

How far are we justified in treating 'religion' as a valid area of academic study?

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intro

Religion can no longer be justified as a valid area of academic study for the following two objections. 1. The social fact of conflict. 2. Influence of the Church. This grammatological critique of the portability of the term 'religion' suggests that the categorisation of experience in to religious and non-religious was the work of organised religion and that the history of religion is contentious and fraught with conflict, not only globally, nationally but locally too. People have been and are divided along religious lines. However, it is through the study of 'experience' and its 'intensities' we can develop meta-theory of equanimity across a fractured cross-cultural 'ethnoscape' (cf Appadurai 2013). Paradoxically, allowing religion to be 'everything' and 'nothing' at the same time (quantum social research, I would call it). I aim summarise ideas from social science, critical religious studies, this line of thinking is exploratory and a fractured, post-modern, work in progress.

The Social fact of conflict

The first objection to the term religion centres around the idea that the 'study of religions' is a conflict area. The study highlights and possibly strengthens social division. History shows are how wars are fought, families killed, in the name of religion. Religion and conflict are synonymous, they work well together (as: symbolic and actual violence? - Bourdieu). Is it ethical the promote the term in such a case? The study of experience is a study of a universal, whereas religion itself is historically specialised in social division. There are many extremely sensitive subjects one could choose, not least the question of religious truth.

Religious studies academics are bound to ask uncomfortable questions, the simple question of proof is at the heart of the enlightenment period coupled with the rise and rise of scientific materialism (Chomsky 1993). Today however, 40% of the American public believe that the earth is 6000 years old and consequently that the bible is a book of literal truths: the ark has been reconstructed as a themed Museum (Genesis, A). Therefore, the bible is of great personal value to Christians. To criticise or question the bible is to attack people's lives directly and personally, this is also true for the Koran, the Torah.

Academic researchers Prof. Stavrakopoulou (Exeter University) disputes the literal truth of the Hebrew bible from an atheistic perspective and considers the bible a collection (anthology) which is not based on factual happenings, but contains at best, allegorical truths and myths, legend and folk tale (Wyatt 2008). I think personally, this view of the bible would bring the text in line with other ancient writings such as the Tao d Ching which is loosely attributed to Lao Tzu but generally accepted to be the written work of many writers spanning hundreds of years (Xunzi 1967). The same applies to the work of Confucius (Ivanhoe 2000), The Vedas, The Buddhist Canon [the work of men]. The Bible, rightly so, has no privilege or pride of place for many academic readers. This kind of assessment is not acceptable to Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Theologist and believers, and can only alienate 'them' from 'us' as Christians vs Academics. Let us therefore leave the word 'religion' out of our study and instead look at 'the intensity of experience', it is a portable notion (drawn from Hardy, 1984, James 1985, Flood 1999).

[Influence of the church](#)

'The construction of 'religion' and 'religions' as global, cross-cultural objects of study has been part of a wider historical process of western imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism': (Fitzgeraald 8)

The second main objection pertains to the study of so called 'religious experience'. There is a high possibility that certain types of experiences have been deemed religious (capitalised on) before the academic discipline arose: therefore, the academic discipline has inherited categorisations from third party sources (such as the church,

governments, imperial forces etc). The church has monopolised certain types of experiences as 'holy' and therefore religious. The monopoly has been wholly supported by society at large, the categorisation has now embodied in the citizens of society at large.

Social organisation manifests in many forms (Bourdieu 1989, Derrida 1997, Weber 2011). As can be observed by organised 'religion' but also as many other activities: as sports fans, as musicians, as nations. as capitalists. How are social forms of organisation not all religious when they have sacred objects, certain practices etc (sacred, pious, holy, dutiful). Many of the synonyms for religion are portable: sacred ground, places of worship, tradition, repetition. There is no distinction between religious experience and the experiences of life in general, including war, identity, belonging.

When "holy "experiences are ratified by the church as 'religious' [social capital] a person may be revered of even canonised. Therefore, for the want of identification with the authority of the church, there to internalised and manifest the church habitas (Bourdieu 2005). Many such experiences maybe consciously or unconsciously manufactured to curry favour with the church, social aspects as shown to be influential. Whether this is true or not the point is that experience is not the property of the church or of religion but have been claimed.

There must be a way to classify experience outside of the influence of the church (Fitzgerald examines 2004:7). Hence my insistence that what we are studying is 'intensity of experience' as opposed to 'religious experiences'. This is because experience is the centre core of this study as opposed to religion (and all of its embedded conflicts and overtones).

Intensity of experience.

Experience is a universal phenomenon not limited to humans. Nimian Smart places experience at the root of organised religion, experience is a given in every sense for Smart, its intensity is infinitely variable. I classify experience as a matter of intensity, when viewed as such I can clearly see that certain intensities of experience have been claimed by religion as well as by academics in the study of religion.

Experience is a universal, which explains why an atheist as well as a theist have reported and testified to similar experiences. This is because the atheist is having an experience of a certain intensity which corresponds to the label 'religious experience'. It suits religion very well to say that an atheist has had or is having a 'religious experience', it is a validation for the church and the believers in the church. All human beings are having experiences all the time, the range of which is the fundamental required baseline of reference. Therefore, what we are studying is the intensity of experience, where emotions and intellect, body-mind are influenced. This is towards the study of the intensity of experience.

A summary of a two-pronged approach.

1. The portability of religious synonyms outlives their benefactor, they are cross cultural tools for describing human social formations. All human experience involves repetition, sacred objects, revered persons and objects, taboo, sacred ground, levels of privacy, distinct habitats, levels of dedication, purity, sanctity, doctrine of some written or oral (all in the golden bough 1887). Therefore, from this perspective all human experience is religion by another name. If indeed all experience can be described through cross-cultural synonyms we should possibly classify all experience as religious (by degrees) from birth until death (which possibly would favour the church).

2. Religion is a false category that relates to an intensity of experience, it certainly seems likely that an intensity of experience may be labelled religious by a person of faith but for an atheist it could simply be that and no more. I have opted slightly towards the latter, although I must say that I could also agree that the human experience is

'religious' because it is: mysteriously noetic, transient, often beyond words, there is a sense of powerlessness once we are thrown in to life (as Heidegger (1962) would put it) therefore William James (1985) and Alistair Hardy (1884) when describing religious experience were making an astute observation about life in general by recording various levels of the intensity of experience.

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