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Reflections on Tradition and Inquiry in the Study of Religions

Gavin Flood

In recent years questions about the coherence of Religious Studies have been raised, responses to which have important implications within both the politics of institutions and broader cultural politics. As specializations deepen, some fragmentation in the field of Religious Studies is inevitable and a welcome antidote to earlier universalising claims. But we need to overcome the inadequate choice of using either problematic general categories or a relativistic reversion to purely area-specific study which relegates the study of 'religions' to departments of anthropology, sociology, or other splintered fields, and excludes theologies of traditions from the secular academy. This paper argues for Religious Studies not only as the social scientific study of religion but as an arena that gives hospitality to traditions' self-inquiry within a framework of rational discourse.

THAT RELIGION IS OF FUNDAMENTAL PUBLIC CONCERN cannot be doubted as we move into the twenty-first century, central to global politics, cultural or identity politics, ethics, and the socioeconomic processes of late modernity. Never has there been a time when the critical understanding of religions of the kind that can arguably be done within

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Religious Studies has been more important and never has there been a greater need for such knowledge and critical understanding to inform public debate which so often lacks informed perspectives. One reason for this is arguably a general fragmentation of Religious Studies into area-specific study and discreet discourses, a fragmentation related to the question of its coherence. In many ways this fragmentation is inevitable as specializations deepen, and this has been a welcome antidote to earlier universalizing categorization and oversimplification of complex culture-specific histories. If Religious Studies is to survive into the future—and in my view it is vital that it does and I am optimistic that it will—it needs to be able to discuss and articulate areas of shared concern in forms of language, whereby different world religions and discreet subject-specific areas can communicate and illuminate each other. We need to overcome the inadequate choice of using either problematic universal categories in understanding religions or a relativistic reversion to purely area-specific study which relegates the study of “religions” to departments of Anthropology, Sociology, or whatever and excludes theologies of traditions from the secular academy. We need to promote Religious Studies as a field of inquiry that gives hospitality to traditions and their self-representations, allows for discussion across subdisciplines such as the Anthropology of Religion, Sociology of Religion, Philology, and so on, and interfaces with a public discourse. In that public discourse scholars should not be too hesitant, perhaps, in making claims about what they perceive to be the human good. Postmodern critiques might criticize Religious Studies for being implicit Theology and being blind to the political nature of all inquiry, and Theology might criticize Religious Studies for being (as I once heard) “Theology without the scholarship,” but in our postcritical environment Religious Studies has the ability and opportunity to embrace a diversity of kinds of reasoning (or rational inquiry founded on both secular and religious presuppositions) along with the ability to speak across disciplines.

In this brief article I wish to argue for a Religious Studies not only or primarily as the social scientific study of religion but as an arena that gives legitimacy to traditions’ self-inquiry within a framework of rational discourse. Such a Religious Studies can be comparative, bold in not veering away from question of cultural politics, from renewed questions about a common human nature after the “death of man,” and from questions about the possibility of transcendence and the nature of the world. Such a Religious Studies is dialogical in nature and has text as a fundamental concern. Indeed, coming out of the ashes of the phenomenology of religion, I detect a new form of hermeneutical phenomenology that has passed through the fire of

postmodern critique, is sympathetic to religiously based standpoints, but is not Theology because not historically locked in to a particular theological tradition, and which has the flexibility to creatively read across traditions. This orientation addresses the problem of the inadequate choice between universalism and area-specific study and the related problem of reductionism.

REDUCTIONISM AND EXPLANATION

Two tendencies in recent years have sought to provide explanations of religion in terms of a naturalist or eliminative reductionism, on the one hand, and a cultural reductionism on the other. Eliminative reductionism primarily refers to theories of cognition and evolutionary psychology along with their philosophical justification. By cultural reductionism I mean accounts that see religion only in terms of a politics of representation and structures of power. On this view religion is a disempowering hegemony caused by a “false consciousness” that has served the interests of the rich and powerful. There are philosophical positions between these or that embrace both. Rorty’s (2002) “cultural politics” would be an example. Both kinds of reductionism share an incredulity to religious truth claims and offer explanation and critique that are rigorously externalist in their explanation of religion and thoroughly materialist in their ontological and ethical precommitments. Some eliminative materialist accounts of religion—and of ritual in particular—are sophisticated and have predictive power: that specifiable patterns of cognitive processing result from frequency of transmission or performance of ritual, for example (McCauley and Lawson 2002).¹ On such accounts knowledge of how the brain works will show us why a cultural phenomenon exists and how it comes about. Culture (and religion) is governed by brain processes and neural networks that give rise to language. The argument goes that once we know how cognition and language work generally, we can know how *religious* cognition and language work in particular. But that there should be neurological correlates to mental states and behaviors is hardly surprising, and although cognitive mapping and the emphasis on language in cultural practice increase our knowledge, neither eliminative nor cultural reductionism is sufficient in providing explanations of religions.² Neither can provide an adequate account of interiority and subjectivity formed by religions, and both must inevitably bypass

¹ Here they draw on the work of Harvey Whitehouse.

² For a lucid defense of reductionism that I cannot engage with here, see the works of Segal (1983).

tradition-internal concerns and forms of reasoning that make claims upon the world and human experience. Although this cannot be developed adequately here, Religious Studies needs to take very seriously tradition-internal reasoning and ways of forming tradition-specific subjectivities.

Part of the problem lies in what it is to give an explanation. There are, of course, long and complex historical trajectories from the Enlightenment that have led to the “explanation of religion” closely linked to scepticism toward religious claims.³ On reductionist accounts to explain religion is to locate a cause (in cognition, genetics, and sociopolitical structures) and to explain religion is to present an external account of it, often antithetical to the internal claims of traditions. This understanding of explanation has been the predominant model in the natural sciences from Bacon through to the social sciences of our own time. Even Theology traditionally understood claimed to explain religion in this way, locating the cause of religion in God. By contrast scientific explanations have been antithetical to Theology in locating causes of religion in nature and claiming superiority to theological accounts because, unlike such accounts, they are falsifiable and have predictive power. Both eliminative and cultural reductionisms offer external accounts of religion through the location of cause, the former in nature and the latter in the genealogy of cultural politics, and so do not engage seriously with traditions’ claims and concerns.

But there is a different sense of explanation that is not the location of a cause. This is to draw on, or return to, the explanation in the history of social science as understanding and to claim that the explanation of religion is the exposition of a meaning rather than the location of a cause: to explain religion is not to seek a causal account in the first instance but to show how something is connected to a broader sphere or context and to demonstrate or translate a tradition’s semantic density into a language which is implicitly comparative. This kind of account is both descriptive and interpretative in drawing out the implications of description in theory-informed, semiotically sophisticated ways, and reasoning within the horizon of the western academy. It is akin to phenomenology in wishing to offer thick description, yet, like hermeneutics in wishing to inquire beyond description. Unlike eliminative reductionism it must recognize the autonomy of higher-level processes in any hierarchy or multiple levels of organized systems, and unlike postmodern cultural constructivists and genealogists it must recognize the legitimacy of tradition and tradition-internal concerns. It is far from clear that this kind of endeavor has

³ See the excellent survey by Preuss (1987).

had its day, and it provides a way forward in avoiding the problem of the inadequate choice between universalism and area-specific relativism.

A number of assumptions are operative in such an understanding, three of which I shall outline. First, religion only exists within cultures (as, one might add, does the study of religion); second, text is the model of culture; and third, inquiry into religions is dialogical and entails an encounter of different kinds of reasoning. Let me address each of these.

RELIGION AND CULTURE

Although I cannot offer a contribution here to the somewhat endless discussion over the legitimacy of the category “religion,” whether it is constructed or whether *sui generis*, it is nevertheless necessary to make some remarks about it as the focus of our subject area. Cantwell Smith encouraged us to abandon the term religion in favor of a distinction between cumulative tradition and the inner piety or faith of participants, and Smith (1982) draws our attention to the problematic nature of the category, and his remarks that “there is no data for religion” and that religion “is solely the creation of the scholar’s study” are widely quoted. More recent works have rejected the category “religion” as being of any use in analytical inquiry and, indeed, have presented an understanding of the ways in which religion is embroiled in a web of power, economics, and politics. On this view religion is not an ahistorical category but embedded within history and only understandable in terms of other historical forces. Not only this, the very discourse that speaks about religion in McCutcheon’s (1997) terms “participates in a general liberal discourse that deemphasises material difference for the sake of immaterial and abstract sameness.” Religion as represented in academic discourse is manufactured. In a fascinating book Chidester (1996) has described the development of comparative religion and the emergence of “religion” on the colonial frontiers of Africa, arguing how comparative religion develops in response to the otherness of the colonized. From within this general area Fitzgerald (2000) has argued that religion has no analytic power and obfuscates rather than illuminates. Indeed, scholars who share the same university department under the title “Religious Studies” but who owe their theoretical and methodological allegiances elsewhere, to Anthropology, Sociology, Philology, Literary Criticism, or Psychology, do not share an object of attention, and Fitzgerald (2000) rhetorically asks “Are departments of religion administrative fictions?”

I have much sympathy with Fitzgerald’s (2000) claim. Religious Studies is not united by a method and if not united by an shared object, “religion,” then is indeed an administrative fiction. But in recognizing the

claim that religion can only be understood within the boundaries of culture and history, we do not need to completely share this scepticism that there is no subject area or object of scholarship. The issue is more complex than a choice between religion as a *sui generis* category, outside of culture and closed to history, and religion as a manufactured academic discourse that constructs its field from diverse social and political elements in the unconscious service of a hegemonic, liberal ideology. In both cases, religion is a fiction of scholarly production. But to maintain that there is legitimacy to the category "religion" does not entail a commitment to an ahistorical conception born of itself. Although I would not wish to offer a definition of religion here, I take the term to refer, par excellence, to forms of human practice communally arrived at which are constrained by a text or group of texts set aside and regarded as sacred. Using the term "sacred" does not, thereby, imply a reification of an area of human thought and activity such as to make it beyond inquiry or analysis, but it is to recognize that human communities mark off certain temporal, spatial, interior, and relational areas of life as having semantic density in contrast to mundane, transactional activities. Such areas are generally not idiosyncratic but determined by tradition and community. Although not all locations of semantic density are religious—Shakespeare's house in Stratford-upon-Avon or the battlefields of Gettysburg and Naseby—all religions in the sense intended here have text as sacred, which is believed to mediate in some sense between the community and a transcendent source. The faith traditions of the world which refer back to their life-forming and life-giving text are thus the primary "objects" of Religious Studies.

TEXT AS THE MODEL OF CULTURE

We can, therefore, take "religion" to refer prototypically to a historical tradition that is formed by text and continuously refers back to that text. A sacred text pervades ritual, pervades the tradition's understanding and practice of economics, and pervades and shapes relationships between members of a society. Such a text-focused tradition creates a pattern of living and framework of values within which people live their lives in particular historical communities. In modernity text-focused traditions are questioned and rejected in favor of a self-assertion that defines itself against tradition (Blumenberg 1983), and this kind of self-assertion has influenced the rejection of text-focused study within some areas of the academy. That there are text-focused traditions cannot be in question. Sikh, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist immediately come to mind. Religion in this sense is clearly fully historical and concrete, established by communities through time and fought for, often at great human

cost. Nor is this to claim a homogeneity to tradition; the life blood of many traditions is conflict and argument over the contested ground of the “true” interpreters or inheritors of tradition. But it is to claim a unity of process through temporal transmission and reference to the tradition’s life-forming text or texts; it is to claim that communities enact the memory of tradition.

Text, both written and oral, is fundamental to culture and cultural transmission. Approaches to the study of religion in recent years have attempted to correct an overemphasis on text that saw a textual view of self and community as normative over and against the performance of traditions. Through focusing on material culture and contemporary practices, it was hoped to glean a more accurate and representative picture of religious life, and this has clearly born fruit in showing, for example, the centrality of relics and pilgrimage in Buddhism as points of mediation (Faure 1991; Trainor 1997). While this has been a welcome corrective to previous generations for whom the philological study of texts was all that needed to be said about religion, there is nevertheless a strong case for the centrality of text in culture, especially religious cultures, in fundamental ways. The text pervades religious practices, and the appropriation and internalization of the text is fundamental to religions. Indeed, we might say that within scriptural traditions, religion can be understood as a form of reading or mode of textual reception (Davies and Flood forthcoming). This mode of reception is distinctive of a genre of textual material, and we might claim that religions are forms of human belief and practice that occur when people in communities inhabit their texts in a particular way. Fundamental to the forms of life we call religions is a text that is set aside by a community as having special status in coming from a transcendent source and in providing a blueprint for how people should live their lives (it provides prohibitions, injunctions, and stories to live by). The sacred text has a “voice” from the past that is complex in its formation—perhaps being the totality of authorial voices that have composed it—and enlivened by the present communities who set the text aside, breathe life into it through their reading or reception, and enact it. While the voices of many sacred texts are now silent for their communities are no more, the voices of the texts in the major traditions are still resonant in those communities of transmission, and these voices make demands upon their readers, demands of repetition and liturgical performance. They also make demands upon the wider world and claims to a voice within contemporary political discourse.

This privileging of text or rather the reception of sacred text allows discussion to focus on a narrower range of practices and forms of reasoning to which the term “religion” applies less problematically than to other forms of culture such as “managerial spirituality” or Neo-Paganism. If

religion is anything, it is the way a community inhabits its sacred texts through reading and performance. To claim that religion in this sense—and surely it is primarily in this sense that religion must be taken—is constructed as a field of scholarship at best misses the centrality of the self-representation of those traditions and the chains of memory, to adapt a phrase by Hevieu-Léger (2000), that comprise them.

KINDS OF REASONING

Claiming legitimacy to traditions' accounts of themselves with reference to their central texts, as I would wish to do, is not a commitment to a reification of religion, although it is a commitment to a truly pluralistic field of inquiry in which the theological expression of traditions has a place alongside the social scientific study of religions. We must inevitably accept a historicism that traditions change through time, constantly reinventing themselves in new contexts, and providing justifications in the face of external critique. We can see this in the defense against both historicism and naturalist reductionism in Christianity, for example, during nineteenth century, in the initial resistance to Strauss' historicizing of Jesus and in resistance to Darwinian natural selection. These resistances are, of course, still present. But claiming legitimacy to traditions' self-representations does not simply mean that Religious Studies as a field of inquiry gives uncritical hospitality. It cannot be simply a plurality of theologies because of the importance and explanatory power of the social sciences, and it can and should offer corrective readings of traditions (Flood 2005). Although sympathetic to traditions' self-descriptions, these are not to be left necessarily unchallenged by external critique, either from text-historical or philological perspectives concerning the composition and derivation of texts or from sociopolitical perspectives such as feminism. Indeed, while deeply sympathetic to tradition-internal concerns, Religious Studies can offer corrective readings to traditions and reflexively offer corrective readings to the "science of religion," particularly in its eliminative and cultural reductionisms. Because of this, Religious Studies cannot be a discipline united by a shared method but is rather a field of inquiry with a shared object, however complex that is.

In the phrase "the study of religions" which might define Religious Studies, one of the problems is what is meant by the "study of" At first glance the phrase entails a detached objectivity that is part of our nineteenth-century inheritance, but the critique of this kind of discourse in the last thirty years, for example, in Foucault's analysis of how forms of knowledge arise, has raised questions about its contemporary possible desirability of such objectification. Turner (2005) reminds us that the

term “study” is derived from the Latin *studium* which can be translated as “passion,” and there is a case for Religious Studies as a forum for “passionate” study and argument: the arguments of traditions within themselves, with each other, and with social science. A Religious Studies that incorporates both traditions’ self-representations and critical social science is necessarily dialogical in Bakhtin’s (1986) sense of each party partially stepping into the “object” of inquiry while maintaining “outsideness” (*vnendkhodimost*).⁴ Religious Studies can provide an academic arena for the self-representation of traditions—that is their theologies—alongside social scientific, hermeneutical, historical, and philological accounts. The relationship between them becomes dialogical in that secular forms of reasoning about religions are themselves traditions of inquiry located in specific histories of the West.

One way of understanding Religious Studies in this pluralistic way is to look at orders or levels of discourse and forms of reasoning. We might say that a first-order discourse comprises tradition itself. The primary articulation of tradition is its text expressed in practices of repetition and the ways in which the text pervades practices of ritual, asceticism and forms of contemplation. This order of discourse exists outside of any academic enterprise. A second-order discourse is the reflection of tradition upon itself. This is the theology of traditions: the ways in which the world faith traditions consider their practices and amend them through time; perform forms of reasoning within the boundaries set by the primary articulation; and offer corrective readings of that tradition. We can draw on many examples from the histories of scriptural traditions from the *Mīmāṃsā* to Christian Theology. It is here that passionate arguments are developed and reflection which, in turn, affects the first-order or primary discourse. A third-order discourse is a form of reasoning about first- and second-order discourses and is implicitly if not explicitly comparative. Above all, this refers to forms of secular reasoning, disciplines, methods, and methodologies developed within the western academy. Religious Studies is a third-order discourse or rather a series of third-order discourses (e.g., Sociology of Religion, Philosophy of Religion, Indology, Phenomenology of Religion, and Critical Theory of religion) that stands outside of its objects of study in offering different kinds of descriptions and accounts to a second-order discourse and presenting often competing explanations of traditions. Academic Theology is both a second- and a third-order discourse, reflecting on Christian traditions yet sharing the

⁴ For a discussion, see Flood (1999).

method of rational analysis and practices of reasoning developed within the secular academy from the Enlightenment.

Religious Studies can function as an arena that allows the self-articulation of traditions to reflect upon themselves, that allows for second-order discourse, while also offering a third-order discourse that reflects upon and offers corrective readings of traditions' self-descriptions. This third-order reasoning about traditions is not necessarily benign as it can and does conflict with second-order discourses, such as when secular reasoning about religion contradicts traditional forms of reasoning. For example, Philology might show how a sacred text developed over a long period of time, whereas a traditional theological account would wish to present a unified view, or feminist critique might conflict with tradition. Philology and historical research might show that the *daśanānī* order was not in fact founded by Śaṅkara, a claim that conflicts with the traditional view (Clark 2004). But while not being benign, Religious Studies needs to be hospitable in allowing a plurality of discourses to function within it and providing an arena for encounter between traditions that would not otherwise happen. Islamic Theology, for example, should not be excluded from the academy on *a priori* grounds, but the incorporation of that Theology entails its encountering other theologies and secular contestation. But Religious Studies can provide this forum for argument.

It is the degree to which traditional theologies accept forms of secular reasoning that determines their degree of participation in the academy. Although there can be a blurring of distinctions between second- and third-order forms of reasoning, generally speaking, the academy is broad enough to absorb within it some kinds of second-order reflection, and clearly Christian Theology has taken on board secular reasoning and fights its battles within the framework of rational analysis. Scriptural reasoning might also be seen as a model for interaction between second-order discourses from different religions and in that activity creating a third-order discourse, a discourse giving hospitality to traditions (a "tent of meeting") and given hospitality within the secular academy. Difficulties come when the question arises as to which kinds of tradition-based reasoning can be accepted and funded, and we have witnessed conflict over the integration of Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and even Hindu theologies within academic institutions. My own view would be that Religious Studies can offer a space in which different forms of reasoning and reflection upon texts and practices can develop within a horizon of expectation that no areas of tradition can be placed outside of method as developed within the secular academy. Religious Studies (despite postmodernity's rejection of metatheory) can, therefore, provide a metadiscourse about

traditions, be comparative, and even offer theories about self and world as is the case with some of the reductionisms discussed above. As in Philosophy, Economics, Literary Studies, and so on, scholars within Religious Studies—given the vast knowledge now made available to them—can offer accounts of what it is to be human and offer accounts of the nature of the world, as has been done in the critical theory of religion, feminist critique of religion, and cognitive study of religion. Indeed, Religious Studies as a broad area of inquiry or series of third-order reasonings has great potential to offer in terms of developing theory, pursuing questions beyond mere description, exploring ontological questions, and contributing to human self-understanding and the human good.

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