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THE CRITICAL ISSUES

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MELANIE J. WRIGHT


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Studying Judaism

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The Critical Issues

MELANIE J. WRIGHT

Studying World Religions



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Table of Contents

Author Biography	vi
Tribute	vii
Series Preface	viii
Acknowledgments	xxiv

1. Introduction	1
2. What is Judaism?	14
3. Authority	28
4. Worship, Festivals and Mysticism	47
5. Beliefs	65
6. Gender	82
7. Politics	100
8. Culture	116
9. Memory	132
10. Jews and Others	147
11. Studying Judaism: the critical issues: the future	163

Notes	177
Bibliography	193
Index	205

Author Biography

Melanie J. Wright was Academic Director of the Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations, and a Lecturer in Religious Studies at the Open University, UK. She is the author of numerous articles and books including *Understanding Judaism*, and *Religion and Film: An Introduction*. With Lucia Faltin, she co-edited *The Religious Roots of Contemporary European Identity*, which is also published by Continuum.

Tribute

Melanie Wright (1970–2011) was an exceptionally gifted scholar. Her impressive scholarship had begun to make an impact on the field of Religious Studies, pushing the boundaries of the field to include innovative research in the areas of religion and film and the study of religion through material culture. Within little more than a decade of the submission of her doctorate, she completed four monographs and a sizeable collection of articles (for a list of her publications, see the website dedicated to her legacy: <http://www.melaniewright.info/>). Her first monograph, *Moses in America: The cultural uses of biblical narrative* (2003), applied cultural studies methods to the study of religion. Her *Religion and Film: An Introduction* (2007) has proven to be highly regarded for the non-theological framework with which she cast light on the making and viewing of films which touch on religion. In the area of Jewish Studies she offered two monographs, *Understanding Judaism* (2003), which was well received, and the present volume, *Studying Judaism: The Critical Issues* (2012). Prominent in all Melanie's work is the commitment to broaden the view from elitist and essentializing constructions of religion, and take seriously the way in which religion is expressed in a wide variety of forms including popular and material culture.

She was highly regarded by her colleagues at Cambridge and the Open University. Her dedication to teaching and learning bore its fruits not only in her relationship with students at Anglia Ruskin and Cambridge Universities, but in particular in her leadership in establishing the MA and then the MSt courses at the Centre the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations, an educational charity of which she was a founding member. At the Open University, which she joined as a member of staff in 2007, Melanie enjoyed working in a department dedicated to the study of religion, proud to be serving at an institution committed to offer education opportunities for all. Her gifts as a scholar and teacher included the ability to see the highest potential in every person she encountered, and to nurture the talent she found in students with generosity and warmth. Melanie was much more than a scholar. She touched the lives of many people through her commitment to friendship and a genuine interest in everyone she met. Her academic legacy will continue to impact on the study of religion.

Series Preface

Religious Studies and Critical Enquiry: Towards 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 multi-disciplinary 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 sub-divisions of Christian Studies, almost always 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 remarkable 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 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. In part, 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 product 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 socially 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 cataloguing of religious data under thematic headings, such as ritual, myth and 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 and the History of Religion (or *Religionsgeschichte*, 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 centre. 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 social science than to theology. It would be a multidisciplinary field, drawing on anthropology, psychology and 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 and 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 towards privileging a single approach, or way of studying religion, above others. The shift towards what may be called phenomenology or 'insider-ship' took place for good reasons, and was a much-needed corrective to past mistakes and distortions. In the post-colonial space, much criticism has been voiced about how the Western world went about the task of studying the religious and cultural Others. 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 post-colonial 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, which are radically different from and less desirable than those of Western populations. Cabezón (2006) argues that '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 and 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. T. W. Rhys-Davids, Britain’s first professor of Comparative Religion, at 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 social–political 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 de-construct 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 *eidos*, of religion, by bracketing out assumptions, theories or preconceptions, so that we see the phenomenon for what it really is, in its own terms. Instead of imposing categories, 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, all Hindus or all Buddhists believe identically, and that what one believer finds acceptable another may not, the criterion that believers should recognize themselves in what gets written, has nonetheless 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, 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, 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 towards theology, then at least towards 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 on world religions courses within departments of Theology or 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 misogynistic. 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,

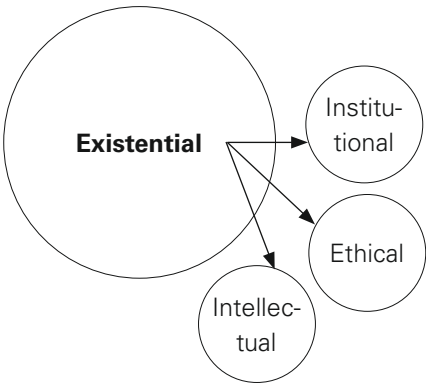
which simply used Christianity as a template, it is not so radically different. Here, the work of Ninian Smart and Frank Whaling, among others, has been influential (see Figure 0.1). Sharpe's 'four modes of religion' model is worth examining, but is less easy to translate into the classroom (see Figure 0.2). Smart and Whaling say that most religions have elements such as beliefs, scriptures, histories, sacred sites and 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, and 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 field work, 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 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 Christianity, 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

Table o.1 Comparison of the models of Smart and Whaling.

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/scriptural	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 o.2 Eric Sharpe's 'four-modes' (based on diagram on Sharpe, 1983: 96).



Sharpe sees these as interlinking. Each can be represented by an adjective: Existential = faith; Intellectual = beliefs; Institutional = organizations; Ethical = conduct. A believer or a community may use any of the four as the 'dominant element'; that is, as a 'gateway' to the others (97). On page 96, he has four diagrams, substituting the dominant dimension in each.

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 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 towards 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 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). Towards 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. And second, 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 the Lebanon, in Iran and in Iraq. Arguably, this reluctance to deal with critical issues results from oversensitivity 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 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, but 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 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 dialogue, 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 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 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 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 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 inter-connected human story than is often supposed. On the one hand, the term 'Hinduism' is now accepted by many Hindus. On the other, its appropriateness can be challenged. Smith commented that '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 Bessant, who may have been the first to design a curriculum based around the four aims in life, the 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 over-stressing sensuality in her work on Hinduism (see Ramaswamy, 2007).

What has been described as Protestant Buddhism, too, developed as a result of the efforts of 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 14th 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 n22). 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 three or four years to master these. On 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, and by others as prohibiting aggression and sanctioning only defence. 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, Islam or 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 in this series, 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 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 programme. On the other hand, 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 it makes to be a critical field of academic enquiry. Religious Studies will be enriched, not impoverished, by reclaiming its multidisciplinary 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 censors 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 their enquiry according to their 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 their subject as they 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 towards 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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* * *

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