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After world religions: reconstructing religious studies

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This much needed volume to the field of the academic study of religion is edited by Christopher R. Cotter and David G. Robertson who are also the editors-in-chief of the *Religious Studies Project*, a website that produces regular podcast interviews and other resources «on the social-scientific and critical study of religion» (<https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/about/>). As mentioned in the preface, the very idea for the volume originated in the work for that website: in 2013 and shortly after the podcast on «The World Religions Paradigm», interviewing James L. Cox, another podcast interview with several scholars was recorded on «After the World Religions Paradigm...?», with the purpose of discussing how can introductory courses in Religious Studies be taught without making use of the problematic World Religious Paradigm (WRP). This volume gives continuity to that discussion.

The book is divided into three parts, addressing three possible positions teachers of introductory courses on religion might find themselves in, bookended by a foreword by James L. Cox followed by the editors' introduction and an afterword authored by Russell T. McCutcheon.

James Cox briefly discusses how the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith helped to pave the way to criticise the WRP. In the introduction, the editors discuss the history of the WRP as a process of classification of religions, particularly from the sixteenth century onwards, which involved power relations, problematic simplifications, dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and colonial ideology. Importantly, they also address the role of the "Science of Religion" in this process, referring that «in popular discourse, and distressingly academic discourse also, "science" is constructed as a disinterested, objective account of an underlying reality» (p. 5). The authors then overview the critiques of the WRP and the hurdles in bringing change about through those critiques, starting with the deep roots of the WRP in both academic and public discourses.

The first part, «Subversive pedagogies: data and methods», is composed of three chapters and aimed at teachers who, for some reason – ranging from departmental pressure to students' preferences –, must work within the WRP.

In the first chapter, «The Problem of "Religions": Teaching against the grain with "new age stuff"», Steven J. Sutcliffe makes important points about the study and the teaching of religion. To begin with, he argues for a shift to the singular "religion" to avoid the problem that the plural "religions" has «come self-evidently to designate rationalized, multi-dimensional, bureaucratic organizations analogous to multi-national corporations whose leaders are effectively CEOs and whose members are obedient employees» (p. 25). Seeing world religions as a symptom of the conceptualisation of "religions" as «self-contained, bounded and

competitive entities» (p. 26), Sutcliffe uses «“new age” or “holistic” spirituality» (p. 28) to teach about religion, without, however, clearly differentiating between spirituality and religion. Importantly, he calls for the historical scrutiny of pluralised religions as self-evident entities, but also notes, with stark realism, that «students are not generally enthused by history and historiography» (p. 32).

Tara Baldrick-Morrone, Michael Grazziano and Brad Stoddard recognise in the second chapter, «“Not a task for amateurs”: Graduate instructors and critical theory in the world religions classroom», that graduate students are often not in a position to make significant curricular changes to courses. In fact, Wanda Alberts mentions elsewhere that, at Hannover University, for instance, «major changes in the design of the programme have to be approved by different committees in the university administration and may require a new accreditation of the whole programme» (ALBERTS, Wanda – Reconstruction, critical accommodation or business as usual? Challenges of criticisms of the world religions paradigm to the design of teaching programmes in the study of religions. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*. 29 (2017) 448, n. 7). Having to work with the WRP, the authors propose a subversive strategy that uses textbooks on world religions as data, examining how they classify religions and what that classification does. In classes, they show, for instance, how difference is constructed in textbooks and apply the same kind of analysis to historical sources, problematising, for instance, Origen’s discursive strategies in deciding who belonged to the group of «“true Christians”» (p. 44).

In the third chapter, titled «The critical embrace: teaching the World Religions Paradigm as data», Steven W. Ramey shares his experiences of teaching the WRP – a subject ubiquitous in public discourse and which students expect to be taught in – while criticising and deconstructing it at the same time. But a potential side effect is students’ anxiety concerning evaluation, «as some students become concerned about what to study since we spend significant time developing skills» (p. 59), an unintended outcome which is countered by Ramey with several pedagogical strategies.

The second part is titled «Alternative pedagogies: power and politics». Its four chapters are addressed to those teachers who are «in a position to propose introductory courses which do not follow a World Religions model» (p. 14).

Craig Martin’s contribution to this volume, with the title «Religion as ideology: Recycled culture vs. world religions», is of especial relevance to historians. In his pedagogical practice, Martin endeavours to reach a compromise between students’ expectations to learn empirical data and the application of more theoretical questions to those data. Accordingly, one of his courses is titled not «“Christianity”», but «“The Evolution of Jesus”» (p. 66). In that course students are guided through the historical evolution of the representations of Jesus from the New Testament texts to modern society, examining what uses were and are made of those representations and what aims they intend to achieve. In this way, the author destabilises and undermines the essentialisms to which the WRP inevitably leads.

While discourse analysis is used consistently throughout the volume, Teemu Taira brings this methodological tool centre stage in his chapter, «Doing things with “religion”: A discursive approach in rethinking the World Religions Paradigm». Making a parallel with John Austin’s *How to do things with language*, Taira’s alternative approach to circumvent

the WRP «focuses on studying how things are done with “religion”, both intentionally and unintentionally» (p. 78). In the pedagogical enactment of this approach, the author proposes a three-step discursive approach centred on the problematisation and historicization of the concept of world religions, the use of ethnographic studies in the classroom, and the exploration of the category of “religion” and the process of classifying something as “religion”.

In a chapter more philosophically inclined and titled «Looking back on the end of religion: Opening re Marx», Paul-François Tremlett presents a pedagogical programme that guides students through Marxism and Critical Theory towards a critique of an objectifying reason that underlies the WRP which, from a subject-centred stance, classifies religions into discrete and unchangeable entities. The critique is extended to the modernity project as well, and students are further guided through the thinking of Jürgen Habermas, who advocates a «communicative rationality» (p. 102) capable of giving modernity a «moral or ethical content» and, thus, of recovering its «original, emancipatory content» (p. 103).

In «The sacred alternative», Susanne Owen proposes the term “sacred” as an alternative to the WRP due to its advantage of including «marginalized groups and ritual activity that cuts across boundaries established and maintained by the World Religions Paradigm» (p. 107). The author offers a theoretical problematisation of the term and follows the conceptual triad developed by David Chidester and Edward Linenthal of «ritualization, reinterpretation and contestation of “sacred space”» (p. 112). Using it to analyse «the annual Beltane event at Thornborough Henge in Yorkshire» (p. 107), Owen demonstrates how this conceptual triad can show students not only how space is made sacred, but how a space contested by different agents relates to other issues generally omitted in the WRP, such as power relations or identity formation.

Also with four chapters, the third and last part, «Innovative pedagogies: methods and media», takes the critique of the WRP up a notch by forwarding pedagogies that «avoid and problematize the WRP, whilst potentially increasing the transmission and internalization of this critique in the next generation of scholars» (p. 15-16).

In his contribution, «The Desjardins diet for World Religions Paradigm loss», Michel Desjardins presents his pedagogical approach to the course «Food and Religion» at Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada, which is a response to the disconnect the author perceived between «academic discussions engaged with method and theory» and «the realities of the undergraduate classroom» (p. 125), with a significant drop in religious literacy among students. Food is used as a way to demonstrate the nuances of religious practices and destabilise constructs such as the WRP, by revealing, for instance, «self-professed meat-eating Jains, vegetarian Jews, and the Indonesian Muslim community in Pangandaran, Java, that holds an annual ceremony dedicated to the sea goddess» (p. 131). For the purposes of this course’s goals, Desjardins found it more useful to move away from history and archaeology and focus instead on modern, lived religion, particularly through interviews performed by students to «people they do not (always) know» (p. 130). In the introduction, the editors caution that a potential pitfall of using the lived religion approach to challenge the WRP is that it may lead students to think that «subjective interpretations ... are what really matters» (p. 12), a concern not addressed by Desjardins.

David W. McConeghy's contribution, titled «Narrating the USA's religious pluralism: escaping world religions through media», concerns the treatment of American religious history in audiovisual media. An important step of the author's pedagogical programme is to lead students to ask not what religion is, but, instead, «why it mattered that a group identified itself or its actions as religious» (p. 151). While this approach has the advantage of avoiding broad and uncontextualized definitions of religion, it can be difficult to apply to pre-modern times, especially to cultures without an emic description of "religion". A perhaps wider-ranging approach taught by McConeghy is the challenging of consensus narratives. He gives the example of studying the Civil Rights movement not only from the perspective of Martin Luther King Junior, but also from the perspective of Malcolm X, as «even those that were marginalized by more successful narratives have something to contribute that creates a more vibrant picture of how religion has functioned in this country» (p. 150).

Carole M. Cusack's entry in this volume, «Archaeology and the World Religions Paradigm: the European Neolithic, religion and cultural imperialism», is most welcome for bringing an archaeological perspective to the discussion, especially when «archaeological data is rarely used to teach Religious Studies» (p. 156). Archaeology is used by the author to present a pedagogical strategy that works «either within the WRP or as an alternative to it» (p. 156): Cusack focuses on the spread of the European Neolithic culture – which would have included some form of religion or, at least, rituals – to British sites in order to interrogate assumptions about how did "world religions" spread and replace indigenous religions, since «a commonly accepted model of the spread of the Neolithic in Europe is that it spread like a new religion» (p. 162). A limitation of the WRP is that it privileges canonical texts, but the Neolithic was dominated by oral transmission and material culture, and its practices and cultural innovations are accessible only through material remains. As pointed out by the author, enquiring into the uses of monumental structures, which may have ranged from ritual practices to astronomical observations, can lead students to question «what is "science" and what is "religion"» and, thus, «to investigate the important debates within religious studies regarding the secularization thesis» (p. 160). This contribution demonstrates, therefore, how the study of pre-modern cultures can challenge and offer new ideas to the academic study of religion.

In the final chapter, «Complex learning and the World Religions Paradigm: teaching religion in a shifting subject landscape», Dominic Corrywright addresses the challenges the WRP poses to student learning by simplifying and essentialising complex phenomena. The discussion is concerned with issues of classification, representation, and epistemology. The pedagogical strategies presented by the author are particularly interesting and include exercises to deconstruct taxonomies and to investigate the locations and modes of organisation of religions, especially new religious formations. The author also ascribes a relevant role to historical enquiry, by using the historical dimension of extant religions to unmask the stable and essentialist, but ultimately deceptive outlook of the WRP.

The book is concluded with an afterword by Russell McCutcheon in which the author discusses the processes of classification and what they involve, exploring the example of the controversial voting session that removed Pluto from the category of planets to address the processes of classification and their implications. Weighing in on the several contributions to

the volume, McCutcheon sees the contributors engaging with one of two options: discussing «the implications of even thinking that there are such coherent and distinct things as world religions, let alone religion itself» (p. 190) or problematising what is included or left out in the category of world religions.

This volume is certainly an invaluable contribution to the pedagogical and theoretical discussions about how to deal with the World Religions Paradigm in the introduction of the study of religion to undergraduate students, but it is not without its limitations. In an earlier review it was pointed out that the book failed the task heralded by its subtitle (*Reconstructing religious studies*), partly because its contributors are not sufficiently diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, or nationality (FUERST, Ilyse R. Morgenstein – The politics of reconstruction: a review of *After world religions: reconstructing religious studies*. *Religious Studies Review*. 43 (2017) 42). These critiques were addressed by the editors in 2019, in the opening lecture at the XXXIII Jahrestagung der Deutschen Vereinigung für Religionswissenschaft, available on the Facebook page of the “Religious Studies Project” (www.facebook.com/religiousstudiesproject/videos/religious-studies-after-after-world-religions/896753360705383/). At the lecture, titled «Religious Studies after “After World Religions”?», it is explained that the title of the book was first intended as «After World Religions: Reconstructing the Introductory Course in Religious Studies» and that its shorter, final version was suggested by the publisher and accepted by the editors. It is also revealed that the make-up of the group of contributors fell short of what had been initially intended, as getting authors to contribute proved more difficult than anticipated by the editors, thus leading to less diversity.

Additionally, in the second 2013 podcast mentioned above («After the World Religions Paradigm...?»), Steven Sutcliffe referenced the tendency towards the polarisation of the academic study of religion around the approaches of cognitive science and of culturalism as one of the hurdles to teach and research religious formations beyond the WRP. A contribution to this volume from the point of view of cognitive science would have certainly enriched the debate and potentially attempted to reduce the polarisation, but none was included, possibly due to the editorial constraints mentioned by the editors.

Because this volume focuses particularly on theory and methodology, and is addressed to scholars teaching introductory courses in different circumstances, it is often unclear what, if anything, should replace the category of «world religions» and what and how should students be taught about individual religions. To address these issues, a follow-up volume showing how the several approaches would be applied to individual religions would be much welcomed. Perhaps the book *Religions of the world: questions, challenges, and new directions* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2024), of which Steven Ramey – who contributed to the volume under review – is co-author, is already a step in that direction.

It has been noted that history is increasingly absent from the academic study of religion (e.g., RÜPKE, Jörg – History. In STAUSBERG, Michael; ENGLER, Steven – *The Routledge handbook of research methods in the study of religion*. London: Routledge, 2011, p. 285). However, it is fortunate that several contributors value the historical and archaeological approaches, as remarked throughout this review. In fact, the religions of the WRP also fall within the purview of the historical study of religions, as the traditional «world religions» extend back into the ancient world, and sometimes even into prehistory.