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Studying religion in context

Perspectives and conclusions

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in the study of religion

Historical and comparative approaches to the study of religion were formative to the origins of religious studies and remain important today despite a withering critique of both by postmodern theorists. The two are linked together in our survey for various reasons. Each can refer to methods in the study of religion, but both the “history of religion” and “comparative religion” have been used as more general terms synonymous with the relatively new discipline of religious studies. These terms were used to distinguish the academic study of religion from traditional theological and philosophical studies. Comparative religion highlighted how this academic study of religion encompasses traditions, texts, myths, and rituals beyond Christianity, and uses comparison to categorize, abstract, and distill religious types, recurrent themes, and the diverse expressions of what may be more unified, or at least meaningfully related, religious modes. Similarly, the history of religion called for examining each religion’s history and the relationship among religions and between religion and other aspects of society aided by the historian’s questions, research methods, insights, and standards.

Historical approaches

History is generally a narrative account—typically written, although there are oral histories—of the past, drawn from a variety of relatively reliable sources. History strives for neutrality in its presentation of facts about the past. Historians also attempt to analyze events to illustrate relationships, particularly cause and effect, between processes or events to demonstrate how a certain situation resulted from previous factors. Although historians have not always agreed with each other on their analyses of past events (e.g. on what was the real cause of the war against the former ruler of

Iraq, Saddam Hussein), there has often been a generally naïve acceptance, particularly by non-specialist readers of history, that even though analyses and interpretations may vary, historical “facts” are unquestionable. However, postmodern sensibilities have dramatically affected the discipline of history, where even certain items once accepted as “facts”—such as whether Christopher Columbus really did “discover” the New World in 1492—are now placed under scrutiny.

The sweeping historical meta-narratives of the rise and fall of civilizations have fallen out of favor and been replaced by studies more deep than broad—that is, more attentive to unique qualities of specific historical context and wary of periodization, which characterizes a vast span of time as an essentially unified whole, or of similar generalizations that do not sufficiently differentiate between the experiences and context of different places, times, classes, cultures, genders, societies, institutions, and individual agents. The same movements can be detected in historical approaches to religious studies. Some earlier works had more pronounced comparative dimensions and could suggest not just a progression of an individual tradition but of religion as a whole. This idea of progress invoked social evolutionary notions of religion developing from its infancy—primitive religions characterized by animism or a lack of texts or central authority—to its maturity, which, not coincidentally, closely resembled the forms of Christianity typical of the theorists discussing religion in this way. Distortions from theories of progress, social evolution, history, and civilization that culminate in Western Christianity—as well as related bias in some comparative studies—have inspired postmodern critiques and attacks on the excesses and problems of both historical and comparative approaches.

However, each approach, done conscientiously, is still valuable and necessary for the study of religion. Religion is one of many subjects of study within the discipline of history. There is no essential difference between a historical study of religion conducted by a scholar in a history department or a colleague in religious studies who employs this approach. Moreover, academic studies that do not explicitly identify themselves with this approach nonetheless typically require some attention to historical context. Some approaches pay close attention to history and others feel free to uproot data from historical context, but the latter are usually criticized if they attempt to escape it altogether. Even the notion of “postmodern” presumes historical progression from pre-modern to modern to postmodern as well as time-bound notions of modernity and the modern project.

Comparative and historical approaches are also linked by their relative freedom to employ a wide variety of theoretical tools. Neither approach is particularly aligned with or determined by any one theory or ideological commitment. The subject matter, emphasis, and theoretical stance can differ considerably among historians in general and even among historical studies of religion in particular. The most useful training and sources needed to study early Christian communities are quite different from the resources necessary to understand the entry and development of Buddhism in China. However, there may be considerable overlap in the types of questions asked and the theoretical tools used to better understand and explain the historical dynamics involved. Then again, the theoretical tools may be significantly different

between these studies or even among studies that focus on the same tradition, place, and time period. Some historians have a strongly determined theoretical stance and ideological commitment. For example, some Marxist historians not only focus on social class and economic influences on history; they also agree with, and may even attempt to foster, the teleological view of Karl Marx that history is moving in a particular direction toward a classless society. However, such a strong ideological commitment is the exception rather than the norm. There is still greater variety in the commitment to and orientation of theoretical stances. Many historians would not be troubled by a relatively weak, or loose, correlation between historical approach and theoretical perspective. For them, an overly determined ideological or theoretical perspective can distort analysis of history by reading into the historical record the very conclusions with which such an historian began his or her study. In short, most would not strive to be known as theoreticians. Moreover, some historians of religion who are well known for their sociological or phenomenological perspectives have been placed in those categories already rather than discussed in this brief overview.

Comparative approaches

Even in these introductory preceding sections, we have already drawn attention to shared elements among religions. Such similarities can be as obvious as the observation that most religions consist of sets of beliefs and assortments of practices, or more particularly, that they may possess sacred specialists, revere scriptures, or utilize symbols. The comparative perspective and approach in the discipline of religious studies differs from the kind of comparison that an evangelical (i.e. missionary) tradition might take. Missionaries may seek to compare religions, pointing out how one religion's values are misguided in order to present their own tradition more favorably. In religious studies, the trend has been to try to understand religions more effectively through comparison, but not to assert the hierarchical superiority of one religion over the other.

Any of the above approaches to the study of religion, or the study of anything else for that matter, can and do make use of comparison. Comparison is inevitable for any study that includes categories. In fact, it is apparent in any study that uses language. If language were to disavow comparison and categories in favor of absolute uniqueness, the explosion of vocabulary would be matched by the implosion of our ability to communicate. The variance along a spectrum can be summarized in a simplistic way by noting that sometimes comparison in studies of religion is at the forefront, and at other times it is not.

Scholars such as Eric Sharpe and William Paden have contributed histories and studies of this approach, and seminal figures such as Max Müller, James Frazer, Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, and Wendy Doniger have helped shape the academic study of religion through their use of comparative approaches. Müller, Frazer, and Doniger all appear in our section on anthropological approaches. Müller

also appears under phenomenological approaches along with Eliade and Campbell. Eliade, in turn, championed the use of the term “history of religion” for his discipline, further linking these contextual approaches. Joseph Campbell, who also appears in the section exploring psychological approaches to religion due to his link with Jung, is one of the most widely read comparativists, whose popular books and television series study myths from all over the world and reveal similarities among the themes encountered there. The discovery of such themes as the quest of the hero against seemingly insurmountable odds (e.g. Jason and the Golden Fleece and the search for the Holy Grail), for instance, can lead us to insights into the shared concerns of human beings throughout time and in widely dispersed places. Other scholars have, however, pointed out that the comparative perspective may tend to gloss over unique differentiating features within individual myths as one attempts to search for similarities. J. Z. Smith has been one such effective critic of comparison that is insufficiently attuned to difference. This tension between focusing on particulars, that is, on regional specifics within their cultural contexts, and the search for universals, on shared meanings, symbols, and such, is intrinsic to the comparative perspective. Kimberley Patton and Benjamin Ray’s *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (2000) provides a series of insightful essays from influential scholars addressing the problems and promise of this approach.

Some concluding theoretical and methodological issues in the study of religion

When considering the historical development of the discipline of religious studies, two major trends emerge. These derive from one of the discipline’s classic dichotomies, namely, “insider” versus “outsider” approaches. The developments of insider approaches move from what were once thick theological and apologetic studies of one’s own traditions, to thin, or thickly veiled, theological or apologetic studies of one’s own traditions. One also finds within this orientation scholarship that accepts (sometimes with great subtlety) the notion of supernatural realities within the framework of studying other people’s religions, or religion in general (e.g. certain phenomenological approaches might fit into this category). One might suggest that these approaches are generically theological, or apologetic, not because they espouse any particular religious notion, but because they accept the existence of some sort of spiritual reality to which human beings have related in various ways, at various times, and within various cultures. In contrast, the outsider approaches might be regarded as philosophical, insofar as they attempt to examine religious beliefs and practices and analyze these intellectually. In early expressions of these approaches, the religions studied were not typically those of the scholar, who might also have expressed various degrees of disdain or even hostility towards the subject matter. This is because religious beliefs and practices were, and still are, often seen as irrational or emotional, going against fundamental orientations of the outsider

approach, which is grounded in the application of rational thought to the object of study. However, in recent decades, the trajectory of outsider approaches has been to try to understand the human propensity for religion in less pejorative terms, to seek within religion an expression of rational behaviour, and so on. A key criterion in outsider approaches is the non-belief by the scholar in any of the supernatural categories of the religious tradition being studied.

To some extent, the theological and philosophical perspectives in religious studies, which we have categorized as “traditional” in this text, have matured with the discipline over the last century so as to be not so far apart as they once were. Until a few decades ago, it was incumbent on scholars to conceal their personal religious orientations and present their studies with a semblance of objectivity (i.e. the outsider philosophical orientation) mixed with sensitivity (i.e. the insider apologetic orientation). No one should have been able to tell whether the approach was insider or outsider. Thus both the Muslim and the atheist might conduct scholarly studies of Islam, but the former should guard against any hint of an apologetics that distorts objectivity and reason in the data gathering and analysis, and the latter should guard against any taint of aloofness or disdain that might jeopardize a sympathetic engagement with the experiential reality of believers. This secrecy of religious orientation (“don’t ask, don’t tell”) continues to the present day, although postmodern sensibilities have led some religious studies scholars to think it valuable to make one’s personal orientation (insider or outsider) evident to the reader at the outset. It would not be incorrect to suggest that in the current culture of the discipline of religious studies one is more likely to forgive the work of an undeclared scholar who errs on the side of the outsider perspective than on the insider. Nevertheless, it is also possible to hear scathing rebukes of purportedly sensitive objective scholarship from factions in the discipline who seek full disclosure of a scholar’s social, cultural, religious, and other statuses. It would also perhaps be correct to suggest that in reality there is more work that errs on the side of insider perspectives. The simple fact is that there are more insiders working on their own religious traditions, albeit making efforts to do so within their understanding of the constraining parameters of the discipline of religious studies.

One of the most intriguing theoretical implications in religious studies derives from ruminations by scholars such as J. Z. Smith. Smith and others have argued that although people through much of history and virtually everywhere engage in practices and entertain thoughts through which they relate to deities or other supernatural entities, these ideas and acts are deeply interwoven with other features of their existence. They are not typically being consciously religious here and non-religious there. The notion of “religion” is thus a creation of academics, who separate it from other thoughts and actions, and then engage in the study of what they designate as “religion.” Smith, for instance, argues that scholars should thus not restrict themselves exclusively to the phenomena that religious insiders would designate as features of “their religion” (e.g. canonical scriptures), but should be willing to look at virtually anything which can be justified as further elucidating the realities of human religiosity.

Studying religion

Jonathan Z. Smith: “Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly selfconscious.”

A provocative implication of these observations and prescriptions is that they recognize the religious studies scholar as engaged in an enterprise that elevates the discipline over its conventional, narrowly defined subject matter. Additionally, when engaged in the exercise of one’s scholarly activities, the discipline of religious studies is more important to the scholar than any religion being studied. This notion is not at all unusual if we apply it to some other discipline: for example, we might say that when engaged in research in chemistry, the proper exercise of the scientific methods of chemistry is more important than the polymers being studied. Just as polymers are useful entities but are not intrinsically sacrosanct, so too are religions for the scholar engaged in her disciplinary research. Religions need not be handled with overly reserved politeness. Just because a suicide bomber believes that his act of mass murder will guarantee him a place in paradise does not make that belief and behaviour sacrosanct for the scholar. Just because the followers of a religious tradition believe that its founder is divine, and his teachings will enable them to attain liberation, does not give this belief a status that elevates it beyond disciplinary analysis. Just because a martyr believes that her crucifixion absolves all humanity of its sins does not make the belief and practice beyond scrutiny, doubt, or analysis. In other words, the taboos of religious believers need to be understood and appreciated, but need not (or even should not) be embraced by religious studies scholars in the exercise of their discipline. Furthermore, it is not necessary or even sufficient to study exclusively what others tell us are their religions and their defining parameters. It is necessary for the scholar to look beyond these insider-defined features and categories to social, political, economic, and cultural traits, and so on. These may be so intrinsically interconnected with each other and with the insider-defined religious categories as to make them all arguably “religious.”

One might suggest that the exploratory terrain of religious studies is everything within the purview of humanity’s conceptions of and relationship to reality as perceived, conceived, and imagined. This conception of religion as intrinsically connected to virtually all features of existence and defined by the scholar’s choice is different from the notion of religion as being difficult to define because of fuzzy boundaries. It is also different from the notion that “religion” is simply a commonly used term, like most other terms, such as music or matter, which are relatively easily grasped and adequately applied by most people. Instead, the implication here is that

it is the scholar who can and does define the object of her study as “religion,” provided she can make a convincing case for why this is so. It raises intriguing and provocative questions as to whether religious studies scholars are then themselves engaged in religious activities when occupied with the interest of their discipline. Is the discipline of religious studies religious? Perhaps it is, if one understands the question through the framework of this all-encompassing scope of religion, the scholar’s role in creating the category, and the imaginative activities employed by scholars to participate in the practice of religious studies. However, this question—in the way it would most likely be initially read and understood—could, and probably should, also be answered “no,” in the sense that one need not be religious to do religious studies, and that the doing of religious studies is not a religious type of practice. This is because while engaged in the academic study of religion at a secular university, one should neither be setting the norms of a religious tradition nor should the scholar be restricting his or her analysis of that tradition in deference to the tradition’s own taboos and ultimate claims. Moreover, although the practice of religious studies may require scholars to develop and exemplify such qualities as sensitivity, patience, judgment, and critical analysis, as well as a passion for understanding, which are traits shared and promoted by certain religious traditions, the scholars’ quest in the practice of their discipline is a fully human undertaking.

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