

Religion in Five Minutes

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62

Where did the study of religion come from?

Michael Stausberg

There is no one point of origin of the study of religion. It did not just materialize out of nowhere, to remain with us ever since. Let's rephrase the question as 'where, when and why did the study of religion first appear?' These three subquestions are interrelated. The underlying question is: what is the study of religion? There is no simple answer to this question as the aims and methodological and theoretical frameworks of this academic enterprise have changed during the course of its history—and disagreement about its nature and function remain part of the business of scholarship.

The discipline has had different names. There are five main varieties, each reflecting somewhat different agendas and emphases:

- 'Religious studies' is the broadest but also most unspecific denominator—it can include virtually all ways of approaching religion including studying religion for religious purposes.
- 'Comparative religion' emphasizes the desire to go beyond the supremacy of one religion in interpreting religion.
- 'History of religions' highlights an approach that puts religion in historical perspective, for example by embedding the history of Israelite and early Christian religion in the context of Iranian, Mesopotamian and Eastern Mediterranean religions.

- 'Science of religion' is a term that has been used early on and continues to be used mainly by German, Scandinavian, French and Brazilian scholars, but given that the word 'science' in English excludes the humanities it did not have much of a success in Anglophone countries—in the United States the related term 'scientific study of religion' commonly refers to social scientific research on religion, mainly sociological and psychological.
- 'The study of religion' has emerged as a common denominator for non-religious and non-confessional scholarship during the past two to three decades. (I prefer the term 'study of religion(s)' to indicate that since its origins the discipline always aimed at going beyond studying religion in the singular: never just one religion, but at the same time concerned to relate the variety of religions to each other with the singular 'religion' as the theoretical point of reference.)

The canon of academic disciplines, as we know it at most universities today, emerged over time since the first modern research university were established in the nineteenth century. Sociology and social anthropology, for example, only emerged around the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. While the study of history and languages such as Hebrew, Arabic, Greek and Latin has had university chairs for centuries, the first chairs of Sanskrit and archaeology were established in the early nineteenth century; comparative philology, or linguistics, emerged at about the same time as the study of religion/s, namely since the later 1870s.

The establishment of two of the first chairs in the study of religion/s that had a sustainable institutional impact was a side-effect of redefining state/church relationships in the Netherlands and France respectively. In the Netherlands, the constitution of 1848 had separated church and state, and the Higher Education Act of 1876 decreed the de-confessionalization of Dutch faculties (divisions) of theology. As part of this transformation, history of religions and philosophy of religion were introduced as new additional subjects. Chairs in history of religions were established

in Leiden and Amsterdam in 1877. In France in 1885, the faculties of theology were disbanded altogether and a new institution for studying religions was erected in their place. Carried forward by an internationally connected group of scholars, the new academic enterprise soon found institutional recognition across the globe. In the United States, the first department of 'comparative religion' was established in 1892. In Japan, the first department was established in 1905.

The study of religion/s remained a highly international but minor affair until after World War II. In line with the worldwide expansion of tertiary education, the discipline has experienced an unprecedented expansion since the 1960s and 1970s. Departments were founded and grew at an increasing number of universities. The discipline spread to new parts of the globe, for example in some Africa countries and in South Korea. In the United States (soon followed by Canada), cultural, religious, political, and legal developments such as a new interpretation of the First Amendment by the Supreme Court boosted a lasting yet partial process of separation of the discipline from religious frameworks and Christian theology.

About the author

Michael Stausberg is professor of religion at the University of Bergen, Norway. He has published on a broad variety of topics, including early modern intellectual history, the intersections of religion and tourism, the category of magic, theories of ritual and theories of religion, and Zoroastrianism (a pre-Islamic Central Asian and Iranian religion allegedly founded by Zoroaster).

Suggestions for further reading

In this book

See also Chapters 2 (origins of the word religion), 63 (first scholar of religion), and 65 (religious studies v. theology).

Elsewhere

Stausberg, Michael. 'History.' In *The Oxford Handbook for the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, 777–803. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

63

Who was the first scholar of religion?

Michael Stausberg

This question implies another one: what is 'scholarship of religion'? Or even what is 'scholarship'? Any take on these issues results in different answers. Is it sufficient to say that scholarship of religion is any kind of learned study of one's own religion, or would the range of erudition also need to include religions other than one's own? In the former case, would it be required that this study is historical or critical? In the latter case, would it be required that one studies that other religion in a non-polemical manner, not subjecting it to truth-claims put forward by one's own religion? Does 'scholarship of religion' allow for religious perspectives or does it have to be strictly 'secular' and maybe even critical of religion? Does scholarship require specific media? Is a travelogue scholarship? Or maybe not any travelogue but only such travel reports that give precise dates and times and provide sufficient details and are written in a non-sensational, non-deprecatory manner? Or is scholarship limited to books or journal articles? If so, what kind of books and journals? Does any literature count as scholarship or only texts that have references to sources and other texts, or even footnotes? This is not just hair-splitting. Each question addresses different modes of dealing intellectually or academically with religion. And for each variety one could seek to trace a 'first' protagonist.

This is not limited to the West. For example, certain Muslim scholars are sometimes acknowledged as early scholars of religion,