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Illinois Council of Social Studies



## WHAT ARE WE TEACHING WHEN WE TEACH ABOUT RELIGION?

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Toward the end of a World Religions course in which we studied Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, a student approached me and asked, “Which one is right?” I asked her to elaborate on her question. She explained that she was struggling because many of the traditions had flaws and seemed to contradict each other at points, but they also seemed to have much in common. She could not figure out if one was better than the others. It’s a question that often arises when I teach this course, and it demonstrates the different ways students and teachers approach the course – students often come in trying to find which religion is “right,” while I attempt to provide a critical engagement of the subject with no commitments to any tradition. Thus, it is easy to address the student’s question as being out of place in a religious studies classroom – we are not concerned with finding which specific religion is right, but rather with critically examining the realm of religion.

However, there is another, less common question that should be asked when teaching this course and others that deal with religious traditions: “What are we teaching when we teach about religion?” Are we teaching that religion has some essence(s) that are unique to it and which make it religious, or is it just a product of our culture? This question has been the focus of methodological debates in religious studies and raises other questions such as whether this essence points to some reality “out there.” And if so, how should we deal with such essences in our research and in the classroom, where we are often committed to critical inquiry of phenomena that, because of this essence, may resist such inquiry? Is it something that is better understood as a human fabrication and that can be accounted for in purely historical and cultural terms, or do such accounts miss the religious aspect of the experience? My goal in this article is to shed light on this question, which, because of its significance to the way we understand religion, must be engaged as we attempt to bring religion into the classroom. By looking at the history of religious studies and the debate surrounding the nature of religion, I will illustrate the complexity of the question of whether there is an essence to religion and discuss its implications for research and teaching in religious studies.

A starting place for this discussion is the distinction between religious studies and theology. The field of religious studies has generally distinguished itself from teaching that is subject to a religious authority, whether an institution, a teacher, or a text. Instead,



scholars inquire into the nature and origins of religious belief.<sup>1</sup> The catalyst for these investigations is often identified as a line of philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, historians, and others who posited a natural rather than supernatural explanation of religion. Examples, briefly, would be Sigmund Freud's theory that religion is a human construction that fulfills our wish for an ideal father<sup>2</sup> and Ludwig Feuerbach's view that God is the projection of our collective abilities as humans.<sup>3</sup> In these cases, the believer's or religious institution's account is not seen as authoritative and is supplanted by what is viewed as a better explanation. Paul Ricoeur describes such views as a hermeneutics of suspicion, indicating that the approach is to be suspicious of the manifest account of religious belief, explaining the belief's latent cause in a way that the believer may not recognize.<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that scholars do not take the experience of the believing community seriously, but they do question whether the explanation of religion provided by the religious adherent or community is the best one. The scholar becomes a critic of religion, committed to questioning that is free from any constraints posed by a religious authority.

The distinction between religious studies and theology offers a response to the student's question about which religion is right — that in an institution without religious affiliations (and even in some institutions that do have affiliations but also have a religious studies department and a divinity school, such as Duke, Emory, and Yale), we are not concerned with the question of right belief and practice; instead, we seek to understand what commitments are entailed in religion and, furthermore, what factors, both within and outside the religious community, influence the formation of these commitments. However, it can be difficult to maintain this division and keep a distance between scholars of religion (those that teach about religion, bracketing the questions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy)

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1For a history of the field, see Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000); Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion*, Revised (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006). For a reader of primary sources for the theories that have influenced religious studies, see Carl Olson, *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion: Theoretical and Critical Readings*, 1st ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2002). In addition, see D.G. Hart, *The University Gets Religion: Religious Studies in American Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

2 See Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, particularly the chapter titled "The Infantile Recurrence of Totemism." Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, 1st ed. (Vintage, 1960).

3 See Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989).

4 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).



and those that teach a religion as correct.<sup>5</sup> As D.G. Hart notes in his book *The University Gets Religion*,

The field suffers from the strain of being pulled in two directions simultaneously, one churchly, the other academic. What is more, as much as religious studies strives to sever ties to communities of faith, it cannot do so without self-immolation. The academic study of religion has not only been dependent historically upon churches, synagogues, and mosques, but it has no object of inquiry without particular religious traditions. As such, religious studies needs communities of faith, and such dependence will always be out of play in the modern university.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the interrelation with religious communities, the field of religious studies has largely succeeded in creating a critical distance from them. Furthermore, one of the key projects of religious studies has been to push this point even further by showing the diversity and complexity of what has been lumped into one group (Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, etc.), thus undermining the very idea of there being “one” essential manifestation of any of these traditions.<sup>7</sup> Each tradition refers to a diverse, and at points contradictory, set of beliefs, and the common origin of those beliefs is repeatedly called into question. Returning to my student’s original question, we can see that the question “Which one is right?” is a non-starter because within each “one,” there is a plurality of viewpoints. To highlight this, and to bring out the voices that have been lost through

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5 I borrow the phrases “teach about religion” and “teach a religion” from Mark C. Taylor. Mark Taylor, “Introduction,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

6 Hart, *The University Gets Religion*, 10. The main argument of Hart’s text is that the history of religious studies is very much tied up with the history of departments of theology and mainline Protestant thinkers. “As such Religious Studies traces its intellectual origins to such figures as David Hume, Emile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, and Max Weber, European philosophers and social scientists who freed religion from its ecclesiastical and dogmatic bondage [and] examined it under the bright light of science and critical reason. Yet, in the context of American learning, the obscure names of O.D. Foster, Robert Lincoln Kelly, Charles Foster Kent, and Clarence Prouty Shedd, mainline Protestant ministers and Bible scholars who in the 1910s and 1920s founded the institutions and formulated the rationale for religious studies, are more important than those of Hume, Durkheim, and company” (ibid., 3).

7 Bart Ehrman’s book *Lost Christianities* provides an accessible account of this within Christianity. His chapter “The Quest for Orthodoxy” shows the role that the development of the historical-critical method and the search for the historical Jesus played in uncovering the way in which Christian orthodoxy was produced in the centuries after the life of Jesus. Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).



history, has been one of the tasks of religious studies. Thus, the problem of teaching a religion as the right one is avoided.

While commitments to one religious tradition are often easily avoided, the question of religion in general is more complex and can result in a different form of apologetics. This leads to the question of whether there is some essence of religion that cannot be reduced to other terms; that is to say, whether there is something unique to religion that avoids reduction to purely historical-cultural terms, and thus, we as scholars must defend or protect this essence. This can lead scholars to set up protective strategies<sup>8</sup> that insulate religion and its essence from criticism. Two examples will demonstrate the problems of protective strategies.

The first example, particularly relevant for teachers of a World Religions course as it comes from a commonly used textbook, including my own, is in Huston Smith's *The World's Religions*.<sup>9</sup> In the opening chapter, Smith states that the book aims to examine religion "at its best."<sup>10</sup> For Smith, this entails limiting the role institutions have played in religion and focusing on the inspired truth contained within the various traditions. In his words, "The empowering theological and metaphysical truths of the world's religions are, this book is prepared to argue, inspired. Institutions – religious institutions emphatically included – are another story. Constituted as they are of people with their inbuilt frailties, institutions are built of vices as well as virtues."<sup>11</sup> The inspiration invoked here is an essence that Smith chooses to distance from the institutions so that this inspiration remains uncorrupted. If religion leads to social ills, abuses of power, corruption, etc. (which, in all its varieties and complexities, it has), it is the institutions' fault, not the inspiration's – the essence of religion for Smith. Smith has set up a strategy to protect the inspiration from criticism. When religion does something deemed unethical, immoral, or violent, it is the fault of individuals and institutions, not the inspiration.

Another form of protective strategy comes from Mircea Eliade, one of the most prominent figures in the history of religious studies, who uses a similar strategy to argue against purely natural explanations of religion:

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8 I borrow this term from Wayne Proudfoot's *Religious Experience*. Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

9 Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, 50th anniversary ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 2009). For a detailed examination of the most used World Religions textbooks, the series of review essays in *Religious Studies Review* is an invaluable resource. Mark MacWilliams et al., "Religions Between the Covers: Dilemmas of the World Religions Textbook," *Religious Studies Review* 31, no. 1 (11, 2005): 1-36.

10 Smith, *The World's Religions*, 5.

11 Ibid., 5.



A religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious. To try and grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art, or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it – the element of the sacred.<sup>12</sup>

If one is to take this stance towards religion, the aim of scholarship becomes to protect religion by showing that investigations that attempt to grasp it in terms other than those of religion are unjustly reducing the phenomenon. At the root of these views, particularly Eliade's, is the notion that the essence of religion is *sui generis* – unique and of its own nature – such that it cannot be understood in non-religious terms. The presupposition here is that any explanation of religion with no reference to something religious (e.g., explaining mystical experiences through chemical processes in the brain or a belief in God as a manifestation of a latent wish) cannot accurately account for religious phenomena. Working with this assumption, methodologies and inquiries that try to explain religion in non-religious terms will be labeled as reductionistic and accused of missing that which makes the religious phenomena religious.

Many scholars are concerned that this view of religion is pervasive in religious studies, diminishing the field's critical edge. As James Preus notes, these practices result in a "subtle form of apologetic" where "the message is conveyed that the (only) right and proper explanations of religion are the sort given by believers."<sup>13</sup> Russell McCutcheon argues that a *sui generis* understanding of religion, because of its discussion of religious essences that cannot be reduced to human discourse, prevents the possibility of sociopolitical analysis of religion that demands translation into non-religious terms.<sup>14</sup> Scholarship becomes less concerned with questioning religion and instead focuses on defending the value and place of the essence of religion. This lends religious accounts a level of authority that is problematic for critical discourse of religious studies. In response, many scholars have strongly criticized any *sui generis* discourse, suggesting that it will inevitably lead to apologetics, and embraced naturalistic methods of studying religion.<sup>15</sup> As

12 Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), iii.

13 James Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), xx.

14 Another issue is the difficulty of delimiting the religious from the non-religious, the sacred from the profane. For two different views on this issue, see Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* and J.Z. Smith's "Religion, Religions, Religious." Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987); Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

15 McCutcheon has devoted many works to expressing this view. Most notable are *Critics Not Caretakers* and *Manufacturing Religion*. Russell McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redefining the*





McCutcheon states in *Manufacturing Religion*, “This book is unapologetically reductionistic, for it advocates a naturalist, historical scale, where all human events and conceptual or textual productions – in a word, discourses – are understood to have socioeconomic and political origins and implications.”<sup>16</sup> For McCutcheon, the way to avoid protective strategies is for the study of religion to move away from the discourse of essences and instead focus on the natural aspects of religion.

The naturalist position seems to be a tidy solution to the problem of apologetics. Scholars are no longer concerned with saying whether religion is right or wrong; rather, their role is to explain religion in naturalistic terms. Protective strategies are to be avoided at all costs. To invoke the title of McCutcheon’s book, the scholar is no longer the caretaker for religion, but instead the critic.

I support the stance that scholars and teachers remain critics of religion, willing to question any dogma or belief, and am sympathetic to the view that protective strategies need to be avoided. This tends to be the *modus operandi* of my classroom and an activity that is often foreign to students, particularly students taking their first class in religious studies. However, I think that the dichotomy of critic/caretaker is a problematic divide, and that at points, scholars of religion may find themselves playing both roles – remaining critical but in the pursuit of an activity that defends religion, while avoiding essentialist and *sui generis* tendencies. As an example, one can look at the experience of Carl Ernst, a leading scholar of Islam and professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

In 2002, a committee in charge of selecting the summer reading for the university asked Ernst if he thought it advisable for the students to read a translation of the Qur’an. Ernst suggested the students read Michael Sells’s superb *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations*.<sup>17</sup> This book includes translations of the earliest *suras* (chapters) of the Qur’an accompanied by commentary that situates them in their historical and cultural context. The committee assigned the book, sparking a controversy that received national attention.<sup>18</sup> The Family Policy Network sued the university on the grounds that it was

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*Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

16 McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 17.

17 Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations*, 1st ed. (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999).

18 Eric Hoover, “Unfazed (and Unconverted) by Book on the Koran,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, n.d., [http://proxy.library.siue.edu:2145/us/lnacademic/frame.do?reloadEntirePage=true&rand=1280249486135&returnToKey=20\\_T9823766136&parent=docview&target=results\\_listview\\_resultsNav&tokenKey=rsh-20.3774.073639527198](http://proxy.library.siue.edu:2145/us/lnacademic/frame.do?reloadEntirePage=true&rand=1280249486135&returnToKey=20_T9823766136&parent=docview&target=results_listview_resultsNav&tokenKey=rsh-20.3774.073639527198).



putting a positive spin on Islam because the book did not discuss the passages in the Qur'an that promoted violence, and as the president of the organization said, that it was attempting to indoctrinate students into Islam. Some North Carolina legislators criticized the university, saying that assigning the reading was equivalent to supporting Muslim terrorists.<sup>19</sup> The move for an injunction was denied, and the reading progressed, but the controversy raised serious questions about the view of Islam in society at large.

In light of these concerns, Ernst wrote *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*, a book that was “written to provide a completely different alternative to the currently available books on Islam.”<sup>20</sup> Ernst described his offering as “a sympathetic yet reasoned and analytical view of the Islamic religious tradition and the contemporary issues that Muslims face. My most radical departure from conventional wisdom is to propose a nonfundamentalist understanding of Islam.”<sup>21</sup> He offered the book as a corrective to the uniform views that had already decided that Islam was a religion of violence and hate and that studying it with the aim of proving otherwise would be to promote the religion.

Under these circumstances — when publishers, religious groups, and politicians are opposed to an impartial and fair-minded discussion of Islam — it is painfully obvious that such a discussion is exactly what we need. The modern debate about Islam in America and Europe has been conducted primarily through sensational journalism and ideological attack.... *Following Muhammad* is designed to cut through the fog of suspicion and misinformation; it offers readers the tools to reach an independent understanding of key themes and historical settings affecting Muslims — and non-Muslims — around the world today.<sup>22</sup>

When confronted by the situation at the university, Ernst had to examine his role in relation to religion. He was no longer the distanced scholar of Islam who reported the facts objectively with no connection to the religion. Instead, in his role as a scholar, he saw the need to come to the defense of Islam. It is in such a situation, in which a religion is wrongly construed, that the scholar of religion may rightly be compelled to move from being the distanced critic McCutcheon advocates to becoming an apologist for religion. Note that while Ernst's aim was not to promote Islam as the right religion, he intended to present a “sympathetic” account that defended Islam against those who would say that it

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19 Carl Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), xv.

20 Ibid., v.

21 Ibid., xiii.

22 Ibid., xv.





should not be studied because it is evil and will corrupt students. Certainly, part of Ernst's motivation was to defend the right to free inquiry in the academy, and much of the discussion surrounding the controversy at UNC centered on this question. But it is also clear that his motives went beyond this and that he adopted the role of a critical apologist for Islam, a suspicious move in the view of those who support a strict adherence to the view of scholar as critic.

Yet, while being an apologist, Ernst remained a critic in McCutcheon's sense of the term. Through a historical analysis of the tradition, one that accounts for various political, social, and economic influences, he showed that there is no monolithic version of Islam. In terms of the current discussion, he argued against an essence of Islam by accounting for the historical and cultural context of the religion, but he did so with an apologetic aim. This undermines the dichotomy of critic/caretaker and calls for a more complex understanding of the position of the scholar and teacher of religion.

The conclusions of this discussion impact my approach to teaching about religion in a number of ways. In response to my student's question, I say I am not concerned with the question of which religion is right and that I will not address it in the class. I take my role as critic seriously, and my goal as a teacher is to show students how to think critically about religion: to apply the methods of the historical-critical method to sacred texts; to understand the hermeneutics of suspicion and other naturalist methodologies; and to see the diversity within any religious tradition (i.e., that there is not *a* Buddhism, *a* Christianity, *a* Judaism, or *an* Islam but that these traditions are diverse, complex, and always influenced by social, historical, political, and various other factors). At the same time, I, like Ernst, may need to become an advocate for religion in light of students' political or dogmatic stances, correcting misinformed views about various religions (Islam is certainly not unique in being misunderstood and misrepresented in the media and pop culture), but this does not mean that I cease to be a critic. There is room for both when teaching about religion.