

Introductory Remarks on the Academic Study of Islam

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[The following remarks were presented at the opening of the “Understanding Islam” workshop that was sponsored by the International Honors Program of the University of Alabama, held in Morgan Auditorium on Saturday, January 18, 2003.]

Since we are here today to talk about Islam, it makes sense to me that we first stand back a bit and address the wider issue regarding just who constitutes this “we” who is here today in Morgan Auditorium. For “we” are people affiliated with, enrolled in, and employed by a public university. And, as carried out in such a publicly-funded setting, the study of any religion is a very particular sort of thing. So, in these introductory remarks (summarized in a handout that you all have), I hope to sketch briefly some of the requirements that are routinely placed on those who engage in the study of religion in a setting such as ours.

In outlining these requirements, I hope you pay particular attention to the fact that at no time do I make reference to the study of religion being objective or neutral; however, neither do I think it is bogged down in competing, subjective disclosures about this or that feeling, nor do I think it is a pursuit where just about “anything goes.” Although many scholars appeal to objectivity as the prime criterion of an intellectual field, I do not see how a forty-one year old middle-class white male with a (slightly) receding hairline, such as myself, could ever leave all that behind, jump out of his skin, and somehow make claims from a vantage point high above the clouds of historical change. If we are all hopelessly trapped within just these skins, at just this historical moment, then how do we engage in the study of religion in a public university in a manner that avoids simply shouting stereotypes back and forth at each other? That’s our

challenge today.

Although the academic study of religion originated over one hundred years ago in Europe, it has thrived in the U.S. only since the mid-1960s. To understand how this field is practiced today, you must conjure up in your minds that earlier context: it is the era of the civil rights movement; the Korean War is a very recent memory; the Cold War is raging and Vietnam is entering the nightly news. What was formerly taken to be a uniform public square is now being seen as populated by pretty diverse groups with potentially competing interests; anti-war protestors will be organizing on campuses; students are becoming interested in learning more about the so-called “mystic East”; much like today, then, forty years ago it was increasingly difficult to pretend that the rest of the world did not exist or that it had little or no relevance for us here at home.

It was from out of this context that a number of court cases were brought forward in the U.S., cases that challenged such things as equal access in the public school system. Although a number of these cases had direct bearing on race (such as the famous 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*), some of them also had bearing on issues of relevance to us here this morning: the role of religious instruction in public education. Anyone a bit older than me who attended public school in the U.S. probably recalls when the day’s opening exercises included such things as the Lord’s Prayer and the reading of selected Bible verses. In the late-1950s in Pennsylvania, there was a family named Schempp who believed that this routine practice was improper; they believed that their children should not have to participate in what was a religious ritual reflecting a specific set of beliefs with which they themselves did not necessarily agree. Of course, the school board had anticipated this, allowing children to be

excused from the opening exercises so long as they had a note from their parents. But, as taxpayers who were supporting the school no less than the parents of the other children, Mr. and Mrs. Schempp believed that the school had no right to engage in activities that required some students to exempt themselves. They took the school board to court. Eventually, after the dust had settled from various appeals, the case landed on the docket of the U.S. Supreme Court and, in a landmark decision from 1963, the majority of the court agreed with the Schempp family.

The case against the school board was based on the opening to the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment, which reads: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...." The Court read the Amendment to state that the elected government has no right to enforce, support, or even appear to encourage any particular religion, nor does it have the right to curtail its citizens' religious choices and practices. It was therefore understood to say that all citizens of the U.S. have the absolute right to believe in any or even no religion whatsoever. In siding with the Schempp family, the Court decided that, as a publicly funded institution charged to include and not exclude the members of a diverse, taxpaying citizenry, the school board was infringing on the rights of its students, not just by supporting a specifically Christian worldview but, more importantly perhaps, by supporting a religious worldview in general.

But what has a case that revolves around prayer in a public high school got to do with us today at the University of Alabama? Well, Justice Clark, the Supreme Court justice who wrote the Schempp decision on behalf of the Court's majority, stated that, although any form of religious indoctrination carried out in publicly funded schools was illegal, ones "education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to

the advancement of civilization.” The majority of the justices therefore interpreted the First Amendment to state that, although the government cannot force a student to be either religious or nonreligious, the government certainly can—and probably should—support classes that study the history of particular religions, compare two or more religions, and examine the practical function religion has played in human history.

Fundamental to its decision was the Court’s distinction between religious instruction and instruction about religion. The academic study of religion is therefore concerned to study about religion and religions. The truth question is left entirely to each person to decide for themselves. This is one of the rules to the game we play when we engage in the study of religion here in our setting. As I said earlier, it is not objective and it is not free of all influence. In fact, like the rules of grammar that make any language meaningful, the study of religion has a number of rules that have been developed in order to meet the challenge of creating a public space for a discourse that is something other than a series of competing, autobiographical self-disclosures, a space that is accessible to all and that can exist in the midst of a diverse and sometimes conflicting society.

So, when we play by these rules, just what does the academic study of religion look like? First of all, it is thoroughly anthropological in its focus; in other words, it studies people and not the will of God or of the gods. For, regardless whether the gods do or do not exist, we at least know that people exist, and that they sometimes talk about beings that they call gods. So we can study these human beings, their beliefs, their behaviors, and the social institutions that pass these beliefs and behaviors from one generation to the next. Scholars of religion therefore share the same object of study with scholars throughout the human sciences: we all study human beings. Since human beings do an awful lot of things, scholars divide up the intellectual labor by

tackling specific subsets of these beliefs and behaviors, doing so in a purely descriptive manner, reporting without judging the suitability or appropriateness of the beliefs and behaviors under examination. For instance, whether or not it is right that sacrifice is practiced, we nonetheless find rituals involving both the practice and the symbolism of sacrifice the world-over and throughout human history. Can we accurately describe these behaviors as well as what the participants say about their own behaviors? Why do they say they do it? Can we then move on to compare these beliefs and behaviors, not looking for the best or the worst, but instead, looking for striking or surprising similarities and differences? Having found just these similarities, or just those differences, can we finally attempt to explain them; can we see them to be the result of differing contexts, differing psychologies, differing economic systems, etc? Whether the gods exist or not, and whether this or that way of worshiping them is better or right, are therefore questions that do not occupy the scholar of religion, since there are literally thousands of private institutions here in the U.S. where the goal is to provide authoritative answers to just these questions. Just as the political scientist studies the ways in which power and privilege are institutionalized and contested in a society, rather than persuading you to become a Democrat, a Republican, or a member of the Green Party, so too the academic study of religion in a public university is rigorously descriptive and cross-culturally comparative.

Which brings us back to the academic study of Islam, the second largest and one of the fastest growing religions. Today, roughly 1.2 billion people, in 56 different countries, identify themselves as Muslim. Contrary to popular belief here in the U.S., only about 20% of the world's Muslims reside in the countries of the Arab world; although this is indeed the region to which we trace the historical beginnings of Islam and the region in which its most important

cities and ritual sites are located, there are nearly as many Muslims in Indonesia alone as there are in all of the Middle East. The vast majority, then, are born and live in such places as Asia, in Africa, and in India. Moreover, Islam is one of the three largest religions in modern Europe, notably in Germany, France, and England. And here in the U.S., it has been estimated that 3 million Muslims live and work.

If the academic study of religion, as practiced here in a public university, is an exercise that focuses on the historical origins, the subsequent development, and the contemporary complexity of the world's many religions, one that avoids rushing to judgment and, instead, listens carefully to the reports and disclosures of the people who actually live the lives about which we happen to be curious, then the roughly 1,400 year history of Islam provides us with an ideal opportunity to practice our nuanced descriptive and comparative skills.

So, as we begin today, please keep a few things in mind: like any good reporter working for something other than a tabloid newspaper, the scholar of religion is a rather timid and modest creature who steers wide of grandiose claims and unproductive stereotypes. Knowing that the world is a complex place characterized by a host of historical and regional differences, we try to avoid making claims about, for example, what all Christians believe or how all Hindus behave; after all, I have no idea what all of you are thinking and feeling, much less 1.2 billion Muslims. We do make generalizations, of course, since that's how we as human beings seem to create knowledge for ourselves, but we ought to be careful always to keep in mind that all of our claims are tentative and our generalizations merely tools to help us make some sense out of a huge body of information. After all, when studying human behavior, unanticipated differences await us around every corner.