The Study of Religion and the Return of Theology

Gavin Hyman

In this essay I consider the future prospects of religious studies or the study of religion in the context of a cultural and intellectual climate in which the "end" of modernity and the "return" of theology are being frequently proclaimed. I argue that the "old" theoretical account of religious studies together with its associated methodology, as developed by Ninian Smart, for instance, has become problematic and must ultimately be left behind. In its wake, however, I suggest that religious studies should take, and to some extent is taking, a postmodern turn. If its traditional "descriptive" and "philosophical" spheres are appropriately reconceived, we may be able to develop what some commentators have believed to be oxymoronic, namely, a "postmodern religious studies." As a result, the "new" religious studies will eschew any unified theoretical self-definition and will best be envisioned as what Alasdair MacIntyre (in a different context) has called a "community of contested discourses."

ONE OF THE DOMINANT MOTIFS of our contemporary cultural and intellectual condition has been the much repeated declaration of the "end of modernity." Scholars and other commentators have been busily occupied with elucidating what this declaration actually entails and the implications that it has for diverse phenomena in various forms of life. In particular, many academic disciplines have themselves been potentially—and in some cases actually—challenged by these developments. This is

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because many of our dominant disciplines in the academy today—particularly, but not exclusively, in the social sciences—are themselves creations of that intellectual milieu or "sensibility" that we have in retrospect come to characterize as "modernity."[1] That sensibility provided the ideological and philosophical backdrop against which the foundations of these disciplines were made intelligible. When this backdrop is removed or interrogated, these disciplines themselves are at the very least problematized.

Religious studies or the study of religion is particularly vulnerable to this potential challenge. For both the term *religion* (in the generic sense that we now understand it) and the enterprise of religious studies are creations of and were made possible by the cultural, intellectual, and philosophical *episteme* of modernity, the passing of which is now being so frequently celebrated or lamented. The extent to which this potential challenge has been realized in actuality has been variable. In certain places and for some scholars, the confidence of religious studies has hardly been dented, and the so-called challenge of the "end of modernity" has been dismissed as a frivolous distraction. On the other hand, however, certain scholars have been struck by the pertinence of this same challenge and have even gone so far as to suggest that the discipline will undergo a process of terminal decline unless it gives some attention to a significant reformation of its methodology, ideology, and self-definition. But regardless of the extent to which this sense of unease is actually felt by the religious studies community at large, I would suggest that the advent of postmodernism does present a substantive *theoretical* challenge to the discipline of religious studies that should not be ignored. In particular, postmodernism's suspicion of universalisms, imperialisms, and objectivities of all sorts represents a very specific challenge to the traditional form of religious studies as we have known it. For it gives rise to questions about the status of the religious studies scholar, with his or her claim to "objectivity." Does this not give rise to an omniscience of the subject that stands in need of deconstruction? And is the standpoint of the observer not informed by assumptions that, far from being neutral, have a particular spatial and temporal provenance? Furthermore, is not "religion" itself a "universal" category that has been created in the West and applied imperialistically to diverse cultural worldviews across the globe? With questions such as these, the somewhat abstract postmodern challenge to religious studies is given concrete and particular expression.

Interestingly, and in contrast, theology has been an unexpected beneficiary of this new climate. Theology has been able to reread the postmodern

[1] On "modernity" as a "sensibility" or "mode of thought," see Lyotard: 314.

move from the universal to the particular in terms of a corresponding move from the universalism of religious studies to the particularism of theology and has therefore found itself in a much more congenial climate than that provided by modernity. In an exact reversal of the hitherto prevailing orthodoxy, certain forms of an emboldened theology have launched an increasingly offensive attack on religious studies, confidently proclaiming the "end" of religious studies and the "return" of theology. Although this strategy on the part of theology may be regarded as a relatively marginal one in the context of the overall theological and religious studies landscape, it does nevertheless serve to bring into sharper focus some of the ways in which a postmodern sensibility represents a specific theoretical challenge to religious studies. Insofar as this is the case, it is a strategy that religious studies would do well to address in the interests of its own intellectual development, vitality, and longevity.

In this essay I attempt a number of tasks. First, I delineate some of the difficulties and problems with the old, classically "modern" form of religious studies before also considering some criticisms made by certain forms of postmodern theology. Even if one does not subscribe to the theological views of these thinkers, I suggest that they nevertheless make some telling criticisms of the "old" religious studies that the latter would do well to address. I argue that just as certain forms of theology have adapted themselves to the new postmodern condition and have revitalized themselves as a result, so too religious studies may undergo a parallel process of transformation. I consider some specific ways in which religious studies will have to be reconceived and argue that religious studies should abandon its old quest for theoretical unity and instead regard itself as a "placeholder" for theoretical pluralism. If religious studies were to transform itself in this way (and there are signs that it is already beginning to do so), then it would find itself revitalized as a discipline fully cognizant of the postmodern context in which it now finds itself. Furthermore, the reading of postmodernism as an opportunity for the return of theology and the death of religious studies would be replaced by an alternative reading in which postmodernism provides an opportunity for the revitalization of *both* theology *and* religious studies.

NINIAN SMART AND THE "MODERN" STUDY OF RELIGION

In order to understand why the "end of modernity" carries such revolutionary implications for religious studies, it is necessary to explore the

way in which religious studies has been defined and understood since its ideological formation and institutional establishment from the 1960s onward. To this end, I discuss the work of Ninian Smart, who is rightly regarded as the leading pioneer in the field and has done more than anyone else to give a unified and coherent theoretical account of what religious studies is and the ways in which it should proceed. I also consider why many aspects of his account have become more problematic and questionable in recent years.

For Smart, there are several essential features of a properly constituted religious studies. First, religious studies is distinct from theology, in that theologians are themselves part of the "data" that scholars of religion seek to understand. Thus, the religionist seeks to understand the tradition in question from the outside, from an external, neutral standpoint. The methodology is thus quasi scientific, in that it promotes the disinterested and objective observation of the religious data (Smart 1983: 4). Second, religious studies must be interreligious and cross-cultural. The "religionist" should not restrict her- or himself to one particular tradition or worldview but, rather, should roam freely around the world of religions, engaging, inevitably, in "comparative" exercises along the way (Smart 1983: 18). Third, religious studies must be constituted by multidisciplinary or polymethodic approaches. It "takes religion as an aspect of life and tries to understand it historically and crossculturally. It applies the insights of various disciplines—such as psychology, anthropology, sociology and linguistics—to illuminate its dynamics" (Smart 1983: 3).

From this understanding of religious studies flow several implications, the most important of which is the methodological primacy of "neutrality." For Smart, "neutrality" is the pearl of great price that is to be secured by such methodological procedures as "phenomenology," "structured empathy," "bracketing," and "methodological agnosticism." He says that for the religionist phenomenology is "the attempt at value-free descriptions in religion," an enterprise undertaken "without introducing the assumptions and slant of the investigator" (1973: 21, 1983: 16). For Smart, these "value-free" descriptions are necessary in order to avoid the imposition of alien interpretative categories onto "other" religions, whether those alien categories come from a normative religious tradition (e.g., Christianity) or a normative theory (e.g., Marxism or reductionism). It appears that such an imposition is to be avoided for two main reasons. First, it should be avoided in order to respect the scientific distinction between theory and data. If the "data" of the religious traditions are not kept uncontaminated from the theories that attempt to explain them, then the resulting conclusion will be skewed and compromised. Second, it

should be avoided in order to be "fair" to the religious traditions themselves. For Smart (1998: 22), the primary aim of the religious studies scholar must be to provide "fair" accounts of religious traditions, thus ensuring that these accounts are not distorted, compromised, or inaccurate and therefore "unfair" to the adherents of those traditions.

If, however, the quest for neutrality stands at the core of Smart's project, it is also the point at which that project is most vulnerable. Modernity, in its late and perhaps terminal stages, has been plagued by the question of whether the search for a prized "neutrality" is possible after all. Can we really wipe away all our intellectual, cultural, and biographical conditioning in order to think, observe, and write in a white, pristine, and uncontaminated state? Should we not have learned from Kant that the mind always unavoidably interprets and shapes knowledge? Indeed, when a phenomenon, whether religious or otherwise, is observed, studied, and conveyed, it is also inevitably interpreted, shaped, and molded by the observer, no matter how "fair" she or he may attempt to be. Smart's reply to criticisms of this sort is to say that while such neutralism "is difficult to achieve in a pure sense, you can at least aim at it, aim at an approach to religions which is much better than aiming at unfairness, lack of empathy and ignorance" (1998: 22).

But such a response is problematic for at least two reasons. First, the prizing of and quest for neutrality may blind one to the way in which such a quest is itself partisan and situated. In other words, the quest for neutrality is itself far from neutral. On the contrary, it is highly particularist, being indissolubly linked with a modern scientific canon of rationality, as numerous scholars have recently pointed out. Gavin D'Costa, for instance, says that "no non-tradition-specific approach can exist and such an apparently neutral disembodied location is in fact the tradition-specific starting point of liberal modernity, what McIntyre calls the Encyclopedic tradition" (19). What this implies is that the tradition-specific starting point or "worldview" of liberal modernity is of the same order (i.e., it is another specific tradition) as the particular religious "worldviews" from which the social scientific methodology of religious studies is trying to maintain some form of "detachment."[2] Thus, the ostensibly neutral,

[2] It is worth pausing to consider this claim, which may appear to be somewhat audacious or counterintuitive. If we accept that the *form* of all traditions or "worldviews" is that they are all types of narrative, that is, if we accept that no one of them is a priori ontologically or metaphysically privileged, then in that sense we must also accept that all such "worldviews"—whether of liberal modernity or of particular world faiths—are all of the "same order." In order to dispute this, one would have to demonstrate that the form of a particular "worldview" is different from that of others, i.e., that it is somehow ontologically or metaphysically more "justified" or more securely "founded" than other narratives. Such a demonstration, however, has never been convincingly established, and,

detached, and disinterested observations of the religionist tend to be rather more committed, ideological, and particularist than was thought. Insofar as one is blind to the particularity and situatedness of this "warm neutralism," the danger is that one will imperialistically impose a particular modern western religious methodology as normative, an imposition that will be all the more insidious because of its invisibility.[3]

Second, however, we may question the dichotomy that Smart presents us, namely, that between neutral fairness, on the one hand, and a non-neutral unfairness or "ignorance," on the other. Smart's concern to be "fair" to religious traditions and not to misrepresent them is, of course, entirely commendable. It is, after all, an essential requirement of intellectual and scholarly responsibility. But one does not need to assume that "fairness" may only be secured from a position of "neutrality." For instance, I am responsible for ensuring that I represent Smart's thought fairly, accurately, and even with empathy. Indeed, it may well be said that a critique of Smart's (or anyone else's) thought can only be properly effective if it is indeed informed by such accuracy and empathy. But I need not resort to any supposed "neutral" or "agnostic" position to do so. I can be openly situated within my own worldview or tradition and be critical of Smart's position on the basis of that worldview without compromising the accuracy and empathy with which I convey Smart's thought. The relationship between commitment to a worldview and the fairness with which one treats other worldviews is not that of a zero-sum game.

A similar problem emerges when we consider the extent to which rationality is relative to particular conceptual schemes. Contrary to popular conceptions, Smart explicitly acknowledges that canons of rationality are relative to a particular narrative or tradition and that there is no overarching

indeed, I would claim that the very attempt has now become untenable. If this is so, then we may say that what distinguishes narrative traditions or "worldviews" from each other is not their *form* but their respective and particular *contents*: the specific messages and values conveyed by the narrative traditions themselves (on the distinction between the form and contents of narratives, see Loughlin: esp. 381). One corollary of this is that if one wanted to make a case for the acceptance of one narrative "worldview" over another, one would have to persuade one's interlocutor that the *contents* of that "worldview" are better, more adequate, and more meaningful. Indeed, it may well be said that my own aim at this point is to question the adequacy of a "worldview" (which we have loosely linked with a "modern scientific canon of rationality"), the contents of which suggest that religion may only be studied from a position of "neutrality." This is *not*, of course, to downgrade the scholarly commitments to fairness, accuracy, respect for data, etc. (as I make clear in my second point, which follows), but it is to deny that such commitments may only be enacted from a position of supposed "neutrality," just as it is also to call into question the "neutrality" of this very quest for neutrality.

[3] On this, see Ward, who says that for religious studies to remain blind to its own situatedness while simultaneously invoking a rhetoric of neutrality and impartiality "is not only to be profoundly deluded, it is to court the possibility of being the most powerful discourse of all" (2000b: 546).

rationality that can adjudicate between them. Smart says that "for most purposes we can treat norms of rationality in a context-dependent way. That is, leaving aside the universal theoretical sway of the law of non-contradiction, rationality can be treated relatively" (1973: 108). This denial of a tradition-transcendent rationality is one that would appeal to many contemporary scholars who are suspicious of the universalizing tendencies of classic models of religious studies. But the problem is that Smart then goes on to make yet another unwarranted connection between context-dependent rationalities and the ideal of neutrality. He says that the relativity of rationality "reinforces the possibility and indeed the theoretical acceptability of bracketing the Focus of a religion and of maintaining the posture of methodological agnosticism" (1973: 108). But why does the recognition that rational criteria are relative give rise to, or even "reinforce the possibility of," the idea of methodological agnosticism? There is no necessity for it to do so. Indeed, to make this move is to commit the common fallacy of thinking that recognition that rationalities are relative necessarily entails relativism (or neutralism or agnosticism). But, on the contrary, one can recognize that canons of rationality are relative while at the same time being committed to and situated within one such canon. What *is* questionable is the notion that one can jump outside all traditions to the "nonplace" of relativism (or neutralism or agnosticism), where no such canons apply. Furthermore, we have seen that this so-called neutral nonplace where "methodological agnosticism" prevails is predicated on a distinctively modern liberal western paradigm. It therefore constitutes a distinctive tradition with a distinctive methodology, and its privileged methodological elevation threatens to undermine Smart's professed respect for the distinctive and different rationalities of particular religious traditions.

At this point one begins to detect the emergence of three distinct paradigms with respect to the status of one's own religious tradition (or "worldview") in relation to others. Each paradigm is constituted by its own premise and conclusion. In the old or premodern paradigm the premise was that "my religious tradition is true," with the outcome or conclusion being that "all other traditions are false (or evil or heretical)." In this paradigm there is no self-reflexive recognition that other traditions constitute a distinctive and alternative social program of a similar order to one's own tradition. On the contrary, the "other" tradition is expelled, excluded, or negated as being a perversion of one's own. It is, of course, this paradigm that Smart is concerned to overcome. In the modern or "Smartian" paradigm there is a process of self-reflexive differentiation, with the result that the premise now becomes "all traditions have their own (different) internal rationale." On this paradigm, as we have seen, the conclusion or outcome is a methodological agnosticism,

with the concomitant separation of academic methodology from private commitment.

We have seen, however, that the logical connection between the premise and the conclusion here is specious, to say the least, and it is this recognition that has given rise to a new postmodern paradigm. In this new paradigm the premise remains exactly the same as on the Smartian model, namely, that "all traditions have their own (different) internal rationale." But now there is a repudiation of the problematic neutral or agnostic "view from nowhere" and a return to the adherent's particular tradition, which then serves as the criterion of truth for that individual and that community. With this move, the problematic dualism between academic methodology and private commitment is also overcome. The conclusion or outcome of this new paradigm, therefore, is that "my religious tradition is true," and we thereby find a curious convergence between the conclusion of the postmodern paradigm and the premise of the premodern paradigm. This is indeed indicative of a certain convergence between the premodern and postmodern paradigms. At the same time, however, the premise and starting point of the postmodern paradigm are shared with modernity, which indicates the fact that postmodernism is the outcome of a movement through modernity and that it cannot (and should not) erase that experience. In fact, there have recently been movements within theology that have made precisely this postmodern move. Not only does this move entail a reconception of theology itself, but it also brings with it a direct challenge to the discipline of religious studies as traditionally conceived. Let us therefore turn to this new movement within theology.

THE RETURN OF THEOLOGY

If religious studies is firmly wedded to the universalism of modernity, then it may well be expected that theology will benefit from the postmodern return to particulars. Furthermore, theology is by no means inextricably linked with modernity in the way that religious studies has been. Theologians have contrasted a religious studies that was both created by and founded on distinctively "modernist" philosophical and intellectual underpinnings with a theology for which modernity has, if anything, been profoundly destructive. They have therefore argued that the "end of modernity" cannot but prove fatal for religious studies while simultaneously offering a unique opportunity for the reconstruction of theology. The most prominent purveyors of this line of argument have been those belonging to the theological school of "radical orthodoxy," particularly John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, who have proclaimed the "end"

of religious studies and the "return" of theology.[4] They have argued that modernity, marked as it was by the primacy of rationalist and scientific modes of thought, was distinctively uncongenial for theology. The end of modernity not only has brought about a crisis of confidence in rationality and science but also has allowed us to see that the discourses of reason and science are no more "justified" and are just as "unfounded" as the discourse of theology. In light of this discovery, the way was opened for theology to expose the (particularly ethical) failures of the modernist modes of discourse and reassert its own status as the ultimate metanarrative. Thus, postmodernism is interpreted as a unique opportunity for the return and revitalization of theology, and in this sense radical orthodoxy does make a "half turn" back to the premodern. At the same time, however, a full return to the premodern paradigm is dismissed as being neither possible nor desirable. For theology is no longer thought unproblematically to "reflect" truth but, rather, is seen to be itself constitutive of truth, and it is recognized that "all our truths are only 'assumptions' or takings up from previous linguistic arrangements" (Milbank 1990b: 242). Furthermore, it is said that theology itself is not hermetically sealed but is in fact rendered intelligible by the cultural narratives in which it is embedded.[5] It is not my intention here to explore or evaluate in depth the way in which "radical orthodoxy" advocates a "return" to theology.[6] Rather, I want to look at the ways in which this "return" represents specific challenges to religious studies. To this end I shall look at some particularly relevant comments made by Graham Ward.

Ward says that "postmodernity at its liberational best is about unmasking the bonds between knowledge and power (Foucault); questioning the colonial desires of discourse (Derrida, Spivak); calling attention to the way the very construction of identity requires an abjection (Kristeva), and a subjection (Butler)" (2000b: 545). In light of all this, he says that if religious studies is to respond to the challenge presented by postmodernism, "does it not have to expose its own strategies of power/truth, surrender its privileged, omniscient perspective, deconstruct its own rhetoric and generally call into question its own ideological presuppositions? Isn't postmodern religion actually oxymoronic?" (2000b: 545). Otherwise, to remain blind to its own situatedness while simultaneously invoking a rhetoric of neutrality and impartiality "is not only to be profoundly deluded, it is to court the possibility of being the most powerful discourse of all" (Ward 2000b: 546). Indeed, the same may be said of the discourse of modern liberalism, which,

[4] See, e.g., Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward.
[5] See, e.g., Ward 2000a.
[6] I have undertaken these tasks in some depth in Hyman 2001.

as we have seen, forms the basis of religious studies itself. For as long as modern liberalism disguises its own particularity as a specific tradition in the interests of a rhetoric of impartiality, it is in danger of becoming powerful and oppressive, thereby threatening the very liberalism it claims to espouse. Ward says that, in contrast, "the theologian is 'up-front' about the economies of faith (Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, etc.) the logic of which theological discourse explores and expands. Theology acknowledges that making and moulding followers is concomitant with the practices of beliefs that it reflects upon. . . . [W]ith theology the ideology is explicit, and its explicitness is a mark of its identity and difference" (2000b: 546).

The question of difference is particularly important for Ward. Christian theology constitutes itself in its self-conscious difference from other (non-Christian) theologies and from religious studies itself. The importance of difference is ethical and political as well as ideological. For if we understand the ethical and political as a process of *making* a difference, then ethics and politics can only proceed on the basis of the recognition of substantial differences. Liberalism, and with it religious studies, eradicates or at least subordinates differences to a higher unity. Ward says that religious studies is "heir to the Faustian dreams and desires for total knowledge: that all practices and belief can be catalogued, and that in and through this cataloguing they become many aspects of the one religion, varieties of human spirituality. As such the discourses of 'religion' cannot vouchsafe difference since difference can only be epiphenomenal if the generic 'religion' is to stand" (2000b: 547). When differences, upon which politics and democracy rest, give way to unity and sameness, what results is a politics of pacifism, political stagnation, and ultimately, when all differences are eradicated, a form of totalitarianism. Ward's point, therefore, is not simply that the enterprise of religious studies is ethically admirable but ideologically redundant. More strongly, Ward wants to claim that the ideology and logic of religious studies actually undermine its ethical commitment to difference, otherness, openness, and tolerance. In contrast, a return to particular traditions may be better able to secure the very difference and openness that religious studies prizes. Theology does not advocate a neutral politics of pacifism, which can so easily turn into political impotence; rather, it more strongly postulates an ontology of peace within a specifically Christian framework. It does not merely advocate a weak "tolerance" of differences but, in fact, looks forward to the day when differences will be gathered up into a harmonious infinite unity. In the meantime, differences will need to be respected as such and not forced into a quasi-liberal and artificial unity.

At this point, therefore, we appear to be confronted with a harsh dichotomy: religious studies or theology? Furthermore, this dichotomy is

sustained by a simultaneous equation between religious studies and modernity, on the one hand, and theology and postmodernism, on the other. But what if this equation and this dichotomy themselves stand in need of deconstruction? Indeed, Ward himself admits that he "is forcing a distinction; drawing the lines of their differences more tightly than in fact they are" and that he has "strategically polarised the difference between the discourses in order to raise a question of politics with respect to that difference" (2000b: 547). It is undoubtedly the case that strategic polarizations such as this are useful in clarifying and explicating differences of the kind Ward is highlighting. But without wishing to undermine these differences, I now want to explore ways in which that dichotomy may be disturbed and deconstructed in order to point toward two possible directions for religious studies after modernity.

A POSTMODERN RELIGIOUS STUDIES?

The return to theology espoused by radical orthodoxy is undoubtedly a legitimate postmodern strategy. It represents a move away from the universal toward the particular, a return to tradition. But postmodernism is by no means homogeneous; it has numerous strands. If one strand seeks a return to tradition, a move back "inside" (as opposed to modernity's so called neutral "outside"), then another strand seeks to problematize and disrupt notions of both "inside" and "outside" and seeks to dwell in the borders and margins, the place that is "betwixt and between." It is this strand, I maintain, that opens up the space for a new form of religious studies after modernity. In practice this will mean resisting both the omniscient, detached "view from nowhere" of the "old" religious studies and the internal and confessional situatedness practiced by theology. Jettisoning both extremes, we emerge upon a "middle ground" that is neither "inside" nor "outside" traditions but which dwells on the borders of particular traditions. It is this "middle ground" that opens the space for the emergence of two main types of "religious studies" in postmodern times. In fact, these two types correspond to the two main species that Ninian Smart insists must make up a properly constituted religious studies. One is concerned to conduct "observational," "descriptive," or what Smart calls "phenomenological" studies, whereas the other is more "philosophical" in orientation, to the extent that it is more concerned with creative and constructive studies probing questions of the meaning and truth of the phenomena in question.[7] If both enterprises are appropriately

[7] See, e.g., Smart 1973: 110–111.

adapted and reformed, I suggest, then they may represent a move to a "middle ground," and together they may be regarded as constituting a "new" or "postmodern" form of religious studies.

I shall look at each of these components of the "new" religious studies in turn, but before doing so it is important to note a process that is common to both strands, namely, that of *particularization*. It is apparent that this process is already well under way, as there is everywhere a trend toward increasing specialization. The old-style phenomenology of religion that traversed religions across the globe, as incarnated in the work of Smart, is fast disappearing, if it is not already extinct. This development is not merely a coincidental trend. Rather, it reflects the fact that such cross-cultural, interreligious scholarship depended on an underlying theoretical unity that has now collapsed. Thus, in departments of religion and religious studies today, one is much less likely to find scholars of religion in the general sense and will instead find scholars of, respectively and particularly, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism. This is not to suggest that these scholars will necessarily be theologians (Jewish theologians, Islamic theologians, etc.), but neither will they be studying their respective traditions through a cross-cultural, interreligious paradigm of the sort espoused by Smart.[8] Indeed, they are likely to be immersed within their traditions (in the manner of theology) and yet at the same time also detached and distanced (in the manner of religious studies). They therefore seem to be occupying the sort of "betwixt and between" position to which I have alluded. Some of these studies may tend more toward the creative or constructive ("philosophical") model, whereas others will tend more toward the descriptive or observational ("phenomenological") model. But in both cases, the studies are being undertaken with respect to *particular* traditions rather than religion tout court.

I now want to consider one new direction for a postmodern religious studies that nevertheless continues to conduct its studies in a "descriptive," "phenomenological," or at least nonconfessional way. One such bold attempt to redefine religious studies for a new world is mounted in the essays of the recent collection *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Taylor 1998). The essayists, comprising specialists in Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, and Japanese studies, as well as anthropologists, theologians, historians, literary critics, and philosophers, all attempt to define an agenda for religious studies in a postmodern world. To this end each author discusses a particular "critical term" for religious studies, and in doing so it seems

[8] Smart is lamenting this trend when he says: "We hire someone in Taoism, let us say, and take a powerful candidate from Sinology. But she may not really be interested in Religious Studies or the logic of our enterprise. Such already exists in both Judaism and Christian studies" (1998: 31).

that what they all deliberately avoid is any attempt to provide an overarching theoretical account of the ideology and methodology of the "new" religious studies. To do so would only be to fall back into the old mode of thinking, which imagines that all religions may be subjected to the same universal interpretative grid. On the contrary, it is recognized that different religions will require different methods of study and that one's ideology must be constantly interrogated in order to avoid any cavalier impositions. What is considered to be of importance is to provide particular and various accounts of how religious studies may still be legitimately pursued even after the collapse of its modernist underpinning. In the midst of this diversity and disparity, however, it is possible to identify some key features and themes in this transformation.

First, there needs to be a revaluation of the discipline's traditional terms and concepts. The difficulty is that so many of the terms and concepts that scholars have traditionally employed in the study of religion are themselves creations of modernity, and many more are distinctively western, not least, of course, *religion* itself. Thus, many of the critical terms discussed by the authors have to be redefined, strictly circumscribed, or else abandoned altogether. At times, therefore, the relationship between the "new" religious studies and the discipline's traditional critical terms can appear unduly negative and deconstructive. David Chidester, for instance, has noted of this book that "some authors are assigned terms that are apparently central, but actually turn out to be useless" (369). Included in this category are traditional terms such as *belief*, *experience*, and, to a lesser extent, *rationality* and *sacrifice*. He says that authors who write on terms such as these exhibit a "discomfort with their assignments. Since they would rather be talking about something else, they do. Fortunately, in most cases. As a result, however, readers of *Critical Terms* can only conclude that we have written off these terms from the vocabulary of the study of religion" (370). Chidester's tone sounds regretful, but it is difficult to see how this situation could be otherwise. For contemporary religious studies has inherited a set of terms that have become inherently problematic and does not have an alternative set of terms with which to replace them. It therefore has no option but to utilize these terms and concepts while simultaneously problematizing them. As a discipline, it is destined to live out an ambivalent and uneasy relationship with its tools. As Catherine Bell puts it, "We are entering an era in which what we want to learn cannot be learned if our terminology overdetermines the theater of engagement. It is an era in which our terms are best used as a minimalist set of props with which we can begin to engage ideas and inquire into practices that may well modify the surroundings" (220–221).

But if the terms and concepts employed by religious studies stand in need of revaluation, so too does its methodology. In this discussion of Smart's methodology we have seen how religious studies espouses a social scientific methodology, with a strict separation between "theory" and "data," pursued in the interests of "fairness" and "neutrality." We have already observed that the very quest for neutrality is itself far from neutral; the ostensibly detached and disinterested observations of the religionist are seen to be rather more committed, ideological, and particularist than was thought. In this sense, therefore, they were rather closer to the theology from which the religionists were attempting to distinguish themselves. Mark C. Taylor says that in light of the unmasking of this tendency, methodological preoccupation gives way to critical theory where

> the possibilities as well as the *limitations* of alternative approaches to the study of religion are precisely delineated and analytically assessed. When critically conceived, theory calls into question every method that claims to be exhaustive. In the absence of any foundational method or comprehensive explanatory theory, no single approach to religion is adequate. In order to appreciate the richness and complexity of religious life, it is necessary to deploy a variety of interpretive strategies. (1998: 13)

Thus, whereas the "old" religious studies invoked a multidisciplinary approach to the study of religion, in order to arrive at a single, "value free," and authoritative account of religions, the "new" religious studies envisages a multidisciplinary approach that will give rise to differing and perhaps incompatible accounts of religions from various disciplinary perspectives. These differing accounts may even subvert each other, but this subversion will itself be valuable. For it will remind the scholar of the partiality and inadequacy of every standpoint and the ways in which "other" religions elude every attempt to "capture" them.

Furthermore, the traditional approaches to "comparative" questions will need to be reconsidered, particularly the priority that has been accorded to the quests for similarity and unity. It is precisely this prioritizing of unity that will have to be jettisoned if comparative studies are to survive in the "new" religious studies. Again, as Taylor says, "it is necessary to develop comparative analyses that do not presuppose universal principles or reinscribe ahistorical essences" (1998: 15). But perhaps more significant than their prioritization of similarity and unity is the way in which old comparative analyses were conducted on the basis of an a priori western philosophical foundation. It was this, after all, that gave rise to the obsessions with unity and sameness. What will need to happen, therefore, is that this modern western philosophical paradigm

will have to become a participant in the comparative exercise rather than the a priori basis on which it is conducted. Indeed, what will be even more fruitful and subversive as a comparative exercise will be to compare religious traditions precisely in order to identify where they would unite in opposition to the very modernist framework through which they have previously been interpreted.

For instance, two of the most popular candidates for interreligious dialogue, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, were Christianity and various strands of Buddhism. One of the reasons for their popularity in this regard was their apparent "difference" from each other. Paradoxically, however, this difference was frequently expressed in terms of a distinctively modern and western philosophical paradigm, the effect of which was precisely to eradicate such difference. This was most frequently expressed by saying that one could contrast an "antirealist" or "deconstructionist" Buddhism with a "realist" or "foundationalist" Christianity. More specifically, the doctrine of Emptiness has been interpreted as a species of antirealism or, perhaps, a form of the postmodern strategy of deconstruction.[9] This was contrasted with the logocentric metaphysics of Christian theology as found in the work of Augustine and Aquinas, for example, with its "realist" or foundational concept of truth being founded on a transcendental signified, its monotheistic God.[10] And yet such characterizations have been rejected by both Buddhist and Christian alike. Such rejections were not merely founded on the justifiable claim that Christianity and, especially, Buddhism are polyvalent and complex phenomena that resist being reduced to such cavalier generalizations. More radically, it was claimed that the very categories through which the traditions were being read and interpreted were in fact alien to the traditions themselves. It was claimed that the philosophical distinctions between realism and antirealism and even, perhaps, between foundationalism and deconstruction are effects of a dualism that stands at the heart of modern western metaphysics.

For most strands of Buddhism, such dualism is constitutive of the human predicament of suffering (*dukkha*), and the Buddhist response can in no way be to espouse a nonrealist as opposed to a realist conception

[9] Mark Siderits, for instance, has said that the doctrine of Emptiness "may, I think, be viewed as a version of what is currently called anti-realism" (231). Newman Robert Glass (1995a, 1995b) has identified two dominant scholarly readings of the doctrine of Emptiness, both of which may be viewed as forms of deconstruction. He claims that one of them corresponds to the "mutual affirmation" of Thomas J. J. Altizer, whereas the other corresponds to the "endless deferral" of Mark C. Taylor, although Glass himself suggests a third reading of the doctrine.

[10] Such a reading of the Christian tradition was dominant throughout the modern period. For a particularly robust defense of a "realist" and "foundationalist" interpretation of Christianity, see Hebblethwaite.

of truth but, rather, to break through and transcend that very dichotomy.[11] Similarly, in the later half of the twentieth century many Christian theologians were attempting to rescue their own tradition from centuries of distortion by modern metaphysics. They labored to recover a more authentic theology that, if not nonrealist, is not exactly realist and certainly not foundationalist. They argue that the specifically "theological" realism found in the work of Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas is quite different from the foundational and metaphysical realism that defines itself as the direct antithesis of antirealism.[12] Thus, specific forms of Buddhism and Christianity may find that they share a common opposition to the philosophical tradition through which they have frequently been interpreted. Such a point of contact may provide an opening for a new form of religious dialogue that respects rather than subsumes the other's alterity. In such a conversation the modern metaphysics of liberalism would be that which is contested rather than the a priori basis on which the conversation is conducted.[13] Indeed, this type of exercise has been advocated by John Milbank, who has said that

> while it is true that the modern consensus tends to disguise the differences among traditional social projects, it is also the case that some coincidences in outlook between these projects, which together contrast with the modern outlook, can be relatively ignored. . . . In certain circumstances, and in the context of a search for modes of cultural existence not under the aegis of liberal capitalism, and more respectful of religions as social projects than the sovereign liberal state can dare to be, these coincidences could indeed provide the religions with something useful to talk about. (1990a: 184–185)

With these various moves, therefore, we see the emergence of a quasi framework for what may be described as a "postmodern religious studies" that nevertheless retains a commitment to an "observational" or nonconfessional methodology. But in spite of all these transformations and reevaluations, it should not be thought that the notion of a "postmodern religious studies" has become unproblematic; on the contrary, several lacunae remain. First, even a residual commitment to a cross-cultural study of religion presupposes that there is something that can unproblematically be identified as "religion," and yet we have seen the way in

[11] Consequently, Roger Jackson has argued that Buddhist thought cannot be unproblematically characterized as either "foundationalist" or "deconstructive." I make a similar argument with respect to "realism" and "antirealism" in Hyman 1998.

[12] For examples of this approach, see the essays by Denys Turner, Fergus Kerr, and Graham Ward in Crowder.

[13] I discuss these issues in more depth in Hyman 1998.

which this term is a creation of the modern western scholar that has now been seriously problematized. This is not simply a question of nomenclature. For when the signifier was coined, when religion was "named" as such, it was not simply that an already identifiable phenomenon was simply being "named"; on the contrary, the coining of that signifier itself constituted the creation of the signified as a unified, though diverse, phenomenon. It was also the creation of the standpoint from which the phenomenon could be observed, identified, and named as such. To the extent that the term *religion* remains fraught with these presuppositions, the term itself remains unstable.

Second, the "descriptive" or nonconfessional standpoint remains problematic even when the claims to "objectivity" and "neutrality" have been deconstructed. For some sort of account needs to be given of the particular standpoint from which the "description" is made. If the disembodied "view from nowhere" has been repudiated and yet, at the same time, the religionist does not speak from within the faith community or tradition being studied, then where exactly does he or she stand? It is clear that a coherent and self-reflexive account of the situatedness of the religious studies scholar is required. Can these difficulties be overcome? Possibly, though not unambiguously. And what cannot be doubted is that such questions will continue to haunt the various enterprises that would characterize themselves as forms of religious studies.

A/THEOLOGY AND/AS RELIGIOUS STUDIES

I now want to consider a second possible direction for a postmodern reconception of religious studies, a direction that deconstructs still further the boundary between religious studies and theology. If the "new" and yet "observational" religious studies represents a movement to an "intermediate zone" from the "old," neutral, descriptive, methodologically agnostic religious studies, then this second direction represents a corresponding movement from the other end of the spectrum, namely, a move away from theology. Such studies are concerned primarily with philosophical, creative, and constructive religious thinking that emerges out of but is also, to some extent, distanced from traditional theological thinking. In the Christian tradition a good example of this involves the various forms of postmodern "a/theology" or "secular theology" that have arisen in recent years, particularly as represented in the work of such thinkers as Mark C. Taylor, John D. Caputo, Carl A. Raschke, and Charles E. Winquist. Their work is a form of religious reflection that takes place neither "inside" in the manner of theology nor "outside" in

the manner of religious studies but, rather, in an intermediate zone. It has, in fact, appropriated and developed methodological concepts and tools from both theology and religious studies.

From theology it has inherited a more self-consciously situated embeddedness. Thinking, albeit transgressively, within the resources of the Christian theological tradition, it repudiates the neutral, descriptive, and social scientific stance of religious studies. Not content to "observe" and "describe" in the manner of the scholar of religions, it engages in creative and constructive (as well as deconstructive) thought at the interface between theology and philosophy. As Ray L. Hart has put it, theology "is not content alone to describe these vastly differing accounts among the world religions, but takes the additional step of asking: What do they *mean for me, for us*?" (733–734). Insofar as postmodern a/theology asks likewise, we may say that it is indeed in closer proximity to theology.

On the other hand, however, postmodern a/theology also wishes to distinguish itself from theology, and in doing so it draws nearer to religious studies. For its relationship to the theological tradition and canon is considerably more ambivalent and complex than it is for "pure" theologians, such as the proponents of radical orthodoxy. These transgressive a/theological thinkers want to question and disrupt the matrix of faith as much as they want to work within it. As Clayton Crockett asks, "What are the possibilities of a genuinely radical theological thinking, which allows contemporary philosophical expressions to inform, affect and even distort theology itself?" (4). We have seen that the theologians of radical orthodoxy utilize the strategies of postmodern critical theory in order to deconstruct the apparently neutral "outside" vantage point occupied by modern liberalism and to move back to a position "inside" theology. The religious thinkers of "secular theology" similarly want to interrogate the totalizing perspective of modern liberalism, but for them the retrospective move back to theology is equally problematic. They maintain that postmodern critical theory problematizes not only a neutral disembodied location "outside" theology but also a nostalgic retrospective location "inside" theology. Instead, they seek to enact a fluid, shifting position that is liminal, intermediate, and marginal with respect to theology. In order to articulate this shifty, liminal (dis)position, they have coined the terms *a/theology* and *secular theology*. Increasingly, however, and perhaps to emphasize still further their distance from orthodox theology, they have utilized the terminology of the "religious" and have characterized their reflective activity as "religious thought."[14] *Religious*

[14] It is significant, for instance, that a collection of essays considering the question "Who comes after the God of metaphysics?" is entitled *The Religious* (Caputo) rather than *The Theological*.

thought, it should be emphasized, is distinct from *theological* thought, on the one hand, and thought *about religion*, on the other.[15] If *theological* thought is the reflection undertaken by "insiders" and thought *about religion* is the activity undertaken by "outsiders," then *religious* thought is the reflection undertaken by the marginal exiles—those who can be neither insiders nor outsiders.

This liminal disposition is thought to be necessary because if theology has become problematic in postmodern times, then the traditional antithesis of secular atheism has been equally problematized. One of the motifs of these thinkers is that the death of God or the absence of the traditional object of faith in contemporary culture gives rise not to secularism or atheism but, rather, to all-pervasive "traces" of the "religious" or the "sacred." Mark C. Taylor, for instance, says: "While I no longer believe in God, I can no longer avoid believing in the sacred" (1999: 31). If God is the object of theology, then the sacred is the object of the "religious," though what religion itself is remains elusive: "The religion that today calls for reflection does not answer questions or provide meaning but abandons us in, and opens us to, worlds that are ever more complex. Forever turning toward what is always slipping away, we can never be certain what religion is about" (Taylor 1999: 6). Thus, as gods disappear and theology fails, the terminology of the "religious" is invoked to denote a post-theological form of thinking at the end of theology. What is particularly interesting, therefore, is that the term *religion* is taking on a new meaning here—it is not being used in the traditional sense as a generic term to refer to world faiths but, rather, to refer to (a/) theological thought at the end of theology: the theological here gives way to the "religious." *Religion* and *the religious* have thus become interstitial terms that refer to forms of thought that occur *between* theological thought and thought "about religion."

This adoption of the terminology of the "religious" has, however, been criticized by theologians for repeating the same hegemonic moves as the "old" form of religious studies. Graham Ward, for instance, has said of Taylor's work that "the repetition of 'religion' and 'religious,' and cognate terms like 'spiritual' and 'sacred,' masks the Christian vision and offers descriptions in a seemingly neutral and non-partisan manner. . . . It is the invisible operation of a Christian hegemony, speaking in the generic name of religion, that disturbs me" (2000b: 545). Ward's "cautionary note" here is one that should be heeded. Those who engage in "religious thought" should be explicit and "up front" about the particularist and tradition-specific character of their enterprise. They should be

[15] The question of the relationship between thinking "about" religion and "religious thinking" is discussed in Taylor and Raschke.

clear that the matrix of orthodoxy, toward which they articulate a disposition of ambivalence, is specifically that of Christian theology. If this admonition is heeded, however, then there is surely no need to abandon the terminology of the "religious," which is, after all, a useful way of distinguishing this form of thought from the "theological." The terminology of "religion" and the "religious" would thus adapt itself to postmodern conditions rather than being dismissed as inherently modern and rejected altogether. Just as we have seen the "observational" form of religious studies to be adapting itself by becoming explicitly particularized, so too the philosophical, constructive, and creative form of religious studies must be similarly and explicitly particularized.[16]

It may well be asked whether this "a/theology" or postmodern "religious thought" would be better characterized as a form of "theology" or a form of "religious studies." The question is a pertinent one because we have seen that this a/theology not only enacts a disposition of ambivalence toward the tradition of theological orthodoxy but also utilizes methodological tools from both theology and religious studies. Precisely because of this liminality, it can, no doubt, be as profitably pursued within a theological context as within a religious studies context. But if, as I am suggesting, religious studies itself should be and perhaps is being reconceived as a liminal "borderland territory," then it may well serve as a particularly appropriate and congenial host. Furthermore, if this postmodern "religious thought" were to take its place beside the reformed "observational" strand of religious studies to form a "new" religious studies, these two spheres may well supplement and complement each other, thus fulfilling the old aspiration of religious studies to comprise both "phenomenological" and "philosophical" approaches.

TOWARD A "NEW" RELIGIOUS STUDIES: BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Although relatively young, religious studies is already experiencing a major transformation in its own self-definition. As Ray Hart remarks in his survey of a sample of North American university departments,

[16] I am aware that in this discussion of the "philosophical" form of the "new" religious studies, I have focused exclusively on the particular form that exists on the borders and margins of Christian theology, primarily because this is the form that has been most fully developed and with which I am most familiar. In principle there is no reason why such thought should not develop out of other traditions, and, indeed, in some cases, this is well under way. There have, for instance, been attempts to articulate postmodern dispositions with respect to the Jewish tradition in, e.g., Robbins and Boyarin and in the Buddhist tradition in, e.g., Akizuki. It is interesting to speculate, however, as to whether the postmodern disposition is so distinctively western that we should not expect this form of religious studies to develop out of other nonwestern traditions.

> *Many* observe that the present situation in the study of religion is "liminal," that it is marked above all by flux. Old "certainties" are jeopardized if not overturned, new and troubling questions are being asked, promising new approaches are being experimented with and very little is fixed . . . . Whether diversity and dissonance bespeak only chaos (as some think) or only the liminality that inevitably precedes the emergence of new paradigms (as others think) is, for now, an open question. (726)

Although more than ten years have passed, this question remains, largely, open. In this essay I have provided one possible answer and have offered a theoretical account of why these old "certainties" and paradigms have passed away. The danger here is that with the collapse of old "certainties" and paradigms, religious studies scholars will continue with their studies in a vacuum, without any theoretical account of what they are doing or why they are doing it.

What I have attempted here, therefore, is to fill this theoretical vacuum. Without wishing to underestimate the impact that the "eclipse of modernity" has on religious studies, I have sketched a vision of a way in which religious studies may adapt itself—and to some extent already is adapting itself—to the new cultural and intellectual climate. I have argued that the end of modernity brings with it the collapse of the old dichotomy between a neutral, disinterested religious studies and a sealed, committed theology. Theology has come to realize that it is not hermetically sealed and that it is itself rendered intelligible by the cultural narratives in which it is embedded. Religious studies, meanwhile, has come to realize that the ideal of the neutral observer is illusory and that the discipline is itself underpinned by certain presuppositions that are themselves more theological than was previously thought. With the collapse of this dichotomy, both enterprises move more into a middle ground. But for religious studies, to accept the end of this dichotomy and to move into the middle ground are also to give up much of the old methodology, ideology, and dogma. In the wake of this transformation I have identified two complementary directions in which religious studies may move. Whereas one direction is engaged primarily in appropriately reformed descriptive and observational studies, the other direction engages primarily in constructive and philosophical studies. Although methodologically heterogeneous, these two forms of religious studies share two significant points of contact: first, we have seen that in both cases their respective enterprises have been appropriately and explicitly *particularized* and, second, they position themselves marginally and liminally with respect to their particular traditions. Whether "observational" or "philosophical," these two forms of religious studies eschew both the "inside" positioning of theology and the "outside" positioning of

the "old" religious studies in favor of a disposition that is "betwixt and between," a disposition of ambivalence. Both strands, therefore, represent movements to an "intermediate zone," together constituting a deconstruction of the dialectical opposition between a "pure" theology and a "pure" religious studies. As such, they would constitute a religious studies better able to respond to both the end of modernity and the return of theology.

Although I have identified some points of contact between these two distinct spheres of the "new" religious studies, there is, admittedly, no theoretical unity between or even within them other than a common opposition to the old paradigm that has passed or is passing away. In the absence of a unitary theoretical account it may well be that "religious studies" (both the discipline and the institutional departments) will instead serve the practical purpose of being a "placeholder" within which dialogue may occur.[17] Thus, whereas the religious dialogue and interaction once took place *within* the work of individual scholars of religion (with the individual "religionist" roaming around the world of faiths), on this new account such interaction will now take place *between* such scholars (with scholars of *particular* traditions engaging with each other). Indeed, it may be said that this model will produce a more genuine dialogue and religious interaction on an academic level than has been the case hitherto. For now a genuine engagement with others (precisely *as* others) will replace the individual religionist's attempt at "mastery." What also follows from this new model is that "religious studies" understood in this sense as a "placeholder" or "umbrella" will be ideologically and methodologically "empty." To say this is not to advocate a return to the illusory "neutrality" of the old paradigm; rather, it is to say that there will be no a priori ideological and methodological "foundation" for religious studies. On the contrary, the ideology and methodology will be part of what is contested by the dialogue partners. Eschewing a universal Kantian grid for the study of religion, differences in approaches to such study will come to the fore and will constitute an important part of the contestations and conversations of the "new" religious studies.

Without an a priori methodological foundation, religious studies will become what Alasdair MacIntyre has called "a community of contested discourses" (22).[18] As such, it will have sacrificed a unified and common theoretical self-definition. But it will have gained a greater sensitivity toward and awareness of the "other" and consequently should arrive at "fairer"

[17] I borrow the term *placeholder* from Ninian Smart (1993), who uses it in a different, though related, sense.

[18] I am grateful to my colleague Richard Roberts for drawing my attention to this phrase. See also Roberts: 88.

and more empathetic accounts of particular religious traditions. It will also have gained a place where religions (whether particular faiths and theologies or academic studies of those faiths) can confront and engage with each other on their own terms rather than on the a priori basis of a specious pacifism that turns out to be a covert eradication of differences. This, in turn, should give rise to a more vibrant and vigorous religious engagement than was allowed for by the insipid and ostensibly neutral tradition of liberal modernity. Thus reconceived, religious studies will also be better placed to pick up the gauntlet laid down by an emboldened theology in postmodern times.

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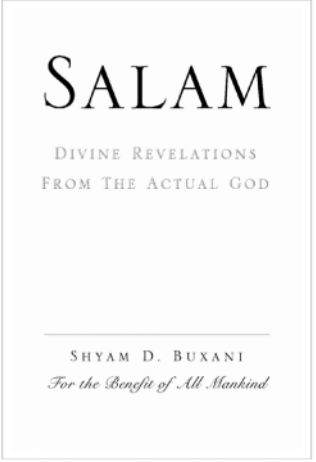

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