

Report

**“Religious Studies—What’s the Point?” Conference,  
Lancaster University 15th - 16th December 2003**

---

**Gary R. Bunt**

*PRS-LTSN*

*University of Wales, Lampeter*

---

The *Religious Studies—What’s the Point?* Conference was hosted by Lancaster University, and supported by PRS-LTSN. It attracted over 50 participants, from the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States. The conference started from a consideration of the impact of Ninian Smart on Religious Studies (RS), focusing on issues crucial to the field at the beginning of the 21st century. A central premise was that studying religion in comparative contexts is a worthwhile exercise, which can widen horizons and deepen understandings of the world around us. It continued into an exploration of contemporary arguments of whether ‘religion’ is a viable topic for analysis, and whether ‘Religious Studies’ should exist at all as a field of study. Between these perspectives are a host of questions relating to the ways we study, analyse and teach religion—from ‘universalist’ and ‘comparativist’, to ‘particularist’ positions. Linked to these broader areas of discussion are other basic questions: the language and the terms utilised (or avoided) in the research and teaching of Religious Studies; and especially, how those engaged in the study of religions deal with terms and words that have particularist orientations or value-laden meanings (e.g. fundamentalism, cult, millenarian) specific to certain cultural discourses, which can come to be applied to other cultures and areas.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The following report draws, where possible, on conference abstracts provided by participants. These have been supplemented, where necessary, by the rapporteur’s notes.

Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies

**Volume 3, No. 2, Spring 2004, pp. 161-172**

© Copyright PRS-LTSN, 2004

**Richard D. Hecht (University of California, Santa Barbara)**

***Smart Phenomenological Pedagogy: Ninian Smart and the Teaching of Religious Studies***

One of the great debates in the study of religion has been whether it is possible to do comparative work. The two sides are unlikely to find a synthesis and the debate will go on as it should to make our discipline intellectually challenging and ever exciting. But the discussion usually takes place at the level of writing and research and overlooks the lecture hall. This paper seeks to re-introduce the classroom as the critical venue for the phenomenological and comparative study of religions. Most of our students, on both sides of the pond, come to our classes with comparisons already in their heads. Some notion of the ultimate unity of religions or their similarities or their differences has already fascinated and animated our students long before they hear their first lecture from any of us. Ninian Smart was a master-teacher and his comparative phenomenology was as much a research agenda for his colleagues as a pedagogy for students. Here, we discuss how Smart utilized the comparative and phenomenological study of religions throughout his teaching, not only producing a “theory” of religion but a systematic pedagogy for how best to teach our subject matter.

Ian Reader (Lancaster University) read Hecht’s paper in his absence. It discussed Smart’s emphasis on introductory courses, and the wide range of courses he taught at Santa Barbara. Smart believed that introductory courses should *not* be taught by junior academics, but by senior staff. Smart had a complex understanding of (and discomfort with) the nature of introductory courses, which might be taken as part of a wider Humanities-Social Science degree). It was suggested that an introduction to World Religions was appropriate at the *end* of graduate courses. The notion of epoche was introduced in relation to Smart’s vision of the study of religion, and the defence the boundaries of the discipline.

**Ron Geaves (Chester College):**

***Religion or Religions? The Dilemma of Teaching Religion in a Post-Smart World*** discussed the pressures facing RS, with departments closing and undergraduate numbers falling. Geaves notes that many countries do not have RS as a discipline. This raises questions as to the relevancy of the subject, in the face of the vocational emphasis placed on higher education by the government. Questions emerge as to the motivations for studying religion, and whether they are met.

Modularisation is pushing RS away from subject specialists. Vocationalism in RS has few indicators of success, as RS is not a vocational subject. It can be linked to students' personal self-development, and has emancipation potential. Industry may require RS skills, away from conventional system organisation. Smart saw RS as poly-methodic and plural in nature, with religion being a key to cultural understanding: scholars have 'something to say' on significant topics, such as '9-11', ethics and globalisation. RS can contribute to discussions on politics, conflict, equality and minority ethnic struggles within multicultural environments. It can also stress issues of syncretism in association with the study of religion(s). RS can also make interdisciplinary links, for example with media and medical academia.

**John Achterkirchen (University of California, Santa Barbara)**  
**'Our Literature is a Substitute for Religion, and so is our Religion'**

Our literature is a substitute for religion, and so is our religion" T.S. Eliot,  
*A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry*

In address to "the point" of religious studies, to the question of *why*, as in *why religion rather than anything else*, we may find that religion has not yet as such been questioned or addressed—will we ever ask the question of religion? It may be that religion will always be a "yet to come", an "as promised." Perhaps, to let religion speak on its own behalf in the stead of our speaking for it must be, and not without a certain irony, a pedagogical proposition.

In the encroachment of the current century, for religious studies, that kind of questioning of religion (and therefore, religious studies) may or may not be possible has become irreducibly pertinent. How can we interrogate religion? If we can *regard* religious studies, where in relation to the discipline are we then positioned? What sort of exteriority, what sort of objectivity (that may or may not be acceptable) can we not help but implicate as necessary for religious studies, in the analysis of that which postulates itself as extra-contextual?

It seems then, that we are perhaps always within the study of the study of religion—can we scholars of the infinite then avoid an infinite regression and self-reference? Religious Studies is religious in more ways than one: via *religio*, it is a kind of worship, and, in the sense of *religare*, an iteration, a rereading, a recontextualising. In our more than justified veneration of the work of Ninian Smart, we must also abandon him in our very act of veneration—a true sacrifice. Only in this way, in sacrifice, in substitution, as an effigy, may we engage religion. As exponents of religious studies, we cannot help but use this effigy, this project.

However, as has been suggested by Jacques Derrida, religion cannot be approached it leaves us without recourse at an “absence of horizon. Paradoxically, the absence of horizon conditions the future itself.” (Derrida, *Acts of Religion*). What might be beyond the asymptote remains to be witnessed. The question is then, of course, is it our asymptote, or theirs?

**James Cox (University of Edinburgh)**

***Methodological Agnosticism and the Future of Religious Studies***

The paper asserts that mainstream thinking in Religious Studies over the past thirty years has followed the position that the scholar of religion makes no comment on the truth or falsehood of the beliefs of any religious community. This position, as it was developed by Ninian Smart, has been labelled ‘methodological agnosticism’. A biting criticism of this view has been formulated by Timothy Fitzgerald, who argues that despite its claim to agnosticism, such a method inevitably focuses on the transcendent, since what one remains agnostic about precisely is determined by ‘the transcendental referent’. This is confirmed by Smart’s distinction between religion and world-views, the latter failing to qualify as religion due to a lack of any belief in transcendent realities. Fitzgerald’s criticism is accepted in this paper, but not his conclusion that Religious Studies must be eliminated as a distinct subject in favour of theology or cultural studies. By analysing, the French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger, the author of this paper separates religion from the ‘sacred’ or transcendent by defining religion as the transmission of an authoritative tradition, or what Hervieu-Léger calls ‘a chain of memory’. Although experiences of postulated ‘sacredness’ abound in contemporary society, these can be included under the category ‘religion’ only when they form part of socially identifiable communities, which have been legitimated by authoritative traditions. In this sense, the field called Religious Studies does not define itself with respect to the ‘sacred’, but instead employs scientific principles to study socio-historical manifestations of authoritative traditions.

**John Shepherd (University College of St. Martin’s)**

***Phenomenological Perspectivalism: From Empathy to Criticism***

The point of Religious Studies is to help people to become religiate. Religiate involves a combination of informed understanding of religions, and the exercise of critical skills in their evaluation.

Ninian Smart's influential advocacy of the phenomenological approach to Religious Studies has been widely taken to imply that Religious Studies should be non-evaluative. This is a misunderstanding. For Smart, phenomenological skills are only part of a wider 'science of religion', and the science of religion in turn is only part of Religious Studies. Religious Studies in this broader sense should include evaluating claims about the truth and value of religion. Phenomenological skills enhance understanding of religion; once understood, critical evaluation is appropriate.

This conclusion is to be supported on more general grounds. Promoting skills of critical questioning and argument is integral to our conception of education, and it would be to compromise both academic integrity and intellectual honesty to allow Religious Studies (or, of course, Religious Education) to function as a no-go area for their exercise.

Yet evaluations are not free-floating. They are rooted in particular perspectives. Making these explicit, as part of exploring the judgments they generate, is an important part of the evaluation process. The label 'phenomenological perspectivalism' thus signals the requirement that empathetic understanding be conjoined with critical evaluation—as Smart always intended.”

**Evan Berry (University of California, Santa Barbara)**

***Dimension of Religion and Nature: Ninian Smart on Religion and Ecology***

In his *Dimensions of the Sacred*, Ninian Smart argues that “aspects of our environment can be picked out as divine: a river, a mountain, the sea, the wind ... nature and its parts are portions of the material dimension of religions (276).” Though Smart here discusses nature within the material dimensions of religion, he environment is bound to religion along the moral, political, ritual and experiential dimensions as well. The interactions between religions and environments will be one of the most rich and provocative areas of study for religionists in the years to come. Ninian Smart's prolific work suggests at least two directions for continuing scholarship of/on religion and nature. First, just as Smart uncovers the relationship between 'the land', and religious nationalism, contemporary scholars of religion need to investigate the naturalistic and environmental foundations of modern political systems and social movements. Second, Smart points out the increasing importance of the experiential dimension of religion. We live in a world where ecstatic experiences of nature help shape the contemporary religious landscape, just as the experience of city life influences urban spirituality. Smart's

closing words to *Dimensions of the Sacred* speak perfectly to the importance of the changing relationship of religion and nature: “while we do not sacrifice to Poseidon and are not so afraid of the ocean, there remains the poetry of waves and the bitter taste of salt.” (298).

***Debate and Discussion: Gavin Hyman and Robert Segal (Lancaster University)***

Robert A. Segal: *In Defense of the Comparative Method*

In the field of religious studies, the rejection of the comparative method, at least as traditionally practiced, long antedates postmodernism, but postmodernism, with its focus on the particular, carries this anti-comparativist stance to an extreme. I identify the six main objections commonly lodged against the method and attempt to refute them all—as mischaracterizations either of the method or of the quest for knowledge itself. I then take the case of the most egregious practitioner of the method, J. G. Frazer, and argue that not even he turns out to be guilty of any of the objections lodged against the method. I maintain that the method is not merely permissible but outright indispensable to all scholars of religion—to those seeking the particularities of individual religions no less than to those seeking the universals of religion.

Gavin Hyman: *Response*

In response to Robert Segal’s defence of the comparative method, my aim in this paper was to express some reservations on the comparative method as it has traditionally been employed within the field of religious studies. While recognising that some form of comparativism is unavoidable in any scholarly field, my concern was to draw attention to the difficulties inherent to comparative endeavours, difficulties that have been exacerbated by the loss of confidence in a universal reason which had previously served as an a priori grid through which religious traditions were interpreted and compared. In addition, although comparativism is often portrayed as a ‘neutral’ or ‘innocent’ tool, in practice, it is inevitably accompanied by attempts at ‘explanation’ which are far from innocent and frequently lead to distortions. If the comparative method is to have a future, therefore, it must take account of these challenges and, if it does so, it may well find that it will take a very different form from the one it has taken hitherto.

**L. Philip Barnes (University of Ulster)**

***Does the Academic Study of Religion rest on a Mistake?***

Dr Barnes considers the arguments recently adduced by Timothy Fitzgerald in *The Ideology of Religious Studies* to the effect that the concept of “religion” is not a genuine analytical category in that it fails to denote any distinctive kind of experience or social institution. A comparison is drawn between Karl Barth’s “positivism of revelation” and Fitzgerald’s opposite and equal “positivism of naturalism”. A number of arguments are drawn from the philosophy of language to show that Fitzgerald operates with a cluster of mistaken notions about the nature of linguistic usage and what it is for a term to have a meaning and an application. The paper concludes with some positive observations on the appropriate ways in which the concept of religion and its cognates might be employed in the study of human beliefs and practices.

**Philip Goodchild (University of Nottingham)**

***On ‘Religion’: Speeches to its Cultural Despisers***

The concept of ‘religion’, always notoriously difficult to define, has come under attack in recent years. The charge is that the notion of ‘religion’ as a transcultural category bears little resemblance to cultural formations in non-Western societies. Implicit within the very notion of ‘religion’ is a liberal, ecumenical theology which, when imposed upon other cultures, functions to promote imperialism and neo-imperialism.

This paper seeks to defend our usage of ‘religion’ by launching a counter-offensive: the common framework that unites detractors of ‘religion’ from both Asian studies (such as Richard King and Tim Fitzgerald) and theology (such as Nicholas Lash and Graham Ward) is a broader turn towards ‘culture’ as a category of analysis in the humanities and social sciences. Following the lead of Terry Eagleton, this paper will suggest that ‘culture’ is just as problematic a concept and field of analysis as ‘religion’, and that it participates in the same dynamics as those imputed to religion.

The study of ‘religion’ is part of the internal conversation of the modern West where it successfully names those practices of thought and devotion that address the limits of human experience, whether these are universal such as suffering, disease, madness and death, or culturally-postulated universals, such as creation, law, liberation and enlightenment. Since an ongoing conversation on responses to such limits remains of immense significance, the study of religion remains a unique discipline where the modern West can encounter, critique and be modified by other

cultural traditions, as well as continuing to discuss and develop its own response to the most significant limits of experience.

**Graham Harvey (Open University)**  
***Tribalism or Globalism? The Challenge of Indigenous Religious Traditions to the Study of Religions***

In reviewing my *Shamanism: A Reader* (Routledge, 2003) in the THES (9 May 2003), Ronald Hutton wrote, ‘[t]his work poses, in its starkest form, the biggest question that hangs over modern Western scholarship: whether it is, in fact, the work of a particular tribal culture, committed to its own, subjectively effective, views of the cosmos, or whether it has the responsibility for creating some kind of universal explanatory structure for all humanity. The historic problem is that it is actually designed to be the former, and is struggling to be the latter.’

This demands my more deliberate reflection of the nature of the Study of Religions and its processes, positions and possibilities.

Indigenous religious traditions have been used by many scholars in their theorising about the evolution and contemporary state of religions. With the reassertion of indigenous sovereignty and intellectual (and other) property rights, empowered by post- and anti- colonial assessments of modern and Western tribalism, it is possible that more reciprocal engagements between scholars of religion and indigenous peoples (perhaps as hosts and guests) might contribute to some decisions about what academia, and Religious Studies within it, could be about. Importantly, this is not simply another call to reflexivity but to relationality. Whether tribalism or globalism or something else beckons, Religious Studies and indigenous traditions will play a role in future dialogues.

**Tim Jensen (Southern University of Denmark)**  
***From History of Religions to The Study of Religions to...?—A Critical Survey of the State of Affairs in Denmark***

During the last 30 years the number of religious studies students and scholars has increased from 20 to 1000 and from 4 to 30. Though most scholars and all of the teaching programs, now as then, stress the comparative perspective as well as the philological competence, the study of religion(s), the research done and the programmes taught, most certainly has changed considerably. Most certainly, however, a host of

problems, challenges and even a crisis of identity, follow close behind the successful career of the study of religions.

Under the rubrics “From history of religions to the study of religions”, “From ‘religions in the past and out there’ to contemporary religions right here”, “From texts to informants”, “From philology to fieldwork”, “From the ivory-tower to the cultural wars”, and “From too little interest in religion and the study of religion to too much interest”, the paper tracks and discusses some of the major lines of the development, some of the most important reasons for the changes, and future challenged to the study of teaching of religion(s) in Denmark.

**David Smith (Lancaster University):**

***The Place of Hinduism within Religious Studies: Past, Present and Future***

This paper looks at the place of Hinduism within religious studies by looking at the work of three Indologists who have played a major role in the development of the study of religion: Max Müller, Mircea Eliade and Wendy Doniger. With all three, getting to grips with polytheism is shown to be crucial to their methodologies. Particular attention is paid to the work of Doniger and her pupils, and they are placed in the context of contemporary Hindu fundamentalism. In conclusion, Doniger’s notion of the toolbox approach to the study of religion is especially commended; and it is argued that the variety of approaches called for by the very varied nature of Hinduism would justify a more central place within religious studies for the study of Hinduism than that study has yet achieved.

**Steve Sutcliffe (University of Edinburgh)**

***Putting ‘Religion’ to Work***

This paper treats RS as a case study in comparative disciplinary formation, including a critique of the existing ‘world religions’ typology, and a modest proposal for a new, nominalistic model of category formation combined with anthropological reflexivity.

I start from the observation that RS is an unusually beleaguered field in comparison with other subject disciplines, which I suggest is a multifaceted ‘beleaguerment’ driven in part by the impact on scholars’ stamina of multiple, often incommensurable, public discourses on ‘religion’, in part from persistent essentialist mystifications about what ‘religion’ is and does, and in part from ‘internal’ bureaucratic-economic pressures on the field. The sum—in comparative disciplinary context - is

that, when cuts are in the air, in a choice between RS or some other humanities subject it may be easier to finger the RS department insofar as that department cannot mount a sufficiently compelling comparative theoretical case for its persistence (even expansion!).

In this fundamentally political process, our common category can be either stumbling block or stepping stone. ‘Religion’ as a category differs in degree from other ‘master tropes’ organising neighbouring academic fields, not primarily due to the range of discourses and practices it signifies (although these are formidable), but because of the intensity of affect it triggers, the attendant political contestation of data and interpretations, and - crucially - the extent to which these reflexes are disguised and/or denied, by both practitioners and scholars. In this sense ‘religion’ is a (perhaps uniquely) overloaded semantic category.

Nevertheless, our competence in negotiating these dynamics is *precisely* what marks us out as specialists in ‘religion’. And as JZ Smith suggested in 1991, the paradigmatically unsettled and unsettling nature of the category—including the data of its institutional histories and scholarly associations—is precisely what makes ‘religion’ potentially a leading subject in the human sciences, in that its contestations conform perfectly to the critical humanities premise of ‘training in argument about interpretation”’

## Closing Discussion

There was a broad-ranging discussion at the conclusion of the conference. Some of the themes are summarised below. Comments have not been attributed.

- The competitive element of universities was not represented at the conference.
- The title of the conference was not intended to be implicitly negative in nature, rather to challenge ourselves (RS academics) and the field.
- Some were surprised that 9-11 did not come up more in the conference.
- In dealing with contemporary issues, there is a danger of the loss of the historical and the linguistic issues. Language(s) in religion are neglected, and this can lead to category mistakes and misrepresentation. Language studies have been driven out of religion.

- Teaching issues have frequently been neglected, or forgotten because of other pressures (i.e. Research Assessment Exercises). The profile of classroom agendas should be raised.
- Responses to 9-11 should be kept in perspective.
- There is a lack of historical and comparative analysis of religions in the media.
- RS academics should be better equipped to respond to the media.
- The question emerged of whether an academic should ‘care’ about a religion in order to teach it; the ‘commitment’ issue in RS needs to be addressed further. Do you need pre-existing beliefs to give a critique of religion(s)?
- There is also a place for those without ‘commitment’. Cynicism can provide more insight than empathy (!).
- Regarding Smart’s comments that senior members of staff should be teaching introductory courses: seniority doesn’t necessarily translate as competency.
- There is a need to distinguish between bad categorization and categorization per se.
- Marketing and recruitment: can we translate (elements of) these discussions to students, potential students, funding bodies, and institutions? Where do we go to from here?
- The ‘system’ assumes pre-determined ‘marketable’ students. How does this fit into the RS model? Does conformity to this model suppress educational aspirations (and results). To what extent does this influence the discipline, and its structure?
- The government and funding councils are “on holiday from reality”.

- In the UK system, many students do a cross-section of subjects, of which RS is a small component of a wider degree. What skills can be passed on in this exposure? How does it influence the teaching of RS? RS skills can also be passed through to other disciplinary areas: for example, psychodrama exercises applied in business studies contexts. RS can challenge the pre-programmed skills of some subject areas. There are opportunities for cross-disciplinary discussions and developments (for example, relating to pedagogy and training). The multicultural angle of RS can be significant in relation to employability and (specific) career development.
- External pressures, and the constant need to ‘justify’ activities, result in economic and intellectual crisis.
- At future events (for example, BASR 2004) these issues can be further explored.