

ON *ACADEMIC* STUDIES OF RELIGIONS AND SPIRITUALITY

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Introduction

In this essay, I explore a popular contemporary notion or concept: "academic studies of religions and spirituality." First, I identify an erroneous distinction between *academic* studies of religious phenomena and *religious* studies of such phenomena that the larger concept sometimes presupposes, considering several significant problems in that distinction. Second, I propose a more useful distinction with which to characterize *academic* studies of religions and spirituality.

I. Erroneous Distinction between "Academic" and "Religious" Studies of Religious and Spiritual Phenomena

Although I have identified the object of this essay as "*academic* studies of religions and spirituality," I have emphasized the word "academic," in order to disclose some problematic features in the use of that term in contemporary discussions about proper approaches to studies of religious and spiritual phenomena. Quite often, professional scholars and teachers in this field of study employ the term "academic" to identify the type of approach or even the quality of work that they perform in their own studies of religious and spiritual phenomena. In many cases, although scholars do not carefully define the term "academic," they imbue the term with a more specific meaning in contrast to another term: "religious." In other words, in this approach to delineating the meaning of "*academic* studies of religious or spiritual phenomena," the meaning of the term "academic" depends upon the distinction between "academic" and "religious" studies of religious and spiritual phenomena. In this distinction, the designation of "*religious* studies" refers to those studies that religious people conduct from the standpoint of their own or their religious community's religious or spiritual perspective, while the designation of "*academic* studies" refers to a non-religious study of those same phenomena by those who do not have religious commitments or those who have set aside or suspended those commitments to study the phenomena with as little bias as possible.

On the surface, while this distinction appears helpful, under closer scrutiny, some questions and issues emerge from the use of this popular distinction. Although other scholars may notice additional problems with this well-known distinction, I mention only six key problems that this popular scholarly distinction generates. For several reasons, I regard the distinction between "academic" and "religious" studies of religions and spirituality as an erroneous distinction, even as a category-mistake.¹

First, the use of the previous popular distinction between *academic* studies and *religious* studies of religious and/or spiritual phenomena creates a serious problem with respect to the well-known and widely-employed designation for many academic departments that study religious and/or spiritual phenomena at many institutions of higher education, especially, but not exclusively, in the United States. The larger academy of higher education increasingly has employed the designation of "religious studies" in contemporary discourse, as distinguished from "theological studies," to indicate exactly that which much of the profession often means by *academic* studies of religious or spiritual phenomena as distinguished from *religious* studies of that same phenomena.² Many colleges and universities now designate their similar departments or programs that study religions or other religious and spiritual phenomena as departments or programs of "Religious Studies." This designation originated from the German discipline, "*Religionswissenschaft*," the scientific or "systematic study of religion." With the designation, "religious studies," contemporary scholars in this field of study have endeavored (although still somewhat unsuccessfully) to distinguish academic preparation for ministry in *religious* or *religiously-affiliated* institutions from studies of religions and other religious or spiritual phenomena as anthropological and cultural phenomena in non-religiously-affiliated institutions.³ In other words, many institutions of higher education, especially in the United States, began to use the designation "religious studies" as the name for their departments that studied religious and spiritual phenomena, in order to differentiate their approaches to these phenomena from the traditional approaches that taught about that phenomena from specific religious, confessional, or denominational perspectives. This approach in the larger academy represented the efforts of scholars who studied religious and spiritual phenomena to imbue their disciplinary approach to this academic field of study with greater objectivity and academic credibility as a scientific discipline or, at least, as parallel to the other sciences themselves. Thus, the use of the popular distinction between "academic" and "religious" studies of religious and spiritual phenomena tends strongly to work at cross-purposes to this widespread understanding of "religious studies" within the larger academy of higher education.

Second, the particular popular distinction ("academic" versus "religious" studies) itself can suggest, when not carefully and critically qualified, at least three implicit and biased assumptions: (1) an assumption that "religious" approaches to studies of religions and spiritualities cannot ever proceed as genuine "academic" (or scholarly) studies of such phenomena; (2) an assumption that so-called "academic" studies of religious and spiritual phenomena can account more accurately or more "truthfully" for such phenomena than "religious" studies of the same phenomena; and (3) an assumption that "academic," scholarly, or scientific studies of religious and spiritual phenomena will necessarily proceed without axiological bias or free from values that influence or even pre-determine the results of such studies. These implicit assumptions themselves carry serious weaknesses that will emerge in following paragraphs.

Third, the term "academic" itself requires careful definition, which uses of that popular distinction ("academic" versus "religious" studies) usually do not provide. What sort of any kind of study qualifies as an *academic* study: (1) one based on research into and comparison of numerous and even divergent perspectives on a given issue or about a specific phenomenon; (2) one that contains carefully-developed reasons and coherent as well as valid arguments; (3) one that employs a wide and diverse range of sources; and/or (4) one that cites a substantial body of evidence, examples, or illustrations to support each particular claim? Of course, one might list additional potential criteria

as well. Even on the basis of that previous small collection of criteria, however, various *religious* studies of religious and spiritual phenomena most certainly also qualify as *academic* studies too. Without a careful and specific understanding of the criteria that qualify a study as "academic," however, that term in this popular distinction serves as little more than an academic shibboleth.

Fourth, the explicit claim or, more often, the implicit assumption that an "academic" (usually understood as synonymous with the notion of "scientific" in some sense) study of religious or spiritual phenomena proceeds more objectively, without bias, or value-free sometimes can camouflage either intentional epistemological pretensions about scientific methods as the *only* avenues through which to acquire *genuine* knowledge or inadvertent epistemological blindspots. Such a pretention manifests itself in at least the following ways. (1) The claim that a scientific approach to the study of religious and spiritual phenomena proceeds without bias or value-free either does not proceed with clear awareness of or intentionally ignores the fact that the *preference* for scientific methods of acquiring knowledge over other traditional means for acquisition of knowledge itself constitutes a *value* that the researcher chooses and on the basis of which the researcher works. (2) In many cases, scientific studies of religious or spiritual phenomena have moved beyond mere description and analysis of religious and spiritual phenomena to assessment of, evaluation of, or judgments about those phenomena. In other words, sometimes scientific or philosophical studies of religious or spiritual phenomena have concluded prior to the studies themselves (based on other assumptions about reality) that the religious or spiritual phenomena have meaning only with respect to the roles or functions that they serve (whether psychological, social, political, economic, etc.) within human life and, therefore, refer to no other realities beyond human experience or culture themselves. Such studies constitute reductionistic approaches to studies of religious and spiritual phenomena, reducing the references or meanings of such phenomena solely to various dimensions of human experience or culture, with no other referential meaning whatsoever.⁴ Thus, despite obvious exceptions to the contrary, sometimes *scientific* (or, in this distinction, "academic") studies of religious and spiritual phenomena proceed with extreme epistemological prejudice and arrogance.

Fifth, by contrast, sometimes *religious* studies of religious and spiritual phenomena proceed with a high quality of academic integrity and sincere epistemological humility. In other words, one may find numerous examples of religious studies of religious and spiritual phenomena that qualify as academic or scientific studies precisely because they adhere to academic criteria, even the small number of which I have mentioned previously: (1) religious studies based on research into and comparison of numerous and even divergent perspectives on a given issue or about a specific phenomenon; (2) religious studies that contain carefully-developed reasons and coherent as well as valid arguments; (3) religious studies that employ a wide and diverse range of sources; and (4) religious studies that cite substantial bodies of evidence, examples, or illustrations to support their particular claims. Even on the basis of that previous small collection of criteria, however, various *religious* studies of religious and spiritual phenomena most certainly also qualify as *academic* or *scientific* studies as well.⁵

Sixth, as stated previously, sometimes so-called "academic" or "scientific" studies of religious and spiritual phenomena assume that such studies can account more accurately or more "truthfully" for such phenomena than "religious" studies of the same phenomena. Nevertheless, sometimes the people who participate *in* a religious community or tradition or "insiders" can perceive in more

depth and with greater insight certain facets, meanings, and dimensions of a religion, religious community, or religious tradition than scientific researchers who necessarily (and even for the sake of greater objectivity) examine or interrogate a religion, a religious community, or other religious phenomena as people who do not participate in a religion, religious community, or religious tradition, as persons from the *outside* or "outsiders." In other words, certain key features of religious or spiritual phenomena may manifest themselves most clearly and fully *only* to and through "insiders" or *only* in a *religious* study of the same religious or spiritual phenomena.

II. Distinction between "Religiously"–Academic and "Non-Religiously"–Academic Studies of Religious and Spiritual Phenomena

In my previous discussion of several major weaknesses in the popular distinction between *religious* studies of religious or spiritual phenomena and *academic/scientific* studies of those same phenomena, features of a more adequate distinction began to emerge. I characterize this distinction as the differentiation of *religiously-academic* from *non-religiously-academic* studies of religions and other religious or spiritual phenomena. This distinction operates on the following basis.

First, of course, this emerging distinction depends on an understanding of that which qualifies any study as an *academic* study. I suggest, without elaboration or extension at this time, that to qualify as an *academic* study, a study of religious and/or spiritual phenomena minimally must meet the criteria that I have previously identified: (1) studies based on research into and comparison of numerous and even divergent perspectives on a given issue or about a specific phenomenon; (2) studies that contain carefully-developed reasons and coherent as well as valid arguments; (3) studies that employ a wide and diverse range of sources; and (4) studies that cite substantial bodies of evidence, examples, or illustrations to support their particular claims. Of course, more extensive examination of the notion will sharpen these criteria as well as yield additional important and helpful standards or measures.

Second, within the distinction between *religiously-academic* and *non-religiously-academic* studies of religions and other religious or spiritual phenomena, the designation of "*religiously-academic studies*" of religious or spiritual phenomena refers to those studies that researchers with religious commitments or researchers who participate within a religion, religious community, or religious tradition conduct from the standpoint of their own or their religious community's religious and/or spiritual perspective. In this sense, such *religious* studies occur as studies by "insiders" of religious or spiritual phenomena. In this case, I understand such studies of a religious tradition or community by those who participate in that tradition or community as *advocative* or even *apologetic* studies, in the sense that such an approach advocates and/or defends a particular religious or spiritual tradition, community, or perspective.

Third, within the distinction between *religiously-academic* and *non-religiously-academic* studies of religions and other religious or spiritual phenomena, the designation of "*non-religiously-academic studies*" of religious or spiritual phenomena refers to academic studies of religious and/or spiritual phenomena that researchers without or aside from religious commitments conduct of religious and/or spiritual phenomena or researchers who do not participate within the religions, religious communities, or religious traditions that they study. In this sense, such non-religious

studies occur as studies by "outsiders" to religious or spiritual communities, religions, or religious or spiritual traditions. *Non-religious academic studies* of religions, religious communities, and traditions, or other religious or spiritual phenomena, however, can take two forms. (1) On the one hand, non-religious academic studies of religions and spirituality can occur from an *anti-religious* perspective, proceeding *antagonistically* or *polemically*, identifying weaknesses in a tradition or religious community to undermine the credibility of its specific claims or to argue against any sort of religion or religious phenomena whatsoever.⁶ (2) On the other hand, non-religious academic studies of religions, religious communities and traditions, or other religious or spiritual phenomena can take another form: a *phenomenological approach*, an approach that proceeds *neutrally* or intentionally as much as possible without bias or pre-determined conclusions, neither advocating nor attacking the religious or spiritual phenomena under scrutiny, an approach that seeks to describe and to understand the religious or spiritual phenomena in their own terms as they present themselves for observation, examination, and analysis.

I understand *contemporary* academic studies of religious, spiritual, and related phenomena at Berea College as *neither religious* (advocative or apologetic) *nor anti-religious* (antagonistic or polemical) studies of religious and spiritual phenomena. Rather, by contrast, I understand studies of religious and spiritual phenomena within this particular contemporary, liberal-arts, collegiate or university academic context as *the neutral, non-religious, descriptive, or phenomenological academic exploration, examination, and analysis of religions and spirituality*. Thus, the Department develops its studies of and teaching about all religious phenomena from that neutral and phenomenological space between apologetic or advocative and polemical or antagonistic academic studies of religious or spiritual phenomena. In that vein, studies of religious and spiritual phenomena at Berea College make explicit and maintain four essential features of the Department's historic and contemporary commitments to teaching and research in this vast cultural field of study: (1) pursuit of *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive* goals in teaching about spirituality and religions; (2) maintenance of a *contextual and cross-cultural scope*; (3) demonstration of genuine *multi-disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity* through employment of methods that encompass frameworks in both the social sciences and the human sciences or humanities for identifying, analyzing, and understanding religious and spiritual phenomena; and (4) insistence, however, that the multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies of religious and spiritual phenomena *do not reduce those phenomena to the respective "non-religious forms of behavior"* to which the multiple academic methods and disciplines refer in various ways.⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ One often sees this distinction between *academic* and *religious* studies of religions and spiritualities in well-meaning efforts, at least purportedly, to indicate an institutional commitment to an unbiased or a scientific approach to examining and analyzing religious and spiritual phenomena. See the following example in which this distinction operates: Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions (ISASR), "What Is the Academic Study of Religion?" (<https://isasr.wordpress.com/about/what-is-the-academic-study-of-religion/>).

² The Department of Religious Studies in the University of Alabama argues forcefully for the following formulation as the work of its department: an academic department that studies "Religion *in* Culture." That Department argues against the formulation of "religion *and* culture," as a designation for its own departmental approach to the study of religious phenomena: University of Alabama (Tuscaloosa, Alabama), "Undergraduate Program in Religious Studies," <https://religion.ua.edu/links/studying-religion-in-culture/>. Nevertheless, I regard that argument as stretching too far with a preposition. The University of Alabama could expend its energy much more profitably by thinking more carefully about its own departmental title: "Department of Religious Studies." The adjective, "religious," modifies the noun, "studies": in this case, that formulation suggests that the studies themselves retain a *religious* quality, rather than that those *academic* studies examine religious *phenomena* – despite the widespread, although intensely-debated, employment of this formulation in the larger academy. The following publication surveys the larger contours of this debate about the designation, "religious studies": Donald Wiebe, "Religious Studies," pp. 125–44, in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, 2d edition, ed. John R. Hinnells (New York, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2010).

³ Richard Rorty (1931–2007) once observed that the term "religion" has become a "conversation-stopper" in Western cultures (Richard Rorty, "Religion as Conversation-Stopper," *Common Knowledge* 3/1 [1994]: 1–6). Although conversations about the concept of "religion" as well as the phenomena to which the term refers certainly continue, despite Rorty's claim, many scholars and scientists who hold assumptions about the notion of "religion" continue to understand its study within strictly academic and non-religious or secular contexts as "religious" and not scientific. See also "Religious Studies," *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Society* (<http://hrr.hartsem.edu/ency/ReligiousS.htm>). Even the designation "Religious Studies," however, carries an ambiguity in the use of the adjective "religious." The usage describes the studies themselves as religious, suggesting some sort of confessional or devotional approach to methods for the study of religions and spiritualities (which carry presuppositions about the nature of religions and spiritualities like the presuppositions held by seminaries and theological schools that train students for various forms of ministry in religious organizations or institutions), rather than a more scientific or neutral approach to the academic study of religions (despite the long use of the phrase in the study of religions to indicate precisely the opposite meaning). The following publications provide additional insights on this point and related points about the term "religious": Adrian Cunningham, "Religious Studies in the Universities: England," pp. 21–31, in *Turning Points in Religious Studies: Essays in Honour of Geoffrey Parrinder*, ed. Ursula King, Bloomsbury Academic Collections Series, Religious Studies: Comparative Religion Sub-Series (London, England, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic, an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, 1990; Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, an Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 1990); and Michael Pye, "Religious Studies in Europe: Structures and Desiderata," pp. 39–55, in *Religious Studies: Issues, Prospects, and Proposals*, ed. Klaus K. Klostermaier and Larry W. Hurtado, University of Manitoba Studies in Religion Series (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba and Scholars Press, 1991).

⁴ See, as examples, the conclusions that both Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx advance about religious phenomena. "The psychoanalysis of individual human beings, however, teaches us with quite special insistence that the god of each of them is formed in the likeness of his father, that his personal relation to God depends on his relation to his father in the flesh and oscillates and changes along with that relation, and that at bottom God is nothing other than an exalted father" (Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey [New York, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1950], 147). "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people" (Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction,"

in *The Marx–Engels Reader*, 2d edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker [New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978], 54).

⁵ See the following excellent twentieth-century examples of impressive *religiously-academic* studies of Christian beliefs and doctrines: Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, First Half-Volume, trans. G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1936, 1969); idem, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, Second Half-Volume, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1956, 1970); and Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Reason and Revelation, Being and God* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1951); idem, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *Existence and the Christ* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1957); and idem, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, *Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

⁶ The most obvious contemporary examples of this antagonistic, reductionistic, and polemical approach occur in the anti-religious works of the neo-atheists. See the following few examples: Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company, A Mariner Book, 2006); Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (London, England, United Kingdom: Penguin Books, 2006); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York, New York: W. W. Norton, 2004); Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York, New York: 2007); Victor J. Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis — How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2007); and idem., *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2009).

⁷ The Faculty in the Department for Studies of Religions and Spirituality shares the conviction of Mircea Eliade, the preeminent historian of religion. According to Eliade, “[e]very religious experience is expressed and transmitted in a particular historical context. But admitting the historicity of religious experiences does not imply that they are reducible to non-religious forms of behavior. Stating that a religious datum is always a historical datum does not mean that it is reducible to a non-religious history—for example, to an economic, social, or political history. We must never lose sight of one of the fundamental principles of modern science: *the scale creates the phenomenon*” (Mircea Eliade, “History of Religions and a New Humanism,” *History of Religions*, vol. 1 [Summer 1961], 6).