'Religion' and the Academic Study of Religions

By the academic study of religions, I mean that field of study which has been variously referred to as *Religionswissenschaft* or the science of religion, the history of religions, the comparative study of religions, the phenomenology of religion and religious studies. My reasons for preferring 'the academic study of religions' to any other designation are connected with my conception of the origins and aims of the study of religions. The distinctive aim of the academic study of religions is the study of *all* religions, and its origins are therefore marked by a shift in the primary meaning of the term 'religion' from a sense roughly equivalent to 'piety' to a sense in which the word has a plural, and denotes a system of belief and practice. 'The religions' became species of the genus 'religion'. The history and implications of these changes will be examined below.

The designation, 'the academic study of religions' does not refer only to the study of religions in formal institutions of higher learning, although it does indicate the context in which the new attitude to religions which I wish to discuss has found its most extensive development. Were the academic study of religions to be taken to refer only to the study of religions in institutions of higher learning, the history of the discipline would begin with the establishment of the first chair of 'the general history of religions' in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Geneva in 1873 and later similar chairs elsewhere in Europe and the United States or perhaps somewhat earlier with the first lecture courses in the subject in the 1830s at the University of Basel and shortly afterwards elsewhere.[1] Rather, 'academic' should be taken in a broader sense, in which scepticism is an important component of meaning.[2] For the religiously sceptical environment in which the academic study of religions was born was not merely an historical accident but, I shall argue, a necessary ingredient in all approaches to religion that have some resemblance to the modern academic study of religions in the West.

The academic study of religions should therefore be distinguished from the treatment of 'other religions' which immediately preceded it, the motivation for which was primarily theological.[3] The academic study of

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[1] See Sharpe 1986.
[2] The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1971) defines the older meaning of 'academic' as 'Belonging to the Academy, the school or philosophy of Plato; sceptical'.
[3] Pailin 1984.

religions has its own agenda, and this has been characterized as 'theological' both by those who argue that the study of religions has failed to free itself entirely from theological presuppositions,[4] and by those who argue that 'every secular positivism is revealed also to be a positivist theology'.[5] Nevertheless this account of the origins of the academic study of religions is premised upon the claim that in principle we may draw a distinction between those writers who are concerned with explaining 'other' religions (i. e. religions other than the writer's own), and those writers who are concerned with understanding and explaining all religions, or religion as such. The works of the latter form the basis of the modern academic study of religions. While many early writers on Hinduism may be placed in the former category, their works, perhaps unwittingly, helped to lay the foundation for the work of those in the latter, and thus also for the academic study of religions in the present day.

The origins of the academic study of religions

The substance of Jonathan Z. Smith's comment that 'simply put, the academic study of religion is a child of the Enlightenment' is repeated in the work of many other writers.[6] Kurt Rudolph notes that this is also true of many 'neighbouring disciplines',[7] by which he means disciplines such as anthropology, ethnology, and sociology which went on to gain a place in the academic curriculum. The rise and development of the academic study of religions is inextricably linked with these disciplines, but it is in the study of religion, the examination, criticism, repudiation and defence of religion, that the thinkers of the Enlightenment focus their efforts most intensely. Ernst Cassirer, in his influential study of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, states that the usual general characterization of the age of the Enlightenment is that 'its fundamental feature is obviously a critical and sceptical attitude toward religion.'[8] While Cassirer goes on to criticize this characterization, he denies only that the Enlightenment's attitude to religion was wholly critical and sceptical, and not that religion was, in one way or another, at the centre of Enlightenment thinking: 'All apparent opposition to religion which we meet in this age should not blind us to the fact that all intellectual problems are fused with religious problems, and that the former find their constant and deepest inspiration in the

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[4] For example, Wiebe 1984, McCutcheon 1997.
[5] Milbank 1990: 139.
[6] Smith 1982: 104. See, above all, Preus 1987, and also Chidester 1996: xiii, Rudolph 1985: 23, Wiebe 1984: 402.
[7] Rudolph 1985: 23.
[8] Cassirer 1951: 134.

latter.' Peter Gay has been followed by many others in arguing that discussion of the Enlightenment demands 'regard for complexity: the men of the Enlightenment were divided by doctrine, temperament, environment, and generations.'[9] This is nowhere more true than in dealing with religion. The thinkers of the Enlightenment diverge so much in their views on religion that one cannot point to 'the Enlightenment attitude toward religion'. 'What, after all,' writes Gay, 'does Holbach, who ridiculed all religion [have in common] with Lessing, who practically tried to invent one?'[10] Nevertheless, as Cassirer writes, the philosophes do share a concern no longer only 'with what is merely believed but with the nature, tendency and function of belief as such.'[11] It is in this concern that we find the roots of the modern academic study of religions.[12] One of the clearest signs of this change of attitude toward religion may be seen in the changes that occur in the meanings of the term 'religion'.

The history of 'religion'

The changes in the sense of the term 'religion', already underway in the sixteenth century and establishing by the end of the eighteenth century the wider range of meanings that the term has today, have been documented by Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his work *The Meaning and End of Religion* and, following Smith, by John Bossy and Peter Biller.[13] Prior to the seventeenth century, Smith argues, the Latin *religio* (and its derivatives in the major European languages), had a primarily adjectival rather than substantive or nominal sense, and referred to 'a quality of men's lives or a colouring of the world they perceive' rather than 'some independent substance or entity'.[14] That is, the use of the term was such that in most cases '"piety" could reasonably be substituted for "religion"'.[15] From the early seventeenth century, however, the leaders of European thought 'gave the name "religion" to the system, first in general but increasingly to the system of ideas, in which men of faith were involved or with which men of potential faith were confronted ... Thus began a long-range development, accumulating until today, of diversion of interest from man's personal sense of the holy to what we might call

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[9] Gay 1967: xii.

[10] Gay 1967: xii.

[11] Cassirer 1951: 136.

[12] It will be shown that this concern was not exclusively with matters of belief, but included also other elements of religion.

[13] See Smith 1991 (first published in 1962), Bossy 1982, and Biller 1985.

[14] Smith 1991: 20.

[15] Smith 1991: 37.

the observable product or historical deposit of its outworking.'[16] The result was a new sense of 'religion' in which the word for the first time has a plural, and in English the singular may take an article.[17] This new sense of 'religion' necessitated the development of concepts by which the individual religions were identified. Thus in addition to the existing 'Christianity', 'Judaism', and 'Mahometanism', terms such as 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism' were invented. Concomitant with this new understanding of 'the religions' is the development of a further dimension of meaning in the term 'religion'. This is religion as such, a generic concept which, as Smith puts it, serves to discriminate religion 'from other aspects of human life, such as art or economics.'[18] Finally Smith argues that since the Enlightenment there has been a further shift in the meaning of 'religion' from a theoretical system of doctrine to a sociological entity, a historical phenomenon. Thus 'Buddhism', for example, 'designated not what Buddhists ought to believe, but what Buddhists have believed.'[19] Smith concentrates on the consequences rather than the causes of these developments, but he does note that one of the characteristics of this new usage is that 'religion' and the terms used to designate the religions are usually, in origin at least, outsider's terms. The degree to which the outsider's terms are adopted by the adherents themselves has varied between the different religions.

Implicit in these changes in the meaning of 'religion' is the recognition, by those who so used the term, that the actions and passions of other people in relation to other gods are of the same kind as their own actions and passions in relation to the Christian god. In the earlier period of interest in them, other religions were not regarded as viable alternatives to Christianity, even by those who had already rejected Christianity.[20] The shift to the modern sense of religion, in which the religious beliefs and practices of humankind are regarded as being different instantiations of what is essentially one kind of phenomenon, is a momentous one. Bossy remarks that 'both [Roger] Bacon and Hugo Grotius seem to have been held back just on the verge of the modern sense [of 'religion'] by a residual unwillingness to reduce Christianity to the same level as other faiths.'[21]

In the part of his article that deals with the history of the term 'religion', Bossy differs from Smith only on a few points of detail. He agrees that in its classical Latin sense *religio* is 'essentially ... a feeling, a frame of

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[16] Smith 1991: 38.
[17] Smith 1991: 48–9.
[18] Smith 1991: 49.
[19] Smith 1991: 78–9.
[20] Cf. Pailin 1984: 45.
[21] Bossy 1982: 7.

mind', but argues that 'in medieval Christianity this usage disappeared. With very few exceptions, the word was used to describe different sorts of monastic or similar rule'.[22] Bossy dates the shift to a 'reified' sense of religion in the mid-sixteenth century, with a further expansion of meaning 'principally during the first third of the seventeenth century' from the 'unwillingly conceded notion of a plurality of "religions"' to religion in general, 'the essence of all those entities visible in the world of which *the* Christian religion could be thought an example'.[23] Bossy emphasizes that the 'actual motor of [these changes] was ... the simple existence of a plurality of embodied and embattled faiths.' Objectification arose, he argues, 'out of the need to describe one's own or other people's way of belief and life, as if from outside, in circumstances where a plurality of such ways had come into existence.'[24] The awareness of religious plurality was, however, only a partial cause of the new understanding of religion and the religions that came about at this time. For evidence of another significant cause we start with the second part of Bossy's article.

Here Bossy is concerned with the term 'society' and he begins by stating that 'the history of the word "society" ... is practically identical with the history of the word "religion".'[25] By this he means that there is a move from a sense in which 'society' means 'companionship' or 'fellowship' (which he calls Sense I) to the modern sense of 'our most general term for the body of institutions and relationships within which a relatively large group of people live' (Sense II).[26] By examining what he calls 'the hinterland of Christian feeling' behind Sense I, he aims to show that 'the passage from Sense I to Sense II is a process of extracting the word from its Christian overtones.' Moreover he claims that 'the passage from subjectivity to objectivity, from active to passive, which we can see in Religion and Society, is characteristic of a large number of words in the same region at roughly the same time – for example, state, property, philosophy, charity, communion, conversation.'[27] He does not attempt to follow up what he rightly calls 'this substantial topic' beyond mentioning Michel Foucault's attempt to say something of a general kind about these changes in terms of an archaeological shift 'from an inclusive to an exclusive mode of mental classification, between a Renaissance mind operating with a system of resemblances, to a 'classical' mind operating through the establishment of identity and difference.'[28] It is sufficient for

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[22] Bossy 1982: 4.
[23] Bossy 1982: 6.
[24] Bossy 1982: 5.
[25] Bossy 1982: 8.
[26] Bossy 1982: 8.
[27] Bossy 1982: 12.
[28] Bossy 1982: 13.

our purposes at this point to note that the shift in sense of the term
religion may be part of a wider detachment from a Christian understand-
ing of the world.

A heightened awareness of religious plurality and a dissatisfaction with
the locally dominant religious tradition are not conditions unique to the
European Enlightenment. If we are right in identifying these as causes of
changes in the concept of religion then we should expect to find similar
developments where similar conditions have existed. Peter Biller argues
that in late twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe something like the
modern notion of the religions is apparent in the development of 'the
single nouns used to denote particular "religions" (or cult of particular
"religions")' such as *Christian-ismus, -itas*; *Judaismus*; *gentilitas, pagan-
ia, -ismus, -itas*; *Saracen-ia, -itas, -ismus* and derivative forms of *Maho-
met*, and also in 'short phrases habitually used to name particular
"religions" (or parts thereof), such as *lex christianorum*, "*fides* of", "*secta*
of"'.[29] The rise of Waldensian and Catharinian sects within Christendom
and the advance of the Mongols (whose religion may be described as
developing from a base of theistic shamanism to Islam, Nestorianism and
finally Buddhism), combined to create a sense of religious plurality.
Biller argues that the result was the formation of nouns for new systems:
Valdesia for Waldensianism and *Saracenitas* for Islam. 'For Catharism
there was a renovation of the semantic content of an existing word, *here-
sis*: as used by inquisitors in southern France and when not further quali-
fied (as in "the heresy of") it usually means *Catharism*, and Catharism as
a "system", not simply a set of beliefs.'[30] Biller detects a similar hang
towards 'reification' in the use of *lex*, *fides*, *secta* and even *religio* at this
time and, significantly, he remarks that

there may be a preference for one word for Christianity but another for other
'religions' when comparisons are being made. Thus Stephen of Bourbon (c. 1250–
60) uses *fides* for Christianity and *secta* for others, including Christian heresies
and Islam. However, the Franciscan Roger Bacon – perhaps an extreme example
– is prepared to use the same word, *secta* or *lex*, both for Christianity and the
others in a passage where he compares various 'religions'.[31]

Thus this earlier treatment of the religions as entities, by Christian
writers, stops short of treating Christianity as just another religion, and is
therefore an antecedent, rather than an early example, of the academic
study of religions.[32]

We can conclude then, that the awareness of religious diversity, the
awareness of the possibility of seeing religious beliefs and practices,

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[29] Biller 1985: 360.
[30] Biller 1985: 365.
[31] Biller 1985: 367.
[32] Another example is the work of Tominaga Nakamoto. See below, p. 23.

including one's own, from the outside, is associated with a tendency to regard such beliefs and practices as objective entities, that is, as religions in the modern sense. However, something more was required if this sense of religion was to be established as the primary sense. Smith adverts to this second element when he writes: 'it is not entirely foolish to suggest that the rise of the concept "religion" is in some ways correlated with a decline in the practice of religion itself'.[33] He argues that a critical attitude to religion is apparent in another much earlier partial shift toward a reified sense of *religio*, in the writings of Cicero and, more especially, Lucretius. There is in *De Rerum Natura* and *De Natura Deorum* a suggestion of

that philosophic 'Enlightenment' in which the intellect stands aside from all religious behaviour and contemplates it as an outsider, reflective or critical. There therefore emerges ... a new idea of religion, as a great objective something. It is thought of not as something that one does ... but for the first time as a theoretical entity of speculative interest ... something in which other people are involved.[34]

It is arguable that it is just this sense of a critical detachment from religion which we find in the thinkers of the Enlightenment. The awareness of the plurality of religions certainly contributed to this critical detachment, but there were also other factors, perhaps above all the religious fragmentation of the Reformation and its aftermath.[35]

The development of a critical attitude to religion is already apparent in the changes in the sense of 'religion' that have been considered. In the new sense which it has been given, 'religion' is essentially an outsider's term. So too, with the exception of 'Islam', are the terms by which the particular religions are designated.[36] As outsiders, those who use these terms are already to some degree detached from the reality that they describe using these terms. Indeed, this had to be the case, especially in the context of a religion that makes exclusivist claims, as Christianity did.

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[33] Smith 1991: 19.

[34] Smith 1991: 22.

[35] For evidence of the importance of this factor in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century debates see Harrison's discussion of paganopapism (Harrison 1990: 144–46). For evidence of its continuing importance in the study of religion see Jonathan Z. Smith's discussion of Protestant anti-Catholic apologetics in the comparison of early Christianity with the religions of late antiquity (Smith 1990: 34). See also Cavanaugh 1995 (discussed below, p.24).

[36] Although of course Islam was long referred to as 'Mahometanism'. It was not until the nineteenth century that the self-designation of Islam began to be used by those who commented on it in the West, and even now the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1971) defines Islam as 'The religious system of Mohammed, Mohammedanism'. Julius Lipner has suggested that 'it is disputable, to say the least, in what sense 'Hindu' is an outsider-designation'. (Lipner 1996: 112). Like 'religion', 'Hinduism' is a term which is derived from insider-usage but transformed in its use by outsiders.

For if the religious beliefs and practices of other peoples are to be admitted as religions, and not as heresies, or mere illusions, the question of their relative truth cannot be decided in advance.[37] Indeed, until they are admitted *as religions*, and thus as rivals to Christianity, itself conceived as a religion, the question of their relative truth cannot even be raised, for it is already decided in advance. In his account of early European approaches to Buddhism, Christopher Clausen writes that 'the assumption that the world was divided between one true faith and many pagan cults' had to be abandoned before what he calls open-minded discussion of another religion could take place.[38]

Thus in what, following Samuel Preus and others, I take to be one of the foundational works in the modern academic study of religion, David Hume's *The Natural History of Religion*, the first move is to set aside the question of the 'foundation of religion in reason' in favour of determining its 'origin in human nature'.[39] This detachment from religious faith may be methodological, as in the later phenomenologists' bracketing of such questions, or it may be existential, as was probably the case with Hume and a number of other early writers in the academic study of religions. Hume does, of course, consider the rational foundation of religion elsewhere and it is not insignificant that when he does his attitude is fundamentally sceptical.

That the description of the religions as religions already implies a critical distancing from religious faith has not gone unnoticed by adherents of the religions. Hence they have refused the application of the term to their own complexes of religious beliefs and practices. As part of his argument against the use of the term 'religion', Smith cites the objections of representatives of Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam to its use in their case.[40] Thus what this new vocabulary signifies is a refusal by those who began to use it to accept Christian theology's account both of Christianity itself and of the other religions. As Smith points out, for Zwingli,[41] Christianity is not the true religion, it is the only religion, or rather it is not 'a religion' at all. 'True religion' is what those who are within the church *have*; those outside are merely

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[37] Cf. Biller's remarks on the 'canon lawyers' use of *heretici* in a broad sense to include Jews and pagans'. (Biller 1985: 362, n.53).

[38] Clausen 1973: 13.

[39] Hume 1993: 134. Jonathan Z. Smith likewise finds Hume's work emblematic of 'the process of transposing "religion" from a supernatural to a natural history, from a theological to an anthropological category' (Smith 1998: 273). Cf. Segal 1994: 225.

[40] It is true that the application of the term 'religion' to these traditions, especially to the Indian traditions, has also been disputed by those who are not adherents, but this is usually for different reasons and hence does not detract from the significance of the *adherents'* refusal.

[41] Smith 1991: 35.

idolaters. But when Christianity is taken to be one among a number of entities of the same kind, this understanding cannot be maintained. Preus writes: 'The very last bastion of theology (or religious thought) was, and is, its claim to be able to explain *itself*, on "its own terms" ... the birth of the modern study of religion occurred at the point where that claim was effectively challenged – where the same procedures for explanation that seemed accurate and fruitful in the realms of nature and social institutions were now applied to religion itself.'[42] Likewise Peter Harrison argues that just as 'the world became the object of scientific enquiry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through a process of desacralization, so too, religious practices (initially those of other people) were demystified by the imposition of natural laws.'[43] The clearest indication of when this happened in the West was when Christianity became one religion among others; one species of the genus 'religion'. Significantly, those who continue to accept certain theological accounts of the religions are often among those who resist the description of Christianity as a religion.

The second part of *The Meaning and End of Religion* is devoted to Smith's reasons for thinking that the changes he has detected in the meaning of 'religion', and the associated rise of terms for designating the particular religions, are to be regretted. The substance of his argument is that

The custom of interpreting other people's religious life under a series of rubrics of the several religions, some of them named, is Western, is recent, and has already passed its zenith ... In the European Age of Reason, when these concepts were developed and flourished, men might think to conceptualize their world without much sense of the numinous or much dissolvent sense of historical flux. Now that the presuppositions of that particular time and place are superseded or outflanked, we may well seek more appropriate terms than theirs in which to depict man's variegated and evolving encounter with transcendence.[44]

Our understanding has moved on, our terminology has yet to catch up. The use of 'religion' and its associated concepts is, says Smith, misleading not only for the historian of religions but also (and here we should remember that Smith is a theologian as well as an historian of religion) for 'the man of faith'.

Smith critiques the use of 'religion' as 'Western', as 'recent' and as having 'passed its zenith'. 'Religion', 'the religions' and the names given to the religions are modern, Western concepts. They were developed in response to a specific set of circumstances in the modern West, and for a specific purpose. The circumstances were characterized by an awareness of religious diversity and a critique of the locally dominant religious

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[42] Preus 1987: xvi.
[43] Harrison 1990: 5.
[44] Smith 1991: 132–4.

tradition, the purpose was the analysis of the religions that presented themselves without reference to the explanations provided by the religious tradition that was being criticized, that is, the early academic study of religions. However, the fact that the concepts are Western is in itself no objection to their use. To the extent that other cultures find themselves in a similar situation and have a similar purpose, it is likely that they will develop comparable concepts. We have seen that on two occasions where there have been partially similar circumstances in the West's past, i. e. the late twelfth- and thirteenth-century, and the time of Cicero and Lucretius, there has been a partial shift towards development of these concepts. Smith himself notes evidence of similar developments in other cultures.[45]

Thus the custom, which Smith would have us abandon, 'of interpreting other people's religious life under a series of rubrics of the several religions' is not as recent as he believes it to be. In fact, the need for some objective grasp of religion, some view of the religions from the outside, of religion as a whole, has been felt periodically in the history of the Western intellectual encounter with religion. The circumstances in which this need has been felt usually include an increased awareness of religious diversity. In the recent history of the West, this sense of religious diversity combined with a powerful critique of the dominant Western religion to produce an approach to religion that is distinctively modern and Western, although not without precedent in the West, nor without parallel elsewhere. The eighteenth-century Japanese thinker Tominaga Nakamoto is said by Michael Pye to have made 'a profound contribution to the historical, descriptive, and theoretical study of religion without seeking to provide a normative statement on behalf of any one tradition to which he was beholden.' Pye stresses that Tominaga's was 'an entirely autonomous achievement' for he 'could not but be unaware' of the European Enlightenment. The parallelism, he concludes, 'inescapably suggests that there is a tendency, given certain intellectual and social presuppositions, for a historical and theoretical (and in this sense rational) critique of religion to emerge'.[46]

Believing that the use of terms such as 'Buddhism', 'Christianity', 'religion' is already past its zenith, Smith declares that he is 'bold enough to speculate whether these terms will not in fact have disappeared from

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[45] See Smith 1991: 58–9 and 249–50. That in some cases contact with the West has been one of the elements in the situation leading to the development of a concept of 'religion', does not invalidate the point. One of the significant elements of the situation in which the West developed the concepts of religion and the religions was increased contact with other cultures. See also Pye 1992 and O'Connell 1973.

[46] Pye 1992: 27–28.

serious writing and careful speech within twenty-five years.'[47] More than forty years after this was written, one can only say that if this prediction was based on an extrapolation from the claim that the use of these terms is past its zenith, then that claim must be false. Scholars of religion continue to use them. In fact, to abandon these concepts would be to engage in something other than the academic study of religions. It would be a symptom of what Donald Wiebe has called the failure of nerve in the academic study of religion, by which he means 'the rejection of the scientific/academic goals it originally espoused'.[48] If one accepts that these concepts, or something very like them, are essential to the academic study of religions, then Smith's insistence that they are 'inadequate for the man of faith'[49] only reinforces the point that the aims of the academic study of religion are implicitly contradictory to those of theology (the province of Smith's 'man of faith').

Among the factors usually singled out as significant in the background to the rise of the academic study of religions are: the European voyages, first of exploration and later of conquest, which began in the fifteenth century, the interest of the deists in other religions, and the development of missionary activities, in particular those of the Society of Jesus from 1540. All of these were important, and together they led to an increasing appreciation of the reality of other religions. They would not, however, have led to an *academic* study of religion[50] had they not also contributed to a critical detachment from a Christian worldview, which was also dependent upon other factors such as the rise of science, the wars of religion,[51] and the revival of classical learning.[52] This critical detachment

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[47] Smith 1991: 195.

[48] Wiebe 1984: 402.

[49] Smith 1991: 128.

[50] The sheer fact of religious diversity had long been apparent. Judaism, Islam and other near-Eastern religions such as Manichaeism had long been known to the Christian West, as had the paganism on its northern borders. Internally, religious diversity was apparent in the Christian heresies and in the religions of antiquity with which the West had been refamiliarized in the Renaissance.

[51] William T. Cavanaugh has argued that the European wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were not so much wars of religion as wars of state: 'These wars were not simply a matter of conflict between "Protestantism" and "Catholicism", but were fought largely for the aggrandizement of the emerging State over the decaying remnants of the medieval ecclesial order.' (Cavanaugh 1995: 398). Nevertheless they can be seen to have contributed to the development of a new sense of religion: 'What is at issue behind these wars is the creation of "religion" as a set of beliefs which is defined as personal conviction and which can exist separately from one's public loyalty to the state.' (*Ibid.*, 403). In the light of our comment that adherents of the religions often reject the description of their complexes of beliefs and practices as 'religions', it is noteworthy that Cavanaugh resists this notion of religion in the name of 'The Church as Body of Christ [which] transgresses both the lines which separate public from private and the borders of the nation-states'. (*Ibid.*, 416).

from a religious worldview is evident in the new sense of 'religion' as 'a great objective something ... a theoretical entity of speculative interest ... *something in which other people are involved*.'[53] This change in the concept 'religion' thus produced religion as a new object of theoretical interest.

This account of the origin of the modern sense of 'religion' reveals its status as a term drawn from a specific religious tradition, but transformed by its rejection of the self-understanding of that tradition. The 'process of extracting the word from its Christian overtones' has, however, been drawn out, and the extended arguments over whether or not Hinduism is a religion will be analysed as evidence of a failure to complete that process, i. e. the failure to detach the concept of religion from the model of one particular religion. First, however, we need to analyse the proper status of the concept.

The future of 'religion'

It has been shown, by analysis of the history of the concept, that 'religion' in its modern sense properly belongs to a worldview which separates religion from other aspects of human existence, such as 'art' or 'economics'. Two corollaries follow: first, that there is a certain tension between this worldview and religious worldviews which deny that these aspects of life either can or should be separated from each other, and second, that this way of categorising the world is imposed upon the world arbitrarily, it does not emerge from the world itself. 'Religion' is not a natural kind. The first point was only gradually realized by the religious, who, as shown by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, tend to resist the use of the term 'religion'. The second point underlies Jonathan Z. Smith's claim that 'Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.'[54] This claim is glossed by Russell McCutcheon as the contention that 'the category of religion is a conceptual tool and ought not to be confused with an ontological category actually existing in reality. In other words our use of the scholarly category religion is theoretically based, a model not to be confused with reality – whatever that may or may not be.'[55]

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[52] On the conditions for the emergence of the academic study of religion see Khan 1990.

[53] Smith 1991: 22.

[54] Smith 1982: xi.

[55] McCutcheon 1997: viii.

The failure to appreciate the proper status of the concept of religion has produced interminable disputes both among the religious, and among scholars of religion. For those within the religions, the failure to realize that it is not the case that some beliefs or practices 'really' are, or are not, religious, has produced insoluble arguments over issues relating to conversion, authority and inculturation. The belief that 'there is a norm by which we can distinguish between social actions and the purely religious',[56] produced the 'Chinese rites' and 'Malabar rites' controversies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which have recurred in various guises elsewhere.[57] The same belief obscured the early nineteenth-century debate over *satī*. For the British the question of whether or not *satī* was a religious practice had to be resolved before they could legislate to ban it.[58]

For scholars of religion the failure to realize that it is not the case that some beliefs or practices 'really' are, or are not, religious, has produced insoluble arguments over issues relating to the definition of religion, and the drawing of boundaries between religions. It may be that for the religious, the belief that some things 'really' are religious while others are not, cannot be given up; it is my contention that scholars of religion *must* give up this belief.[59] This will involve giving up the belief that religion is a *sui generis* phenomenon, and integrating the study of religion with the other human sciences.

The category of religion embodies a principle of selection, usually selection for the purposes of comparison. To say that (what we call) Hinduism is a religion is to say something about how we intend to

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[56] 'quod regulam, qua dignosci debent, quae sint apud hos Indos politica et quae sacra.' Nobili 1971: 154/155.

[57] On the Chinese rites see Minamiki 1985 and Rule 1986. On the Malabar rites see Neill 1985: 75–79 and below, p.60f. Related questions arising from the false distinction between religion and culture arose in the context of Christian mission in Africa. In west Africa, for example, the worship of *orisa* (subordinate gods) was forbidden to Christian converts as part of their prior idolatrous religious practices. 'The *orisa*, however, though personalized gods, are not clearly separated from *ogun* – charms and medicine colloquially called "juju". Some *orisa* are barely more than what works in a particular field, while some *ogun* must be invoked in order to work, or require incantations to be said. The category *ogun* includes all the extensive pharmacopoeia of the Yoruba, whose purpose was obviously good, and which was seen as a simple parallel to European medicines. *A line had to be drawn somewhere between devils and medicine.*' Peel 1968: 127, emphasis added.

[58] The question was in fact never resolved, rather it was determined that even if *satī* was a *religious* practice, it was not sanctioned by the most authoritative texts, and therefore could be banned without contravening the British policy of non-intervention in indigenous religious affairs.

[59] Cf. Laidlaw's comments on 'the question ... are these people really Buddhist, Jain, or whatever?' The question, he argues, 'is, ultimately, either theological or vacuous' (Laidlaw 1995: 6).

approach it, not about what Hinduism is. That is, we intend to approach it in the same way as we approach, for example, (what we call) Judaism. This is *not* because we already know that Judaism 'really' is a religion, and are therefore approaching Hinduism to determine whether it too, 'really' is a religion. Rather, it indicates only that we have made a similar decision to approach (what we call) Judaism as a religion. It is equally possible to approach Judaism, for example, as a system of social organization, a political ideology or as a cuisine.[60] Each of these approaches would tell us something different about (what we call) Judaism. The decision to adopt such an approach is arbitrary, except with respect to our purposes. That is, there is no way of making a compelling case for describing (what we call) Judaism as a religion rather than as a cuisine, without making reference to our own interests, our reasons for bothering to think about Judaism at all.[61] The decision to approach what we call Judaism as a religion can be justified only in terms of whether the results fulfil *our* purposes in making the approach.

The cumbersome way of speaking about the object of our study as 'what we call Hinduism' or 'what we call Judaism', indicates that there is a double process of selection going on when we describe Hinduism as a religion. The description of Hinduism as a religion indicates that we have chosen to approach the selection of data we have made and have chosen to call Hinduism, in the same way as we have chosen to approach the selection of data we have made and have chosen to call Judaism. 'Hinduism', 'Judaism', and 'religion' itself, may only be defined stipulatively.[62] Hinduism does not exist, except as a selection of data for a particular purpose.[63]

The representations which we make of religions may be understood by analogy with the process of cartography. Our scholarly constructions of Hinduism are partial models of a vast collection of historical and contemporary beliefs and practices of a group or groups of people known for at least several centuries as 'Hindus'. Likewise, a map of India is a partial model of a vast space designated as India.[64] The mountains, plains

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[60] The last is not as flippant a choice as it may first appear. Cf. Jonathan Z. Smith's comments on 'culture as cuisine' (Smith 1982: 39–40).

[61] Which reasons may include, but do not necessarily have to take as determinative, the self-designation of those who call themselves Jews.

[62] Such definitions, if they are to be useful, will not be simply arbitrary, but will make reference to the ways in which the words are already used. See Baird 1991a: 6–8.

[63] The criticism that early European scholars distorted Hinduism is therefore entirely beside the point. We can say that their selection of data does not serve our purposes, but the selection of data that *we* make and identify as 'Hinduism', can no more be identified with what Hinduism 'really' is, than can their selection.

[64] The analogy is not coincidental. The first maps of what Edney calls India *per se*, i. e. 'the lands south of the entire circuit of northern mountains and including the lands west of the Indus' appeared at the same time (in the second decade of the eighteenth century) as

and rivers which are mapped exist (or have existed), just as people who worship Śiva, practice Agnyādhāna and believe Kṛṣṇa to be an avatāra of Viṣṇu exist (or have existed). 'India', however, exists only as a concept, and the same is true of 'Hinduism'.[65] The map should not be mistaken for reality. Moreover it is impossible to judge the accuracy of the map without reference to the intentions or purposes of the map-maker. A map indicating, for example, the 'Territorial Growth of the East India Company, to 1843'[66] may fulfil its purpose admirably (and thus be an accurate map) but be of no use whatsoever in indicating, say, the distribution of temples. Matthew Edney's comments on the kind of 'unconscionable' maps satirized by Jorge Luis Borges,[67] are equally pertinent for the ideal of an 'undistorted' representation of Hinduism:

Even if it were epistemologically possible to construct the perfect, totalizing knowledge archive, it would have been institutionally impossible actually to do so. The possibility of constructing a map at 1:1 ignores the reasons why specific institutions make maps in the first place: to stand in for, to represent, the territories they depict in a wide variety of personal, social and cultural exchanges. Not only would a map at 1:1 be impractical ('the farmers objected: they said it would ... shut out the sunlight'), it would be quite useless ('so now we use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well').[68]

We cannot *use* a map on a 1:1 scale (*viz* 'undistorted' view of Hinduism), nor can we use the country itself (*viz* Hinduism) as its own map, it will *not* do nearly so well. What then are we aiming for in the study of religion? Not a one-to-one mapping of reality, not total knowledge. This is a fantasy which must be given up. What we ought to aim for is a collection of useful, partial, maps. The accuracy, and hence the usefulness of those maps, can only be judged by reference to their scale, that is, with reference to the purposes of the mapmaker. Given that a 1:1 map is not only impossible, but also useless, we must acknowledge that while the maps may be more or less partial, they are *always* partial. It

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the Jesuits were first framing the concept of Hinduism as a pan-Indian religion. Thus the idea of India and the idea of Hinduism were coeval. See Edney 1997: 5–8 and p.162f. below.

[65] Although both have been, of course, defined, and exist, also as legal entities. While the boundaries of each for political or legal purposes can be defined, these may or may not coincide with the boundaries preferred by geographers or scholars of religion respectively.

[66] Such a map is reproduced in Edney 1997: xx.

[67] Borges 1964: 90.

[68] Edney 1997: 25. Edney quotes Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (London: Macmillan, 1894): 169. For an examination of the paradoxes raised by constructing a 1:1 map see Eco 1994.

is not even the case that the less partial a map is the more useful it is. '"Map is not territory" – but maps are all we possess.'[69]

'Religion' and the representation of Hinduism

Given that we can only judge the accuracy, or rather the usefulness, of any representation of 'Hinduism' with reference to the purposes for which it was constructed, two questions arise. First, what were the purposes of those writers who first constituted Hinduism as an object of study, and second, what are (or what ought to be) our purposes in approaching Hinduism. We will return to the first question in the course of examining significant writers on Hinduism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. With respect to the second question, I would argue that here it is not enough to say that our purpose is, or ought to be, to give an accurate representation of Hinduism (with the implied ideal of an undistorted view of Hinduism in the back of our minds). On the carto-graphic analogy, this would be like saying our purpose is to draw an accurate map of India (with the implied ideal of a map on a scale of 1:1). We must specify our purposes more closely. And this is where we can offer a relevant critique of early writers on Hinduism: that they under-stood themselves to be offering an accurate representation of Hinduism, without taking into account the perspective from which they viewed it.

The ideal of an undistorted view of Hinduism, or for that matter of any religion, is a *religious* ideal. The ideal of such an understanding of the way things are, unmediated by language (and thus by concepts which have a specific history), is very old, going back in the western tradition at least to Plato. However, as Jonathan Z. Smith points out, in its more recent forms it is, 'above all, a modulation of one of the regnant Protes-tant *topoi* in which the category of inspiration has been transposed from the text to the experience of the interpreter, the one who is being directly addressed *through* the text ... As employed by some scholars in religious studies it must be judged a fantastic attempt to transform interpretation into revelation.'[70] The same ideal is apparent in the view of religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon, rather than as a scholarly abstraction from an historical flux in which there are no underlying essences. In the next chapter I will examine the consequences of the continuing influence of a (Protestant Christian) religious view of the nature of a religion in the debate over 'Hinduism'.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that this account itself is not exempt from the perspective outlined above – it is an attempt to recover a

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[69] Smith 1978: 309.
[70] Smith 1990: 55.

particular history of the study of religion and, 'as with any map, it has depicted some things by leaving others invisible.'[71]

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[71] Biggs 1999: 398. Cf. David Chidester's comment that, '[u]navoidably, any disciplinary history of the academic study of religion will be invented rather than merely discovered. Its narrative sequences inevitably will be devised in the present to serve present intellectual or institutional purposes' (Chidester 1996: xii).