Introduction

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> Religion is sociologically interesting not because, as vulgar positivism would have it, it describes the social order (which, insofar as it does, it does not only very obliquely but very incompletely), but because, like environment, political wealth, jural obligation, personal affection, and a sense of beauty, it shapes it.
>
> Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System"[1]

> Religion is more complicated than it sometimes seems.
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> Nicholas D. Kristof, *New York Times*, October 9, 2010[2]

The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies comes at a critical and challenging time for the academic study of religion in the United States and around the world. The field of religious studies is at a crossroads, having embarked for the past two decades on a fundamental reexamination of its most basic ideas and terms, while the world at large has awakened to the enduring public salience of religion and to religion's importance to the everyday lives of much of the planet's population. Recent political events have given an anxious edge to this curiosity about religion, but religious conflict and violence, important and compelling as these are as subjects, do not exhaust the place of religion in the contemporary world, nor do they account completely for the intensified academic interest in the study of religion across the humanities and social sciences. Rather, people of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have turned out to be not nearly as disenchanted as earlier generations of thinkers about religion had predicted – just the opposite, in fact. The secular and the sacred are braided together today, sometimes in novel configurations and in unexpected places, and there are those who suggest that

[1] Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973), 119.

[2] Nicholas D. Kristof, "Test Your Savvy on Religion," *New York Times*, October 9, 2010, online at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/10/opinion/10kristof.html (accessed May 27, 2011).

we have never been modern, never completely disenchanted. This has invited renewed attention to what religion is and what religion does to and for individuals and communities, social movements, global and national economies, and to the politics of nation-states and the relations between them.

Scholars in the nations of the former Soviet space and China, for example, are asking about the role that religion and religions will play in their respective contexts, amid revolutionary social, economic, and demographic upheaval and transformation. Does religion contribute to national identity or undermine it by redirecting personal allegiance to transnational affiliations (for example, global Islam or world Catholicism) or to ethnic particularity? What does it mean to be Muslim in the rapidly changing social and economic circumstances of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan or in France, and what does it mean to be Catholic anywhere in the world given the multiple inheritances and diverse interpretations of the Second Vatican Council (1962–5)? No one is certain how these matters will develop or what new shapes religions will take.

Does it make sense any longer to speak of religious "traditions," given what we know of the multifarious and hybrid nature of all religious worlds? How are sacred texts read, and what is the relationship between text and practice in changing social and religious contexts? Are religions inherently violent or inherently peaceful? There is urgency to such questions today because people understand that they need to be able to think clearly about these matters in order to comprehend their turbulent environments and to live with eyes wide open in the modern world.

This convergence of circumstances – the reevaluation of critical terms in the study of religion and the exigent interest in religion in the social, political, economic, and existential environments of the world today – opens a charged but productive space for creative theoretical work. How do we take the theoretical and historical inheritances of the study of religion in the West, so thoroughly deconstructed and criticized of late, and in a constructive manner generate forward-looking theoretical perspectives on religion and religions that will result in research agendas for the twenty-first century? The recognition of this unique moment, with its promise and attendant risks, inspired this volume.

A fundamental commitment of this *Companion* is to pay attention to the genealogies of the issues at stake in each chapter. This follows the recent historicist turn in religious studies. Scholars of religion have become deeply interested in the history of their various subfields (of the study of Buddhism, for instance, or of the philosophy of religion), and

it is understood now that scholarship in any area of religious studies must be alert to its genealogy, to the history of the making of its terminology, to the cultural and religious values inscribed in its account of the past, and to the broader social and political context of its judgments. This begins with "religion" itself. Scholars of religion are asking what forces converged to shape particular understandings of "religion" and "religions" as the objects of critical inquiry, primarily in the modern West (where most of the analytical terminology for the scientific study of religion developed), and as the lens through which those objects would be viewed. The past of "religion" is a historical question with theoretical and methodological implications, in other words, for the present and future. "Genealogy," anthropologist Talal Asad has written, is a "way of working back from our present to the contingencies that have come together to give us our certainties."[3] Searching the past of the study of religion is not about rethinking static entities – "religion," "Buddhism," "Hinduism" – but about exploring the dynamic and contingent encounters out of which came both our certainties and the resources with which to challenge them. This is the spirit of this volume.

I. "RELIGIONS" AND "RELIGION" IN THE MODERN WEST

The history of the making of "religion" as the object of critical inquiry and the invention of "religions" to be compared with Christianity and to each other begins in the sixteenth century and was deeply entangled from the start with the social, political, military, and intellectual history of the West in its engagement with the rest of the world. But there is a long prehistory to the modern study of religion that contributed terms, general perspectives and orientations, and judgments to later religious scholarship. Classical philosophers asked where the gods came from, noting the strong similarities between the lives and behaviors of the deities and those of the humans who worshipped them and between the imagined orderings of heaven and social hierarchies on earth (anticipating much later ideas about the social origins and functions of religion). During the medieval period, scholars working within particular religious contexts sometimes thought comparatively about their religious worlds and about religion as a dimension of human life. Reflection on religion and religions became especially necessary at the

[3] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 16.

borders where different worlds came into contact with each other. Such meeting places have been rich grounds for the generation of questions (and anxieties) about religion and religions. Many of the words used to talk about religion from early modernity onward were inherited from the ancient world, especially from Christians' encounters with pagans, first in Greek and Roman lands and then in the forests of northern Europe, and from the long and troubled relationship between Christians and Jews. Knowing about how the others worshipped their gods, buried their dead, or honored their rulers could be essential information for intercultural survival and communication, for mutual understanding, as an aid in defining and establishing one's own social and religious identities, and for the purposes of peace or domination.

The impress of this prehistory has been enduring, but it was in modernity, with its own specific concerns and crises, that the critical and comparative languages of religious scholarship acquired the meanings they have today. Four key moments may serve as organizational focuses for this brief historical survey: the geographical discoveries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the subsequent expansion of European power and presence throughout the world; the breakup of Christendom in the sixteenth century and the terrible protracted internecine religious violence that followed it; the epistemological reorientations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of the social and natural sciences; and the institution of the first university chairs in the science of religion and comparative religions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Each of these points of crisis, transition, and intellectual innovation fundamentally shaped how religion and religions came to be understood, not only in Western contexts but also around the globe.

The discovery of the new world confronted Europe with peoples and ways of life – including religious practices – utterly unknown to ancient authorities. This provoked an epistemic crisis and compelled European thinkers to stretch their inherited conceptions of history, cosmology, law, religion, and anthropology to take into account what was being reported from other lands. The expansion of European trade with Asia brought Christians in contact with ancient religions of rich textual and ritual traditions, while the proximity of Muslim armies kept the fear and fascination of Islam burning in European imaginations. Curiosity about the religions of others and about one's own in relation to these others expanded in this earlier age of globalization. European intellectuals, some of them writing from afar, approached what they identified as the religions of distant people in terms of the religious practices they

were familiar with closer to home, developing frameworks for thinking about and comparing religion and religions globally. These reproduced Christian theological assumptions and confirmed their authors' belief in the superiority of Christianity. Later theorists of the emerging science of religion in the nineteenth century drew on accounts of indigenous religions by missionaries, travelers, soldiers, and administrators in developing their understandings of the nature of religion and its role in society and human experience, with reference to the era's new theories of evolution and social development. Sometimes these accounts called the superiority of Christianity into question, but most often they affirmed it.

These efforts to locate unfamiliar religious practices within recognizable categories was further inflected by the hostility between Protestants and Catholics, which endured at varying degrees of intensity in different places from the sixteenth century into the twentieth. Various agents of European nations carried this schism out to the rest of the world, and scholars of religion mapped it onto other peoples, recreating the religious history and contemporary religious practices of Asians, Africans, and South Americans in the image of Protestant/Catholic prejudices. Buddha became the Luther of Asia in the view of Protestant scholars, for example, and Buddhists were cast as Asia's Protestants, in contrast to "Hinduism," which was denigrated in the very process of its invention by Western Protestant scholars because of its alleged resemblance to Catholicism. The devotional practices of Irish laborers in England and the sacred festivities of Sicilian peasants were classified in the racist categories used for the religions of Africa and South Asia and vice versa. Catholics protected themselves from the similarities they perceived (and Protestants pointed out) between Catholicism and indigenous religions around the world by declaring the latter to be the mimetic work of Satan.

Then in the seventeenth century, philosophers and theologians, weary of internecine Christian violence – men and women who were thinking on a pile of bones, in Voltaire's grim image – sought to come up with an irenic religion stripped of its particularities (dogmas, rituals, and hierarchies) and thus acceptable to all reasonable people.[4] Enlightenment philosophers extended this endeavor further by setting religion within

[4] Voltaire's vision of a world devastated by religious wars may be found in the anthology edited by Isaac Kramnick, *The Portable Enlightenment Reader* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 119–24. It appears as the entry for "Religion" in *The Philosophical Dictionary* published by Voltaire in 1764.

the newly established epistemological limits of rationality. Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the modern notion of "religion" acquired its shape. Against it other forms of religious practice, not conforming to this norm, in Europe and elsewhere, in the present and in the past, were measured and then recast as premodern, irrational, emotional, magical, superstitious, and "primitive." In the narrative of "religion," these now lower forms of religion were destined either to disappear from history or evolve into modern religions on the model of European and North American Protestantism. "Religion" underwrote new thinking about the organization of society, about freedom of conscience, and about human nature and destiny.

Finally, the separation of the study of religion as an academic enterprise from theological studies in the universities of northern Europe and the United States in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought the study of religion into engagement with the physical and social sciences and the humanities and secured its place in the modern research university. It also instituted a deep and lasting division between the empirical study of religious practices and theological reflection that would deepen over time, to a greater or lesser extent in varying cultural and religious contexts. This grafted onto other distinctions in academic culture, such as those between faith and reason, between scholarship supervised by religious authorities and religious inquiry free of such constraints, between objectivity and subjectivity, and between empathy and detachment as scholarly positions. These polarities continue to bedevil the study of religion, and thinking past them remains a powerful and generative challenge.

Any attempt to address contemporary interest in religions and religion within the academy and outside it must take account of the impact of this history on the making of the discipline. When they talk about *religion*, scholars of religion are referring – or have been referring for more than a century, at least – to three things: (1) a critical, analytical category that aims to name a distinct and universal dimension of human experience as the subject of academic inquiry (about which there has been definitional debate but fundamental agreement that such a dimension exists); (2) a normative discourse about religion deeply enmeshed with the intellectual, political, and military aims of Western nations that proposes how people ought to live and how states ought to be organized and that distinguishes good religion from bad, the tolerable and the intolerable, with northern European and American Protestantism as exemplary forms of the good and tolerable; and (3) the lived practices of men and women around the world. "Religion" and "religions" as terms

guiding inquiry have always entailed both descriptive and prescriptive ambitions, inscribing one way of being religious – as developed out of the epochal events and broad shifts in the global reality of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – as "religion" itself and measuring other religions against this standard.

At the same time, the past of religious studies and of "religion" is characterized by the irony and inconsistencies common to every area of human history. Devout Christians made fundamental contributions to the critical study of East and South Asian religions. For example, the Oxford translator and interpreter of Confucian texts, James Legge (1815–97), a pious Protestant, found himself regularly denounced by other Christians for his scrupulously fair and relatively nonjudgmental accounts of Confucius's life and teachings and especially for daring to compare Christ and Confucius favorably. Theologians such as Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) and Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), working within confessional contexts (in their cases, Lutheranism) and contending with the epistemological and theological legacy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), introduced important theoretical terms for religious analysis. A British and American tradition of learned clergy writing popular volumes about other religions, ancient and contemporary, contributed to broadening public knowledge and literacy about the world's religious diversity. One of the finest examples of such texts is Reverend F. D. Maurice's *The Religions of the World and Their Relationship to Christianity* (1847), which originated in a lecture series for a British working-class audience. A great irony of the past of the study of religion is that groundbreaking work on religious traditions other than Christianity was done by scholars who not only had little affinity for these religions, but – as in the case of the influential Sanskrit scholar, Monier Monier-Williams (1819–99) – despised and feared them or translated their texts with an eye toward the conversion of "heathens."

The "heathens" were not silent figures in this story, moreover. Religious scholarship arose in a world in which Europeans and Americans were meeting and talking with real people, with memories and histories of their own. Among the interlocutors of Westerners curious about other religions were figures within these cultures and religious worlds. The efforts of Asian scholars to understand religions in China, Japan, and Korea predated the West's interest, subsequently informed and challenged what Western scholars came to think about these religions, and continued to develop alongside and in communication with Western scholarship. The others pushed back against and corrected the work of Western scholars of religion. Sometimes political

actors or religious leaders in other lands used Western analyses for their own ends; on occasion they misled Western agents to protect local religious sources, knowledge, and artifacts. The history of the study of religion is the history of such relationships in specific circumstances evolving over time in varied political, institutional, and religious environments. Religious sources, scholars, and scholarship were all caught up in transactions and exchanges on quite particular historical fields.

II. DEBATES IN CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS STUDIES

As the various dimensions of the history of the study of religion have come into sharper focus, its equivocal quality has contributed to a number of critical conversations over the most fundamental theoretical, political, and ethical questions in the contemporary discipline of religious studies. Some historians of the Western study of religion have argued, for instance, that because such scholarship was so central to the imposition of the modern Western political and intellectual project on the rest of the world, religious studies is caught in a relentless solipsism. Modern religious studies, says Daniel Dubuisson, one of the voices in this debate, represent the West's "lonely face-to-face encounter with itself." Why do Westerners study Hinduism? So "we could peer into the past of our own religion in the Indian present," in the words of another scholar.[5]

Because Christian theological assumptions and conceptions have been so foundational not only to the study of religion but also to the construction of "religion" as a modern category, one of the challenges facing the discipline today is to understand this legacy and its implications. Debates over the relationship between theology and religious studies approach the question from two different – indeed, opposing – perspectives, emphasizing two divergent concerns: the introduction of theological perspectives and norms into religious studies, on the one hand, and the rejection of the theological legacy as irrelevant to the study of religion, on the other. Religious studies cannot escape theology, according to some; religious studies as empirical practice has abandoned theological analysis to the flattening, if not the death, of its subject, say others. The relationship between theology and religious studies requires care to clarify its history and critical implications, judicious consideration

[5] Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 69; Ronald B. Inden, *Imagining India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000 [1990]), 91.

of the methodological questions attending both empirical and constructive work, and attention to theological engagements with the humanities and social sciences.

The very work of critical self-scrutiny within the discipline in recent decades has aroused suspicion. The denial of the stability and coherence of religious "traditions," for instance, may appear to those with strong commitments to these traditions as a rejection of their deepest beliefs and values and a dismissal of their history and memory. Deconstructions of the entity called "Hinduism," for example, or interpretations that focus on aspects of South Asian myth and imagery that some would prefer to deemphasize have appeared to a number of South Asian intellectuals and public figures as yet another expression of colonial presumption and power, with outsiders once again claiming the authority of determining what is real and what is not about the South Asian religious world.

Who has the right to teach particular religions, in any case? Those who insist that religious traditions are unified, coherent, and authoritative say that only practitioners of these traditions legitimately represent them and that they do so for the purposes of advancing the faith among students who belong to these traditions or of presenting them in a positive light to outsiders. The more radical traditionalists from several religious worlds have disrupted gatherings at the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion in recent years, threatened scholars "outside" traditions who make arguments that "insiders" find offensive or upsetting, trashed books and derailed careers, obstructed research, and sought to influence hiring decisions in religious studies programs in the United States and in other countries.

Meanwhile, as scholars of religion contend seemingly endlessly with each other over the meanings of their terminology and the limits of their knowledge, often coming to conclusions that emphasize polyvalence and instability of critical terms, people are looking for assistance with the real religious challenges of their local worlds and with their immediate and personal concerns. Religion is fundamentally implicated today in the most challenging areas of contemporary life, such as in making some sense of and living with pain and suffering; in the shaping of historical memories and the political actions that may be provoked by them; in the lives of immigrants, migrants, and refugees; in the generation or contestation of national or ethnic identities; and in the ways that people adapt to new technologies. The eruption of epistemological doubt and the understandable reluctance of contemporary religion scholars to speak in the singular about phenomena that

are always "both/and" can appear at times an abandonment or sidestepping of the field's responsibilities to the wider public.

These fault lines seem to be threatening the very existence of the academic study of religion as a distinctive component of liberal education today. But from another perspective, the one taken here, these places of most acute intellectual and public contestation offer opportunities for identifying new research possibilities, introducing theoretical innovations, and addressing the public's urgent questions in relevant ways. It is the assumption of this book that the conversation does not end with the questions that are most roiling the discipline today. It starts with them.

III. *THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO RELIGIOUS STUDIES*

The ambiguous genealogies of "religion" and of the "religions" have been well established. What next? How do we move forward within the discipline? Contributors to *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* respond to this challenge by exploring how the study of religion has lived with and against its multiple inheritances (and its varied encumbrances), with equivocal, instructive, creative, and unpredictable outcomes. The goal is to find a balance between the recognition of the ambiguous historical legacy of the study of religion and engagement with contemporary theoretical innovations and opportunities in the discipline.

The chapters ahead are organized into three parts. The first, "Religion and Religious Studies: The Irony of Inheritance," explores how the inherited terminology of religious studies might be worked with, worked through, or reworked to be of use in developing research agendas moving forward. The second, "Major Theoretical Problems," takes up especially gnarled and contentious issues in the study of religion today, the field's hot spots, to explore where such fierce and focused questioning might or can lead. The final part, "Methodological Variations," addresses theoretical questions in emergent areas of religious inquiry.

It is one of the book's governing commitments that productive and innovative avenues of religious inquiry open up at the intersection of theory and empirical study. Modern theories of religion were developed in relation to assembled evidence of religious practice, narrative, experience, and imagination that was more or less accurate; in some cases, this evidence was obtained directly, either in the archives or the field, while in others it came refracted through intermediaries. But the