

Studying Christianity

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Series Preface

Religious Studies and Critical Enquiry: Toward a New Relationship

Clinton Bennett

Birth of a discipline

This new series takes the view that, as a field of studies, the Study of Religion is multidisciplinary and poly-methodological and needs to not merely affirm this but to translate this claim into practice. Religious Studies has its academic, historical roots within faculties or departments of Theology, where it began as a Comparative Study of Religions predicated on the assumption that Christianity was either a model, or a superior religion. The first University appointment was in 1873, when William Fairfield Warren became Professor of Comparative Theology and of the History and Philosophy of Religion at Boston University. The concept of Christianity as a model meant that anything that qualified as a religion ought to resemble Christianity. Traditional subdivisions of Christian Studies, usually called Theology, were applied to all religious systems. Thus, a religion would have a founder, a scripture or scriptures, doctrines, worship, art, sacred buildings, and various rituals associated with the human life cycle. These elements could be identified, and studied, in any religion. This approach has obvious methodological advantages but it can end up making all religions look remarkably similar to each other and of course also to what serves as the template or model, that is, to Christianity. The very terms “Hinduism” and “Buddhism” were of European origin, since all religions had to be “isms” with coherent belief structures. The assumption that Christianity was somehow superior, perhaps uniquely true, or divinely revealed to the exclusion of other religions meant that other religions had to be understood either as human constructs or as having a more sinister origin. Theology was thus concerned with evaluation and with truth claims. The study of religions other than Christianity often aimed to demonstrate

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how these religions fell short of the Christian ideal. Their strengths and weaknesses were delineated. Some classified religions according to their position on a supposed evaluative scale, with the best at the top and the worst at the bottom. Religious Studies, as it developed as a distinctive field of study, quickly distanced itself from Theology even when taught within Theology departments. It would be mainly descriptive.

The break from theology

Evaluation would be left to theology. Assessing where a religion might be considered right or wrong, strong or weak might occupy a theologian but the student of religion would describe what he or she saw, regardless of their own opinion or lack of an opinion about whether religions have any actual link with a supra-human reality. Partly, this stemmed from Religious Studies' early interest in deconstructing religions. This was the attempt to determine how they began. Usually, they were understood as a response to, or products of, particular social and political contexts. This took the field closer to the social sciences, which remain neutral on such issues as the existence of God or whether any religion can claim to have been revealed, focusing instead on understanding how religions operate, either in society or psychologically. Incidentally, the term "Comparative Religion" has been used as a neutral term, that is, one that does not imply a comparison in order to refute or evaluate. In its neutral sense, it refers to the cataloging of religious data under thematic headings, such as ritual, myth, beliefs without any attempt to classify some as better than others. The field has, to a degree, searched for a name. Contenders include the Scientific Study of Religion, the History of Religion (or *Religiongeschichte*, mainly in the German-speaking academy) but since the founding of the pioneering department of Religious Studies, at Lancaster University under Ninian Smart in 1967, Religious Studies has become the preferred description especially in secular institutions. One issue has been whether to use "religion" in the plural or singular. If the singular is used, it implies that different religions belong to the same category. If the plural is used, it could denote the opposite, that they share nothing in common, arise from unrelated causes and have no more to do with each other than, say, the Chinese and the Latin scripts, except that the former are beliefs about the divine-human relationship or the purpose of life while the latter are alphabets. Geo Widengren, professor of the History of Religion at Uppsala, rejected the notion that an *a priori, sui generis* phenomenon called "religion"

existed as breaking the rules of objective, neutral, value-free scholarship. Incidentally, Buddhism and Confucianism were often characterized as philosophies, not as religions because they lacked a God or Gods at their center. On the history of the field, see Capps (1995) and Sharpe (2006).

Privileging insidership

The field soon saw itself as having closer ties to the humanities and to social science than to theology. It would be a multidisciplinary field, drawing on anthropology, psychology, philosophy, as well as on linguistics and literary criticism to study different aspects of a religion, what people do as well as what they say they believe, their sacred texts, their rituals, their buildings as well as how they organize themselves. However, a shift occurred in the development of the discipline, or field of study since it is a multidisciplinary field, that effectively reduced the distance between itself, and theology, from which it had tried so hard to divorce itself. While claiming to be a multidisciplinary field, Religious Studies has in practice veered toward privileging a single approach, or way of studying religion, above others. The shift toward what may be called phenomenology or insider-ship took place for good reasons and as a much-needed corrective to past mistakes and distortions. In the postcolonial space, much criticism has been voiced about how the Western world went about the task of studying the religious and cultural Other. Here, the voice of Edward Said is perhaps the most widely known. Much scholarship, as Said (1978) argued, was placed at the service of Empire to justify colonial rule and attitudes of racial or civilizational superiority. Such scholars, known as Orientalists, said Said, described Others, whether Africans, native Americans, Hindus or Muslims, Arabs or Chinese, who, so that they could be dominated, were inalienably different from and inferior to themselves. However, this description did not correspond to any actual reality. The term “Other” is widely used in postcolonial discourse and in writing about Alterity to refer to those who are different from us. The term was first used by Hegel. In contemporary use, it denotes how we stigmatize others, so that all Muslims or all Hindus, or all Africans share the same characteristics that are radically different from and less desirable than our own. Cabezón (2006) argues, “the dialectic of alterity is as operative today in the discipline of religious studies as it was in the discipline’s antecedents.” This is a sobering assessment (21). The Orientalists portrayed the non-Western world as chaotic, immoral, backward, and as exotic, as sometimes offering forbidden fruits but always offering adventure,

riches, and the opportunity to pursue a career as a colonial administrator, in the military, in commerce, or even as a Christian missionary. Religions were often depicted as idolatrous, superstitious, oppressive, and as the source of much social evil.

Admittedly, some scholars, including the man who can be credited as founding the scientific study of religion, F. Max Müller, thought that religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism had become corrupt over time and that in their most ancient, original form they represented genuine apprehensions of divine truth. Writing in 1892, he remarked that if he seemed to speak too well of these religions there was little danger of the public “forming too favorable an opinion of them” since there were many other writers who presented their “dark and hideous side” (78). It was in his *Chips from a German Workshop* (1867) that Müller used the term “scientific study of religion.” Supposition about the human origin of religion, perhaps excluding Christianity, resulted in a range of theories about how religions began. Britain’s first professor of Comparative Religion, T. W. Rhys-Davids of Manchester thought that his work on the classical texts would help to separate the rational, ethical core of Buddhism from the myths and legends that surrounded its contemporary practice. Often, the socialpolitical and cultural milieu in which a founder type figure could be located were regarded as significant contributory factors. In the case of Hinduism, the “lack of a founder” was often commented upon almost as if this alone detracted from the possibility that Hinduism was a *bone fide* faith. Even such a careful scholar as Whaling says that Hinduism lacks a founder (1986: 43). In the case of Islam, Muhammad was invariably depicted as the author of the Qur’an and as Islam’s founder, neither of which reflect Muslim conviction. Of course, for Christian polemicists, Muhammad was a charlatan and worse, Hinduism was a tissue of falsehood and Buddhism, if it qualified as a religion at all, was selfish! The result of this approach was to deconstruct religion, to reduce religion to something other than revealed truth. Instead, religion was a psychological prop or a sociological phenomenon that helps to police societies or a political tool used by the powerful to subdue the poor. Another aspect was that ancient or classical rather than contemporary religion was the main subject matter of religious studies.

The personal dimension

Even before Said, in reaction to the above, a different approach began to dominate the field. Partly, this was motivated by a desire—not absent in

Müller—to right some of the wrongs committed as a result of what can only be described as racial bias. One of the most important contributors to the new approach was Wilfred Cantwell Smith who, in 1950 in his own inaugural lecture as professor of Comparative Religion at McGill, spoke of the earlier generation of scholars as resembling “flies crawling on the surface of a goldfish bowl, making accurate observations on the fish inside . . . and indeed contributing much to our knowledge of the subject; but never asking themselves, and never finding out, how it feels to be a goldfish” (2).¹ Scholars such as Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950), influenced by the philosophical concept of phenomenology, had already applied its principles to religious studies, arguing that the field should move beyond description, “an inventory and classification of the phenomena as they appear in history” to an attempt to understand “all the experiences born of what can only become reality after it has been admitted into the life of the believer” (1954: 10). This introduced what Smith called a personal element into the study of religion, an element that has always played a part in theology, which deals with matters of faith, with people’s most cherished and deeply held convictions. Smith suggested that all religions should be understood in personal terms: religion is “the faith in men’s hearts”; it is “a personal thing, in the lives of men” (1959: 42). Thus the student will make progress when he or she recognizes that they are not primarily dealing with externals, with books and rituals that can be observed but with “religious persons, or at least with something interior to persons” (1959: 53). In the past, the study of “other men’s religions” had taken the form of an “impersonal presentation of an ‘it’” (1959: 34). Now, instead of an “us” talking about “them,” it would first become “us” talking “to them,” then a “‘we all’ talking with each other about ‘us’” as Religious Studies took on the task of interpreting “intellectually the cosmic significance of life generically, not just for one’s own group specifically” (1981: 187). The Religious Studies’ professor now wrote for the Other as well as for outsiders, since they would also read what he wrote. “The day has long past,” said Smith, “when we write only for ourselves” (1981: 143). Phenomenology, applied to the study of religions, is the effort to penetrate to the essential core, to the *eidōs*, of religion, by bracketing out assumptions, theories, preconceptions so that we see the phenomenon for what it really is, in its own terms. Instead of imposing categories and theories and value judgments from outside, like the Orientalists did, we enter into the religion’s worldview. We all but become the Other. Instead of decrying what we write as a mockery, as inaccurate, as belittling what he or she believes, the Other ought to voice their approval (1959: 44).

Leaving aside the problem that not all Muslims or all Hindus or all Buddhists believe identically and that what one believer finds acceptable another may not, nonetheless, the criterion that believers should recognize themselves in what gets written, has become a generally accepted principle within Religious Studies. It is also widely embraced in anthropology. Certainly, effort is made to represent religions as diverse, to counter the impression given by earlier writers that Islam, for example, was more or less the same everywhere and, for that matter, throughout history. Smith himself insisted that there is actually no such thing as Hinduism or as Christianity or as Islam, only what this Hindu or that Muslim believes. At the deepest level, this is undoubtedly true. However, Religious Studies would not survive if it took this too literally, so pragmatically it accepts that while no abstract reality called “Christianity” or “Islam” may exist, believers also believe that they belong to a religious tradition and share beliefs with others who belong to that tradition. They believe that these are not merely their own, individual personal opinions but are “true,” that is, according to the teachings of the religion itself. The phenomenological approach, or methodology, then, tries to depict a religion in terms that insiders recognize. Thus, when explaining how a religion began, it describes what believers themselves hold to be true. An outsider writing about Islam might attribute its origin to Muhammad’s genius in responding to the need for political unity in seventh-century Arabia by supplying a religion as the unifying creed that bound rival tribes together. The phenomenologist will write of how Muhammad received the Qur’an from God via the Angel Gabriel in a cave on Mt. Hira in the year 610 of the Common Era. The phenomenologist does not have to ask, unlike a theologian, whether Muhammad really did receive revelation. However, by neglecting other explanations of Islam’s origin they veer, if not toward theology then at least toward a type of faith sensitivity that is closer to that of a theologian than to a Freudian psychologist or a Durkheimian sociologist.

Faith sensitivity: A paradigm too far

From at least the mid-1970s, what has been taught in most College and University departments of Religious Studies or in world religions courses within departments of Theology or of Religion is the phenomenology of religion. Most popular texts on the religions of the world depict their subject matter in what can be described as an insider-sensitive style. Indeed, there is a tendency to employ Hindus to teach about Hinduism, Muslims to teach about

Islam, so what gets taught represents a fairly standard and commonly accepted Hindu or Muslim understanding of these faiths. Hinduism does not get described as having kept millions of people in bondage to the evils of the caste or class system, nor is Islam depicted as an inherently violent religion, or as misogynist. This tendency to appoint insiders has meant, in practice, little of the type of collaboration, or “colloquy” that Smith anticipated (1981: 193) but also much less misrepresentation. Partly, the trend stems from the suspicion that it takes one to know one. In anthropology, Clifford Geertz has spoken of an “epistemological hypochondria concerning how one can know that anything one says about other forms of life is as a matter of fact so” (1988: 71). There is a reluctance to depict all religions as basically the same or to imply that the same fundamental truths can be found in all of them—if differently expressed—because this sounds like theology. However, a similar pedagogical approach to teaching each tradition is commonly practiced. While this approach is more sophisticated than the early model, which simply used Christianity as a template, it is not so radically different. Here, the work of Ninian Smart and Frank Whaling, among others, has been influential (Figure 0.1). Sharpe’s “four modes of religion” model is worth examining but is less easy to translate into the classroom (see Figure 0.2). Smart and Whaling say that most religions have such elements as beliefs, scriptures, histories, sacred sites, worship and that without imposing too much from the outside, an examination of each of these provides a common framework of investigation. Smart’s term “worldview,” too, easily includes Marxism as well as Buddhism, and is less problematic than religion because no belief in the supernatural is implied. Flexibility is possible because some traditions place more stress on certain elements; therefore, these can be discussed in more detail. The role, for example, of a seminal personality in Islam, Christianity, or Buddhism is very significant while less so in Judaism and absent in Hinduism. One very positive development associated with this personal understanding of religion was that the field started to take an interest in contemporary religion, not only in ancient texts. Observation and fieldwork, alongside knowledge of languages and literary analysis, became part and parcel of studying religion. If anything, the trend may have gone too far in the other direction, to the neglect of texts. It is just as mistaken to think that you can learn all about a religion by visiting a place of worship as it is to claim that everything can be learnt from reading its texts. It is not insignificant that when Smart proposed his original six dimensions it was in the context of a lecture on the “Nature of Theology and the Idea of A Secular University,” thus his concern was with the “logic of

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Smart's seven-fold scheme of study (initially six; see Smart, 1968: 15–18).

Whaling's eight inter-linked elements, behind which lies some apprehension of ultimate reality (Whaling, 1986: 37–48).

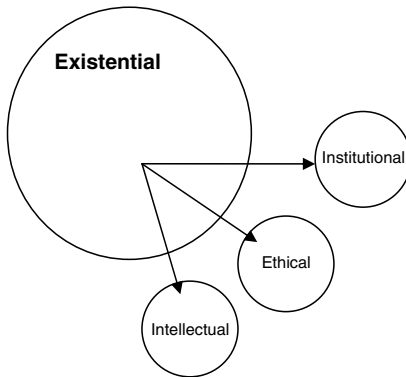
1. Doctrinal	1. Religious community
2. Mythological	2. Ritual
3. Ethical	3. Ethics
4. Ritual	4. Social involvement
5. Historical	5. Scriptures/myth
6. Social	6. Concepts
7. Material (added in his 1998 text)	7. Aesthetics
	8. Spirituality

Note: Smart categorized 1–3 as “para-historical” and 4–6 as historical.

Figure 0.1 Comparison of Smart's and Whaling's models.

religious education in a secular or religiously neutralist society . . . with the *content* of what should be taught” rather than with the “question of *how* religion should be taught” (1968: 7).

This series takes the view that phenomenology or insider-sensitivity dominates the field today at the expense of other ways of studying religion. This series also takes the view that this dominance has cost Religious Studies its ability to engage with critical issues. The reality of what a student experiences in the field may be different, less pleasant, than what they learn in the classroom. From what is taught in the classroom, religions are all sweetness and light. True, the darker side of religion may indeed be a distortion, or a misrepresentation, or the result of the manipulation of religion for political or for other ends. True, the earliest strand of the religion may not have contained these elements. However, to say nothing about how a religion has been used to sanction, even to bless violence, or to subjugate women, or to discriminate against outsiders or certain designated groups, simply reverses the mistakes of the past. If the Orientalists rarely had anything good to say about religions other than the Christian, the contemporary student of religion appears blind to anything negative. One of the most popular Religious Studies texts, at least in North America, is Huston Smith's *The World's Religions* (1958; 1991; originally *The Religions of Man*). For all its merit, this deliberately set out to present religions as sweetness and light, or, as the author put it, to show religions “at their best” (5). Smith himself winced to think how someone closing his chapter on Hinduism and stepping “directly into the Hinduism



Sharpe sees these as interlinking. Each can be represented by a noun: Existential = faith; Intellectual = beliefs; Institutional = Organizations; Ethical = conduct. A believer or a community may use either of the four as the 'dominant element', that is, as a 'gateway' to the others (p97). On page 96, he has four diagrams, substituting the dominant dimension in each.

Figure 0.2 Eric Sharpe's "four-modes." *Source:* Based on diagram on page 96 in Sharpe, 1983.

described by Nehru as 'a religion that enslaves you'" would react (4). He excluded references to the Sunni-Shi'a and traditional-modernist divisions in Islam (3) because he chose instead to note "different attitudes toward Sufism" by way of taking Islam's diversity seriously. Yet this also avoided discussing some less rose-colored aspects of religion, the full story of which is "not rose-colored" but "often crude" (4). What Smith set out to achieve may be said to characterize the Religious Studies' agenda; he wanted to "penetrate the worlds of the Hindus, the Buddhists, and Muslims" and to "throw bridges from these worlds" to his readers. His goal was "communication" (10). He wrote of aiming to see through "others' eyes" (8). Toward the end of his "Points of Departure" chapter explaining his methodology, he gives an eloquent description of phenomenology, which, although he does not call it that, is worth repeating:

First, we need to see their adherents [World religions' adherents] as men and women who faced problems much like our own. Secondly, we must rid our minds of all preconceptions that could dull our sensitivity or alertness to fresh insights. If we lay aside our preconceptions about these religions, seeing each as forged by people who were struggling to see something that would give help and meaning to their lives; and if we then try without prejudice to see ourselves what they see—if we do these things, the veil that separates us from them can turn to gauze (11).

Smart describes the process as one of “structured empathy,” a crossing over of “our horizons into the worlds of other people” (1983: 16).

Avoiding the less “rosy”

Yet by ignoring such problematic an issue as the Sunni-Shi’a division in Islam, Smith’s book, as admirable as it is, provides no tools that could help someone trying to make sense of events in Lebanon, in Iran, and in Iraq. Arguably, this reluctance to deal with critical issues results from over sensitivity to insider sensibilities. A theologian may justify elevating faith sensitivity over all alternatives but if Religious Studies is a social science, other, less faith sensitive explanations and content should also be given space on the curriculum. A faith sensitive treatment of Christianity, for example, would depict Jesus as the son of God and as the second person of the Trinity, who died and rose again, replicating what Christians believe. The implication here is not that it can be stated as fact that Jesus died and rose again but that this is what Christians believe. However, a critical approach might take Jesus’ humanity as a starting point and try to understand the process by which belief in his divinity developed. Christian scholars themselves explore the degree to which the words of Jesus in the Gospels may reflect the convictions of the primitive Christian community, rather than what Jesus really said. Yet this rarely intrudes into a Religious Studies class on Christianity. The volume on Christianity in this series, however, examines the problem of canonicity and discusses the existence of later gospels and epistles as a case for a variegated Christian tradition in the first three centuries. Similarly, a faith sensitive explanation of Muhammad’s career depicts him as the sinless prophet of God, who contributed nothing to the content of the Qur’an, replicating what Muslims believe. Again, the implication here is not that it can be stated as a fact that Muhammad received the Qur’an from God but that Muslims believe that he did. However, an alternative view of Muhammad might regard him as someone who sincerely believed that God was speaking to him and whose own ideas and perhaps those of some of his companions found expression, consciously or unconsciously, in Islam’s scripture and teachings. Such an alternative view does not have to follow the pattern of past anti-Muslim polemic, in which Muhammad was a charlatan, an opportunist, insincere and self-serving. Kenneth Cragg, who has contributed much to helping Christians form a more sympathetic view of Islam, sees Muhammad as a sincere servant of God but he does not think that the Qur’an contains nothing of

Muhammad's own ideas. Cragg, though, may be regarded as a theologian rather than as belonging properly to Religious Studies, which begs the question whether it is useful to maintain a distinction between these two fields. Suggesting how outsiders, who wish to remain committed members of a different faith, can approximate an insider-like view without compromising their own could be part of the agenda of Religious Studies. Currently, this role appears to be undertaken by practitioners of interfaith dialog, such as Hans Küng (see Küng, 1986) and by theologians such as Cragg, rather than by Religious Studies specialists. In many instances, the distinction is blurred because of the different roles played by people themselves. Frank Whaling is not only a Religious Studies specialist but also an ordained Methodist minister. W. C. Smith was a Religious Studies specialist (although he preferred the term Comparative Religion) but was an ordained Presbyterian minister. Methodist minister, Kenneth Cracknell had contributed significantly to thinking on how to understand the relationships between religions but it is difficult to say whether his academic credentials identify him as a theologian or as a Religious Studies specialist (see Cracknell, 1986; 2006). The same can probably be said of this writer. Cabezón discusses the acceptability of scholars today declaring their faith allegiances in relation to the "us" and "them" divide, pointing out that some scholars "self-identify as belonging to multiple religious traditions" and so a simplistic "us" and "them" polarity is problematic; "the Other is problematic when *we* claim to BE-THEM" (33). The author of the volume on Buddhism in this series, the topic of his doctorate, was born a Hindu, became Christian but self-identifies as a Hindu-Christian. The author of the volume on Hinduism regards himself as a Hindu but continues to be a licensed priest of the Church of England, a fact that has attracted some criticism in the British press. How will Religious Studies deal with such complexities?²

Discussion of some alternative explanations and critical theories can be problematic, given that believers may find them offensive. Some scholars who have challenged the Muslim consensus on Islam's origins have received death threats, so replicating insider views is less risky. A teacher who wants to attract insider approval may find it expedient to ignore other views. The possibility that material from the Gnostic gospels can be identified in the Qur'an, for example, runs contrary to Muslim conviction, and is ignored by almost everyone except Christian polemicists. A Muslim in the classroom may be offended if the teacher alludes to this type of source and redaction critical approach to the Qur'an. Such an approach, if it is pursued, may take

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place elsewhere in the academy. What has been described as shattering the “consensus of scholarly opinion on the origins of Islam” came from outside the corridors of any Department of Religion or of Religious Studies (Neuwirth, 2006: 100). The Aryan invasion theory is increasingly unpopular among Hindus, who dismiss it as imperialist. This Euro-centric theory, it is said, denies that India’s heritage is really Indian. Yet, to ignore the relationship between Indian and European languages and the similarity of some ideas and myths could be to overlook important facts about a more interconnected human story than is often supposed. On the one hand, the term “Hinduism” is now accepted by many Hindus. On the other hand, its appropriateness can be challenged. Smith commented, “the mass of religious phenomena we shelter under that umbrella is not an entity in any theoretical let alone practical sense” (1963: 64). As taught, Hinduism arguably owes more to the Theosophist, Annie Besant, who may have been the first to design a curriculum based around the four aims in life, four ages, the four stages of life and the four classes and their duties than to any classical Indian text, even though all these can be found in the texts. The elevation of a great tradition over the myriad of smaller traditions needs to be critiqued. Western fascination with Hinduism’s esoteric system, Tantra, has attracted criticism that this elevates what is actually quite obscure to a seemingly more central position. Since sex is involved, this revives a certain Orientalist preoccupation with the East as alluring and immoral, offering possibilities for pleasure denied by the West. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, a former President of the American Academy of Religion, has been criticized for overstressing sensuality in her work on Hinduism (see Ramaswamy et al., 2007).

What has been described as Protestant Buddhism, too, developed as a result of the efforts of another Theosophist, Henry Steele Olcott, among others. A type of “philosopher’s abstraction” (Gombrich, 1988: 50) it set out to present Buddha’s teaching as a coherent, systematic system, beginning with the four noble truths followed by the noble eightfold path. These were taught by the Buddha but he loved lists, and these are two among many. This is not to suggest that Buddhism is unsystematic, although use of the term “systematic” here could be another example of transposing a European concept into non-European space. In fact, believing that people at different spiritual stages require different teachings, the Buddha sometimes gave different advice on the same issue. Teaching that may appear contradictory, as the fourteenth Dalai Lama put it, prevents “dogmatism” (1996: 72). It could be argued, then, that the somewhat dogmatic way in which what the Buddha taught is

presented in many Religious Studies classrooms, misrepresents what he actually taught. Kitagawa (1959) observed, and arguably not much has changed, that “despite its avowed neutrality and objectivity,” Religious Studies “has been operating with Western categories” (27). More recently, Cabezón has said that Religious Studies is still dominated by Western terms, theories, and paradigms. Theory parity, says Cabezón, is a long way off; “for example, it is hard for us to even conceive of the day when a “Theories of religion” course might be taught with a substantial selection of readings from nonwestern sources” (31). How long are Western views of religion and of what is to be included and excluded as religiously interesting going to dominate? Cabezón identifies at least the start of a much needed paradigm shift in which non-Western theologies are getting some exposure (34). Cabezón also argues that some non-Buddhist scholars, despite the insider-ship bias of the discipline, “still construct their identity in contradistinction to the Buddhist Other” which effectively emphasizes the distance between themselves and the “object (Buddhism)” they choose to study (29 Fn 22). The volume on Judaism discusses problems associated with the very definition of Judaism as a religion, and the relationship between Judaism and the Jewish people, often assumed to be identical. It asks whether such a significant thinker as Freud, who was secular, can be located within a Jewish religious framework. The same question could be asked of Marx.

Another issue, relevant to studying and teaching all religions on the curriculum, is how much should realistically be attempted. If a degree is offered in Islamic Studies, or Buddhist Studies, or Jewish Studies, this issue is less relevant. However, more often than not, what gets taught is a survey course covering five or six religions. If a traditional course in Christian Studies covers scripture, history, philosophy of religion, theology, and languages, the student usually has 3 or 4 years to master these. In a survey course, they have perhaps a day to master a religion’s scripture, another day to study its historical development, another to gain an understanding of its rituals. It is widely recognized that in order to understand another world view, some grasp of language is necessary, given the difficulty of translating meaning across languages. Muslims, indeed, say that the Qur’an is untranslatable, that it is only God’s word in Arabic. How much Hebrew, how much Arabic, how much Sanskrit, can students be expected to learn in a few days? If the answer is “hardly any,” are they really able to achieve anything that approximates insider-ship? It is often claimed that students learn more from attending a service of worship than they do from books. This writer has taken students to

Mosques where quite hostile attempts to convert them to Islam left them with a less positive view of Islam than they had taken away from the classroom. Yet can any course on Islam neglect a mosque visit? This author has chosen to leave one out on the basis that no such course can cover everything anyway! Another issue, also relevant to studying all traditions covered on the curriculum, is how different interpretations of texts are to be dealt with. For example, the Qur'an can be read by militants as permitting aggression, by others as prohibiting aggression and sanctioning only defense. Can both be right? Is it the business of so-called neutral Religious Studies scholars, who may well be located in a secular and possibly public (State) school, to say what is, or is not, a more authentic version of Judaism, of Islam, or of Christianity? In some contexts, this could even raise issues of Church-State relations. How seriously should a Religious Studies specialist take the postmodern view that all texts have multiple meanings and no single reading can claim to be exclusively or uniquely true? This certainly challenges some religious voices, which claim infallibility or at least to speak with special, privileged authority! Far from being fixed objects, or subjects of study, religions are often in flux. The Christian volume, for example, shows how ethical thinking on such issues as war and peace, justice, economic distribution, and human sexuality has changed over time and varies across Christian communities.

Reviving critical enquiry

If Religious Studies is to live up to its claim to be a social science, it cannot afford to ignore other approaches and critical issues, even if these are less-faith sensitive. Otherwise, it must resign itself to merely describing what believers themselves hold to be true. Only by placing alternative approaches alongside insider perspectives can Religious Studies claim to be treating religious beliefs and practices as subjects of serious and critical investigation. This is not to suggest that faith sensitivity should be abandoned. One reason why students study religions other than their own, or any religion for that matter, is to understand what believers really believe, often as opposed to how their beliefs are popularly or commonly portrayed. A religious studies' student may be an agnostic, or an atheist but he or she will still want to know what a Hindu or a Jew believes, not what some prejudiced outsider says about them. Stripping away misconceptions, overcoming bias and prejudice, presenting a religion from its believers' perspective, will remain an important goal of any Religious

Studies program. However, the privileging of insider-ship to the exclusion of other ways of seeing religion reduces Religious Studies to a descriptive exercise, and compromises any claim to be a critical field of academic enquiry. Religious Studies will be enriched, not impoverished, by reclaiming its multi-disciplinary credentials. This series examines how issues and content that is often ignored in teaching about religions can be dealt with in the classroom. The aim is, on the one hand, to avoid giving unnecessary offence while on the other hand to avoid sacrificing critical scholarship at the altar of a faith-sensitivity that effectively silences and censures other voices. Since critical issues vary from religion to religion, authors have selected those that are appropriate to the religion discussed in their particular volume. The Smart-Whaling dimensional approach is used to help to give some coherency to how authors treat their subjects but these are applied flexibly so that square pegs are not forced into round holes. Each author pursues his/her enquiry according to his/her expert view of what is important for the tradition concerned, and of what will help to make Religious Studies a healthier, more critical field. Each author had the freedom to treat his/her subject as he/she chose, although with reference to the aim of this series and to the Smart-Whaling schema. What is needed is a new relationship between Religious Studies and critical enquiry. A balance between faith-sensitivity and other approaches is possible, as this series proves. These texts, which aim to add critical edge to the study of the religions of the world, aim to be useful to those who learn and to those who teach, if indeed that distinction can properly be made. Emphasis on how to tackle critical issues rather than on the content of each dimension may not make them suitable to use as introductory texts for courses as these have traditionally been taught. They might be used to supplement a standard text. Primarily aids to study, they point students toward relevant material including films and novels as well as scholarly sources.

They will, however, be very appropriate as textbooks for innovative courses that adopt a more critical approach to the subject, one that does not shy away from problematical issues and their serious, disciplined exploration.

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Foreword

Each year as I prepare my Holocaust course, I wonder about the teaching of this event. How can I instruct my students about this most horrific event without trivializing it? I wonder, too, given the current state of our world, if the event has already been trivialized. In a world where Holocaust imagery pervades our culture and yet at the same time, violence and atrocity continue apace, is there any validity to reciting the lessons of the Holocaust when they aren't taken seriously, sometimes not even by Jews?

Of course, a main component of any study of the Holocaust is Christian anti-Semitism. My students, mostly Christian and often evangelical, bristle when they begin to learn of the underside of Christian history. I often think that they must have heard this story many, many times before. But, like the Holocaust, with Christian symbols pervading our culture, Christianity is often trivialized as well.

So it was quite surprising when I received this interesting manuscript, *Studying Christianity*. At first I wanted to place it in my desk drawer; as a Jew, especially when I am teaching the Holocaust, my feelings of ambivalence toward Christianity reach a crescendo. At the same time, I realize that the same students who resent my recounting of the sins of Christianity know very little of the Christian heritage, including the struggle to define exactly what it means to be a Christian. *Studying Christianity* might well be what they need to read.

Because of my studies of religion, I, of course, had indeed studied Christianity, but in reading this book I became reacquainted with the diverse dynamics of an ancient and global religion. Though my teaching of the Holocaust can only emphasize certain aspects of Christian history, Christianity's whole is better than its parts. Stated differently, the history of Christianity has so many twists and turns that its past can be seen as prologue. Depending on what road is taken, Christianity's past can be prologue for a new emphasis on life over death, a resurrection politics and economics that might lead us past the crucified Jews of the past and those who are victimized today as well.

Could my students have a better view of what their Christianity might be if they studied Christianity like they study the Holocaust? It seems that

Christianity, like any religion, should be studied alongside formative events in history. Studied in a dynamic way, as a force within and outside of history, but only known and embraced by us within the exigencies of history, perhaps Christians might then choose another path than was chosen before.

So it went for me during this season, teaching the Holocaust and reading *Studying Christianity* side by side. What I experienced is perhaps what other readers might also experience: following the arc of Christian history, I am struck by the sense that Christians believe that the world is redeemed—and has yet to be. I am also struck by the arguments for and against the peoples of the world, including the Jews, and how things can go so wrong that only darkness reigns and just when that night seems permanent, dawn arrives. We can think, learn, pray, and live with a new understanding of an original faith in the now context of our lives.

Christianity stands at a crossroads. Is there any other time in history where a Jew would be asked to write a short welcome to the readers of a book detailing the heritage and character of Christianity. *Studying Christianity* is part of the light, a heritage to be read, so that we, and the world, can be made new.

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Introduction: Approaching Christianity

Chapter Outline

For further reading and study

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Jesus, the founder of Christianity, is depicted as one who regularly critiqued the Jewish religion, his ancestral religious orientation. At an early age, he was seen in the Jerusalem Temple debating the rabbis. Later in his adult ministry, he answered questions and publicly disputed the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes. Jesus avoided strict interpretations of the Law in favor of principles of theology and ethics. He left a heritage of being one who taught with authority and one who welcomed interaction with seekers.

The first persons to examine Christianity after the life of Jesus were his disciples. From the interactions of Jesus with Peter, Thomas, and the dialog at his ascension among a group of disciples, there was an intensive debate about the meaning and applicability of Jesus' teachings. In the Book of Acts, the debate was frequently agitated, as the disagreement between Peter and Paul over dietary laws and required circumcision for the Christian community that James had to arbitrate. Other issues that created a healthy difference of opinion in the primitive Christian community included hierarchy of leadership, unusual manifestations of religious experience, and the priority of religious faith over works of merit.

By the time of the composition of the first literature of the New Testament, there were apparently several literary versions of the Christian witness in circulation. The writer of the Gospel of Luke said, "I investigated everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account . . ." ¹ Likewise, the

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gospel authors Mark, Matthew, and John, and the apostle Paul each opened different windows on the meaning of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. It became the primary task of later collections of bishops and teachers (the Church “Fathers”) to establish a uniform version of the Christian message and create an authoritative text of sacred writings that Christians refer to as the “canon” or standard of Scripture.

Eusebius of Caesarea (c.263–c.339) is joined by Tyrannius Rufinus (c.345–410), Socrates Scholasticus (380–439), Salminius Sozoman (c.390–c.457), Theodoret of Cyrrhus (c.393–c.458), and Evagrius Scholasticus (c.536–c.594) in providing the first historical analysis of Christianity. The historical discipline was important to the establishment of Christian learning because the historians traced the evolution of a tradition from the voluntary association of Jesus through the establishment of congregations in the Middle East, to the recognition of episcopacies or regional administrative units virtually throughout the Roman Empire. Eusebius attempted to cast Christianity over against the pagan cults and fit it into a narrative of human history that reached back to Creation. Sozomen, writing during the reign of Emperor Theodosius, extolled the virtues of imperial Christianity and the Christianization of the Roman Empire. Continuing the work of Eusebius, Rufinus blended the narratives of Eastern and Western Christianities and chronicled the development of monasticism in Egypt. Theodoret wrote a theological history of Christianity, seeking to identify and refute the Arian controversy from the standpoint of the school of theologians in Antioch. He understood the importance of the original sources and reproduced relevant documentation. Theodoret was also much impressed with reports of miraculous occurrences and gave numerous accounts of such experiences. Evagrius, also writing from Antioch, continued the narrative from the conclusions of his worthy predecessors and he dealt with the interaction of Christianity with barbarian people, giving his version a decidedly Eastern orientation, preserving many original sources. One of the most important achievements of the earliest historians of Christianity was their recognition of the regional diversity of the overall Christian tradition. One notes constant references to Asiatic Roman, African, and Palestinian types of Christian witness and thought. At the foundation of all early Christian scholarship was the historical enterprise, and it produced a surprisingly analytical accounting.

Theologians of the early church like Origen of Alexandria (185–c.254), the parent of systematic theological education, and Augustine (354–430), a widely published North African bishop, followed the lead of the Apostle Paul and

moved Christian thought to a new level by practicing solid intellectual skills and by raising the correlation of faith and reason. Origen moved freely among extant philosophical schools, secular literature, physics, and ethics to blend an awareness of the divine with the world of human understanding. He dealt honestly with the seeming paradox between God's unity and the multiplicity of the material world, as well as the differences between first principles and nonrational impulses in making decisions. Among Origen's more controversial accomplishments was his allegorical method of interpreting scripture in order to derive multiple meanings from texts. Later, Augustine arrived at the position that God created the universe in God's sovereignty and therefore all of creation is thus dependent upon God. It then followed for Augustine that knowledge comes by way of a restored relationship with the Creator and that there is a purpose in human history and development that leads to fulfillment in God. Reflecting a three-in-one understanding of God, Augustine deduced that body, soul, and spirit compose the human self in the image of God. The heritages of both Origen and Augustine remain pervasive influences among the vast number of Christians presently as they respond to questions of knowledge, value, and morality.

Among the students of Christianity's character during the Middle Ages were regional historians like Bede of Northumbria (c.672–735) and the many chroniclers of the East. Bede's great accomplishment was to link the Christianization of Britain to the successive waves of monarchies and tribal confederations and demonstrate how a Christian culture had emerged. In the meantime, he happened to codify the English language in a form that would remain intact for centuries. In the Christian East, Saints Cyril and Methodius of Thessaloniki, Greece, are credited with a similar linguistic contribution in establishing the Cyrillic alphabet. In Kievan Rus, the family chronicles detail everyday interaction between villagers and priests and preserve an otherwise lost window on Orthodox medieval Christian experience. In addition to historians, monks and later members of the mendicant orders debated the meaning of the sacraments and church authority.

The capstone of Christian intellectual pursuits in the Middle Ages was Scholasticism, actually an attempt to use the methods of Aristotle to inquire into Christian faith and life. Leading thinkers in this movement, Anselm of Canterbury, Peter Abelard, Peter Lombard, Gratian, and Hugh of St. Victor, focused on a rigorous faith seeking understanding. Of all the scholastics, Thomas Aquinas at the University of Paris was foremost. These thinkers perfected a method of questions, the adduction of evidence and a reasoned

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conclusion to achieve a rational basis for the revealed truth of Christianity. Their bold assertions included several cogent arguments for the existence of God, a basis for the sacramental liturgy of Christian worship, and a body of principles called “natural law” to serve as a foundation for Christian ethics. Aquinas’ unfinished work, the 70-volume *Summa Theologica* (1265–1274) and the structured curriculum of a new institution, the papally-chartered university, set the pattern for Christian learning for centuries to come. With Scholasticism, Christianity may truly be said to have come of age as a religious tradition.

The humanist movement in Europe during the Renaissance brought major scholarly attention to Christianity. The spirit of the Renaissance was devoted to an emphasis upon human beings and their circumstances, including their relation to God. In examining the “humanities,” these scholars rejected the medieval synthesis of ecclesiastical authority in temporal as well as spiritual matters and Scholasticism, preferring instead to follow an intellectual combination of St. Augustine, Plato, and several Latin literati like Cicero. Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374) of Italy was the leader of the southern European Renaissance with an interest in the classical tradition of learning and the arts. The new learning also had a German and French phase that emerged in the late fifteenth century. Where such principles were applied to Christian thought and sources, it meant a rigorous textual recovery of ancient manuscripts in which the “true Christ” could be revealed without the overlay of metaphysics and church dogma, a kind of “purification of the sources.”² Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) developed a monistic method in which God was understood as the unity of the cosmos, knowable through human intelligence. Cusa also explored a comparison of Christianity with Islam and Judaism. Several new German universities became centers of humanism: Heidelberg, Vienna, Leipzig, Munich, and Mainz. Part of the efforts of Christian humanists was directed at the study of the Bible. Johannes Reuchlin (1455–1522) at Heidelberg revived interest in the study of Hebrew language in order to interpret properly the Old Testament. Similarly, Desiderius Erasmus (c.1466–1536), preeminent among the Christian humanists, insisted upon the necessity of knowledge of the natural world, of the rules of rhetoric, and use of the classical poets in order to interpret Scripture rightly. His premier accomplishment, a critical edition of the New Testament (1516), spawned a new venture in the science of textual criticism. John Colet (c.1467–1519) at Oxford developed a literary critical method of interpreting the letters of Paul, while in France Jacques Lefevre d’Etaples (c.1460–1536) used comparative

philology to prepare commentaries on the Psalms, the Gospels, and the General Epistles. The Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century, to a person, would be greatly indebted to the humanistic achievements.

Perhaps the symbol of new Reformed approaches to studying Christianity was the German university. As we have seen, the popes chartered the earliest universities in the region and the Church licensed the faculties. In 1527, however, Philip the Magnanimous, the Landgrave of Marburg, deviated from that practice and started the University of Marburg, the first university belonging to the Protestant tradition, and chartered by a civil government. Philip's University, as it came to be called, had faculties in theology, humanities, and the arts. The university set the stage for intense self-criticism of the Christian religious tradition.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Enlightenment thinkers unleashed a scathing critique of Christianity, largely as a reaction to perceived clericalism and superstition, as well as claims of miracles and the notion of divine revelation. They variously championed religious toleration and the integration of faith and the sciences. Protestants were committed to Enlightenment principles because the Enlightenment stood against the prevailing Roman Catholic deterministic view of human nature and practice of authoritarian religion. For instance, Francois Turretini devoted student of the teachings of John Calvin, modernized Calvinism by downplaying original sin and predestination. Instead, he preferred the moral aspects of the Reformed faith. Edward Gibbon at the Royal Academy in London made a long-lasting historiographical contribution in his reinterpretation of Roman history in which he expressed his distress at the decline of the greatness of Rome whilst Christianity advanced. This generation of critics, as Peter Gay has quipped, became a cluster of "cuckoos in the Christian nest."³

By the later seventeenth century, Christianity and reason were firmly wed in learned circles. The Englishman John Locke became the prince of enlightened Christians, as his work, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) illustrates; later Mathew Tindal's *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730) made a similar case for Christianity as a religion of nature. Likewise, Gotthold E. Lessing, son of a theologian and an influential German poet and philosopher, was interested in the seriousness of theological questions, but not in any of its supernatural claims. In a harsher critique, the Frenchman Voltaire moved far beyond Locke's "reasonable pulpit-style Christianity" to a more personally rewarding religion of nature. The Scottish philosopher, David Hume, wrote of the scandal of miracles in 1737, while the Dutch rationalist Baruch Spinoza

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labeled Jesus, Moses, and Mohammed “the great imposters.” More conservative thinkers, dubbed “neologians” attempted to keep the traditional language of Christianity but gave the words new meanings devoid of supernaturalism. Christian Wolf at Marburg taught that revelation might transcend reason, but never contradict it. Taken collectively, these religious critics or “philosophes” as they were labeled in France made a virtue of questioning and forever after subjected Christianity to close scrutiny.

In the lead of a self-critical Christianity were professional and academic historians, theologians, and biblical scholars lodged firmly in the university faculties. The critical documentary approach of historians like Leopold von Ranke in Germany separated the myths of Christianity from the identifiable historical contexts and events, particularly as applied to the Protestant Reformation. This in turn caused theologians to use principles laid down by G. F. Hegel, like the recovery of dialectical thinking, to distinguish between the Jesus of history and the existential Christ of faith. Hegel’s method gave a new strategy to the analysis of Christianity in its historical and political contexts. The early twentieth century was dominated by “Neo-Orthodox” theologians and biblical scholars like Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Rudolph Bultmann and existentialist theologians like Paul Tillich who, with a dialectic approach, moved the discourse of Christianity well beyond traditional doctrinal and ecclesial bounds while retaining much of its historic vocabulary. This essentially historicist orientation influentially emanating from Albrecht Ritschl at the University of Berlin also produced the groundbreaking sociological approaches to analyzing Christianity by Max Weber at Heidelberg, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904), and Ernst Troeltsch, also at Heidelberg, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (1911).

As we shall discover in discussing below the missionary character of Christianity, the interaction of Christian missionaries with practitioners of other world religions in the nineteenth century led to a serious study of other religious values and rituals. The result was the emergence of the theological discipline of ecumenics and the pursuit of interfaith or interreligious dialog. A high point in this interaction of Christianity with other religions came in 1893 with the convening of the World’s Parliament of Religions. The Parliament, convened in Chicago with the endorsement of its reconstituted university, featured lectures and exhibits by confessing Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Taoists, and Confucianists. In the ensuing decades, Christianity came to be treated as one of the world’s major religions, to use the term then in vogue, phenomenologically.

In North American terms, from the early nineteenth century most universities and colleges taught subjects relating to Christian culture, bible, Christian evidences, and ecclesiastical history. Typically, persons trained for pastoral ministry who might have earned a master's degree taught these subjects. Commencing in the 1830s, a modest amount of intellectual ferment was noticeable in the urban institutions, many of which imitated trends in Britain and Germany. The pace quickened with the advent of graduate research schools in the 1870s like Johns Hopkins and the transformations of Harvard and Yale universities. At the forefront of "new" American Christian scholarship, however, was the Chicago School, the collective name for an approach and two generations of scholars associated with the University of Chicago. Behind the leadership of William Rainey Harper, a Semiticist and philologist, an array of specialists like George W. Northrup and Shailer Mathews (theology), Shirley Jackson Case (history), Ernest Dewitt Burton (New Testament), George Burman Foster (philosophy of religion), Albion Small (church and society), and Henry Mabie (world religions) redefined the parameters of the Christian religion according to its evolved values in historical contexts and its commonalities with non-Christian religions. Others like C. H. Toy at Harvard, Jacob G. Schurman at Cornell University, Morton S. Enslin and James Pritchard at the University of Pennsylvania, and William F. Albright at Johns Hopkins University, each contributed to a broadened understanding of Judeo-Christianity as a defining social and political force in Western and Eastern civilizations.

A genuine North American watershed in studying Christianity was the work of H. Richard Niebuhr. His 1929 book, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, itself based upon the earlier work of Ernst Troeltsch, Max Weber, R. H. Tawney, and Adolf Harnack, set aside orthodox approaches to understanding the different categories of Christianity (the "denominations"), favoring instead a principle of differentiation that lay in their conformity to the order of social classes and castes.⁴ Niebuhr used the language of social construction, the "disinherited," the middle class, immigrants, sectionalism, and nationalism, to classify Catholics, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Baptists. While numerous later scholars quibbled with his categories, Niebuhr's theoretical construct spawned a cottage industry of scholars and "ecclesiocrats" who translated confessions and structures into choices or aspirations according to socioeconomic factors. Anyone interested in the meaning of Christianity in the United States' and Canadian contexts where religious plurality is the norm, must work through Niebuhrian ideas.

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One of the results of a searching self-critical Christian scholarship was the emergence of a robust and assertive evangelical Christianity. The word “evangelical” first came into common usage in the Reformation era when it was the equivalent of “reformed.” Later, it came to be synonymous with a pietistic, experiential, biblical form of Christianity in contrast with sacramental or political forms. In the nineteenth century, as mainstream Christian scholarship tended to become overly critical, Evangelicals put their efforts to work in defense of a Christianity that was synchronous with the primitive church and with a vital understanding of the Lordship of Christ. This resulted in a renewed emphasis upon biblical studies to recover the central thought and evidences of the first century, plus the heritage of an unbroken fidelity to transforming discipleship. Evangelicals joined hands with those in Christian mission who looked to world evangelization through preaching, teaching, translation, and caregiving missions. Underpinning their efforts have been solid intellectual accomplishments from biblical scholars like F. W. Gotch, H. Wheeler Robinson, B. F. Westcott, J. F. A. Hort, J. B. Lightfoot, H. H. Rowley, F. F. Bruce, and B. M. Metzger. Among evangelical historians, one finds names like K. S. Latourette, J. Edwin Orr, Justo Gonzales, and more recently Mark Noll. Additionally, Evangelicals are to be found in a wide variety of scholarly endeavors, including, C. S. Lewis and John Stott (apologetics), Helmut Thielicke and Louis Smedes (ethics), David Moberg and Reginald Bibby (sociology), and Clyde Narramore and Wayne Oates (psychology and counseling). In recent decades, Evangelicals have represented a conservative, apologetic form of Christian studies with all the rationalistic urgency of the Enlightenment.

Other special interest groups have plunged deeply into Christian Studies. Beginning in the 1920s, Black scholars began to reinterpret the Christian narrative in terms of slavery and oppression. Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey differed on outcomes but agreed on the influence of Christianity upon the African experience. Fostered in the Chicago School orientation were Howard Thurman, Mordecai Johnson, Miles Mark Fisher, and Benjamin Mays. Later powerful exponents of the Black American experience as a liberating and reconciling movement have been Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Martin Luther King, Jr., James Cone, and J. Deotis Roberts in the United States, and Desmond Tutu and Leon Sullivan in the South African struggle against apartheid. The great contribution of Black theology is that theology must grow out of the context of experience.

Similar to the Black Studies school is the feminist critique of Christianity. Here major writers like Mary Daly, Phyllis Trible, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza,

Rosemary Radford Reuther, Mercy Amba, Betty Govinden, and Sallie McFague have severely critiqued traditional Christianity as a form of institutionalized patriarchy. They find hope for Christianity as it breaks away from a male religious orientation, a male-dominant clergy, and gender specific vocabulary, to equity among the sexes, and an entirely new sense of the cosmos that values the feminine. Christianity must address the plight of women worldwide, they collectively argue.

Finally, the Liberationist and postcolonialist interpreters have used the history of Christian thought and a revisionist theology to create new readings of Judaeo-Christian Scripture that unmask imperialist interpretations and empower communities to social and political transformation. For Gustavo Gutierrez in 1988, "Theology [was] critical reflection on praxis in light of the Bible."⁵ There is a powerful impulse in Latin American liberation theology toward freedom. With respect to African Christianity, Lamin Sanneh in his seminal book, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (1989), has suggested that the full brunt of colonialism has been lessened by the translation of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures into indigenous African languages, thus giving rise to a rich variety of African Christian subcultures.

A scathing critique of Christianity emerged from within Christianity itself in the 1950s and 1960s. The voices of key Neo-Orthodox theologians at mid-century were replaced by a new generation of thinkers who were asking genuinely "radical" questions. Important books appeared such as Paul Van Buren's *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (1963), William Hamilton's *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (1963), and Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* (1965). In an explosive era politically focused primarily upon the United States and its foreign policy, theology became a means of political commentary: the consensus was that the traditional forms and vocabulary of Christian thought were found wanting. The new focus came to be on the actual finite world in which humans lived, not the idealism of the longstanding Christian institution, nor any beatific vision of eternal life. Prompted by a secular existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger at the University of Marburg, and moved ahead by a new breed of Christian theologians, Jürgen Moltmann, Johannes Metz, and Roger Garaudy, a conversation opened between Christianity and Marxism. This conversation produced at least three results: a useful catharsis for both Marxism and Christianity; a new understanding of Christianity in Socialist countries; and a new integrity among Christians to ask any question and seek the most radical alternatives: secular, revolutionary, or primitivist. The Christian-Marxist dialog opened the door for Christian engagement with Black, Brown, Red, and Yellow races and the need for a more universal ethic

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and understanding of transcendence. Inevitably, the liberationist, feminist, and postmodern critics took up the opportunity, nurtured along by the social sciences.

Lately, the social sciences have again opened new approaches to the study of Christianity, and vice versa. A foundational classic that integrated psychology and historical biography was Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther* (1949). Erikson concluded that Luther bore all the marks of an abused child with a lifelong gastrointestinal difficulty and that his "evangelical breakthrough" occurred in the toilet, not in the study. Later psychohistorians like Lloyd de Mause have drawn Christian religious factors into their analysis of contemporary world figures. The well-known American sociologist, Rodney Stark, has ventured into early Christian development of the first five centuries CE, and using demographic and social group identification methods, has offered persuasive revisionist interpretations of the role of women in the movement, the transition from Judaism, and the class structure of emerging Christians. Recent anthropologists like William Hurlburt and theologians like Philip Hefner are looking into the question of what it means to be human and the theological relevance of new areas of inquiry like sociobiology. Some Christian theologians are quite intrigued with the work of anthropologists like Ward Goodenough and Solomon Katz who suggest that primitive peoples have a human capacity for belief or that changes in religion may have prompted the transition to agriculture in premodern societies. An exceptionally useful example of a holistic social science approach to human civilization, including Christian religious cultures, is Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (1997; 2003). To be completely balanced, however, John Millbank, a Christian theologian at Cambridge University, has insightfully challenged the assumptions and results of a social theory critique of religion as in fact a disguised form of theology that promotes a certain secular consensus. Millbank boldly urges that the sociology of religion ought to come to an end!⁶

Political scientists, public policy analysts, social workers, futurologists, geographers, and demographers have all become accustomed to Christian categories and sets of data that identify public attitudes, voting trends, legislative initiatives, and socioeconomic projections. Having commenced in the United States and Canada, and at the London School of Economics, this type of data gathering and interpretation influences decisions about the environment, stem cell research, pandemic diseases, militarism, and political ideologies in places as far-flung as Latin America, Ireland, Russia, equatorial

Africa, South Africa, and the nations of the Pacific Rim. Among the leading interpreters of data with a quasi-Christian perspective are the Heritage Foundation, the Brookings Institute, the Pew Research Center, and the Gallup Organization and writers like David Barrett, an internationally recognized religious demographer. Various Christian media outlets make use of the work of Alvin Tofler (*Future Shock*), John Naisbitt (*Megatrends*), Peter Drucker (*Men, Ideas, and Politics*), Stephen Hawking (*A Brief History of Time*), and Richard John Neuhaus (*First Things*).

Theological inquiry has also changed profoundly. Christian “Process” theologians following the lead of Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), have offered intriguing alternatives to traditional classical Christian theism. Theologians like Henry N. Wieman, Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb, and Shubert Ogden have redefined God from being thought of as a cosmic moralist or controlling power to “creative-responsive love” who acts creatively in the world primarily by persuasion. By empirical observation, these thinkers posit evil and calamity in the world, suggest that these realities are part of the working out of God’s allowance of human freedom, and are not incompatible with God’s beneficence toward all his creatures. The traditional theistic position of the sovereignty of God becomes in process thought only a last resort.⁷ Process thought has opened new bridges between Christians and other world religions and by embracing evolutionary science, its advocates have engaged a new kind of conversation with scientists who are interested in existential concerns. A vast new array of thinkers is involved in dialog about Christian religious issues and communities: for instance, Michael Benedikt at the University of Texas has resuscitated the “Argument from Design” from an architectural perspective, and classicists and archaeologists are unearthing artifacts that demonstrate social and cultural transformation pointing toward the Christianization of Classical Civilization.

Scientific inquiry has been both advanced and retarded by Christian culture. At the beginning of the fifth century, St. Augustine rejected the power of astronomy to predict person’s lives, favoring instead divine revelation in the Scriptures. The papacy would easily follow Augustine’s lead in establishing an authority for the Church over all learning. As we have seen, the Renaissance opened up inquiry in the humanities that led to new theories of a scientific kind. While the Church condemned anatomical and physiological experimentation, Christian scientists forged ahead like Michael Servetus (1511–1553) with a study and later a description of pulmonary circulation. He was burned at the stake in Geneva for questioning the doctrine of the trinity. In the next

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century, Galileo Gallilei (1564–1642) was condemned to house arrest for life in 1633 for promoting a Copernican idea of the universe. That ban was only lifted in 1978 by Pope John Paul II. Little wonder why a significant movement among philosophers and scientists, beginning with Auguste Comte (1798–1857), set aside the “theological era” in which persons depended upon the church and overarching metaphysical principles in favor of a “scientific age” in which only that which can be verified by observation and finite, cognitively meaningful procedures is valid. As “logical positivists” who believed in the cumulative results of science, they created a lively debate with Christian thinkers.

Withal, there remains a long-term preoccupation among Christians who are scientists with the processes and timing/duration of planet earth’s origins. On the one hand, there are persons of faith who want to accept the fruits of scientific discovery, which inevitably suggests that the earth is very old and has undergone several eras of cataclysmic change, thus accommodating the age of the dinosaurs and the ice epochs. On the other hand, there are critical believers who are persuaded that science is faulty in its methods and when inquiry runs counter to a literal reading of Scripture, revelation trumps science. In contemporary circles, there are mathematicians, physicists, and philosophers who are Christians, like William Dembski and John Polkinghorne who teach “intelligent design,” whereby they assert that there is a high probability that biological structures were assembled by a nonnatural agent, which in turn leads to a theistic position. And, there is a substantial school of biblical “inerrantist” Christians who subscribe to the “Creationist” interpretation of the origins of the universe whereby the descriptions in Genesis 1–2 are taken literally. Generally, Creationists are disinclined toward the theory of evolution because it reduces the role of a sovereign creator and independently created species. Flowing from a traditional Christian theological understanding of Creation, Christian philosophers and theologians interact with medical scientists and biologists on questions relating to eugenics, genetic engineering, definitions of the beginning and ending of life, and life beyond death.

Beyond the Christian interest in cosmology, there is a steady conversation between Christianity and science in other areas. For instance, advocates of artificial intelligence raise the issue of rights for robots, and conversely, of whether humans are basically a type of machine. Routine questions among Christians arise over the ethics of organ transplants, the understanding of dreams, factors determining human behavior, and the possibility of extraterrestrial life in the distant galaxies. Francis Collins, longtime head of

the Human Genome Project, is both a Creationist for Christian religious reasons and an advocate of the evolutionary hypothesis for scientific purposes.

The student approaching Christianity will find a multifarious religious tradition, one that is historic, adaptable, self-critical, and unified across time and context in its essentials, yet very diverse in its applications. One must be careful to recognize that the global Christian religious community is generally delineated between Roman Catholics (1.1 billion), Protestants (550 million), Pentecostals (480 million), Evangelicals (420 million), and Orthodox (225 million). Each of these categories brings a unique theological and cultural orientation to the meaning of Christianity. What unites these divergent strands of over two billion Christians is the central figure of Jesus Christ historically and theologically, and various channels of ecumenical dialog and infrequent areas of mission and cooperation.

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