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Religion

Sources, Perspectives, and Methodologies



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Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks

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Jeffrey J. Kripal

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Religion: Sources, Perspectives, and Methodologies

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Preface

The Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks on Religion represent the state of the art in one of the most consistently surprising, inherently fascinating, and shockingly relevant fields of modern thought: the study of religion. You hold in your hands something of this surprise, fascination, and shock.

These ten handbooks bring together well over two hundred gifted writers in order to provide the reader with a broad, generous, next-generation vision of how the study of religion thinks today on the cutting edge of tomorrow. The topics include a history and overview of the field and its major methods (*Religion: Sources, Perspectives, and Methodologies*); the social scientific study of religion in fields such as anthropology, psychology, and history (*Social Religion*); the complex interactions of secularism, atheism, law, and religion within the modern nation-state (*Beyond Religion*); religion and social justice (*Just Religion*); the material, artistic, and architectural dimensions of religion (*Material Religion*); religion and embodiment, race, gender, and sexuality (*Embodied Religion*); esoteric or secret forms of religion throughout Western history and in contemporary scholarship (*Secret Religion*); religion and the brain (*Mental Religion*); new understandings of the possible supernatural or transcendent dimensions of religion (*Super Religion*); and, finally, the narrative aspects of religion in ritual, myth, and literature (*Narrating Religion*).

Each of these ten volumes is strongly interdisciplinary, bringing together a broad spectrum of approaches and models. Each volume is also eminently accessible and reader-friendly, containing a helpful glossary, multiple illustrations, and consistent attempts to make the study of religion come alive for the reader or student with little or no prior knowledge of the field.

Two basic images, which are also two basic values, have guided the project from conception to production: the Big Tent and the Bright Future.

A Big Tent. For whatever else it is, the contemporary study of religion is a big tent, which is to say that it is a robustly *interdisciplinary* enterprise that has involved hundreds of thousands of individuals from around the world who, over the course of the last two centuries, have employed numerous intellectual techniques from the humanities, the arts, the social sciences, and the natural sciences in order to understand and analyze those dimensions of human experience and expression that have collected under the broad umbrella term of “religion.” The Big Tent metaphor implies the presence of these different perspectives and people. It also implies real disagreement among those in the tent, a civil conversation, and a basic ethic of engagement.

A Bright Future. The other value that has guided this series is a calm conviction that the study of religion has something profoundly important to contribute to the world. The

handbooks spin out of a positive view of the field's institutional future and global relevance. The range of concerns and crises the study of religion speaks to are impressive indeed: social justice, poverty, economic inequity, the moral failures of capitalism, and the new colonialism of global corporations; gender equity, sexual diversity, and racism; medical ethics and health care; climate change and environmental sustainability; secularism, religious freedom, religious violence, and religious intolerance ... the list goes on and on. In each case, the religions are not only relevant to the problems at hand. They often have generated the questions and concerns in the first place, even as they have also been integral parts of the same contemporary concerns and crises. The conclusion is as simple as it is pressing: none of these growing problems can be adequately addressed without also addressing their religious dimensions. I cannot speak for my colleagues, but I personally would go so far as to say that the future of the world hinges—perhaps largely—on how well and deeply, or on how poorly and superficially, the global community comes to terms with and *puts into public practice* the methods and questions of the study of religion.

This is a very odd claim inasmuch as most people have never heard of the study of religion, much less put it into practice. Hence, the importance of accessible handbooks—hence this series.

There is another, equally profound reason to ponder and practice the study of religion. It comes down to the fact that the religious traditions encode humanity's consistent attempts to answer the most fundamental questions that human beings can ask. Who are we? What are we? Why are we here? What is the nature of the cosmos in which we find ourselves? How can we flourish as part of a much larger web of life and being? Why do we suffer? Why is there so much injustice in the world? What happens to us when we die? What is the point of all of this? Is there a point? To put the matter in a single word, religion is about *meaning*.

For anyone interested in such questions of meaning—and who, in a full life cycle, will not be?—the study of religion is a resource without equal. Assumptions aside, however, the religions, of which there have been hundreds of thousands in human history, have not given the same answers to these questions. The study of religion, then, can never be about parroting the answers of any particular religion, or even a half dozen “world religions,” as if *any* historical religion is the “right” or “correct” one. The study of religion is not a multiple-choice question: “Choose A, B, C or D.”

For sure, the study of religion is about “stepping into” the traditional religious answers and worldviews in order to examine and ponder them from within, as it were. But it is also about “stepping out of” the religious framework entirely and asking new questions, including those that suggest that the religions themselves are a part of our problems. Think of it this way. Contemporary moral values that most of us take for granted today—values such as the rule of law, religious tolerance, religious freedom, gender equity, human rights, and now ecological sensibilities—did not fall out of the sky. They arose very gradually, often over centuries, through the intellectual labor and very real social risks of individual writers, activists, readers, and brave religious (and brave irreligious) leaders who dared to step out of their cultural assumptions and imagine new ways of being human. These new humanities rose into public prominence because people dared to imagine them, think them, write them, and put them into public practice.

So, too, with our present problems and their future answers. The same deep engagement or “stepping into,” the same brave “stepping out of,” and the same daring imagination are

called for again. If, on the one hand, we seek a future that is bright and positive instead of dark and violent, we will do well to engage “religion” as fully, as honestly, and as radically as possible. If, on the other hand, we are more interested in the ultimate nature of reality, in the nature and limits of consciousness, and in the meaning of life (and death), we would do well again to take up the study of religion, particularly in its more extreme experiences and expressions.

Whether one conceives of the study of religion as a pressing moral task or as a philosophical search for meaning, such an enterprise cannot be taken up lightly or superficially, for this is not something that we can do in a neutral, distant, or objective way. There really is no way around it: once understood and activated, these ideas and practices will change us. We will become how and what we know. In the process, we will be surprised. We will be fascinated. And we will be shocked. We will also become *more*. This is the Big Tent and the Bright Future of the study of religion.

So come on in, read on, and be more.

Jeffrey J. Kripal

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July 2015

Introduction: A Story about How We Got Here

It has to be said. Very few people study religion. Billions of people practice religion, of course, but this is not the same thing, at all. Indeed, often the practice of religion has been a genuine barrier to and censor of the study of religion. Still, the two human activities are deeply related—historically, biographically, and conceptually.

Historically speaking, the simple truth is that the professional study of religion arose out of the religions themselves, most recently among Protestant Christian and progressive Jewish intellectuals in nineteenth-century Europe, and it depends, to this day, on the religions themselves for its objects (and subjects) of study. The biographical dimensions of the professional study of religion are equally complex. Many a scholar of religion began the journey within the heart of a religious community but found it necessary to move beyond the parameters of faith in order to ask questions that the tradition would not ask, much less answer. Others have found it possible to remain within their communities. Still others think and work out of entirely secular contexts and perspectives. Conceptually speaking, virtually all of the major categories of the field (from myth and magic to justice and ritual) are historical products of very specific dogfights between Protestants and Catholics over the last five hundred years or so.

Despite these various historical, biographical, and conceptual relations, there are differences between the practice and study of religion, and these are very important to maintain in our thinking about religion. This primer and the next nine volumes that it crystallizes are all about the study of religion, not the practice of religion. They are handbooks, show-me-how manuals designed to do one thing: demonstrate the incredible power, promises, and problems of the professional study of religion for the contemporary world. The believer and the unbeliever, the devout and the indifferent, the religious person and the secular person have much to lose, and much to gain, in the pages and volumes that follow. Whatever you think of religion, that thought can be nuanced, deepened, extended, and clarified. That is what these handbooks are all about—to clarify your thinking about religion in the mirror of the histories, personalities, and ideas of the study of religion.

THE STORY OF THE STUDY OF RELIGION

These handbooks begin with this primer. This primer begins with this essay, an attempt, however imperfect and brief, to give some sense of the history of the field. Once you have such a story in your head, you can then place most of the authors and ideas that follow here and in the nine subsequent handbooks somewhere in its narrative. Indeed, the nine essays following this introductory essay are written by the nine editors of the subsequent handbooks. The thirteen essays that follow these first ten then fill out the narrative of

the study of religion with yet more perspectives from yet more directions. We might think of the final result as a multidimensional object floating in the mindspace of the reader, a weird object, to be sure, that is also a story. Depending on how long and careful you ponder this multidimensional object, you will eventually be able to “see” and tell a story with dozens, hundreds, even thousands of sides, characters, events, and ideas. It is up to you.

As with most attempts to trace a history, one can begin almost anywhere, but that somewhere will never quite be the real beginning. There are always beginnings before any beginning. All beginnings are relative. They are frames in the film of life that one rather arbitrarily clips out of the running reel of human history and says, “The story begins here.”

Well, not really.

Still, we have to begin somewhere. Certainly, we in the modern world were not the first human beings on the planet to think about religious pluralism (the simple fact that there are many, really thousands of religions and not one or two or five); about the contradictory truth claims of the different religions (no, all religions do not say the same thing); about the poignant plausibility of a worldview from within its own cultural framework and the apparent absurdity of its claims from outside that same framework; and about both the socially cohesive and violent tendencies of religious claims and communities. The species did not wait for our few generations to begin thinking about its own mind-bogglingly diverse religious expressions and experiences (Kripal 2014).

THE POLYTHEISTIC HANDBOOK AND THE BEGINNING OF INTERPRETATION

To take one telling example, numerous writers have pointed out that polytheism—that is, the general worldview that there are many (*poly-*) gods (*theoi*), and so many religions—was already an implicit way of interpreting religious pluralism in the ancient world. The scholar of ancient Mediterranean religions Fritz Graf, for example, sees ancient polytheism and the tendency of these systems to translate other people’s deities into one’s own local deities as the Western beginning of *interpretatio*, or “interpretation.”

We can think of interpretation as the intellectual act that does not take a particular cultural expression on its own terms but translates that expression into some other framework that makes more sense to the interpreter and his or her own community. Every interpretation, particularly when it comes to religious pluralism, also involves comparison, that is, the cognitive act of negotiating and balancing sameness (how is that similar to this) and difference (how is that different from this) in a set of observations.

The polytheistic interpretations and comparisons often involved treating the names of the deities of others as cultural variations of the names of one’s own. Such a simple comparative method, of course, assumed that the deity existed outside of both cultural frameworks and so could take on the names of the respective cultures. These same ancient peoples assumed the existence of many gods, and so religious pluralism did not surprise them. Indeed, it simply supported their general polytheistic worldview. Through these two simple cognitive acts—translating names of deities across different cultures and assuming the existence of many deities—they compared religions. They tried to negotiate how the religions were similar and how they were different.

As a concrete example of the polytheistic handbook, consider the second-century Roman Latin novel *The Golden Ass*, so named because a man, Lucius, is turned into a donkey in the story. Poor Lucius has just escaped being forced into copulating with a woman in public, in a circus no less, when he wakes up one night to witness a full moon rising over the Corinthian Gulf. He prays to the moon goddess:

And lo and behold! a beautiful woman rises out of the silvery path on the water; she consoles Lucius and introduces her astonishingly multiple personality: “The Phrygians, earliest of humans, call me the Pessinuntian Mother of the Gods; the Athenians, sprung from their own soil, call me Cecropian Minerva; the sea-tossed Cyprians call me Venus of Paphus, the arrow-bearing Cretans Dictynna, the trilingual Sicilians Ortygian Proserpina; to the Eleusinians I am the ancient goddess Ceres, to others Juno, to yet others Bellona, Hecate, or the Rhamnusia Goddess; and the Ethiopians who are illuminated by the first rays of the sun, the Africans, and the Egyptians full of ancient lore and wisdom honor me with the true rites and call me with the true name: Isis.” (Graf 2004, 3)

The different names, we might suppose, make their own point: names don’t matter. And yet they do. Polytheistic comparative practices are seldom if ever completely evenhanded. Even the moon goddess prefers one name over all the others. Her “true name” is Isis. It turns out that the Egyptians had it right. But not for long. Graf observes what would happen next in the ancient world. The Christian figure of the Virgin Mary would “top—and topple—all of them” (2004, 3).

Very similar stories could easily be found in other parts of the world, including in medieval and modern India, where the Hindu traditions’ various goddesses were, and still are, often understood to be local manifestations of a single, variously named Mahadevi or “Great Goddess” and where different deities vie for supremacy in a polytheistic world.

There are some very good reasons to be suspicious of such implicit comparative practices. Such interpretations, after all, assume the existence of multiple deities (which may or may not be true) and tend to downplay important differences (not to mention outright contradictions). And it is not at all clear that such an appreciation of religious pluralism leads to more peace and social stability. Polytheistic cultures, after all, have engaged in warfare like other cultures, and they have called on their deities for protection and victory. Still, the point remains: polytheism has been an implicit method for interpreting religion for thousands of years.

THE SEAL OF CYRUS

Politics are never far behind within any interpretive project, however ancient or modern. Not surprisingly, then, one of the earliest material artifacts suggestive of a kind of official religious pluralism can be found on the famous seal of Cyrus, which dates to the sixth century BCE. Cyrus (590–530 BCE) was the founder of the Persian Empire, which he created through a series of conquests, some of which appear to have been peaceful invasions. Like most imperial rulers in history, Cyrus attributes his victories to a local god, in his case the Babylonian god Marduk, whom he describes on the cylinder as talking to him directly and giving him the authority to conquer and subdue. In a polytheistic spirit (and one no doubt also motivated by political expediency), Cyrus also asks for the blessings from all the gods of the world and attributes his rise to power to their help as well.

His was a remarkably successful empire. The Greek conqueror Alexander the Great admired Cyrus centuries later as a model to emulate, and the Bible includes a number of verses that give similar witness to his Israelite subjects' gratitude. According to biblical books like Ezra and Isaiah, it was Cyrus who returned the Jewish people from their exile in Babylonia back to Jerusalem and allowed them to rebuild their temple. Isaiah goes so far as to call Cyrus the "anointed" of the god of Israel (Isaiah 45:1), that is, a Messiah, a title before then reserved for Israel's kings and priests. The same biblical books, of course, attribute Cyrus's success not to Marduk, but to the god of Israel. The polytheistic policies of the historical Cyrus were already being reread in a monotheistic way. The gods of the ancient Mediterranean world were being absorbed into the notion of a single God.

THE MONOTHEISTIC HANDBOOK

Monotheism is a term scholars of religion use to refer to any religious system that revolves around the belief in one (*mono-*) god (*theos*). Monotheism is usually connected to the religion of the ancient Hebrews, which gradually developed into ancient Judaism in the four or five centuries before the Common Era. In historical fact, however, monotheism first appeared in ancient Egypt under the fourteenth-century BCE pharaoh Akhenaten, well before the rise of Judaism in the same part of the world. As a wildly heretical idea in a robustly polytheistic culture, the pharaoh's monotheism lasted only a single reign in Egypt. Through the ancient Hebrews it took hold centuries later—in the biblical stories, at least, through means that were at once religious, violent, and political—and has lasted nearly three millennia now in the histories of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism, to name the four most prominent streams.

The birth of monotheism, if we can call it that (the word itself would not appear until the eighteenth century, and each of the traditions contains elements that qualify, nuance, or even move beyond the category), accomplished many things, but one of the things it enacted was a fundamental rejection of the polytheistic handbook on how to interpret and compare the religions. After monotheism and its exclusive logic (there is only one God), it became difficult, if not impossible, to appreciate other religious worldviews as foreign versions of one's own, much less as independent practices and systems that might have some special mystery or secret teaching to impart (which is how polytheism often operated in the ancient Mediterranean world).

There may have well been other gods in the earliest biblical narratives, but there could only now be one true God. The gods of foreign peoples could no longer be compared and change names, and any religious engagement with other deities was deemed idolatry or, in the sexual code of the Israelite prophets, a kind of unfaithful adultery. The other gods now had to be denied, and their ritual images literally destroyed. This destruction of the idols, which is to say this particular religious logic of exclusion and violence, would continue within the complex histories of both Christianity and Islam, which inherited the monotheistic intolerance of other people's religions and took it to new levels. Judaism, after all, did not attempt to convert other peoples to its religious culture. Christianity and Islam both did (Assmann 2004).

So here was the second major method for interpreting religion in the ancient world: do not posit a deeper sameness below the cultural differences of the religions and their local names, as the polytheistic interpretations do. Rather, reject these differences as too different from the only sameness there really and truly is: the one and only God.

As with the polytheistic practices, there are some very good reasons to be suspicious of these methods as well, since such a monotheistic practice assumes the existence of a single deity (which may or may not be true) and tends to downplay important dimensions of sameness across cultural boundaries. It also seems unaware of the profound ways that the ancient Hebrew conceptions of God developed out of the foreign religions, particularly those of the Egyptians and Canaanites (or maybe these authors were aware, hence their anxious concerns to separate their god from those gods). The same monotheistic practices can also lead to religious violence, particularly when monotheism is fused with a political system or nation-state, as it long has been.

Still, the point remains: monotheism is another way of comparing religions, and, like polytheism, this monotheistic method is one of the world's oldest how-to handbooks for interpreting religious pluralism, here largely as a negative fact to deny, fight, and eventually eliminate, in the name of God.

COMPARATIVISM AND MYSTICISM

There were, of course, multiple exceptions to this monotheistic refusal of religious pluralism. Some particularly dramatic exceptions can be found among what we call the mystical traditions. The invocation of the mystical, or mysticism, comes from a Greek adjective (*mystikos*) for “hidden” or “secret” and generally refers to a type of religious experience or genre of literature that expresses some particularly extreme communion or complete union with some ultimate reality or divine being.

There is something about mysticism and comparativism. They go together. Many modern comparativists have been intensely interested in mysticism and have identified mystical literature as the source of their comparative inspirations (Otto 1932; Wasserstrom 1999; van den Bosch 2002; Hakl 2013). And some (by no means all) historical mystics and poets have expressed a radical openness to other religions or have even expressed an experience of the divine beyond the religions. One thinks of figures like Kabir (1440–1518), Guru Nanak (1469–1539), and Ramakrishna (1836–1886) in India, of Meister Eckhart (1260–1327) and Thomas Merton (1915–1968) in the Christian world, and the philosopher Ibn al-Arabi (1165–1240) in the Muslim world. Listen, for example, to the latter writer:

If a gnostic [mystical knower] is really a gnostic he cannot stay tied to one form of belief. . . . [H]e will not remain trapped in one belief.... He accepts all kinds of beliefs, but does not remain tied to any figurative belief.

Beware of being bound up by a particular religion and rejecting all others as unbelief! If you do that you will fail to obtain a great benefit. Nay, you will fail to obtain the true knowledge of the reality. (Sharify-Funk and Dickson 2014, 147, 158)

Such a religion beyond religion, as it were, was not always well received. Ibn al-Arabi's disciples may have called their master the “reviver of religion,” but his conservative critics called him the “killer of religion.” His books and ideas have since been celebrated and condemned for centuries. Similar patterns of celebration and rejection of mystical forms of comparison can easily be identified in other religious and cultural contexts.

THE SAFETY OF SECULARISM AND THE RISE OF THE MODERN PRACTICE

Whether we are talking about the ancient polytheistic or monotheistic handbooks, or mystical poets and philosophers who attempted to integrate or move beyond both

handbooks, what we are really talking about are early precedents of the modern study of religion. None of these precedents quite add up to what we think of today as the study of religion, mostly because all such precedents lacked the fundamental social context that provides the necessary freedom, safety, and economic resources for an extensive and sustainable study of religion. That key social context is some degree of secularism, that is, a social and legal arrangement that does not privilege any particular religious group or belief system, and that—most important of all—protects the intellectual expressions, however offensive or blasphemous they may seem, that are the life and substance of any adequate analysis of religion.

Put bluntly, it is impossible to study religion in freedom when the majority religion of the day has power over the publication and dissemination of the scholars' conclusions (and often over their livelihoods, if not their lives). Official condemnations, institutional murders at the burning stake or in the prison towers, and book bans do not lend themselves to robust conversations about religious matters.

It has been a very slow, very painful, and very tentative process to this point in time, and we have hardly yet arrived. Books continue to be banned and suppressed. Scholars continue to be harassed for their honest thoughts. And there is no extensive institutionalized professional study of religion in most parts of the world to this day. But the simple fact remains. There are now thousands of individuals, mostly in North America and Europe, who make their living studying religion formally, and there are hundreds more in Africa, East Asia, South Asia, Australia, and Latin America, really any part of the world that can provide a sufficient degree of secularism and economic support for such study. By any historical measure, this is simply extraordinary.

THE HOUSE OF THE STUDY OF RELIGION

As a simplistic but hopefully helpful way of understanding how we got to this point, we can think of the contemporary study of religion as a house built on two different but related intellectual movements in early modern Europe: the Enlightenment and the Romantic movement. We can then watch the house that is the study of religion go up on this double foundation over the course of about two centuries in five basic overlapping stages. In the first stage (roughly, 1800–1900), the professional origins of the field begin to appear in early biblical studies and the height of European colonialism. In the second stage (1900–1950), the field reaches full institutionalization in Europe and North America before, between, and just after the two world wars. In the third stage (1950–1975), the general ferment of the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, which included robust social justice movements around race, class, and gender and a youth culture promoting a new kind of religious pluralism, produced a much more global, and morally incisive, discipline. In the fourth stage (1975–2000), the rise and dominance of constructivist, contextualist, and other local methods in the study of religion acted as a correcting reaction to the universalizing impulses of the countercultural period. And in the fifth stage (2000–present), the dominance of digital culture in both daily life and metaphor, the prestige of neuroscience, and the consequent rise of cognitive and computer metaphors for the study of the brain and religion in the new millennium have led to a new universalism, now focused on the human brain. A few paragraphs on these two foundations and these five chapters in the story follow, along with a few historical examples.

THE SHINING ONES

What we now call the Enlightenment was a highly varied intellectual, publishing, and moral venture that arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries throughout Europe, partly as a moral critique of the religious wars between Catholics and Protestants that had bloodied Europe for a century, partly as an intellectual search for a new universal worldview and culture that was not bound by any previous religious belief system. A distinct break with the past was felt throughout the movement. Many attribute the general features of modernity itself to this time period. These include the rise of modern science, an emphasis on rational modes of knowledge and authority, and an emphasis on assumed universal moral values like equality and freedom. The languages of religious tolerance and human rights also stem from this same general period and intellectual revolution (Zagorin 2003).

The genres of Enlightenment writing were as diverse as religious satire expressed in pamphlets and cartoons that anyone could see and understand to abstract philosophy that almost no one could. Most fundamentally, though, the Enlightenment was a rejection of religious authority or belief of any kind as a legitimate mode of knowledge. *Reason* became the watchword, and independence from any external authority became the call. Many intellectuals became atheists, while others became deists or sought new modes of spiritual orientation.

Early and foremost among these new “shining ones” of Europe was the Dutch intellectual Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677). Spinoza was the first to argue that the Bible is not the literal word of God but a work of human authorship. Indeed, it is “erroneous, mutilated, corrupt, and inconsistent” (Huenemann 2014, xiii). He developed an elaborate philosophy that affirmed the divine in and as the natural world and posited the real existence of both an eternal mind and an eternal substance called “God,” which is not a person and displays no concern for human affairs (Huenemann 2014). He was also one of the first to mount arguments against religious control of the state and for religious tolerance and democracy, arguments that in turn influenced people like Thomas Paine (1737–1709) and Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826). Spinoza paid a price for his convictions. His most famous and influential publication was called “a book forged in hell” that was written “by the devil himself.” For writing such a book, Spinoza was excommunicated from the Jewish community in Amsterdam (Nadler 2011).

“OF ALL THE PEOPLES OF THE WORLD”

Amsterdam was also home to one of the earliest and most remarkable European examples of comparing religions: *Ceremonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*, or *Religious Ceremonies and Customs of all the Peoples of the World*. Created by the author Jean Frederic Bernard (1683–1744) and the engraver Bernard Picart (1673–1733) and published between 1723 and 1737 in seven large volumes, this remarkable project covered all the religions known to Europeans at that point in time. The volumes begin with Judaism and Roman Catholicism, move on to the Americas and India, then to Asia and Africa, and finally to the different forms of Protestantism and Islam.

We have already noted that there are powerful historical, biographical, and conceptual interconnections at work in any systematic study of religion. So, too, here. Europe at this point had been torn apart by deadly spasms of religious persecution between Catholics and Protestants. This is how both Picart and Bernard ended up in Amsterdam. They had fled their homes in France in the wake of the persecution of Protestants by the intolerant



Engraving showing a Japanese temple by Bernard Picart, 1737. In *Religious Ceremonies and Customs of all the Peoples of the World*, seven volumes published in Amsterdam between 1723 and 1737, author Jean Frederic Bernard covered all the religions known to Europeans at that time, with illustrations by engraver Picart. © BERNARD PICART/HULTON-DEUTSCH /HISTORICAL/CORBIS.

Catholic monarch, King Louis XIV, who revoked the Edict of Nantes of 1598, an important legal milestone enacted under the Catholic king Henry IV that had set in place important protections for French Protestants. The remarkable attempt of Picart and Bernard to create the first European global vision of religion needs to be understood in this context. Comparison for them was the antidote to the poisons of religious and political intolerance.

As persecuted Protestants, both Picart and Bernard were committed to the “True Idea of the divine being” and contemplation “in spirit” but were deeply critical of what they saw as the idolatrous and superstitious ritual practices and images of religion, which they understood to be human constructions deserving of curiosity but of no real authority (Hunt, Jacob, and Mijnhart 2010, 5). Although hardly adequate to the present sensibilities of the study of religion (which, at its best anyway, knows no judgments of idolatry or superstition), it is important to realize just how radical this approach was for its own place and time.

Where Picart and Bernard saw a shared humanity expressing itself in different religions, most Catholics and Protestants thought in the stark black-and-white terms of the monotheistic handbook and its key distinction between true religion and false religion. The result of the latter logic, of course, was violence.

The dominant model at this time was a simplistic fourfold monotheistic scheme. There were only three genuine religions: the monotheisms of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (with Christianity as the most perfect). Everyone else fell into the vague and dismissed category of pagan idolaters, that is, into polytheism. So the scheme looked like this:

1. Christianity
2. Judaism
3. Islam
4. Paganism

Picart and Bernard clearly broke with this fourfold scheme. Their texts and images embodied a new way of studying religion that was much more attuned to subtle differences, even in material details like dress and ritual costume. They treated the most foreign religions more or less fairly, and they assumed a common humanity. They thus wrestled the category of *religion* away from the intolerant logic of their predecessors and began to shape it into a much more generous comparative term.

The result was predictable enough. The Catholic Church put their volumes on its Index of Forbidden Books. Like their Muslim forerunner Ibn al-Arabi and their Dutch ancestor Baruch Spinoza, Picart and Bernard found themselves objects of religious censorship and suppression.

THE IMAGINATION AND THE SYMBOL

Not everyone was happy with the emotional coldness of Enlightenment reason and the increasingly mechanistic or machine-like view of the universe that it was producing. The critique of religion had been made, and it would stick, but many were beginning to wonder if the world could really be fully explained by a thinking that relied on mechanistic metaphors and ignored all of the other capacities of the human being: feeling, intuition, vision, poetry, dream, and symbol. The Romantic movement arose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries around this general critique of the Enlightenment, especially among painters, poets, and writers.

Here it was not pure reason but the imagination that was now being privileged. We have to be careful here, though. By the imagination the Romantic artists and poets did not mean the imaginary. They held a whole spectrum of views, but generally they were celebrating a kind of inspired creativity through which the real world might manifest through image and poetry in the vision of a gifted artist or writer. Basically, they meant a natural capacity for what the religions had called revelation. Their primary inspiration, however, was no longer the Bible. It was the natural world, or nature.

The Romantic approach to what we think of today as religion was at once deeply critical and deeply sympathetic. As a whole, the movement recognized inspired genius in the scriptures and art of the religions, but it generally refused to take these symbolic expressions literally or as absolute or final. We might say that the Romantic poets and artists had integrated the Enlightenment critique of religion into their own appreciation for the religious imagination. They were not simply criticizing religion, but they were not quite

believing it either. They were doing something else that did not yet have a name: they were interpreting religious phenomena as symbolic expressions, that is, as signs pointing toward some ultimate reality. Perhaps these symbols are expressions of that reality, but the religious phenomena are not themselves literally or absolutely true. It was a subtle, nuanced position that often led, and still leads, to a kind of paradoxical thinking about religion.

In any case, here was the double foundation of the house of the study of religion: the rational suspicion of the Enlightenment and the imaginative sympathy of the Romantics. It was this double attempt to explain religion away as a surface phenomenon, and to understand it more deeply as a symbolic expression, that would eventually become the future study of religion.

EXPERIENCE VERSUS BELIEF

Probably the first writer to lay out this double move in a systematic fashion was the liberal Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Schleiermacher famously turned to intuition and feeling before the infinite or the eternal as the key to defending religion against those he called its cultural despisers, that is, the Enlightenment rationalists. Schleiermacher attempted to point out that the experience of religion, particularly the feeling of absolute dependence before the infinite, was the key to understanding what religion is really about and why it can withstand the criticisms of reason. Reason may well be able to dispense with the literal beliefs and scientific mistakes of the religions, but it cannot touch such deeper facts of immediate experience.

By expressions like *intuition* and *feeling*, Schleiermacher did not mean what we think of today as emotion. With a bit of artistic license, we might suggest a more modern translation: “consciousness” or “awareness.” Once religion is recast as addressing this deeper consciousness of the infinite, the external and culturally relative beliefs can be discarded. They become what a later heir of Schleiermacher, the Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James (1842–1910), called over-beliefs. Beliefs are built on or “over” the nature of mind, psyche, or soul. They are not that mind, psyche, or soul itself. As we say today, one “has beliefs,” which, of course, implies that one is *not* those beliefs. Like the Romantic thinkers they were, Schleiermacher and his descendants gave a great deal of ground to the Enlightenment criticisms but finally affirmed a deeper truth.

THE HOUSE GOES UP ON EXPERIENCE

The house of the study of religion went up early on the category of religious experience. Indeed, Schleiermacher’s early Romantic turn to experience as the key to understanding religion would define much of the twentieth-century study of religion, particularly in its hermeneutical, psychological, and phenomenological modes.

By hermeneutics, we mean the art and practice of interpretation. The word comes from the Greek trickster god Hermes. Hermes was the god of communication between the divine and human realms and, indeed, of all such middle realms that require translation or crossing across different forms of mind or being. The hermeneut or interpreter, in effect, stands in for the mercurial Hermes. Interpreters work in the middle zone of translation, always with the awareness that their own consciousness is engaging a form of consciousness coded or frozen in the text or work of art to be interpreted or translated. The act of interpretation unfreezes the coded form of consciousness and releases it back into public culture, where, of course, it is immediately coded again. There is no end to this process, nor is there any way to step out of it as some objective perfect observer. The early founding figures of hermeneutics

emerged out of German Romanticism. They include Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911).

By the psychology of religion, we mean those methods that understand all religious experience and expression to be a function, either in full or in part, of the human psyche and its various projections, repressions, and—in some psychological thinkers, like James—possible openings, doors, or portals into realms beyond itself. The early founding figures of this approach were Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), and William James, each of whom took up different positions but all of whom turned to the psyche and the category of experience as the key to understanding religion.

By phenomenology we mean a careful study of the details and nuances of experience or “that which appears” (this is what the Greek word *phenomenon* literally means) in the consciousness of an individual. We also mean a bracketing or setting aside, at least for the time being, of the questions of whether such experiences are true or not or what, if any, their external sources might be. The phenomenologist of religion tends to the experience or expression at hand, however foreign or bizarre it might be to a personally held worldview or belief. Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and his student Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) are usually named as the most important founding figures of this approach, although what scholars of religion generally mean by phenomenology is somewhat different from what these philosophers meant.

THE BIBLE AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION

The house of the study of religion did not just go up on the category of experience. It also went up on the historical study of texts, especially the Bible. Spinoza’s observations that the biblical texts were clearly authored by humans were developed in very extensive and radical ways in the first half of the nineteenth century by numerous scholars in the Protestant universities of Europe, especially those of Germany. These men sought to demonstrate such things as the ways that ancient Hebrew religion drew on the earlier beliefs and practices of Canaanite and other Mediterranean religions; how the first five books of the Bible could not have been authored by Moses (which is what most everyone believed before this period); how the four gospels could not be made to agree on numerous key points and historical details; and, perhaps most explosively of all, how the figure of *Christ* (a name derived from the Greek for anointed or messiah) as Son of God developed gradually within the early Jewish-Christian communities of the first and second centuries and could not easily or automatically be identified with the self-understandings of the historical Jesus.

There is another way to put this: the immediate historical origins of the critical study of religion do not lie in the ancient monotheistic or polytheistic handbooks. They lie in the historical and critical study of the Bible. The first religions that European intellectuals professionally analyzed and studied were their own.

COLONIALISM AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION

It was not just religious experience and the Bible, though. Most conventional accounts of the history of the study of religion, particularly in its comparative modes, trace the field back to European colonialism in the nineteenth century, when European nation-states controlled most of the world economically and politically.

There is much truth in such an origins story. This is indeed where the modern comparative study of religion began, at least as an organized and sustainable institutional

practice: in the European universities and as a helpmate to the Western colonial and imperial enterprises. It is also when scholars began speaking and writing of the world religions (Masuzawa 2005). In this period, scholars generally studied the religions of other peoples not to convert to the foreign faiths or to better appreciate the other cultures, but to better manage or control them, explain their religions away, maybe even convert them to the scholar's own religion, which in most cases was some form of Protestant or Evangelical Christianity.

There is a deeper, and darker, backstory here. European colonialism, after all, did not begin in the nineteenth century. Long before the British colonized India, Cristóbal Colón, otherwise known as Christopher Columbus, discovered the New World, which of course was neither discovered nor particularly new. Columbus, driven by a keen sense of divine mission, sailed for what would eventually be called the Americas in 1492, the same year that the Catholic monarchy expelled the Jewish community, en masse, from Spain, and just after the Spanish had wrested the Iberian peninsula from the last vestige of Muslim control. Indeed, Columbus would set sail on the very day the Jews were given for a deadline to leave, or else.

Conditioned by these Old World antagonisms against Jews and Muslims, the Catholic conquistadors saw religious difference in the “New World” as dangerous, if not actually demonic (this easy label was in fact a very old Christian comparative strategy). The result was the demonization of other people's religious practices, actual enslavement (Columbus forcibly took back to Spain some 500 Taino people, half of whom died on the way), murder, forced labor, disease for which the indigenous peoples possessed no immunities, and the destruction of whole peoples and cultures. This was the infamous “Destruction of the Indies” (de Las Casas 1999). The utter failure to compare religions and cultures fairly in this case was deadly, and on a scale so vast that is simply unimaginable (Manseau 2015). And that was just the beginning of the Christian colonial arrogance and its subsequent failure to come to terms with the fundamental plurality of human religious experience and expression.

So too in nineteenth century India. The early British colonial portrayals of the religions of other peoples were often quite negative. For example, the Hindu traditions were generally portrayed—largely with the old monotheistic handbook in hand—as a collection of dark superstitions, idols, and frightening, many-armed demon-gods. Hindus themselves, of course, were considered pagans or idol worshippers in need of conversion. They were souls to be saved, not religious equals with their own spiritual integrity, intellectual sophistication, and ancient culture. Similarly, the religions of the indigenous peoples of Africa, Australia, and the Americas were called primitive religions. And so on.

What was being constructed here was what Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair in *Religion and the Specter of the West* (2009) calls a toxic comparative imaginary, that is, a conceptual model for understanding religious otherness that organized the world's cultures in relationship to the centrality and superiority of the colonial self: the world was now divided between “the West and the rest.” Two criteria organized this global schema: race and religion. The closer both assumed features were to Europeans and monotheism, the higher in the comparative imaginary they were placed.

The result was a largely unconscious and unquestioned schema of thought that was internalized by both the colonizers and the colonized. Even the reformers among the colonized (e.g., Hindu and Sikh reformers in the second half of the nineteenth century)

internalized this schema and recreated their religious traditions after the Western monotheistic model. In the process, they self-censored and suppressed aspects of their traditions that could not be fit into the Western notions of religion and God (Mandair 2009). The rich polytheisms and varied philosophies of Hinduism and the sophisticated mystical nuances of Sikh scripture and poetry were now translated into much simpler and familiar monotheistic categories that could presumably play better in the West.

There were other forces at work, however—other, more positive and cross-culturally creative comparative imaginaries. The study of religion was also becoming a powerful secularizing cosmopolitan force within Christian Europe. Whatever the religious or political intentions of its funders and founders, the study of religion often ended up undermining, not supporting, the notion that European Christianity was the only advanced religious civilization on the planet. It also opened innumerable intellectuals and readers up to the richness and nuances of other religions, including numerous intellectuals and readers in Asia, who took up the same methods and used them for their own purposes, many of which were counter-colonial. Hence the new languages of the spiritual and the secular that emerged together as a new cosmopolitan space in which new forms of the global village could be imagined and enacted (van der Veer 2013).

Perhaps the bottom line is this: a historical origin is not the same thing as a destiny, and a badly used idea is not the same thing as a bad idea. A comparative imaginary there will always be. The only question is this: how sophisticated, fair, and adequate will it be?

PROTESTANT AMERICA AMONG THE WORLD WARS

The twentieth century was no less momentous for the study of religion than the nineteenth. Two world wars devastated Europe and much of Asia and, in the process, put a definitive end to any naïve notion of an automatic modernist progress. The Nazi campaign to wipe out the Jewish people, along with any number of other minorities, within their so-called final solution nearly came to pass in the concentration camps, where millions of people, most of them Jews, lost their lives. God and His presumed justice would never quite look the same again. The Cold War that soon followed was built on a vast and dark mythology of a Christian America and its European allies pitted against a godless Soviet Union, each threatening the other with what was now a technologically possible global apocalypse. The nuclear era had begun.

It was in this same murderous and anxious century that the study of religion arose and developed in the United States. We might isolate two different stages here: an initial rise under the aegis of a modernizing Protestant America (1925–1965), and then a rapid rise and major revisioning under the aegis of the counterculture and its double turn toward social justice and a new religious pluralism (Hart 1999).

This was a long cultural process that began with dramatic, and largely staged, national debates between Christian fundamentalists and modernists around the teaching of Darwinian biology in the public schools. These debates came to a head in the famous Scopes Trial of 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee. The modernists won the larger cultural debates and set out to instill their values of reason, progress, and a largely liberal Protestantism in the universities. A decades-long project of bringing religion to the campuses ensued, primarily through the teaching of the Bible and ethics in the classroom and through the institution and extracurricular activities of campus ministers.

Significantly, this was also the same historical period that saw the development of a general alliance that became the Judeo-Christian tradition and inserted any number of Christian nation tropes into American public culture, including the famous “In God We Trust” official motto of the US government (formally adopted in 1956) and the “under God” language of the Pledge of Allegiance in the public schools (adopted in 1954). Both phrases were adopted very late in the nation’s history, and very much in an anti-communist, Cold War context.

It was during this same period that religion increasingly became an academic subject, mostly in an uneasy alliance with the research aims of higher education, which tended to be much more secular and scientific. Robert A. Orsi in *Between Heaven and Earth* describes the general scene in the first half of the twentieth century:

Proponents of the academic study of religion claimed a place in university culture by asserting that the study of “religion”—meaning the denominationally neutral version of Christianity recast as an ethical system—was good and even necessary for American democracy. Outside the walls of the academy, the winds of religious “madness” howled (in the view of those inside)—fire-baptized people, ghost dancers, frenzied preachers and gullible masses, Mormons and Roman Catholics. “Religion” as it took shape in the academy was explicitly imagined in relation to these others and as a prophylactic against them. (2005, 186)

COUNTERCULTURE: JUSTICE AND CONSCIOUSNESS OVER CULTURE

Mormons and Catholics were only the beginning of the challenges to the neutral Protestant vision. As the 1950s changed into the 1960s and 1970s, the key social categories of race (championed by the civil rights movement), class, and gender (championed by the women’s and early gay rights movements) provided conceptual tools to criticize and seek to reform reigning social structures and cultural norms. At the same time, the youth culture turned more and more to the Asian religions for their inspiration, particularly in some idealized Buddhist and Hindu forms, many of these now colored bright within various psychedelic states. The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the new rock ’n’ roll, and a vibrant antiwar movement all added to the already potent cultural brew.

The eventual result of this was a set of radical new theorizations of religion as liberation (Gutiérrez 1973) and black power (Cone 1969, 1970), as patriarchy (Daly 1973), as refuge and spiritual home for gay peoples (Boswell 1980), as altered states of consciousness (Tart 1969), as counterculture (Roszak 1969), as human potential (Kripal 2007), and, by the 1980s, as an established New Age movement (Hanegraaff 1998). The contemporary “spiritual but not religious” demographic is rooted immediately in this same general history, but much of it, including many of the Romantic and experiential streams of the counterculture, can also be traced back further to the middle of the nineteenth century and the Bostonian Transcendentalists and poets like Walt Whitman, who developed a strikingly similar spiritual orientation and critique of institutional religion (Albanese 2007; Schmidt 2012).

Counterculture, at least as it was originally conceived and theorized by the historian Theodore Roszak in 1969, carried the basic observation that the youth culture—in contemporary figures like the Buddhist poet Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997) and the historical figure of the Romantic poet-artist William Blake (1757–1827)—was privileging consciousness over culture (Kripal 2010). The counterculture, in this view, was a series



American poet Allen Ginsberg chanting in Hyde Park, London, 1967. Ginsberg (1926–1997) and other representatives of the 1960s youth counterculture sought to liberate consciousness from conservative cultural and religious limitations so that it could flower in artistic, political, moral, and mystical expression. © BETTMANN/CORBIS.

of practices, ideas, and enthusiasms that attempted in various ways to liberate consciousness from its cultural and conservative religious embeddedness and release it into various forms of artistic, political, moral, and mystical expression.

The counterculture was important to the study of religion not just because of this double turn to social justice and consciousness, but also because this same time period laid the legal and professional foundations for the study of religion in the state universities. In 1963, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Abington School District v. Schempp* that it was constitutional to teach courses about religion in public institutions as long as the content did not profess or preach for a particular religion. In other words, description and analysis were acceptable, but advocacy was not. On the heels of the court decision, in 1964, the National Association of Biblical Instructors (NABI, which had been founded in 1909; *nabi*, by the way, happens to be Hebrew for “prophet”) changed its name, and much of its mission, to the American Academy of Religion. The professional field would now grow further and further away from its biblical and Protestant roots and become more and more pluralistic.

If religious experience, the Bible, and colonialism, then, were the nineteenth-century cultural catalysts for the study of religion, liberal Protestantism, social justice, and counterculture were the twentieth-century catalysts of the same.

CONSTRUCTIVISM: CULTURE OVER CONSCIOUSNESS

If the countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s saw a heavy swing to an emphasis on justice and consciousness over culture, the 1980s and 1990s saw a heavy swing in the opposite direction, toward an emphasis on social, linguistic, and historical constructions over consciousness. Religion was no longer to be studied as a set of practices designed to liberate and realize consciousness from an unjust and limiting culture. Religion was now rather all about local culture, history, language, ritual, and political identity. It was all about social constructions: assumed realities—like experience, the self or soul, and God—were now understood to possess no independent realities apart from the elaborate social, linguistic, and psychological processes that create and sustain them.

Power became the watchword in this new milieu. Partly indebted to older Marxist analyses of religion, which see religion as coded forms of social and economic oppression, this new language was reshaped by the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) into a model of the ways that the history and nuances of language and words shape our most basic assumptions and lock us into particular understandings of ourselves and the world. Foucault reimagined power as a largely invisible web of psychological, cognitive, and political control that works through what he called discourses, that is, the ways that we use language and historically constructed categories to know (and so construct) anything at all, including and especially human nature. The latter is not a fixed thing or essence for Foucault. It is a constantly shifting and always contested set of discourses and the practices associated with them.

Scholars of religion did not always follow Foucault, but many did embrace the basic flip from consciousness to construction. These writers now focused on historical detail, on the complex ways that language and social interaction shaped religious expression, on religious institutions and their wielding of power and authority, on religious violence (particularly after 9/11), and on the specificities of religious identity and the material cultures of religion. Lived religion or ordinary religion became the focus of much new scholarship.

THE RETURN OF SAMENESS: EMBODIED COGNITION

If *social justice* and *consciousness* were the watchwords of the countercultural origins of the contemporary study of religion and *construction* was the watchword of the 1980s and 1990s, *cognition* became the watchword of the first decade and a half of the new millennium. Enter the cognitive study of religion, which focuses on cognition, that is, how the brain processes information. Mostly these cognitive processes deal with ordinary states of mind and behavior, but sometimes they are associated with unusual or extraordinary experiences. The latter experiences, in association with the meanings attributed to them (say, the belief in a separable soul or a deity), are among what Ann Taves refers to as the building blocks of religion (Taves 2009). Out of these basic building blocks communities then develop belief systems, ritual practices, and, eventually, institutional structures that we call religions.

The cognitive study of religion is very young, and it remains to be seen if the fruits of this approach are really as significant as its practitioners commonly claim. But the field has already had one very positive effect on the study of religion. It has reintroduced comparison in a particularly robust way. The brain has become the new basis of comparison across cultures and time periods. The cognitive study of religion has, in effect, issued a challenge to the humanities and their almost exclusive turn to local detail, on social construction, and on religious difference: “The brain is the brain, regardless of where or when we encounter its expressions in our historical materials. And it works more or less the same wherever we find it. Such a neurological universalism is not a bad thing. It is an obvious empirical fact. Deal with it.”

As a simple example of what the cognitive study of religion might give us, consider the category of embodied cognition. Embodied cognition is the fundamental notion that human thinking tends to follow closely along the metaphors of the human body and its kinesthetic or physical self-location in space and time. Hence the common spatial metaphors with which we all think—behind, before, above, below, inside, outside, container, path, and so on—are reflections and expressions of the body's experience in space.

But this basic insight goes much further, since the self itself in this model is also an embodied cognition—that is, it looks very much like a function of the body and its sense of being a separate entity in a social world. When you look in the mirror and see yourself, what is it that you are looking at? The body, of course, which is given the attribute of a name, your name, through the extremely elaborate social processes of child-rearing, language acquisition, and enculturation. Language, social conditioning, and perception itself, then, all work together to create a natural sense of a body-self, of *you* as physical form.

The Buddhist countercultural writer Alan Watts had a wonderful expression for this basic cognitive insight (long before cognitive science): he called it the “skin-encapsulated ego.” This cognitive identification between self and body, of course, is what generates the fear of suffering, disease, and death, since it is the body that will suffer such things and so presumably eventually end the self. From here, we can see how different cultures generate different religious systems of soul and salvation to solve this most basic of all embodied cognitions: the body as self.

SUMMARY

How to conclude? Consider one last time the metaphor of the house of the study of religion and how it was built on the two foundations of (1) Enlightenment reason and its project to explain (away) religion and (2) Romantic imagination and its desire to understand, even re-experience the symbolic truths of religion, but now no longer taken literally or dogmatically. Although it could well be argued that most scholars of religion exhibit something of both, it is also true enough that these two foundations have long been in serious tension and remain so to this day.

But in an interesting and uneven way. Most Romantic approaches to the study of religion (e.g., hermeneutics, phenomenology, and the psychology of religion) generally engage in both rational criticism and imaginative recreation of the religious world being studied. They have little problem with all of the Enlightenment-based methods of the study of religion, but they see these as producing partial truths. They generally assert that there is something else, a “More” to use the language of William James, at work in the historical phenomena. For them, what scholars have long called the sacred—that which is considered holy, special, or set apart in a particular culture—is both a social construction and a potential real presence or power in the environment (or in the human). Not surprisingly, their writings are filled with paradoxes of all sorts, expressing this *both-and* understanding of the sacred.

Enlightenment approaches to the study of religion (e.g., Marxist analyses of power and socioeconomic factors, social constructivism, and the cognitive study of religion) have generally not returned the favor. They have commonly insisted on an *only*, that is, they have commonly asserted that reason and its reductions should be the only privileged approach in the field. Accordingly, they have resisted the Romantic turns to imagination, participation, experience, and modern revelation. The ideal here is the objective, purely rational observer with no personal involvement in that which is being studied. Scholars should only be critics, never caretakers of the sacred, which is really simply the profane (McCutcheon 2001,

2013). Religion and mythology are always ideologies in disguise, always coded expressions of political authority and economic control (Lincoln 1999). The sacred is a social representation or an expression, not an experience or presence (Smith 2004, 103). Religion and the categories that are used to study it are purely mental constructs that scholars invent and employ for their own purposes and goals. There are no paradoxes here, since there is only an *only*.

These are much too simple of generalities, but there is something to them. The bottom line is this. The house of the study of religion is unstable, if not actually leaning. Which way it is leaning depends on which decade we are addressing. For much of the twentieth century, it leaned fairly heavily to the Romantic side of things. For the last four decades, it has been leaning increasingly further to the Enlightenment side of things. The two foundations, however, remain just that: foundational.

And the house continues to rise with each new generation. As these generations build floor upon floor into the sky, it is difficult to see how the future will not require yet more reason and yet more imagination. Hopefully, future writers can learn to balance these so that the house of the study of religion can rise tall and not fall.

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