is where we get our information in the first place. Is it perhaps presumptuous to claim to know someone's religion better than they do? Or are we rather just claiming to know it *differently*? The insider, after all, is not always 'right' about their religion, and may only be speaking from personal *experience* rather than scholarly *knowledge*. The insider, incidentally, does not need the outsider, and outsider interpretations made about one's religion are largely irrelevant to one's experience of being religious.

Finally, it should be pointed out that there are various *levels* of 'insiderness' and 'outsiderness'. If one is a Muslim, he or she is more of an insider to religion in general than an atheist. Is the perspective of an insider of one religion about another more or less reliable/accurate/valuable than that of the outsider to religion *per se*? Can a Muslim better understand Hinduism for the simple fact that they are both 'religious'? Or does the identity of that individual as a Muslim inhibit his or her capacity for neutrality and open-mindedness to the 'other' religion?

Or is the agnostic – one who neither believes or disbelieves in any particular religion – in the most ideal position to study religions, having a combination of detachment *and* sympathy with religion in general? There are also 'middle ways' of studying religion, or of attempting to be theoretically agnostic. For example, an outsider may attempt to be an observer-participant, attempting to experience a religion by essentially 'going through the motions' in attempt to feel what it's like to be an insider. Conversely, an outsider can take a participant-observer stance, wherein they attempt to temporarily distance themselves from their faith and experience their religion from the outsider perspective. Other ways seek to actually incorporate the two viewpoints, seeing both insiders and outsiders as equal partners, or 'co-participants' in the formulation of narratives about religions (see Knott 2005: 255). Similarly, some (e.g. King 2002, Sutton 1993) have argued that Theology and

Religious Studies need not be mutually exclusive, and that there can be a merging of methodologies from the two fields.

Yet another perspective on the insider/outsider problem is the pluralist theological one summed up by Wilfred Cantwell Smith (see Chryssides & Geaves 2007: 346):

Outsider scholars have avoided the issue of sacredness by focussing on studying or analysing scripture as if it was any other piece of literature – historical documents that can be used to reconstruct the conditions of life in a particular culture or period.

Religious followers [i.e. insiders] duck the issue of pluralism by asserting that there is only one scripture and that it has only one meaning... there is a particular version of understanding that is the 'true one'.

WHAT IS 'RELIGION'?

Even if the parameters of Religious Studies can be agreed upon (a very big 'if!'), what is this thing called 'religion' anyway? Scholars such as James Cox (2003) and Timothy Fitzgerald (2003, 1995) argue that the very idea of 'religion' (and thus Religious Studies) is itself theological. This is because it is seen as an inherently *universalizing* term in that it groups diverse traditions together as if they are somehow the same – or at least embodying the same 'essence'. Traditions as diverse as Christianity, Hinduism, and even atheistic Buddhism are thus all somehow 'religion'. Such categorization is rooted in the history of Religious Studies, and scholars such as Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Rudolph Otto (1869-1937), and Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) (see Section II) who defined religion as having this *essence* in common, referred to variously as 'the sacred', 'the holy', 'the divine', 'the numinous', etc. The problem here is once again the issue of context, and not reading our own presuppositions about religion into 'other' traditions. In short, what is 'sacred' or 'holy' in a given religion is culturally-situated and therefore specific to that religion. There is no objective 'sacred', the argument goes, only culturally-situated *sacreds*. The doctrine of reincarnation is not 'sacred' to Christians, and resurrection of the flesh is not 'sacred' to Buddhists. Shiva and YHWH are not universal gods, but local ones. To suggest that they are somehow expressing the

same 'essence' is to accept the existence of some objective 'sacred', and is thus a form of universalizing theology.

This is the problem of religion as a *sui generis* category – something that exists independently of culture, is irreducible, wholly unique, and even objective. After all, if 'religion' is wholly unique, why are there so many 'unique' (i.e. diverse) *religions*? By seeing all 'religions' as 'religion' (the argument goes) we are decontextualizing them – removing them from their own cultural context and viewing them through the lens of Western European thought (and its historically Christian influence, even if not from an overtly Christian stance). We see 'religion' as having some special status which makes it different and exceptional from other aspects of human culture, and as such it is treated differently from other fields of academic enquiry, requiring its own field, specialist journals, and university departments. The argument concludes that because we accept the idea that 'the sacred' is common to all religions, and indeed is the very thing that defines them, we are not actually doing Religious Studies at all, but Theology. As James Cox (2003: 4) summarizes, Religious Studies has 'adopted a form of liberal theology, where the universal transcendent becomes the defining focus for the study of religion.' In her introduction to the collection of articles devoted to the subject, Maya Warrier (2008: 2) neatly summed up the situation:

The valorization of secular rationality in the modern academic world comprises the 'proper' study of theology's main object – God. Religious studies is undermined by critics of 'religion' who question the universal relevance of this concept, and therefore question the very legitimacy of religious studies as an independent discipline. The question of disciplinary identity in either case is bound up precisely in these concerns.

Cox argues that Religious Studies thus needs to disconnect 'religion' from the whole idea of 'the sacred', and basically look at it as a purely social phenomenon. Other scholars (e.g. Fitzgerald) go so far as to suggest that Religious Studies as such should be abolished, and that what we generalize about as 'religions' should simply be studied within the various disciplines it draws upon, or in Cultural Studies departments, or at least that the name of the field should be changed to something like Worldview Studies (a term preferred by Ninian Smart).

Is 'religion', however, necessarily defined by 'the sacred' or 'God'? As John Hick pointed out 35 years ago, while it is not obvious to everyone that 'the sacred' exists, most would acknowledge that *religion* does (see Chryssides & Geaves 2007: 378). We all seem to know at least the types of things Religious Studies looks at (generally including Sikhism and Judaism, for example; but generally excluding corporate law and the latest James Bond film!). Common sense might tell us that while we may not know how to adequately define 'religion', we all seem to know one when we see it. But would this apply to individuals of other traditions? Would a Japanese Buddhist see Islam as essentially 'the same' as his or her religion, or even comparable in any meaningful way? Would a Trobriand islander with animistic beliefs see his or her religion reflected in a Jewish monotheistic conception of 'the sacred'?

So, if it is methodologically inappropriate to define religion in terms of 'the sacred', how *can* we define it? There have been numerous attempts. For example, in his book *Primitive Culture* (1871: v. 2, p. 461; 1958 Harper ed.), the 19th century anthropologist E.B. Tylor proposed a minimum definition of religion: 'the belief in Spiritual Beings'. One problem here is that people can obviously believe in 'spiritual beings' without being 'religious': many might believe in the survival of the soul after death, or even in ghosts, though this does not in itself indicate 'religion'. Does religion then mean belonging to an *organised group* that provides a *context* for the worship of Tylor's 'Spiritual Beings'? If so, where does this leave atheistic Buddhism?

James Frazer, another 19th century anthropologist, defined religion as 'A propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life' (*The Golden Bough*, 1890: 46; 1994 Oxford University Press ed.). This does not account for people who have spiritual or religious feelings or beliefs but do not pray or make offerings; or those who pray simply in order to *commune* with their god or gods as opposed to attempting to influence their actions. An Islamic ideal, for example, is total submission to the will of Allah.

A more recent attempt at a fairly minimum definition is by the American anthropologist Melford Spiro in 1966: 'an institution consisting of culturally patterned

interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings' (see Saler 2008). This is not too far from Walter van Beek and Thomas Blakely's definition of religion as 'human interaction with a culturally postulated nonfalsifiable reality' (see Cox 2003: 2). However, this definition is open to charges that it over-generalizes just as much as the term 'religion' because it implies that belief in more than one reality is universal. In fact, the idea of two realities, or a division between 'natural' and 'supernatural' may be unintelligible to some. The definition is therefore no less universalizing than 'religion'. Who determines what is 'alternate', and what does the term actually refer to? 'Alternate' to what?

An interesting attempt at a more comprehensive definition proposed by a Lampeter postgraduate student (Karl Gibbs, MA Death and Immortality) is:

Religion is an institutional cultural phenomenon that involves (but is not limited to) dialogue and/or dogma systematically relating ways of living to an ultimate (or higher) source, destiny and/or accommodating cosmological context for humanity beyond its biological confines.

Definitions of religion can be as diverse as William James' *sui generis* perspective: '...the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto'; and Ambrose Bierce's sardonic one: 'A daughter of Hope and Fear, explaining to Ignorance the nature of the Unknowable'. Jonathan Z. Smith (1998: 281) points out that the issue is not that 'religion' cannot be defined, but that it *can* be defined in so many ways. There is room in the field for competing definitions, and there can be no single correct term.

Religious Studies is broad and diverse enough to be able to encompass not only all the competing definitions of 'religion', but also all the arguments concerning how the field should define itself. Perhaps one thing all can agree upon is Gavin Hyman's (2004) characterisation of the field not as some well-defined entity but as 'a community of contested discourses'. As as a *field of enquiry* (as opposed to a *discipline*), Religious Studies encompasses multiple methodological approaches (see Section III). It is difficult to imagine how such an interdisciplinary field can ever satisfactorily resolve all the issues discussed here. Some will certainly continue to develop a 'theological Religious Studies', while others will seek to strengthen the barriers between the fields.

You will have surely noticed by now that there are more open questions than there are definitive answers to these issues. This in itself is also one of the characteristics of Religious Studies! However, despite the grey areas and all the competing arguments and approaches, one thing is certain: we are not doing Theology here, but Religious Studies – however you choose to define those terms! Irrespective of the debates and a degree of fluidity between these terms, certain aspects are 'non-negotiable': Religious Studies does *not* promote a particular religion or belief-system, or make arguments from faith-based agendas or based on personal experience. In your coursework and future research, the important thing is to be clear about your definitions, methodology, assumptions, and arguments; and to maintain a reflexive awareness of your own cultural/ religious context.

