

Every question is open: Looking for paths beyond the clearing

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Abstract

However challenging scholars of religion find it to talk across their respective subfields, they are responsible for doing so in order to consider future trajectories for research in religious studies. This contribution to the symposium considers what a 2014 seminar of younger scholars of religion see as urgent problems and issues in religious studies today in order to open a conversation about what is left of religion after “religion.” How do we approach the lived religious practices of men and women in particular times and places after the historical deconstruction of “religion” as the object of scholarly inquiry from modernity to the present? Do scholars of religion in the humanities, on one hand, and sociologists of religion, on the other, recognize their respective subfields in this discussion of problems and questions? This article is offered as a diagnostic to chart the fault lines between divergent methods and theories.

Keywords

Religion, Religious Studies, history of the study of religion

Two years ago, I asked the students in the second course of the two-course sequence in method and theory required of graduate students in Religious Studies at Northwestern University where I teach what direction(s) they thought the study of religion ought to take now, going forward, in light of our discussions over the quarter. We were in the last weeks of the course. There was a strong feeling in the seminar that the many posts- (post-modernism, post-secularism, and post-foundationalism among them), turns (cultural, historical, linguistic, etc.), and ends-of (including the end of religious studies) we had been discussing constituted potential paths to the clearing where the discipline finds itself today and perhaps even beyond to what comes next. The first course in the sequence covered the history of the making of “religion” as a category of critical inquiry, from early modernity

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to the later twentieth century; the second, called “Contemporary Conversations in the Study of Religion,” surveyed recent works on religion(s) in various disciplines as well as in subfields within religious studies. The students enrolled in the second course in the sequence that year had all taken the first, although this was not required. Roughly half the class was from Religious Studies; the others came from Political Science, Anthropology, History, English, and Art History.

During the first quarter, we discussed how the theoretical canon of the discipline, the inherited eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories of religion that so fundamentally shaped the academic study of religion, had been written over the polymorphously perverse abundance of the world’s religious practices, at home and abroad. This theoretical canon included theories of magic, of fetishism, racialized theories of religious development, theories of ritual, of the human mind, cognition, and development, and theories of sacrifice, as well as theories of “religion” itself, what it was and, especially, what it was not. Beginning in the age of exploration and conquest and extending into the era of enlightenment, colonialism, capitalism, industrialization, and empire, those practices and ideas which were designated not-religious but something else were increasingly seen as out of step with enlightened modernity. Theories of religion created the historical unconscious of the discipline, in which everything disallowed, terrifying, disruptive, and “irrational” was confined, and from this perspective, the discipline’s theoretical languages and categories functioned as hysterical symptoms, reaction formations against the distress caused by the unsayable and unsaid, by the unthinkable and unthought known. The unsayable and unthinkable tended to speak up, however, or to break through, in descriptions of real-world religious practices by ethnographers, travelers, missionaries, traders, criminal authorities, and others—accounts of what people were actually doing, in distant places and closer to home, with and to their gods and what their gods were doing to them. This was the return of the repressed, and it was the self-appointed task of scholars of religion to control it all by theory. We further saw in the first seminar how throughout the history of the discipline and increasingly in past decades, some scholars of religion have struggled against this inheritance to surface the repressed and forbidden and to recover its voices and ontologies. Now what?

This “now what” was the dominant mood at the close of two quarters of work. There was a generational dimension to this: my students were asking, in effect, what remains *to them* of the study of religion after the critical, historiographical, and deconstructive work of the last quarter century? What will their subject matter be? Or, to put this in another way, what remains of religion after “religion”?

As my contribution to this symposium, I will report what the students said in response to my question. The topic and ambition of the symposium—“talking to each other, not about each other”—appears to assume that those invited to participate have strong positions on the questions sent us by the organizers, or they invite us to take strong positions on those questions. But I had no idea that the ground between sociologists of religion/religionists was contested until I was asked to join this conversation, so I have no strong positions on the subject, or even weak positions, for that matter. This undoubtedly reflects the fact that the sociologists of religion I know best and read most closely fall on the “qualitative” side of the theoretical spectrum rather than the “quantitative,” but this divide, which is not unique to the study of religion, is an old one and I have no interest in revisiting it. There may be methodological differences between scholars of religion, who are trained as historians, or in the history of religion, or as ethnographers, or most often as some

combination of these, on one hand, and non-quantitative (more or less) sociologists of religion, on the other. But it seems to me that there is already quite a bit of productive conversation going on, and if the divide is great, I am blissfully unaware of it.

That said, I do believe that all of us scholars of religion of whatever methodological or theoretical orientation are confronted by the question of what lies beyond the clearing. My plan is to use the list my students came up with as a kind of diagnostic, something like the pain charts in physicians' offices that show six little faces going from happy (big smile) to increasing states of agony (mouth open in silent scream). Patients point to whichever face best expresses their level of pain, in this way making visible the invisible reality of their internal condition, otherwise hidden because it is resistant to language.

I invite sociologists of religion and scholars of religion (an awkward distinction!) reading this to point to and circle the items on the following list that best indicate their respective senses of the most pressing topics and questions in the study of religion today. Then, I propose that they find their respective counterparts, whether across the hallway or in e-mail, show them the list and their choices, and then compare notes. ("What! Are you saying you're not increasingly dissatisfied with the state of the critique of 'religion'? You're an idiot!") This is to encourage the "talking to" rather than "about," and as we scholars of religion of varied methodologies do this, we may surface the hidden differences among us, if there are any, along with unsuspected commonalities, as we think about what lies ahead in the study of religion.

The list of ten items begins with: (1) *increasing dissatisfaction with critical theory; deconstruction must yield to something constructive*. This reflects the seminar's conclusion that the critical turn in the discipline in the last several decades, which everyone agreed was absolutely necessary, has reached a cul-de-sac. This dead end is most clearly evident in the claims that some critics have made that there is *no such thing as religious studies*, that only the most venal motivations keep scholars pretending that there is, and, therefore, departments of religious studies ought to be shuttered. This suggestion is made seriously as both a political and ethical proposal, which goes to show how unproductive, if not nihilistic, the critique of "religion" has become. But after the critique of "religion," the question becomes how to study "religion" and religions—the analytical category and its particular instantiations in practice and imagination—in the same project. How to pay attention both to the genealogies and histories of the words and categories of analysis deployed, on one hand, and at the same time to religion(s) as found in the world of real people, the lived and contested material stuff, practices, and ideas of religion?

Second on the list is: (2) *negotiating the author's voice; the author's voice is an issue*. This is the old question of authorial omniscience and visibility/invisibility, which remains vexed. Ought scholars of religion continue to speak and write about other people's religious behavior from a privileged, invisible, and unmarked place of authority, which is also a position of intellectual and existential safety, or—given the critical scrutiny over the past decade or so of the implications of the study of religion in underwriting racism, for example, or constituting the borders of the normal—ought we now to be experimenting with new ways of writing that reflect a heightened awareness of who we are that are doing the writing? The matter of religious poetics surfaced repeatedly in the seminar. Students were curious about the possibilities of trying out different voices, genres, and positionalities in religious scholarship. Daniel Gold (2003) addressed this matter elegantly in *Aesthetics and Analysis in Writing on Religion: Modern Fascinations*, but to my knowledge the subject has not been systematically treated since, nor has it found its way into graduate curricula. There are pragmatic

reasons for treating the question of poetics with care. Search committees might not look with favor on dissertations that playfully experiment with authorial voice and position. That said, far-reaching and profound matters are at stake in discussions of poetics, and it was the seminar's judgment that this ought to be on the agenda (again) of the study of religion on the other side of the clearing.

(3) *Mapping borders of political, moral, religious imaginations* came next. The key word here is "imagination." What is the relationship, in particular times and places, between political and religious imaginaries or between religious idioms and "ethics"? This question may be thought of in terms of horizons of possibility: what shapes and constrains what is politically, morally, and religiously imaginable in any social context? The question puts the topic of the imagination at the forefront of the conversation. Students believed that "imagination" is going to be one of the key words in the study of religion going forward, and I agree with them. I have noticed that British psychoanalyst D W Winnicott, author of *Playing and Reality* (1971) among many other works, is ubiquitous lately, across the disciplines, in queer theory (see Maggie Nelson's, *The Argonauts* (2015), for instance), and on Broadway (in Alison Bechtel's *Are You My Mother?*), which I take as a leading indicator and a positive sign. Winnicott's work centered on the intersubjective formation of the imagination, specifically in environments that were either good enough (or not) to support simultaneously internal development and engagement with the world outside. This took place in a process Winnicott called "transitional," which belonged neither completely to the self nor to the world, a third space in other words—a space/time/process in between, which is the eighth item on the list, to step out of numerical order, (8) *search for third spaces, dreams, encounters, hybrid nationalities, ethical ambiguities*.

With the arrival of the imagination, the fourth desideratum on the list was bound to appear: (4) *common humanity, meta-languages, equality, and human rights*. There is a lot to be said about each of these words, but I will note simply that the existential root of this matter of common humanity among the students was their frustration with what seemed to them the exclusive emphasis in the study of religion on difference. I heard this as a strong protest against scholarly isolation, against the complacency of the idea that "we" study "them," and that there is either no connection between the "we" and the "they" or if there is a connection it stays off-stage. (There is an obvious link here to the earlier discussion of poetics.) The aim is not to collapse difference into sameness. Number four on the list, like the others, is a question that arises in the post-, in this case, post-difference. Once the idea of difference has been grasped and elaborated in all its radical critical implications, then what? This is also a call for a scholarship on religion that is robustly subjective enough to lead to deeper understanding, perhaps on levels hitherto forbidden.

This leads to (5) *ethics/morality*. During the quarter, we read Jarrett Zigon's *HIV is God's Blessing: Rehabilitating Morality in Neoliberal Russia* (2010), which traces the resonance between the theology of a resurgent and nationalist Russian Orthodoxy, specifically its understanding of the dynamics of sin and repentance, and the neoliberal ideology of post-Communist Russia. If this is what my students meant by the "ethics" they want to study, then I think they are correct that this may become one of the major topics of the discipline going forward. But here, I am less sanguine than my students. I worry about the sudden reinsertion of the "ethical" everywhere in the study of religion nowadays, because I am afraid that "ethics" is the wedge that will allow for the unapologetic revival of the good religion/bad religion distinction along with the scholar's presumed responsibility to make this determination. The "ethical" is such a narrow way to frame human existence; it is like

saying that religion is about “meaning.” This is a perennial danger in the study of religion, so I hope this is not what my students meant.

The next item is (6) *post-secularism as a critique of liberalism*. What this means is clear, I think, and reflects the anthropological work of Talal Asad and his students, among them Saba Mahmoud and Charles Hirschkind; the research of Winnie Sullivan and others on law and religion; and the rich literatures on post-secular societies in anthropology and political science. But again I sense a danger: I want to urge caution that the matter of post-liberalism not become a celebration of religion in the contemporary world, in particular the power of certain neo-traditional religious idioms and practices to disrupt hegemonic politics. A certain kind of religious nostalgia too often haunts the post-secular. In any case, it is clear that students value the conversation that has arisen in recent years among scholars of religion (Pamela Klassen, e.g., and C S Adcock), of law and religion (David Engel, John Bowen, Sullivan, Sarah Barringer Gordon, and others), anthropologists (such as Matthew Engelke, Hussein Ali Agrama, and Veena Das) and political theorists (among them William Connolly and Wendy Brown), in which sociologists of religion (I think here of Courtney Bender) have taken a leading role.

Concern with power and violence, expansive definition of “violence,” e.g., “interpretive violence” is seventh (7) on the list, with subterranean routes to (2) and (4).

Violence has been on the religious studies agenda for more than a decade now, although often framed either in terms of “sacrifice” or “bad” religion. The students seem here to be calling for a wider conceptualization of violence, generally, that would include the violence of the symbolic orders of religion and society. This sounds abstract, but in fact I think it is directed against abstractions; it recognizes that we exist in a distracted, over-mediated world of warfare without warfare, politics without politics, economics without inequality, and racism without racism, all products of what Jon Stewart has called the “bullshitocracy.” By an “expansive definition of violence,” I understand one that restores the danger and cruelty to everyday life, asking not only who kills or harms whom, let alone who kills or harms *us*, which is usually what underlies the question. The narcissism of the study of religious violence points to a key problem, that if identifying the conditions within which specific forms of violence do not recognize themselves as violence.

Eight (8) we have seen already (above, in relation to 4). The ninth seems to me a reflex of anxiety, as most talk of method often is (9) *pin down methods of religious studies; interdisciplinarity*. This is a familiar yearning in the study of religion. Religious Studies has no method of its own, goes the old lament, but instead is parasitic on others, most recently on history, anthropology, and critical theory. I think this is a misbegotten issue. “Pin down” gets it right; talking about method is very often talk about containment, the anxious need to take control “of the strangeness I see in myself and others,” in Wittgenstein’s words. He was commenting in this acerbic phrase on Sir James George Frazer, the goal of whose method in *The Golden Bough*, Wittgenstein says, was “to make [religious practice and phenomena] plausible to people who think as he does.”¹ Perhaps, this is harsh both to Frazer and my students. If method is not fetishized into what you might find in a how-to manual, but if instead method has to do with the pragmatics of our work, it may broaden out to raise questions about what we do and how we live as scholars today, in the world as it is. Otherwise, what is so bad about foundering around? Why this hypostatization of method? “Disciplines actually get in the way of answers and theorems,” writes Judith Halberstam (2011: 6, 16, 9) in *The Queer Art of Failure*, “precisely because they offer maps of thought where intuition and blind fumbling might yield better results.” Saying that what she does is

“low theory,” Halberstam calls for “antidisciplinarity,” “a kind of theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples,” the “refusal of mastery,” “modes of thinking that ally not with rigor and order but with inspiration and unpredictability.” Where this leads, she says, is towards the “thicket of subjugated knowledge that sprouts like weeds among the disciplinary forms of knowledge,” which sound like spaces-in-between.

This is sure to make scholars of religion nervous. Religious Studies tries so very hard to win acceptance by the folks Paul Krugman relentlessly ridicules, in column after column in the *New York Times*, as “serious” people, those thoroughly committed to the status quo (see number 7 above). The discipline yearns to be “compliant,” Winnicott’s word for the opposite of the spirit of playfulness. This is what worries me about my students’ interest in ethics (see number 5), as well as in this impulse to “pin” religious studies down, namely, that it represents a not-so sublimated desire for a certain kind of public authority among scholars who study (or ought to study) a subject matter that since early modernity has been identified with women. Halberstam (2011: 8) is clear that the stakes of how scholars think about method and theory are high: it is “a choice between the university as a corporation and investment opportunity and the university as a new kind of public sphere with a different investment in knowledge, in ideas, and in thought and politics.”

Religious Studies has much to offer such a vision of the university; think of what we study, the subjugated knowledge and marginalized practices that are our *métier*. But it is too frightened to make this contribution. One sad sign of this is the determination in the American Academy of Religion to partner with various federal agencies and offices (most recently with the State Department), in a consultative role, but how unrealistic is this? This brings me to (10) *expansionist definitions of religion*. Definitions invariably give and take; they make some things legible and at the time render others illegible. Whatever talk happens about “religion” must take this into account, along with a keen awareness of the audience for whom a definition is being written. Nothing is innocent here, certainly not being a consultant to government.

About this last item, let me add, finally, that the directions in which “religion” is expanded depend entirely on the point at which the expansion begins. If “religion” means what happens in authorized religious spaces, under the authority of elites, then expansion takes one form. But if “religion” means a neo-Tillichian “ultimate concern,” an account of religion that is grounded in liberal Protestant theology and is allied with the religious project of secularism, then expanding the meaning of “religion” is just what has been happening all along in the discipline, with the results we have seen, and which the discipline has been so thoroughly excavating in recent years. We do not really want to enter this loop!

Here, I hand the conversation over to my colleagues in the study of religion and the sociology of religion. With which of these ten anticipations of what lies—or what might lie, or what must lie—ahead for the study of religion do you each respectively agree, if any, and what alternatives or additions would you propose (perhaps a completely different list!)? As together you discuss and modify the list or create an alternative version of it, you will also be clarifying you each stand today. The diagnostic is meant to surface urgencies and frustrations, within subfields and among generations. This is the kind of conversation I think the discipline requires now, and yet I am surprised by how few occasions there are to have it. I fear, though, that if we do not talk about these things the consequence will be a listless drifting at just the time when religious studies might be making a distinctive contribution to the academy.

Note

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein ([1979] 1991: 1e, 5e) (this is the numbering of the English text facing the German). Maggie Nelson (2015: 53) put this well, “How does one get across the fact that the best way to find out how people feel about their gender or sexuality—or anything else, really—is to listen to what they tell you, and to try to treat them accordingly, without shellacking over their version of reality with yours?”

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