HARDING (John), « Secularization and Study of Religion at North American Universities », *Éthique, politique, religions*, n° 2, 2013 – 1, *Le sécularisme en perspectives comparées*, p. 163-182

DOI : 10.15122/isbn.978-2-8124-1200-4.p.0163

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RÉSUMÉ – Cet article examine la manière dont les sciences religieuses universitaires se sont développées en parallèle de la sécularisation et dans le cadre d'influences sociales et culturelles. En Amérique du Nord, il a existé une relation symbiotique entre la sécularisation et études religieuses. Ce domaine d'études universitaires a connu une croissance rapide au cours des cinquante dernières années, mais est souvent mal compris. Il n'a pas établi de manière convaincante de claires et cohérentes normes disciplinaires. Les réflexions menées sur les relations de ce champ avec la théologie, le rôle de la comparaison, les menaces extérieures, les tensions internes, et les variations régionales et institutionnelles illustrent l'absence d'unanimité disciplinaire à l'égard de la théorie, de la méthode et des objectifs des dites sciences religieuses. Elles ont néanmoins survécu montrent des signes prometteurs de vitalité et de maturation en cours, incluant un engagement réflexif sur des considérations disciplinaires.

MOTS-CLÉS – sciences religieuses, sécularisation, Amérique du Nord, universités, méthodologie

ABSTRACT – This essay examines how the field of religious studies has developed in tandem with secularization and related social and cultural influences. In North America, there has been a symbiotic relationship between secularization and religious studies. This frequently misunderstood area of academic study has experienced rapid growth in the past fifty years. However, it has not convincingly established clear and consistent disciplinary norms. Reflections on relations with theology, the role of comparison, external threats, internal tensions, and regional and institutional variation illustrate a lack of disciplinary unanimity with regard to theory, method, and objectives. Nevertheless, religious studies has survived and there are promising signs of its ongoing vitality and maturation including thoughtful engagement with disciplinary considerations.

KEYWORDS – religious studies, secularization, North America, universities, methodology

SECULARIZATION AND STUDY OF RELIGION AT NORTH AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

Only since the middle of the nineteenth century has the secular academic study of religion taken shape. Breaking away from theology, various anthropological, sociological, and psychological approaches used social scientific methods to understand or explain religion. Other approaches did not sever links with theological concerns as completely, but have nonetheless been formative to the development of the study of religion as an emerging field, which has been variously labeled "comparative religion", "history of religion," and "religious studies." Moreover, only since the middle of the twentieth century has growth and increasing support and interest in this area led to a proliferation of distinct programs for the study of religion at North American universities. Perhaps surprisingly, the existence and growth of these relatively young religious studies programs owe a debt both to secularization and to interest in religious traditions other than Christianity. These strange bedfellows share a resistance to granting Christianity a privileged position in the university or in the interpretation of various social, cultural, moral, ethical, political, and epistemological issues.

In this article, I explore facets of the relationship between secularism and religious studies as well as examine related tensions within religious studies about issues of purpose, practice, and disciplinary norms. Although most or all areas of academic study at universities encounter some misperceptions from the general public about the scope, methods, and professional practices of their disciplines, misunderstandings about religious studies are especially common and profound. For example, outsiders often have the mistaken assumption that professors of religious studies are engaged in a "religious" activity. Such a misconception suggests a conflation with other settings for religious education, such as seminaries, religious schools, and education about religions in

households or religious congregations. Moreover, this misunderstanding is exacerbated by a lack of disciplinary clarity and the low profile of the academic discourse about religion relative to more pervasive voices that shape conversations about religion. As a result of this attribution of a "religious" dimension to "how" and "why" this study takes place rather than just "what" is studied, there is a tendency to obscure the strong similarities between religious studies and other secular academic pursuits within the humanities and social sciences.

However, there has also been a vibrant movement by scholars of religion in North American universities to separate religious studies from theology, clarify the boundaries and norms of this nascent area of study, and accelerate and influence the field's maturation through greater emphasis on sophistication of theory and method as well as practices and assumptions more in line with related disciplines in the university. For example, the *Guide to the Study of Religion* begins with a quotation from Jonathan Z. Smith, who has been a particularly influential voice for more probing reflection about the study of religion: "Lacking a clear articulation of purpose, one may derive arresting anecdotal juxtapositions or self-serving differentiations, but the disciplined constructive work of the academy will not have been advanced, nor will the study of religion have come of age[1]". This is not simply a suggestion to pay more attention to issues of theory and method; rather, it is a call to become methodical and earn the clarity and recognition of the study of religion as a distinct discipline. In this essay, I will touch on some of the "coming of age" problems for religious studies in North American universities. This "state of the field" presentation will be supplemented by reflections about the relationship between religious studies and secularization.

1 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, Chicago, University of chicago Press, 1990, p. 53, cited in Willi Braun and Russell McCutcheon, eds., *Guide to the Study of Religion*, London and NY, Cassell, 2000, p. 1.

RISE OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES: RELATION WITH THEOLOGY AND ROLE OF COMPARISON

There are a number of excellent accounts of the emergence of religious studies including its recent growth[1]. Rather than replicating this history, I want to highlight a few issues most relevant to the purpose of this essay. First, the contemporary academic study of religion has been shaped by influences of modernization and secularization. To an extent the existence and form of religious studies in universities today is possible because religion can be perceived as one mode of human activity among others. Moreover, this variable collection of practices, beliefs, myths, texts, and worldviews can be the object of study employing the same tools and techniques of other secular academic pursuits. The first part, religion as one mode among others, speaks to a basic premise of modernization in contrast to traditional, pre-modern perspectives in which religion was relatively more resistant to such separation. William Paden describes this "emergence of the idea that religion is a subject matter in its own right" and delineates the phases of the "'science of religion' movement[2]". Donald Wiebe examines related intellectual trends, resistance to religion being subjected to scientific study as well as critiques of modernist assumptions about the possibility and desirability of such scientific techniques, and his own conclusion that "the study of religion as a social science provide[s] us with the only acceptable model for the study of religion in the modern public university[3]".

The second aspect of this general claim invokes the influence of secularization in dismantling protections that often shielded religion from scholarly analysis and critique. In short, religion could be conceived as a separate object of study that could be scrutinized without special treatment designed to protect it from critique by elevating or obscuring it

1 Eric J. Sharpe, "The Study of Religion in Historical Perspective", in John R. Hinnells (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 21-45; William E. Paden, "Religion as a Subject Matter", in W. E. Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1988, p. 35-49.

2 William E. Panden, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

3 Donald Wiebe, "Modernism", in Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon, *Guide to the Study of Religion*, London and New York, Cassell, 2000, p. 363.

from the researcher's gaze. These concepts are far from absolute, and one can find early instances of treatment of religion that fits this description of the modern and secular just as one can find contemporary discussions of religion in public universities in North America where protectors of the sanctity or inaccessibility of religion may still argue that religion cannot be objectified as a separable realm to be explored. Guardians of religion also argue that it should not be examined by social scientific techniques deemed too coarse, too reductionist, or simply unable to access what they characterize as the unique genius, power, insight, or authority of religion. Nonetheless, the broad strokes of influence from modernization and secularization help contextualize the emergence and growth of religious studies in recent history.

The surge in religious studies programs after World War II arises, in part, from encounters with "others" from foreign wars and international travel to greater access to Asian religious teachers, traditions, and texts. Bias and distortion continue, but characterizations of distant and disembodied "others" have become tempered by global news and popular culture as well as the local presence of various religious communities, temples, and embodied encounters at home in the wake of immigration. The partially overlapping spheres of influence from secularization, modernization, and globalization affect government policies and discussions of religion within and beyond the academy.

What is meant by "religious studies" and what this field should be –including whether one can refer to it as a "discipline"– remains contested. Wiebe indicates problems with both terms –"discipline" and "religious studies"– and addresses various ways this latter term has been used and understood, but he points to general agreement "that this designation for the study of religion, 'legitimated' by virtue of inclusion in the curriculum of the university, came into use only after the Second World War; primarily since the 1960s"[1]. Unlike divisions with regard to the content, method, purpose, and even most suitable name for the field of the study of religion, the timing of the proliferation of religious studies programs is consistently approximated to the 1960s. Ninian Smart locates the rise of religious studies at this time and characterizes it as "a modern quest. Religious studies were created out of a blend of

1 Donald Wiebe, "Religious Studies", in John R. Hinnells (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 21-45.

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"[1]. Disciplinary growing pains as well as links with modernity and various contemporary intellectual movements are not surprising given the recent rise of this "modern quest."

Although there are important similarities between developments in the field in Europe and in North America, there are also striking contrasts that suggest important cultural and institutional differences. The relationship between theology and religious studies exemplifies both similarities and differences. Certain internal tensions about what religious studies should be are often shared across oceans, but more particular social and historical context has shaped external state and educational policy differently from country to country. One barometer to gauge the role, strength, and expression of secularization in relation to the study of religion at state universities can be seen in terms of the presence of, and institutional links between, religious studies and theology. For example, relative to North American public universities, in the United Kingdom religious studies and theology are more likely to share a department, in Germany state universities continue to have a more vibrant and directly supported theology presence, and in France secular influence on policy has generally restricted the study of religion to individual scholars often in social science departments, such as Anthropology, Sociology, and Political Science, whereas theology is quite circumscribed with almost no presence in the state university system beyond Strasbourg, which can in turn partially be explained by this area's cultural and historical ties to Germany[2].

1 Ninian Smart, "Foreword", in Peter Connolly, *Approaches to the Study of Religion*, London and New York, Continuum, 2001.

2 These observations stem from my experiences and observations –especially during research in Europe in 1996-1997 and 2010– as well as from conversations with colleagues from Europe. For a recent multi-author study that extends beyond comparisons among institutions in North America and Western Europe, see Gregory Alles (ed.), *Religious Studies: A Global View*, London and New York, Routledge, 2008.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SECULARIZATION AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

There are intriguing parallels between religious studies and secularization in terms of historical development and regional variation that prompt questions of how each has shaped or responded to the other –facilitating or resisting aspects of the other's development and vitality. Regional variation suggests the need to contextualize and qualify statements about the rise and characteristics of religious studies. Moreover, regional difference combined with the thesis that secularization and religious studies have shaped each other raises questions about the consistency of secularization between Europe and North America. This comparison can offer insight into shared traits in religious studies worldwide as well as characteristics more particular to North American universities and society. In fact, the definitions of secularism and secularization are unclear, as are the domains –public or private– for which they are relevant. Judith Fox, in her 2005 essay "Secularization," instructively touches on these issues, reinforces regional differences on all of these fronts, and provides an overview of related theories and critical questions that reflect on the difficulty of resolving these issues.

The first use of the term "secularism" is attributed to George Jacob Holyoake, who wrote several works on the subject including *The Principles of Secularism* (1860), and advanced this movement along with fellow Englishman, Charles Bradlaugh[1]. In the tradition of "freethought," these secularists asserted that morality should be based on available evidence and reliance on science rather than deference to religious revelations; moreover, they called for separation of church and state including reversing tax exemption and other forms of governmental support of religious institutions. Their movement coincides with the emergence of comparative and historical study of religion largely separate from a theological framework among early pioneers of religious studies. Secularism and secularization are at times distinguished from each other

1 Charles Dubray, Secularism, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 13. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912 http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13676a.htm <accessed January 21, 2011>

with the former term linked more closely to the personal domain and morality. As Fox characterizes, "secularists do not consider that moral codes should take into account, for instance, the existence of God, or of an afterlife" –whereas "secularization takes place in the 'public' arena" and "refers only to the diminishing of the public significance of religion". She then notes that such a differentiation is rejected by Peter Berger, who instead understands secularization to encompass both private and public dimensions[1].

The rise of religious studies programs around 1960 also coincides with growing differences with regard to secularization theory –disputes about its conclusions as well as regional variation between Europe and the United States. Fox draws direct links from Weber's position that modernity entails the unavoidable decline of religious influence to the secularization thesis of Bryan Wilson, "seen by many to be the foremost British sociologist of religion of his day[2]". Wilson's 1966 work, *Religion in Secular Society*, defines "secularization as 'the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance'" and asserts that "religion would become increasingly marginalized and lacking in social significance" in Western society[3]. This is the classical secularization thesis, a sociological version of predictions about the death of God framed in terms of a more social death for religion and diminishment of its influence. Such secularization certainly seemed to be a dominant shift in Western Europe and to an extent in North America as well. For example, weakened authority is epitomized by the "Quiet Revolution" in Quebec with the dramatic loss of influence by the Catholic Church around this same time.

Fox contrasts Durkheim's assertion "that religion would never lose its social significance" to Weber and notes "elements of Durkheimian thought" in Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, who critiqued this secularization thesis[4]. Confronted with surprisingly high religious participation statistics in the United States, Wilson "allowed that religion appeared far more resilient in the United States" but held

1 Judith Fox, "Secularization", in John R. Hinnells (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 292.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 294.
3 Cited in J. Fox, *op. cit.*, p. 295.
4 J. Fox, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

to his basic secularization thesis with some regional variation and a similar conclusion that "religion had ceased to be significant in public life"[1]. Stark and Bainbridge suggest a very different economic model with supply, demand, and rational choice that debunked Wilson's secularization thesis and anticipated the ongoing religious resilience –"like Durkheim, they believed that religious innovation and renewal are inevitable"[2]. Fox further indicates that the thesis of Stark and Bainbridge "was met with friendly ridicule on the other side of the Atlantic" including vocal criticism from Wilson's former student, the sociologist Roy Wallis[3]. The rivalry suggests regional differences not just in the vitality of religion or role of secularization in society, but in the academic study of religion and the theoretical understanding of secularization.

Stark and Bainbridge's reinterpretation of secularization as neither new nor eliminating religion punctured predictions of religion's demise well ahead of most of their colleagues. It also helped explain the surge of new religious movements, such as Zen and other Asian traditions and techniques that gained popularity in the West in parallel with the rise of religious studies programs. Their findings discuss the relationship between secularization, religion, and its study:

> Most modern scholars, however, do not regard current trends of secularization as the harbinger of religious change, but as the final twilight of the gods. …Science is expected to make religion implausible, and hence modern secularization will not produce new major religions, but an era of rationality in which mysticism can no longer find a significant place. […] Our theory of religion forces the conclusion that religion is not in its last days. We think that most modern scholars have misread the future because they mistakenly identified the dominant religious traditions in modern society with the phenomenon of religion in general. […] We see no reason to suppose that the diffusion of science will make humans in the future less motivated to escape death, less affected by tragedy, less inclined to ask, "What does it all mean?" True, science can challenge some of the claims made by historic religions, but it cannot provide the primary satisfactions that have long been the *raison d'être* of religions[4].

1 *Op. cit.*, p. 296-297.
2 *Op. cit.*, p. 299.
3 *Ibid.*
4 Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1985, p. 430-431.

This theory accounts for both the decline of "dominant religious traditions" and the rising interest in religions such as Buddhism. Disenchantment with Christianity, diminishment of its public influence, and a growing openness to diverse religious forms and views align with secularization and with the growth of religious studies separate from traditional theology but often still linked to questions of meaning.

POST-SECULARISM, PUBLIC POLICY, AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Post-secular developments could foster or hinder religious studies depending on what one means by this controversial term. In his 2010 article, "Post-secular Society: Christianity and the Dialectics of the Secular," Ingolf Dalferth argues against interpretations of post-secular as characterized by "renewed interest in the spiritual life" with less "secular suspicion of spiritual questions" and greater "spiritual and intellectual pluralism, East and West." Instead of this idea, championed by the Centre for Postsecular Studies at London Metropolitan University, Dalferth posits that:

> post-secular societies are neither religious nor secular. They do not prescribe or privilege a religion, but neither do they actively and intentionally refrain from doing so… they take no stand on this matter, because it is irrelevant for their self-understanding and without import for the communicative, civic, legal, political, or economic operations by and through which they define themselves. For them, religion has ceased to be something to which a society has to relate in embracing, rejecting, prescribing, negating, or allowing it. Religion in whatever form has become a matter of indifference[1].

Whereas one can clearly see a supportive environment for a religious studies program in the former definition of post-secular as signaling renewed interest in religion and religious diversity, I draw attention to Dalferth's definition because its implications for religious studies departments in North American universities are more ambiguous.

1 Ingolf U. Dalferth, Post-secular Society: Christianity and the Dialectics of the Secular, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 78(2), 2010, p. 324.

On the one hand, indifference is not a ringing endorsement about the importance of understanding religion much less of religion itself in society. On the other hand, such indifference, which neither promotes nor obstructs religion –nor treats as particularly special or noteworthy– could allow for better integration of religious studies alongside departments of history and various social sciences. Such integration may remedy misperceptions of the field of study, but risks irrelevance (as opposed to definitions of post-secular that point to rising interest in religion and concomitant relevance of studying religion to better understand people, society, politics, etc.).

Paul Bramadat addresses the contemporary relevance of religion and the academic study of religion in relation to the state. His 2008 article examines the intersections between "Religion and public policy in Canada" by pursuing three questions: "First, how is religion currently framed by existing Canadian laws and policies ? Second, is there evidence that policy-makers are actually interested in academic perspectives on religion and public policy ? Third, which problematic issues might merit scholarly attention in the near future[1] ?". Bramadat's findings suggest that "until very recently Canadian policy makers have been reluctant to engage critically the problematic social and political issues in which religion is intimately involved," but now are taking note of religious studies contributions to understanding the role of religion in society's "source tensions". He notes that "the events of September 11, 2001, reminded many people that the simple or 'vulgar' version of the secularization hypothesis simply has not been borne out by contemporary historical events" and that resurgent interest in religion and public policy has led to increased vitality in this area as evidenced by scholarly activity from conferences and collaborative projects to new PhD programs and research chairs[2].

This view of the Canadian scene suggests a recent increased relevance of religion for public policy, which resists Dalferth's post-secularism. Instead, religion seems to be receiving increasing attention from the state and the relatively young discipline of religious studies is growing and perhaps slightly less marginal in the university setting. The role of public policy in this shift should not be underestimated. Government

1 Paul Bramadat, "Religion and Public Policy in Canada: An itinerary", *Studies in Religion/ Sciences Religieuses*, 37(1), 2008, p. 121-143.

2 *Op. cit.*, p. 122-123.

policy, though itself a product of historical, cultural, social, and political context, influences the discourse about religion, especially at public institutions. Assessing different governmental attitudes and policies provides one perspective for understanding regional differences in the study of religion within Europe or between Europe and North America. Within North America, the rise of secularization certainly has not led to the death of religion, and prospects of a fully secular society, whatever that might look like, is nowhere in sight. Nonetheless, public policy about education and separation of religion and the state has been a very important interface between secularization and the development of religious studies.

With regard to one important aspect explaining why and how religious studies programs emerged rapidly from the 1960s onward in North America, Russell T. McCutcheon examines how "the effort to establish the field in the U.S. public university was given momentum by the U.S. courts system" at this time[1]. McCutcheon underscores the quite different possible meanings for the word "respecting" in the First Amendment to the Constitution in the United States, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof…" and he explains the basic distinction between this amendment's "establishment" and "free exercise" clauses[2]. This amendment, adopted as part of the Bill of Rights in 1791, has been interpreted through later court cases, which in turn have established policy conducive to the more recent rise of religious studies in the United States. In particular, the decision written by Justice Clark in a 1963 United States Supreme Court case "stated that although confessional instruction and religious indoctrination in publicly funded schools were both unconstitutional…one's education… 'is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization'[3]".

The ruling and its accompanying endorsement of the value of this type of comparative and historical study of religion facilitated the rise of these programs *at the university.* Public high schools (and lower grades) often remain reluctant to teach about religion for lack of expertise and

1 Russell T. McCutcheon, *Studying Religion: An Introduction*, London, Equinox, 2007, p. 44.
2 *Ibid.*
3 *Ibid.* p. 45-46.

fear of legal, social, political, or parental backlash if done in ways perceived to be contrary to the separation of church and state. As a result, universities remain the gateway for the academic study about religion. The absence of a secular religious studies mode of scholarship prior to university exacerbates common misunderstandings about this area of study among students and colleagues in other fields. These misunderstandings can in turn marginalize the role of religious studies in the university and leave this nascent field vulnerable.

PERILS FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES: EXTERNAL THREATS

Although the boldest secularization claims of religion's imminent demise have proved exaggerated and increasingly unlikely, this does not mean that religious studies is fully secure in North American universities. There could still be external hostility directed toward teaching religion in public university settings. However, it seems this fate would have been more likely in earlier phases of secularization. Religious Studies have remained considerably more prominent in public universities in North America than in the state system of France, for example, and a state-sanctioned reversal would be surprising in present circumstances. A larger external threat might be one of restructuring at individual institutions. Budget crises, rampant in North America as elsewhere during the economic woes of recent years, can threaten cuts across all departments or the elimination of departments seen as more marginal. Although the size and quality of the religious studies department at the Florida International University seems far from peripheral, it had to weather such an assault in 2009. A June 15, 2009 letter expresses appreciation to the Dalai Lama and others who helped raise funds to save the department and announces that the "FIU Board of Trustees today rejected the proposal of the administration to terminate the Department, its BA, and half of its full-time faculty[1]".

1 Christine Gudorf, Open letter from Christine Gudorf, Professor and Chair, Department of Religious Studies at FIU, June 15, 2009. http://www2.fiu.edu/~religion/ <accessed January 16, 2011>.

The threat to disband departments of religious studies occurred during budget difficulties fifteen years earlier at the University of Pennsylvania, an Ivy League institution in which religious studies was never linked to a school of theology. The Dean of the School of Arts and Science announced plans to disband religious studies and two other departments by the end of June 1994. She argued that the interdisciplinary character of religious studies allowed for this restructuring without harming the "undergraduate mission"[1]. The department's response took up the challenge to justify their existence as a unit dedicated to the study of religion, in contradistinction to religion occasionally being the subject of study in various other departments at the university –each with its own particular disciplinary perspectives.

> What disturbs us most of all is that the dissolution of the Department will make impossible the study of religion as a phenomenon. The study of religion is not circumscribed by isolated movements (e.g. Hinduism, Judaism), or specific approaches (e.g. sociology of religion, history of Christianity), or creative expressions (religious art, literature, music). It is a coherent field of its own[2].

In both of these instances, the religious studies departments survived. However, their interdisciplinarity and their very differentiation from theology and alignment with aspects of secularism can leave religious studies vulnerable to dismemberment into cognate disciplines. Moreover, one can imagine how a post-secularism consistent with Dalferth's definition could undermine the perceived contribution of religious studies by indifference rather than hostility. One other example of dismemberment is the case of the religious studies' body at my university in Canada. Around the time that the University of Pennsylvania successfully fended off the attempt to reassign members to other departments, the University of Lethbridge took this action as a temporary measure in the same era of budget crisis. The program survived its loss of a departmental home, but was only able to fully regain critical mass and momentum once reassembled as an intact department years later. Although it proved

1 Rosemary Stevens, Comments from Dean Stevens' news release, September 22, 1993. http://www.digitalhumanities.org/humanist/Archives/Virginia/v07/0215.html <accessed on January 16, 2011>.

2 Ann E. Matter, Response of the Department of Religious Studies, September 30, 1993. http://www.digitalhumanities.org/humanist/Archives/Virginia/v07/0215.html <accessed on January 16, 2011>.

temporary, this disbanding suggests that the most daunting external threat remains the combination of budget crisis and perceived marginality relative to more established departments.

Willi Braun extends the defense of religious studies in opposition to the 1990s "trend in some North American universities to see religion departments as unrationalizable in these economically stringent times" by arguing that

> a wide collaborative expertise-coalition of scholars[1], intentionally gathered around religious *arts de faire* makes a great deal of sense. Thick knowledge, unlike revelations, about highly complex social practices comes neither by *ad hoc* pursuit nor without costly investment in disciplinary props. We still need a set of cooperating methods and foci of study for the purpose of compiling an "archive" of these *arts*. We will require a "critical mass" of intelligence, a grouping of disciplined specialists, to manage that archive with self-consciously critical practices of concept formation, theory construction, classificatory and interpretive operations. We will need thoughtful curricula for the distribution of our knowledge, and so on. The larger purpose of generating and disseminating an academically credible public knowledge about religion is therefore undoubtedly best pursued in an institutionally designated and licensed place[2].

It seems that arguments such as these have gained influence. The external threats cannot be completely discounted, but circumstances seem better aligned for stability or even increased vitality for religious studies.

TENSIONS WITHIN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

However, in the larger picture of religious studies in North America, the internal tensions about disciplinary norms remain more apparent –and more consistently present– than external threats. For many, it

1 See Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995, p. 336-337.

2 Willi Braun, "Religion", in Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon, *Guide to the Study of Religion*, London and New York, Cassell, 2000, p. 14; Gary Lease, (ed.), "Pathologies in the Academic Study of Religion: North American Institutional Case Studies", Special Issue: *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 7(4), 1995.

seems clear that Religious Studies is not a "religious" activity. Instead, religion is simply the object of study. A more accurately descriptive title, such as Department for the Study of Religion, might help matters. However, confusion arises from disagreement and divergent practices as much as by misleading names or lack of familiarity with the field. Certainly scholars can be "insiders" or "outsiders" to the tradition they teach and research. However, the disciplinary identity of religious studies is more clear and in less tension with secularism if professors –when engaged in their professional duties, such as teaching in the classroom, writing a journal article, or adjudicating a grant– are not setting the tradition's norms or attempting to convince an audience of the superior merits of their traditions or of particular authoritative interpretations of contested doctrine. Such a call to restrict discourse to these disciplinary norms within the context of a secular university may seem modest. However, the debate within religious studies continues. There is resistance from earlier models of theology and various types of phenomenology or comparative study and there is resistance from more recent postmodern and cultural studies challenges to the possibility and desirability of striving for some sense of objectivity and critical distance perhaps unrealistically alienated from one's own views and positions.

This debate has been carried out through academic books and journals with scholars such as Wiebe and McCutcheon at the vanguard of the first position—clarifying and restricting disciplinary norms to what is deemed appropriate for a secular university and is not restricted to the insiders' claims of privileged access. A useful review of the conversation, in stages, is illustrated by exchanges in three journals over three decades. The format, readership, and periodic publication of these journals best reflect movements and multiple voices in this debate. The Canadian journal *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses (SR)* addressed issues of appropriate method and the *raison d'être* of religious studies in the mid-1980s. The debate included articles by Wiebe and Charles Davis in a 1984 issue and then follow-up essays by these scholars and others in 1986. In his 1984 article, "The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion," Wiebe states that his concern "is with the relationship of theology to the study of religion, and, more particularly, to the 'academic study of religion,'" which "gained a political identity within the academic community (i.e., the scholarly-scientific

community), precisely by distinguishing itself from theology" but is threatened by a "call for re-establishing an explicit role for theology"[1]. The title of his essay refers to what Wiebe characterizes as a failure of nerve if religious studies scholars forsake the scientific basis and academic goals foundational to their field by allowing the role of theology to become more prominent. Wiebe discusses the history of religious studies, clarifies what he means by theology –in contrast with Davis– and indicates that "the hidden theological agenda present in religious studies has now, so to speak, come out of the closet"[2].

One decade after the second *SR* issue devoted to this debate, Bruce Lincoln's concise contribution "Theses on Method," first appeared in a 1996 issue of the journal *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion (MTSR).* Lincoln's thirteen theses reinforce Wiebe's call for a rigorously secular approach to the study of religion and highlight fundamental tensions within religious studies through the effort to clarify and promote disciplinary standards and norms for academic scholarship about religion. Lincoln states from the outset that "History of Religions" is a name for the discipline that "announces a proprietary claim and a relation of encompassment: History is the method and Religion the object of study"[3]. Lincoln reminds the would-be historian of religions that "reverence is a religious and not a scholarly virtue"[4]. He indicates fundamental shortcomings of cultural relativism, highlights advantages of studying "ideological products and operations of other societies" as opposed to the difficulty of doing this for one's own society, and makes clear that "critical inquiry need assume neither cynicism nor dissimulation to justify probing beneath the surface, and ought probe scholarly discourse and practice as much as any other"[5]. In the final two theses, Lincoln articulates the professional obligations of the scholar of religion and argues that if religious claims and assumptions displace methods and disciplinary standards of the academy, the resulting product simply is not scholarship. Again, Lincoln gets to the core of the tensions about

1 Donald Wiebe, "The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion", *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 13(4), 1984, p. 401-402.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 411.
3 Bruce Lincoln, 1, "Theses on Method", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 8(3), 1996, p. 225.
4 *Ibid.*
5 *Ibid.* p. 226.

the nature of religious studies and the scholar's best practices including a rebuttal of the critique of "reductionism" leveled by some who want to protect religion from typical academic scrutiny on the basis of just such religious claims about the supposed "transcendent nature and sacrosanct status" of religion. Lincoln states that such "critical inquiry has become commonplace in other disciplines" and "is the starting point for those who construct themselves as historians"[1]. The gulf between positions is clear. The "reductionism" some point to as clear indication that secular study of religion has gone too far and failed to apprehend what it attempts to explain is here presented as the starting point for bona fide scholarship.

Finally, moving ahead one more decade brings us to an exchange in a 2006 volume of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion (JAAR).* The September 2006 issue offers several perspectives representative of influential voices and ideas in this ongoing debate about identity, motives, methods, and standards for Religious Studies. Wiebe argues that an examination of presidential addresses at the American Academy of Religion (AAR), in most cases, "provides support for making the voice of religion heard both on college and university campuses and society at large and that in this, the AAR still reflects the intentions and aims of the National Association of Biblical Instructors from which the AAR evolved"[2]. Wiebe is concerned about insufficient separation in religious studies from theological approaches. His 2006 article serves the role in this *JAAR* issue that Philip Boo Riley provided in the 1984 issue of *SR* with an essay that assessed the theological vs. religious studies content in that journal over a decade-long span[3]. In both cases the authors look to the output and leadership of religious studies journals and organizations to assess the relation between more secular, social scientific approaches as opposed to religious, theological approaches to the study of religion as discerned from practices and statements of mission. This is an historical exercise motivated by methodological concerns. Wiebe indicates that on the whole, a social scientific discipline

1 *Ibid.* p. 227.

2 Donald Wiebe, "An Eternal Return All Over Again: The Religious Conversation Endures", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74(3), 2006, p. 674.

3 Philip Boo Riley, "Theology and/or Religious Studies: A Case Study of Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses, 1971-1981", *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* 13(4), 1984, p. 423-444.

of religious studies is not emerging and that separation from explicitly religious roots is sporadic at best.

McCutcheon further reinforces the positions of Wiebe and Lincoln through his discussion of the scholar's role[1]. However, other scholars in this issue of the journal disagree. Tyler Roberts resists what he calls the "excessive historicism" of McCutcheon and Lincoln and cites Joan Copjec's definition of historicism –"the reduction of society to its indwelling network of relations of power and knowledge"– to specify the type of historicism that he perceives scholars to be overemphasizing in their study of religion[2]. Paul Courtright also suggests overemphasis in some otherwise valid points about misrepresentation and agency in his concise 2006 response to McCutcheon.

Although there is resonance in the basic positions of this debate across three decades and three journals, there is also movement. Unlike the wider disconnect between Wiebe and Davis in their mid-1980s debate, this 2006 exchange between McCutcheon and Courtright suggests a smaller gap and some important shared assumptions. For example, both cite J. Z. Smith's influence on this debate with appreciation for what Courtright describes as Smith's "well-taken point that, in the interpretation of religion, it is about the choices the scholar makes regarding what to emphasize that makes all the difference[3]". A related passage from J. Z. Smith informs the positions of Wiebe, Lincoln, and McCutcheon, and has also exerted influence more generally on discussions of theory and method in the study of religion for thirty years.

> That is to say, while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious –*there is no data for religion*. 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

1 Russell T. McCutcheon, "It's a Lie. There's No Truth in It ! It's a Sin !": On the Limits of the Humanistic Study of Religion and the Costs of Saving Others from Themselves, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74(3), 2006. P. 720-750.

2 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists*, Cambridge, Mass, MIT, p. 6. Tyler Roberts, Between the Lines: Exceeding Historicism in the Study of Religion, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74(3), 2006, p. 697-719.

3 Paul Courtright, "The Self-Serving Humility of Disciplining Liberal Humanist Scholars: A Response to Russell McCutcheon", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74(3), 2006, p. 752.

> 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 self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study[1].

Courtright's response illustrates that this concept articulated by Smith has gained wider acceptance, up to a point, but debate remains in terms of the degree to which scholars of religious studies should understand their role in the creation of the category of religion and what kind of scholarly activity is produced or excluded by being so "relentlessly self-conscious."

CONCLUSIONS

The lack of unanimity on these points suggests the academic study of religion is not yet a discipline whose standards are universally recognized. Nevertheless, discussions of enduring tensions remain productive to the extent that scholars are at least more likely to reflect on what they do, why they do it, and in some cases entertain suggestions of what they may want to do instead or in addition to their current practices. Discussions of method also lead to examining practices and controversies in other disciplines and exploring the history of the field of religious studies and the changing ways in which it interacts with secularization and a wide variety of social and cultural forces. More focused reflection within religious studies and wider awareness beyond the study of religion can be beneficial in their own right. However, it seems possible and desirable to strive for disciplinary advances including certain standards that delimit claims to what can be demonstrated by our usual tools of analysis in the humanities and social sciences without recourse to privileged "insider" experience or revelation that can be neither tested nor confirmed. The field of religious studies would also be better understood –in breadth and depth– if we began to inform our students about theory, method, and disciplinary considerations before launching into the "content" of

1 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. xi.

religion, which is itself a category shaped by the scholar. Each course and level at university presents opportunities to remind students of disciplinary considerations and debates –including the perspectives of positions that disagree with social scientific (and "historian of religion") norms.

Many, but not all, secular universities in North America provide the opportunity to expose students to these debates and to diverse religious traditions, topics, and ways of thinking about and contextualizing religion. Secularization helped open space for religious studies as a field in humanities and social sciences apart from theology. Religious studies, at least in its social scientific and historical mode, has developed in tandem with secularization by treating religion as a subject of study without special status or *sui generis* nature. Secular priorities and possible permutations, such as the post-secularism indifferent to religion rather than the post-secularism of renewed interest in religion, could also present obstacles to the development of religious studies. However, religion has remained in the spotlight and religious studies have resisted attempts to displace it. Many critics of religion still appreciate the importance of thinking about religion, understanding it and its complex relations with so many other academic fields as well as human history, politics, and culture more generally. Although religious studies faces certain threats from beyond the field and ongoing internal tensions as exemplified by the disciplinary debates, there is reason for optimism that just as classical secularization theory has given way to the acknowledgment that religion is not likely to disappear, so too the academic study of religion in North American universities seems well positioned to maintain its ground. Such maintenance will better keep pace with other disciplines and intellectual trends if scholars of religion continue to reflect on the nature of the academic study of religion and clarify the norms of this scholarship. To this end, the ongoing internal debate and external misunderstandings may require periodic reclaiming of the field's non-sacred space in the academy and society.

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