The Academic Study of Religions: Contemporary Issues and Approaches

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After some discussion of the study of religions in academia, the main body of this article will focus on the task contemporary religious studies scholars face and some of principal methodological issues and debates that have emerged over the years. The article will conclude with what amounts to some personal reflection on the relationship between Christian theology and religious studies. Finally, to avoid any confusion, it is perhaps

worth pointing out that this is an article dealing with the academic study of religions, not with Christian theologies of religions. Whilst the two are related, in that ideally the latter is informed by the former, they are methodologically distinct.

Religious studies in academia

Interest in other religions has a long history stretching back at least as far as the ethnographic and historical studies of Hecataeus of Miletus (*fl.* 500 BCE) and Herodotus (*c.* 484–425 BCE). More recently, during the medieval period, Islamic scholars studied Indian, Persian, Jewish and Christian belief and practice. Indeed, the first history of religion, *Treatise on the Religious and Philosophical Sects* (1127), was written by the Muslim thinker, Muhammad al-Shahrastani. Also working around this time was the twelfth century Christian scholar, Peter the Venerable, who, for missiological reasons, studied Islam and commissioned a Latin translation of the Qur'an.[1] However, whilst there is this history of curiosity, the study of religions is a relative newcomer to the halls of academia. Not only were the first chairs established as recently as the final quarter of the nineteenth century, but, as Jean Holm has pointed out, 'in many countries of the world [the academic study of religions] still has no place in higher education or in the curriculum of schools.'[2]

The academic study of religions was understood by nineteenth century scholars to be a 'scientific' discipline based on observation and objective analysis just as the other sciences were. The following words are taken from what has been described as 'the foundation document of comparative religion',[3] Friedrich Max Müller's *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873):

> A Science of Religion, based on an impartial and truly scientific comparison of all, or at all events, of the most important, religions of mankind, is now only a question of time . . . It becomes . . . the duty of those who have devoted their life to the study of the principal religions of the world in their original documents, and who value and reverence it in whatever form it may present itself, to take possession of this new territory in the name of true science.[4]

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century the academic study of religions began in earnest with the first 'attempt to systematise the material which was emerging . . . to subject it to a definite method, and thus to make of it a "science". By 1870 what Max Müller called "this new territory" was beginning to be mapped out, and to assume firm outlines.'[5]

By the second half of the twentieth century the study of religion had emerged as a prominent and important field of academic enquiry. In a period of history in which the scientism and rationalism of the earlier part of the century has seen a decline and in which there has been a rise of interest, particularly in non-Christian spirituality, there has been a growth in academic institutions offering courses and modules in the study of religion. Moreover, work done in the social sciences has increasingly converged with the work done by students of religion. These factors, amongst others, have made it possible for the study of religion in universities and colleges to gradually pull away from its traditional asymmetrical place alongside the study of Christian theology in order to establish itself as an independent field of enquiry. That is to say, whereas earlier in the century the study of non-Christian faiths was undertaken in faculties of Christian theology and studied as part of a theology degree, the study of Christianity having pride of place in the curriculum, the balance of interest has increasingly shifted towards religious studies. Indeed, many religious studies scholars would join with Ninian Smart in wanting to 'rid religious studies of the grip of the Christian establishment' because, it is argued, the relationship between theology and religious studies 'prevents an openness of approach, and means that interested agnostic, Jewish and other "outsiders" are discouraged from taking up the subject'.[6]

Of particular note are the developments in the 1960s and 1970s when the term 'religious studies' became common currency. Whilst there had been, since Müller's day, several chairs in the field of 'comparative religion' or 'the history of religions', student interest in the area had not been high. As such, it was difficult to establish separate departments of religious studies. The tide was to turn in the 1960s. (That the tide did turn during this decade is perhaps not surprising, bearing in mind the various cultural developments, not least the fact that many, mainly young, people spiritually 'turned East'.) The late 1960s and 1970s witnessed the founding of new departments of religious studies and also the founding of several important journals (e.g. *Religious Studies* in 1965, *The Journal of Religion in Africa* in 1967 and particularly *Religion* in 1971). As Ninian Smart recently commented,

> In the English-speaking world [religious studies] basically dates from the 1960s, although before then there were such fields as 'the comparative study of religion', 'the history of religion', the 'sociology of religion' and so on . . . Religious studies was created out of a blend of historical studies, comparative expertise, and the social sciences, with a topping of philosophy of religion and the like. It rapidly became a major enterprise in academia. It helped as a midwife to cultural studies.[7]

By the beginning of the 1980s, although the study of religion in universities and colleges of higher education had progressed significantly and the future looked

sanguine, things were to change. Cut backs and a shrinking volume of student applications led to the curtailing of religious studies courses and research. Whilst some departments, such as those at Leicester and Southampton, disappeared, many adapted to the new environment in the 1990s by broadening the range of modules offered, providing evening classes and summer schools and seeking to be relevant by addressing contemporary cultural issues and developing interdisciplinary links with other departments.

A similar trend in religious studies can be observed in the United States. The 1960s and 1970s saw the rapid development of religious studies programmes and the 1980s witnessed a decline. In the 1990s colleges have been looking for ways to respond to the forces of change.

> By the early 1970s, religious studies programs could be found in nearly every kind of institution offering undergraduate liberal arts study: private nonsectarian colleges, church-related colleges, public colleges and universities, community colleges, and professional schools. In many church-related colleges, where religious departments had traditionally enjoyed a special importance, a number of factors combined to transform the nature of religious studies. Only the more conservative Protestant colleges retained an exclusively Christian focus in their religious programs.[8]

As in Britain, the decrease in student applications and diminishing resources in the 1980s led to cut backs affecting religious studies departments. Since the mid-1980s there has been much effort to cater for the needs of students, to integrate religious studies with their other courses and to provide programmes of study which have relevance to particular careers.

As to the future of religious studies in Anglo-American higher education, it is, as Thomas Benson argues,

> linked to the fate of the humanities and the changing fortunes of the university itself . . . The continuing health of religious studies programs will depend upon their ability to sustain demanding multidisciplinary research and teaching in an environment of increasing competition for limited funds. The rapidly expanding frontiers of research in religious studies and the patterns of increased specialisation in the traditional subject areas are imposing difficult choices between depth and breadth on many graduate and undergraduate programs.[9]

What is a religion?

We begin our overview of some of the key approaches, issues, and debates in religious studies with Smart's seven-dimensional definition of religion which, whilst other models could be used,[10] is a useful and influential starting point when seeking to secure an adequate grasp of a religion. The seven dimensions of religion are as follows: (1) the practical and ritual dimension; (2) the experiential and emotional dimension (conversion, enlightenment, visions, ecstatic phenomena, awe, mystical experience etc.); (3) the narrative and mythic dimension (sacred writings and stories); (4) the doctrinal and philosophical dimension; (5) the ethical and legal dimension; (6) the social and institutional dimension (the ways in which religions are historically manifested and in which systems of belief are lived out in social contexts); (7) the material dimension (e.g. architecture, art, music, iconography).[11]

Whereas, historically, studies have tended to focus on doctrine and the historical development of a religion (its founder, key figures, splits etc), studying 'the dimensions' of a religion — common in contemporary work which we have noted utilises a variety of methods taken from the social sciences and humanities[12] — enables scholars to understand religions as they are lived out in particular contexts. Too often people, not least Christians, have operated with caricatured understandings of the world religions, wrongly assuming that because they have grasped several key doctrines of a faith they have grasped the totality of that faith and are therefore in a position to judge it and to evangelize its adherents. Contemporary approaches to the study of religion, such as that developed by Smart, whilst problematic in certain ways (as we will see), lead to a firmer grasp of other religions.

Of course, there have been a variety of interpretations / explanations offered over the years which have sought to support a particular thesis. Some have argued that religion is a psychological construct (e.g. Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud), or that it is a social construct (e.g. Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim), or that it is the result of an experience of the divine (e.g. Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Otto), or that it is simply the product of human sin (e.g. Karl Barth).[13] However, Smart's model is less of an interpretation of religion (although it is that) and more of a phenomenological analysis of the different facets of any historical faith. As such, it is of more help to the religious studies scholar.

The polymethodic nature of religious studies

Whilst there is admittedly a lack of precision regarding the definition of 'a discipline', and whilst religious studies is, arguably, 'a discipline' in the broad sense, it is essentially multi-disciplinary. That is to say, the study of religions not only concerns a very broad field of

enquiry, dealing as it does with the belief systems of the world, past and present, but it also encompasses a range of disciplines and methods, such as, for example, anthropology, phenomenology, philology, sociology, and psychology. Indeed, the contemporary term 'religious studies', whilst not greatly different from the older terms 'comparative religion' or 'the history of religions', does indicate more directly the 'polymethodic' nature of the enterprise and the greater range and combination of disciplines involved.[14] This usually means that, constrained by the human life span, scholars are usually able to gain an adequate grasp of only a single religious tradition and expertise in a couple of disciplines.

That religious studies is not what it was in the early years of the twentieth century can be demonstrated by looking at the definition of religious studies provided by Louis Jordan in 1905. For Jordan, the study of religion is 'that Science which compares the origin, structure, and characteristics of the various Religions of the world, with the view of determining their genuine agreements and differences, the measure of relation in which they stand one to another, and their relative superiority and inferiority when regarded as types'.[15] (a) The first thing to note is that the idea of a 'science of religion' (*Religionswissenschaft*) is not popular nowadays. 'Science' has always been a broader term in German, the language in which 'science of religion' was originally coined. In the English-speaking world, being closely linked with the natural sciences, the term is narrow and misleading. Moreover, influenced by the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer (as many were in the early years of the century), Jordan basically understood religion to have progressed from simple, 'primitive' beginnings into the complex, historical manifestations that are the major world religions. The 'science of religion' tended to chart the progress of religion, trace its origins and, for many, end up explaining it as a human phenomenon. Whether this was done from a psychological perspective, from a sociological perspective, or from an anthropological perspective, the conclusion was often an explanation of religion on the basis of a theory of its origin. Today, few would be happy with such naïve evolutionary presuppositions. (b) Furthermore, unlike Jordan, contemporary scholars tend to be less concerned about the origins of religion and, as we will see, more cautious with regard to the structures and characteristics of particular religions. (c) Finally, it would be very unusual for contemporary scholars to speak of the 'relative superiority and inferiority' of religions. The argument is that, since different faiths develop in, and are appropriate to, particular cultural and geographical contexts, it is simply inappropriate to speak of 'their relative superiority and inferiority'.

The phenomenological method in religious studies

Phenomenology is arguably the most influential approach to the study of religion in the twentieth century.[16] Not only is it still a very important methodology, but many of the key issues in religious studies have been faced and raised by the phenomenologists.

The term *Religionsphänomenologie* was first used in 1887 by the Dutch scholar Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye in his work *Lehrbuch der Religiongeschichte* to refer to the fact that his 'handbook' brought together a variety of groups of religious phenomena. This might be described as 'descriptive' phenomenology, the aim being simply to gather information about the various religions and, as botanists might classify plants, identify varieties of particular religious phenomena. This classification of types of religious phenomena is one of the hallmarks of the phenomenological method and can be seen in the works of contemporary scholars such as Smart and even Mircea Eliade. Not surprisingly, such typologies (certainly in earlier works) tend to lead to an account of religious phenomena which reads much the same as a botanical handbook. That is to say, various species are identified (higher religion, lower religion, prophetic religion, mystical religion and so on) and particular religious beliefs and practices are then categorized and discussed.

However, in more recent years the term has come to refer to a method which is more complex and claims rather more for itself than did Chantepie's mere cataloguing of facts. This later development in the discipline is due, in part, to the inspiration of Edmund Husserl's philosophical phenomenology, the foundation of which, says John Bowker, can be discovered in the Delphic expression with which he concluded his Paris Lectures, *gnothi seauton* (know yourself).[17] The foundation of knowledge is, Husserl argued, consciousness, in that consciousness is the one fact of which we can really be sure. Without going into the details, whilst Husserl recognized his connection to Descartes' method of doubting until he reached what he felt to be a sure foundation of knowledge beyond doubt (*cogito ergo sum*), he was critical of Descartes for not attending to his presuppositions rigorously enough. This was particularly evident in Descartes' defence of the idea of God, which Husserl argued was simply a presupposition, rather than an idea he had established philosophically. The point is that, recognizing how easy it is for prior beliefs and interpretations to unconsciously influence one's thinking, Husserl's phenomenological method sought to shelve all these presuppositions and interpretations. In Husserl's words, 'The universal and concrete phenomenology of consciousness . . . does not claim to be anything more than an attempt . . . to

discover a radical beginning of a philosophy which, to repeat the Kantian phrase, "will be able to present itself as science".'[18] That is, he sought to place philosophy on a descriptive and scientific basis. This, he argued, can be accomplished only by the application of 'a phenomenological *epoch*', the 'bracketing out' of all the metaphysical questions and focusing on the phenomena of experience in and of themselves. Hence, whereas we have seen that previously it was felt that one could simply observe and catalogue religious facts, following Husserl, the later phenomenologists became acutely aware of their own consciousness in the process of understanding and interpreting religious facts. A related concept of Husserl's which was also used in religious studies was 'eidetic vision', the capacity of the observer to see beyond the particularities of a religion and to grasp its essence and meaning. Whilst we often see only what we want or expect to see, eidetic vision is the human ability to see a phenomenon without such distortions and limitations.

Although the extent of the influence of Husserl in this area has been debated, and although few religious studies scholars 'were willing or able to follow the philosophical phenomenologists into the obscure hinterland of their thought',[19] Husserl did provide phenomenology with the twin principles of '*epoch*' and 'eidetic vision', terms which have since gained a wide currency in religious studies.

These can be clearly seen in arguably the most systematic and thorough example of phenomenology, Gerardus van der Leeuw's *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (1933). Firstly, argues van der Leeuw, the student of religion needs to classify the religious phenomena into distinct categories: e.g. sacrifice, sacrament, sacred space, sacred time, sacred word, festivals, and myth. Secondly, scholars then need to interpolate the phenomena into their own lives. That is to say, they need to try and understand empathetically (*Einfuhlung*) the religion *from within*. He quotes the following extract from G.K. Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man*: 'When the professor is told by the barbarian that once there was nothing except a great feathered serpent, unless the learned man feels a thrill and a half temptation to wish it were true, he is no judge of such things at all.'[20] The life examined by the religious studies scholar, insists van der Leeuw, needs to 'acquire its place in the life of the student himself who should understand it out of his inner self'.[21] Thirdly, van der Leeuw stresses perhaps *the* fundamental phenomenological principle, namely *epoch*, the suspension of value-judgements and the adoption of a neutral stance. Fourthly, scholars need to clarify any apparent structural relationships and make sense of the information. In so doing, they move towards a holistic understanding of how the various aspects of a religion relate and function together. This leads naturally to the fifth stage at which 'all these activities, undertaken together and simultaneously, constitute genuine *understanding* [*Verstehen*]: the chaotic and obstinate "reality" thus becomes a manifestation, a revelation' (eidetic vision).[22] Sixthly, having thus attained this general grasp, there is a continual need to make sure that it tallies with the up-to-date research of other disciplines, such as archaeology, history, philology etc. For van der Leeuw, as for other phenomenologists, the continual checking of one's results is crucial to the maintenance of scholarly objectivity. In order to avoid degeneration into fantasy, phenomenology must always feed on facts. Finally, having gone through the above six stages, the phenomenologist should be as close as anyone can be to an understanding of the 'meaning' of the religious phenomena studied and be in a position to relate his understanding to others.

Although phenomenologists such as van der Leeuw are aware that there will always be some distance between the understanding of the believer and that of the scholar, the aim of phenomenology is to eschew all subjective input and to testify only to what has been observed. It aims to strip away all that would mitigate an unbiased presentation of the facts. As van der Leeuw puts it:

> This entire and apparently complicated procedure . . . has ultimately no other goal than pure objectivity . . . It desires to gain access to the facts themselves; and for this it requires a meaning, because it cannot experience the facts just as it pleases. This meaning, however, is purely objective: all violence, either empirical, logical or metaphysical, is excluded . . . It has, in fact, one sole desire: *to testify* to what has been manifested to it.[23]

Van der Leeuw thus argued that, whilst phenomenology constantly observes instances of religious experience, it is not in a position to provide a theological evaluation of what is going on. All the phenomenologist can do is report that a person claimed to have a religious experience. To go further than that is to leave religious studies and to enter into theology or philosophy. Indeed, whilst van der Leeuw, a Christian, understood himself to be a theologian doing religious studies, he was clear that theology and religious studies are distinct disciplines. Theologians need to bracket their beliefs when studying religion. They may want to reflect theologically on their conclusions afterwards, but whilst engaged in the study of religion their theology must remain bracketed.

In order to indicate the breadth of approaches covered by the umbrella term 'phenomenology', it is worth mentioning that some phenomenologists very explicitly take the further step and, in effect, bring theology and phenomenology closer than van der Leeuw would have allowed. In other words, some thinkers have

constructed a methodology which explicitly reflects a particular theoretical stance. On the basis of 'the facts themselves', they argue for the existence of 'an essence of religion' underlying the particular historical manifestations. A classic example of such a thesis is Rudolf Otto's (1869–1937) *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), which, on the basis of the study of religions and his own particular theology, claims that central to *all* religious expression is an *a priori* sense of 'the numinous' or 'the holy'.

Neutrality in religious studies?

Bearing in mind the above discussion of phenomenology, we turn now to some of principal issues and concerns in contemporary religious studies. However, I should say that, because it is not possible in an essay of this length to survey all the approaches taken or all the issues which have been discussed, certain key issues have had to be selected.[24]

To begin with there is a problem with phenomenology (particularly the earlier forms which included little personal fieldwork), in that it relies heavily on the findings of other disciplines. It then takes the 'facts' uncovered by archaeologists, sociologists, historians and so on, and applies the phenomenological method. The obvious problem is that insufficient account is taken of the 'unbracketed' presuppositions of the scholars working in those disciplines.

There is another more obvious problem with the 'essentialist' type of phenomenology in that it clearly operates with specific theological and philosophical presuppositions. The scholar surveys the world's religions and produces a typology/classification in order to establish the existence of a general pattern of religious experience (e.g. the distinction between the sacred and the profane in Eliade's work[25]) or a universal essence of religion (e.g. Otto's sense of the numinous). The interpretation and selection of religious 'facts' are being determined by a previously held theory established on theological or other grounds. Hence, whilst described as phenomenology, much more is being claimed than Chantepie de la Saussaye or even van der Leeuw wanted to claim.

Having said that, the lack of neutrality is a problem for phenomenology *per se*. Whilst many contemporary religious studies scholars would want to defend the notion of *epoch* as an ideal to which one should aspire, there is a question as to whether this ideal entails a certain hermeneutical naïveté. Firstly, the very process of selection and the production of typologies assumes an interpretative framework. To select certain facts rather than others and to present them with other facts as a particular type of religion presupposes an interpretative framework in the mind of the scholar. Indeed, even were a scholar able to attain a state of pure, unadulterated objectivity, it is arguable that the very belief that this is a desirable position to strive after is a value judgement arising out of a particular western worldview. Hence, the belief in objectivity and the claim to be purely 'descriptive' are now considered to be hermeneutically naïve. Pure neutrality is an *ignis fatuus*. Indeed, because all accounts of religion are filtered through minds formed in particular contexts, with particular worldviews, it is often not too difficult to discern what theoretical direction the author of a particular study is coming from. Hence, for example, although Smart has called for religious studies scholars to adopt 'methodological agnosticism' and an 'open mind', there is some question as to how far this can ever be the case. It is, for example, difficult to believe that an atheistic worldview will make no difference to a scholar's study of say Christianity, or even that van der Leeuw's Christian beliefs made no difference to his studies. In calling for an 'open mind', Smart may actually be calling for an 'empty mind' — something which is not an option, nor, I suggest, desirable.

Insiders and outsiders

Perhaps one of the hottest theoretical and methodological issues in contemporary religious studies is the 'insider/outsider' problem.[26] To what extent can a person who is not a believer ('an outsider') understand a faith in the way a believer ('an insider') understands that faith? Although this has been a recognized issue for many years, it has become a matter of considerable debate in recent years, not least because of the increased interest in contemporary religion. Because earlier scholars tended to focus on religions of the past, the study of which was limited to an examination of texts and ruins, the force of the insider/outsider question was not as acutely felt as it is today.

As to the problem itself, although it concerns a number of issues, firstly it is argued that outsiders, simply because they are outsiders, will never be able to grasp fully the insider's experience. Experiences evoked within other persons are interpreted within the context of their *particular* individual history, environment and personality. Even people who experience the same event at the same time will (because of their contexts and personal histories) interpret that experience in different, sometimes very different, ways. The point is that personal experiences will always be, in some profound sense, *personal* and thus inaccessible to others. Secondly, some scholars insist that there is a definite advantage to being an outsider. Since members of a religion tend to be conditioned by and often pressurized into accepting a particular and usually narrow understanding of their faith, the outsider is in the important

scholarly position of not being influenced by such forces and conditions. Impartiality and disinterest allow greater objectivity. However, whilst there is undoubtedly a value to scholarly detachment and whilst the scholar may have a greater knowledge of the history, texts, philosophy, structure and social implications of a particular faith than the average believer, not to have experienced and grasped that faith from the inside is surely to have a rather large hole in the centre of one's understanding. Indeed, many insiders will insist that such scholarly 'head-knowledge' is, in the final analysis, peripheral to the 'meaning' of their faith.

Hence, bearing the above issues in mind, *empathy* and *imagination* would appear to be important scholarly attributes in order to allow some understanding of the worldviews of others. For example, although Smart tends to be too optimistic about the scholar's ability to bracket presuppositions and 'fly above and away from our own commitments and assumptions', his stress on empathy and imagination is helpful. There is a necessity, he says, 'if we are truly to understand other people's beliefs, of not interpreting their behaviour as if it implied an identical worldview to our own. The exploration of another's worldview involves empathy and imagination. It needs empathy so that we can . . . feel our way into other people's worlds . . . It needs imagination so that we can fly above and away from our own commitments and assumptions, and thus freely explore the feelings and commitments of others.'[27] Furthermore, I would argue that, ideally, empathy for a particular religion should arise naturally in the scholar. That is to say, for a variety of personal reasons, an individual will find it easier to empathize with one faith or type of religion rather than another; it is that faith and type of religion that the scholar will, in the final analysis, most comprehensively grasp. Indeed, to take this line of thought a step further, without underestimating the differences between religious experiences and faith traditions, there is surely a sense in which a religious believer can understand something of what another religious believer feels. In other words, non-religious people are at some disadvantage compared to religious people when it comes to the study of religions. This is part of the reason why Joachim Wach, the important German-American historian and sociologist of religions, himself a Christian, insisted on the value of a scholar's personal religious experience. Dry, academic objectivity can never adequately empathize with religious feelings.[28]

Participant observation and the importance of thick description

Whilst there is still a great stress on the importance of the more traditional areas of endeavour in religious studies, such as, for example, philological research (studying the meaning of texts, symbols and language), it is now recognized that all symbols, including words, derive their meanings from their total context. This point has been made particularly strongly by anthropologists. Beliefs, practices, texts and indeed all aspects of culture should be studied together as they are lived out. Although phenomenologists such as van der Leeuw would agree with this, anthropologists have gone a step further in stressing the importance of 'participant observation'. This method, pioneered by the important Polish-born, English anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, requires living with the community being studied, learning its language and participating in its life without seeking to alter it. As a participant, the scholar simply observes and tries to get as close as possible to seeing a religion from the 'inside'. As such this approach represents a move away from phenomenologists such as van der Leeuw and the armchair anthropologists of an earlier generation who tended to rely overly on the findings of others.

Furthermore, the influential anthropologist Clifford Geertz has developed what he calls 'interpretative anthropology' which aims to interpret beliefs and actions as 'insiders' do.[29] This, he argues (quite reasonably), is possible only if the scholar is a participant observer. Geertz, however moves beyond Malinowski in distinguishing between 'thick' and 'thin' descriptions. 'Thick' descriptions describe, for example, not merely what a person is doing, but also, as far as is possible, what the person *thinks* they are doing. A 'thin' description is simply a description of a practice without indicating how the practice is understood from the inside. In other words, Geertz is rightly concerned with *meaning*. For example, during worship, believers regularly eat bread and drink red wine. Simply to provide a thin description of this practice could easily lead to a misunderstanding of a central Christian rite. For an outsider unfamiliar with Christianity to understand adequately what is taking place, there needs to be some thick description, some understanding of what the practice *means* to the believers involved.[30]

Listening and dialogue

The move towards the study of contemporary religions and towards participant observation has led to a consideration of what has been called the 'response threshold' in religious studies. Again, because van der Leeuw and many of the early scholars studied texts and ancient beliefs, it was fairly easy to develop theories which tended to engender a procrustean approach to the study of particular religions. This in turn led to erroneous theories and the misinterpretation of beliefs and practices. This is mitigated in contemporary religious

studies when the 'response threshold' is crossed. Quite simply, the crossing of the response threshold happens during the study of contemporary and recent religion when insiders question the scholar's interpretations. The insider's interpretation, which may conflict with scholarly interpretations, is felt to carry equal if not more weight. For example, Wilfred Cantwell Smith has argued that no understanding of a faith is valid until it has been acknowledged as valid by an insider. Religious studies is thus carried out in the context of a dialogue. Although dialogue can have several purposes, this form of dialogue is not a common search for ultimate religious truth or some other questionable enterprise, it is rather about seeking a deeper and firmer understanding of the other's worldview, and may eventually develop into introducing the other to a greater understanding of one's own worldview.

Secularization?

A major issue in contemporary religious studies, particularly amongst sociologists, concerns secularization (the process by which religion loses its significance in a society).[31] Evidence supporting the secularization thesis is not difficult to find. Throughout Europe there has been, for example, a steady decline in attendance at religious services, a decline in the numbers of those training for ordination, a decline in the acceptance of the authority of religious beliefs and a consequent decline in the influence of religious institutions on society. There are several reasons posited for this, the principal one being modernization, particularly the move from rural areas and agricultural work to the cities and industry. This move has led to 'social differentiation', a situation in which, unlike premodern communities, a person's employment, education, food production, play and religion are rarely carried out in the immediate locality with one's neighbours. Unlike premodern medieval societies, modern, urban, industrial societies have seen the erosion of the church's influence on communities. Religion is generally considered to be a recreational activity for 'those who like that sort of thing'. Religious belief is increasingly understood to be a 'private' matter, rather than a matter of public and societal concern. This privatisation of religion leads to a decline in the significance of religious institutions and the various ceremonial functions they provide.

Whilst much of this can hardly be denied, even the most cursory exploration of contemporary culture will lead one to a very different conclusion. Hence, there are those who rightly argue against the wholesale secularization thesis. They point out that what is happening is *a change*, rather than *a decline*, in religious belief and practice. That is to say, although religion might be more invisible nowadays, it is nevertheless there. Christians are not, as some believe, living in an irreligious society, they are living in an invisibly religious society.[32] Having said that, forms of religion which were invisible a couple of decades ago are becoming increasingly visible and influential. Whether one thinks of astrology, Paganism or the variety of beliefs and practices covered by the increasingly nebulous term 'New Age', these alternative spiritualities testify against those who would argue that modern western societies are irreligious. Hence, it is argued that, rather than disappearing, religion has simply transformed into a less obvious, more mystical form, which focuses on private experience and tends to function within relatively small groups (though these may be linked to larger networks).

Finally, that this is a significant area of religion in the West is supported by the fact that an increasingly popular area in the contemporary study of religions is the study of new religious movements, popular 'New Age' and Neo-Pagan spiritualities and implicit religion.[33]

Christian theology and religious studies

We begin with a broad definition of theology provided by Frank Whaling: 'First, it has to do with God or transcendence, whether seen mythologically, philosophically or dogmatically. Second, although it has many nuances, doctrine has always been a significant element in its meaning. And third, it is essentially a second order activity arising from "faith" and interpreting faith.'[34] There is nothing in this definition which requires Christian belief. The point is that, for many nowadays to use the term 'theology' as shorthand for 'Christian theology', is an example of unacceptable Christian imperialism. The argument is that, because Christian theology is not the only theology, one should identify which theology one is referring to. In other words, *if* one holds to a definition of theology such as Whaling's, as long as the 'faith thinking' (to quote P.T. Forsyth's definition of theology) is not Christian faith (which it was for Forsyth), then theology need not be Christian. Islamic faith thinking is Islamic theology. Sikh faith thinking is Sikh theology. Pagan faith thinking is Pagan theology.

As to the difference between theology and religious studies, if theology arises out of and interprets faith, then it is clearly much narrower in its remit than we have seen religious studies to be. The subject matter of religious studies is far broader than that of theology.

Moreover, religious studies is distinct from theology because, in a sense, it stands outside a particular faith. By this I mean that, whether one approaches it from a phenomenological, anthropological, sociological, or psychological angle, the aim (which can never be fully realized) should always be the phenomenological ideal of objectivity and judgement-free analysis. When the

study of religions moves beyond this, thereby giving up the pursuit of the phenomenological ideal and becoming explicitly faith thinking about religions, it becomes a theology of religions or a theological interpretation of religion, rather than religious studies. However, although we have seen that neutrality is not an option, and although it is certainly not desirable to try to forget that one is a Christian scholar studying religions, the value of what I would call 'qualified *epoch*' is hard to underestimate. A theological interpretation of religion should be based on the knowledge provided by a sensitive study in which the scholar aims to understand empathetically a faith from the 'inside', to see as the believer sees, to feel as the believer feels, to 'walk in the moccasins of the faithful.' Just as Christians would prefer/expect others to spend time seeking to understand the Christian faith from the inside in order to avoid caricatures and misunderstanding, so they should do no less when seeking to understand non-Christian religions and when formulating theologies concerning those religions: '. . . in everything, do to others as you would have them do to you . . .' (Matt.7.14). Indeed, it is the Christian's duty to make sure that his or her theology is based on the most accurate understanding possible. Unfortunately, it is not difficult to find Christian theologies, theories and descriptions of religion based on inadequate research, misinformation and offensive caricature. For the sake of the gospel and the construction of reliable, comprehensive Christian theologies, Christians need to work at securing an accurate and informed understanding of the world in which they live.

Moreover, to follow this line of thought a little further, because books and second-hand reports are not enough to give scholars a firm grasp of the particular religions they study, some degree of participant observation is required. Hence, dialogue *within the context of friendship* is important in that it allows access to the 'inside' of personal faith. This is important because it is persons and personal faith we are dealing with, not some abstract religious system.[35] The point is that we cannot simply rely on religious data to provide us with understanding because faith is a quality of the personal life. It is therefore distorted when it is abstracted from its personal context. This point has been persuasively argued in recent years by Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Key to Smith's work is the distinction between 'faith' and 'belief'. 'Faith is not belief.'[36] Rather, belief is the rational objectification of faith; its intellectual expression. Therefore, to properly understand religion one needs to understand a person's faith. And of course to understand the *meaning* of any particular doctrine or practice, it needs to be understood within the context of a person's faith as a whole. Simply to know the facts about a person's religious tradition is *not* to know the individual personal faith-response which that tradition evokes. Friendship, dialogue, qualified *epoch*, empathy and imagination will allow the scholar a deeper, more rounded understanding of personal faith.

Finally, in recent years there has been some debate as to the relationship between theology and religious studies. On the one hand it is argued that 'no clear distinction can be drawn between religious studies and theology on the level of the methods they employ. Each . . . is able to address questions of religious truth.'[37] Others argue that religion as a human phenomenon is discussed in religious studies, whilst questions addressing issues of truth and value are, strictly speaking, philosophical and theological. Whilst I have argued that theology and religious studies are distinct, one being very clearly 'faith thinking', the other being more concerned with phenomenological ideals and empathetically feeling one's way into someone else's faith, I would argue that Christians are bound to reflect theologically on their religious studies. In this sense Christian theology and religious studies should not be separated. Indeed, it has to be said that any religious studies scholar should not avoid shifting into a more philosophical (if not theological) gear when engaging with the truth claims of others.[38] As Harold Turner has argued, 'religious studies is not serious in its study of religion if it does not take religion's own claims about itself seriously'.[39] In taking these claims seriously the Christian scholar will need to engage with them theologically at some point. I should say that I am not arguing for an obligatory theological analysis to be bolted on to the end of every academic essay, article and monograph produced by the Christian. Just as Christian archaeologists, physicists, botanists and philosophers contribute theologically neutral scholarship to their particular areas of research interest, so religious studies scholars should feel free to do the same without feeling the need to theologise. Having said that, there will always be the need to engage with the material as a Christian, to speak to one's friends in other faiths as a Christian and to address the specific concerns and needs of the Christian community (e.g. providing reliable information for churches, pastors and missionaries). As such, whilst a distinct stage methodologically, religious studies is, for the Christian, part of the larger task of constructing a Christian theology and responding to Jesus' Great Commission (Matt.28.16–20). As Christian students of religion, our ultimate purpose is, in the words of H.H. Farmer, 'to make some contribution to a specifically Christian theistic world-view by a study of the fact of religion in the life of mankind from the standpoint of the Incarnation: the affirmation, that is to say, that God has made unique and final revelation of Himself as personal in history through Jesus Christ and through the personal relationship to Himself which that revelation makes possible and calls into being.'[40]

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Footnotes

1 See J. Holm, *Key Guide to Information Sources on World Religions* (London: Mansell, 1991), pp. 3ff.

2 Ibid., 3.

3 Quoted in E. Sharpe, *Comparative religion: a History* (London: Duckworth, 1975), p. xi.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 N. Smart, *Concept and Empathy: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), p. 158.

7 N. Smart, 'Foreword', in P. Connolly (ed), *Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 1999), p. ix.

8 T.L. Benson, 'Religious Studies as an Academic Discipline', in M. Eliade (ed), *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, vol.14 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 88–9.

9 Ibid., 92.

10 For example, Eric Sharpe identifies four 'modes' of religion: 'the existential, the institutional, the intellectual and the ethical' — *Understanding Religion* (London: Duckworth, 1983), ch. 7.

11 See N. Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). A short account of his thesis in this book can be found in his earlier work, *The World's Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1989), 10–21. In his 1971 book *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (London: Fontana), he identified only six dimensions; the 'material dimension' was not included.

12 Smart comments, 'it is partly because of the dimensional character of religion that there arises the need to use differing approaches, such as the social sciences and the humanities (history, philology and so on) . . . While doctrinal and organizational aspects of religion can be important, there are other, often more vital, dimensions, such as ritual, experiential and ethical or legal expressions of a faith' (N. Smart, 'Foreword', in P. Connolly [ed], *Approaches to the Study of Religion*, x).

13 For an excellent overview of theories of religion see J. Thrower, *Religion: the Classical Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

14 As Adrian Cunningham comments concerning the teaching of religious studies at Lancaster University, '. . . all the major historical traditions and social scientific and other approaches are taught within a single department. It is this combination and scale which distinguishes it from comparative religion or history of religions — the terms need not otherwise be all that different.' 'Religious Studies in the Universities: England', in U. King (ed), *Turning Points in Religious Studies* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), p. 24.

15 L.H. Jordan, *Comparative Religion, its Genesis and Growth*, 63 — quoted in E. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: a History*, xii.

16 See O. Hultkrantz, 'The Phenomenology of Religion: Aims and Methods', *Temenos* 6 (1970), pp. 68–88.

17 J. Bowker, *The Sense of God: Sociological, Anthropological and Psychological Approaches to the Sense of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 169–70.

18 E. Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, tr. by W.R. Boyce Gibson London: Allen & Unwin, 1931) pp. 26–7.

19 E.J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, p. 224.

20 G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 675.

21 G. van der Leeuw, quoted in C. Erricker, 'Phenomenological Approaches', in P. Connolly (ed), *Approaches to the Study of Religion*, p. 78.

22 G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, p. 676.

23 Ibid., pp. 677–8

24 Unfortunately this has meant totally neglecting psychological approaches to religion and gender issues. See S. Morgan, 'Feminist Approaches', and P. Connolly 'Psychological Approaches', both of which can be found in P. Connolly (ed), *Approaches to the Study of Religion*.

25 Although Eliade did not consider himself to be a phenomenologist, some scholars have argued that he is in fact a very important phenomenologist. See D. Allen, *Structure and Reality in Religion: Hermeneutics in Mircia Eliade's Phenomenology and New Directions* (Berlin: Mouton, 1978). For a good, concise discussion of Eliade's methodology see D. Hughes, *Has God Many Names? An Introduction to Religious Studies* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), ch. 9.

26 For a good introduction to the problem see the anthology edited by Russell McCutcheon, *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 1998).

27 N. Smart, 'Foreword', *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, p. xii.

28 I would strongly agree with Wach and have myself made much of H.H. Farmer's development of Georg Wobbermin's 'productive empathy', a method of feeling one's way into the faith of another on the basis of one's own religious experience. See C.H. Partridge, *H.H. Farmer's Theological Interpretation of Religion: Towards a Personalist Theology of Religions* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1998), pp. 115–129.

29 See particularly C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

30 I am very aware that one of the major omissions in this discussion, which should have been included here, is the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–) and 'structuralism' generally. Unfortunately, the length of the

article and the space needed to adequately unpack structuralism preclude its inclusion.

31 For a good, accessible discussion of secularization see Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: from Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), ch.3. See also S. Bruce, 'Cathedrals to Cults: Evolving Forms of the Religious Life', in P. Heelas (ed), *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 19–35.

32 On this shift towards 'invisible religion' see Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1971).

33 See S. Bruce, 'Cathedrals to Cults: the Evolving Forms of the Religious Life'; P. Heelas, *The New Age Movement: Celebrating the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford Blackwell, 1996); J.P. Newport, *The New Age Movement and the Biblical Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); J.A. Saliba, *Perspectives on New Religious Movements* (London: Cassells, 1995); B. Wilson and J. Cresswell (eds), *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response* (London: Routledge, 1999).

34 F. Whaling, 'Theological Approaches', in P. Connolly (ed), *Approaches to the Study of Religion*, pp. 228–9.

35 This is a point made by personalist scholars such as H.H. Farmer and later, from a different theological perspective, by Wilfred Cantwell Smith. See my discussion of their ideas in *H.H. Farmer's Theological Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 326–37.

36 W.C. Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 82.

37 Gregory W. Dawes, 'Theology and Religious Studies in the University: "Some Ambiguities" Revisited', *Religion* 26 (1996), p. 49.

38 Scholars such as Gregory Dawes who argue that theology and religious studies are basically doing the same thing, the only difference being that religious studies has a wider remit, fail to grasp that religious studies scholars often operate at two levels. Just because some do move from the more descriptive and historical level to the more 'parahistorical' and philosophical level does not mean that religious studies is necessarily 'parahistorical' and philosophical. In other words although religious studies scholars do tend to move into a theological or philosophical gear, the motivation of religious studies (first stage) is different from that of theology and philosophy (second stage). See ibid.

39 Quoted in ibid., p. 50.

40 H.H. Farmer, *Revelation and Religion: Studies in the Theological Interpretation of Religious Types* (London: Nisbet, 1954), p. 23.