

Why Study Religion

by Joseph A. Adler

A Kenyon professor looks at religious studies in a liberal-arts setting

What is the study of religion?



The study of religion as an academic discipline is a fairly recent development. Most departments of religious studies (as the field is generally known) in colleges and universities in the United States and Europe were founded since the 1960s as a result of the confluence of several historical and intellectual factors.

One was that the more global perspectives gained by men and women who served in the armed forces in three Asian wars (the Pacific theater of World War II and the wars in Korea and Vietnam) stimulated many of them, upon their return, to pursue graduate study of the languages and cultures of Asia. This produced a substantial supply of scholars in the 1950s and 60s with the training and experience to transcend the limited Euro-American perspective that had prevailed in higher education throughout the first half of the twentieth century and before.

Another factor was the increasing demand, arising from the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1950s and 60s, for a more self-reflective, self-critical perspective on our own cultural tradition. And along with this conjunction of supply and demand there were intellectual developments in the fields of anthropology, classics, history, philosophy, sociology, and theology (political science and psychology might also be included) that converged in the felt need for religion to be given an institutional home in the academy in which methods from all these fields could come together.

Thus, we have the situation today, in which nearly every secular institution of higher learning in this country, public and private, has a department of religion or religious studies that--at least nominally--understands its mission to be the study of religion as a global, historically and culturally embedded aspect of human experience. (I include Kenyon as a basically secular institution, despite its historical connection with the Episcopal Church, simply in the sense that there are no religious requirements here, curricular or otherwise, and the College's Department of Religion as now constituted is a product of this period.)

Prior to these developments, religion was the chief focus of study mainly in departments or schools of theology, or divinity schools, whose primary mission was to train clergy. To the extent that they studied

religious traditions other than their own at all, they generally approached them from the perspectives of their own theological assumptions and beliefs. So, for example, the Hebrew Bible would be read as merely a precursor to the New Testament, as the name "Old Testament" itself implies, with the uncritical acceptance of Christian theological assumptions built into the methods of interpretation--e.g., the assumption that the essential message of the Hebrew prophets was the life and meaning of Jesus as interpreted by Paul and the early Church as much as eight centuries later, instead of the ethical and political meanings clearly rooted in the prophets' own social-historical contexts. Thus from a Christian theological perspective, it might be clearly and self-evidently *true* that Jesus was the Messiah foretold by the Hebrew prophets. But from a Jewish theological perspective, it is just as clearly and self-evidently *false*. And we might add that from a Buddhist perspective, among many others, it is completely irrelevant.

The methodological first principle of the academic study of religion--which, incidentally, is today found in some divinity schools as well--is that *none* of these perspectives can be taken for granted; we cannot *assume* the truth of any theological claims. In fact, their truth value is only secondarily a concern at all, for such judgments must be predicated on as full an understanding of the phenomena as is possible to achieve. And when the subject is as deeply rooted in human psychology, society, and history as is religion, achieving an adequate understanding is not a simple matter. The pedagogical task of departments of religious studies is therefore to provide students with the tools and methods with which they can make their own personal judgments and choices, not to inculcate them with any particular religious world view.

This is not to say that questions of truth and value are out of bounds; we certainly do not subscribe to a "cheap relativism" in which no ethical values can be applied cross-culturally. In fact, we sometimes need to stress to students that religions, like all human phenomena, have dark sides, that they can be dysfunctional, destructive of their own proclaimed values as well as ours, and (in the unlikely case that it needs to be pointed out) the cause of a great deal of human suffering. Yet, for the most part, we are concerned primarily with the *meanings* of religious phenomena to members of the relevant traditions; with the social, historical, political and ritual processes in which they are embedded; with the personal experiences that are often related to them; with their philosophical contexts and implications; with the literary, artistic, and other cultural forms in which they are expressed; and with what we can learn in general, in cross-cultural perspective, about the categories of human endeavor and experience that we call "religion" and "religions."

This methodological principle makes some difficult demands upon scholars and students. For whether we personally identify with a religious tradition or consider ourselves basically secular, we all have world views and assumptions that can be, and almost assuredly will be, challenged by those that we study. But is it really possible to "bracket" our own beliefs, to set them aside temporarily while we try to understand what it is like to subscribe to another world view? Conversely, is it possible really to understand another world view without personally accepting its truth or validity?

Perhaps not perfectly. But as an ideal or limit to strive for, it is all we can do; the alternatives would be intellectually irresponsible. To be true to our own tradition as scholars--i.e., to the academic tradition rooted in ancient Greece--demands that we subject religion to the same critical inquiry to which we subject other areas of human activity, thought, and experience; that we maintain a "critical distance" from the object of our study (to the extent that it is humanly possible); and that we "free" ourselves from the limitations of the assumptions and values of any tradition *other than* the academic tradition in which we are all engaged--whose values, paradoxically, require us consistently to subject our own assumptions to doubt and self-

criticism. This freedom or liberation is, of course, one of the direct implications of the "liberal" in "liberal education" in our late-modern and post-modern world.

Nevertheless, there are methods by which we can approximate an insider's understanding of another religious tradition. One method that may be an option for some is to become a sincere participant, at least for a time. An alternating pattern of engagement and disengagement with the object of one's study--e.g., joining a monastery or other religious community for a year or a few years, then withdrawing to digest and analyze--sometimes leads to first-rate scholarship. Some scholars, of course, study their own traditions and manage to maintain the delicate balance of engagement and disengagement simultaneously. Another method, used in fact by all scholars of religion, is to participate *imaginatively* in another tradition: to imagine, given all the data at our disposal (including dialogue with those inside the tradition), what it means to be a participant. Rationality and imagination, after all, go hand in hand in all the best scholarship, even in the natural sciences.

Why do we study it?

The great Sanskritist Max Müller (1832-1930), editor of *The Sacred Books of the East* and one of the founders of what he called *Religionswissenschaft*, or the "science of religion," once said something to the effect that "He who knows only one religion knows none." This idea remains one of the foundations of contemporary religious studies. It is the principle that the meanings of religious phenomena become clearer the more they are seen in comparison and contrast with similar or analogous phenomena in different cultural contexts.

Since religious studies takes as its subject religion in its global and pluralistic manifestations, it is well-situated to deal with recent intellectual developments that have impacted all the human sciences. To the extent that we live in a world in which many of the old verities have lost their credibility, or at least the unquestioned assumption of their credibility, we are faced with tremendous intellectual challenges. How can we make sense of a world that is, in cultural terms, irreducibly pluralistic? How can we rely on the beliefs and values of our own world view once we have begun to see it, however imperfectly, from the perspective of "the other"?

The global, comparative approach to the study of religion has, since its inception, recognized and addressed the challenges of pluralism. It is thus capable of providing students with some perspective on them and some ways of dealing with them. Religious studies is pluralistic and global not only in its subject matter but also in its methodology. Since the phenomena we collectively call "religious" are so varied, it is appropriate that they be studied from a variety of theoretical perspectives and with a variety of methods. Religious studies is thus a discipline (in the sense of a "discourse" on a coherent subject), polymethodic (employing methods drawn from various social scientific and humanistic disciplines) and synthetic (attempting to construct general theories of religion and its various manifestations). Moreover, in addition to its discourse on the theoretical and comparative level, religious studies requires the mastery of a different discourse for each religious tradition that is studied. In this sense, it provides quite concrete experience in dealing with "multiple discourses"--which is precisely what is necessary in communicating across cultural boundaries in today's pluralistic, multicultural environment.

Religious studies differs from other disciplines in that it deals not only with objective cultural data but also with beliefs and values that may have deep, personal meaning to our students. This is, for most of our students, a new mode of academic study. Their initial reactions sometimes tend toward two extremes: unreflective criticism and even active dislike of the tradition they are studying or uncritical admiration of the exotic and new. These reactions show that they are engaging with the material in ways that can potentially be productive. Criticism in the classroom is fine as long as it is thoughtful and respectful. Admiration and agreement is fine as long as it is realistic. Both are fine as aspects of the learning process in an academic setting as long as they are based on responsible attempts to understand the tradition on its own terms and in its own cultural context. I, for example, am happy to have students in my Taoism class whose prior introduction to the subject is limited to having read *The Tao of Pooh*. But I waste no time in telling them that the subject of the course, Taoism as a *Chinese* religious tradition, may not exactly match their expectations.

The importance of religion as a force in human history and the contemporary world is, happily, obvious to the great majority of Kenyon students. Religious doctrines, ethics, experiences, myths, rituals, and institutions are reflections and shapers of the various worlds in which human beings think and act. I am often pleasantly surprised (although I suppose I should not be) at how many students take my courses in East Asian religions not for distribution requirements but because they are genuinely curious about them. Some of these students are interested for the good intellectual reasons I have just mentioned, while others are more interested for personal reasons. We have the luxury in our culture today of being more or less free to "shop around" for our religious and philosophical beliefs, to the extent that they are conscious beliefs and not prereflective assumptions. As the old counterculture slogan says, we are free to "question the authority" of our inherited traditions, and many students are doing just that--to their great credit, in my opinion, as long as they do not prejudice the answers to their questioning.

I am even more impressed with those of our students who take courses in other religious traditions precisely because they *do* identify more or less strongly with their own religious heritage yet they want to see what others are all about. These students are not afraid to challenge their own assumptions. They seem to understand that "an unexamined life is not worth living," and that, as Müller said, an examination of even one's own religion without a comparative context is shallow. Observing the deeper, more thoughtful and nuanced self-understanding that results from this kind of encounter with other religious traditions makes for some of the most rewarding experiences for a teacher of religious studies.

So, the reasons for studying religion and religions, and the benefits of studying them in the way I have described, are various. Basic to all of them is the perception that we are living in a culturally *pluralistic* world in which (somewhat paradoxically) *global* perspectives are needed. That is, we simply cannot ignore the otherness of other cultures, nor can we subscribe any longer to the naive, European Enlightenment assumption that Western cultures are more evolved on a self-evidently rational scale than others. (One episode in our recent history that drove home the fact that these assumptions were not self-evident or universally shared was the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, which said, "No thanks, we have our own culture and we want to keep it," to the presumed cultural advances bestowed upon Iran by the Shah's program of Westernization.) Yet because of the increasingly interdependent nature of our world or worlds, we need to find ways of dealing with systems, challenges, and problems that cut across political and cultural borders.

On one level, given our evident interdependence, we simply need to be able to communicate with our neighbors in the world. But, as many trade and investment negotiators in China have discovered, communication is not a simple matter of translation; it requires an often subtle understanding and appreciation for different cultural rules and values, different assumptions about the functions of language, different conceptions of individual and collective responsibility and identity, and so forth. The deeper these points extend into the assumptions that form the framework of the culture, the more they are connected with the culture's religious beliefs and values.

At the same time, we should acknowledge that cultural diversity, whether at home or in the world, is not something to be merely tolerated; it is something to be encouraged and celebrated. Cultures are to societies as personalities are to individuals; sameness would probably be destructive of creativity--not to mention awfully boring. An analogy with biological evolution is quite apt in this respect. It is a basic principle of population biology that diversity or variability in a gene pool increases the likelihood of a species' adaptive success in response to changing environmental conditions. The greater the diversity, the greater the chances of there being a gene in the pool that can enable the species to adapt successfully to the change. Similarly, we are rapidly changing our own cultural environments with technology, medical advances, increased travel and communication, trade, and so forth. Any culture will be better able to respond creatively to these changes the more cultural resources it can draw upon. Cultural diversity, like genetic diversity, is a sign of health and a requirement for successful evolutionary growth.

From this perspective, the benefit of the study of religion in global and pluralistic terms is that it opens us to human options in the face of universal human questions and problems--philosophical questions such as how the world came to be, what it means to be human, the relationship of individual identity and social identity; existential problems such as suffering, loss of loved ones, evil, and dying. Some of the responses we encounter may seem strange to us, but they are all human responses, and so in learning about them we are learning about ourselves. "The other" can thus be a mirror, revealing to us some of our own potential--for good or for ill--and helping us to understand the range of human ways of experiencing, creating, and recreating our world.

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