

## Beyond the Concepts of the Secular and the Religious

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The U.S. Supreme Court gave the privately owned company Hobby Lobby the authority to deny healthcare coverage to its employees, a decision by a secular authority involving the owner's religious beliefs. In France, the first issue released by the secular magazine *Charlie Hebdo* after the terrorist attack depicted a religious figure declaring, "All is forgiven." In each instance the boundaries between the "secular" and "religious" were transgressed. In the academic study of religion, an additional direction methodology needs to take involves the lens formed by academic concepts and categories as shaped by the historical development of the university's discourses and lines of inquiry. The university is an epistemological project and we look "out there" through concepts and categories formed "in here", inside of the history of "the university". It is another dimension to the problem of the insider/outsider. This paper will use the characteristics of interdisciplinarity to historicize how the university as an epistemological project has developed the concepts of "religion", the "secular", and the binary they form, in order to suggest directions for their use to interpret events in the 21st century through the academic study of religion.

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I work at a public university and frequently visit the University of Chicago where I did my graduate work in the early 1980's. On one recent trip, I turned on WXRT, billed as a progressive rock station in those days, and heard Lou Reed's *Sweet Jane* playing, sounding as progressive now as it did when it was recorded in 1970's. Yet, it begged the academic's question: Is WXRT still a progressive rock station or now an oldies station? It can't be both; or can it, the newest thing and a record of yesterday? Our job as scholars is to conceptualize and categorize in order to create and order knowledge, and hearing Lou Reed crooning *Sweet Jane* on WXRT in 2015 transgresses this process and its products. When asked today to recommend a progressive rock radio station in Chicago, how could I respond?

"Anyone who uses a language bears the preunderstandings, partly conscious, more often preconscious, of the traditions of that language."<sup>1</sup> Part of the work in the academic study of religion over the past decades has involved a self-conscious examination of the concept of "religion", the preunderstandings that form it as a concept and the boundaries of thought and behavior it outlines as an object of study. In the oft-repeated declaration that has set this modern agenda Jonathan Z. Smith wrote:

...while there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religion—there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of

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<sup>1</sup> David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, p. 16.

comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy.<sup>2</sup>

While examining concept and category as produced in the scholar's study has yielded an abundance of valuable conversation concerning concepts and theories of "religion" and speculations as to its origins, there remains an additional element in this declaration: "the staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religion." While debate in academia has involved concepts and categories, Smith also implies an additional direction methodology might take: the integration of a historicized concept into use outside the halls of academia. But, of course, when we look "out there" we do so through a lens formed by academic concepts and categories "in here", and shaped by the historical development of the university's discourses and lines of inquiry. So, an additional concern arises in giving equal attention to the process of integrating in useful ways the concepts and categories formed in academia for understanding human phenomena outside of academia. It is a crucial part of the "insider-outsider" problem for all scholars to know in depth. We are inside of academic discourses and their intellectual histories while encountering objects of study outside of, and yet related to them.

As an intellectual concept we create "religion", bring it to human experience and use it to manufacture knowledge. Yet, the historicizing of this foundation to our conceptualizing and categorizing means, also, that we do the same kind of methodological work on concepts and categories in close relationship to "religion", like "secular", while paying attention to the additional methodological challenges of integrating them to understand real world events. This paper uses the lens of interdisciplinarity to describe the development of the university as an epistemological project wherein concepts arose like religion, secular, and the binary formed by their relationship; that is, the university context where they were and are considered. Intertwined within this description of the university's epistemological development will be an analysis of the effect that development had on the consideration of these concepts, and how that impacts our use today. The paper concludes by offering directions interdisciplinary methodology suggests in terms of integrating historicized concepts into creative interpretations of modern phenomena. Using interdisciplinarity will allow us to see more broadly how the concepts of religion and secular arose in relationship to the development of the university's distinctive form of knowledge gathering and ordering, so that we use the academic study of religion for creating new paths in understanding 21st century religious life "out there".

### **Concepts Transgressed**

The secular/religious binary is often presented in its 20th century guise as two distinct and competing arenas of culture. The recently released Pew survey, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," generated reporting and commentary that simultaneously promulgated the binary as a competing one, and challenged it as camouflaging a more complex scene. Associate Press religion reporter Rachel Zoll noted that, "Researchers have long debated whether people with no religion should be defined as secular since the category includes those who believe in God or consider themselves 'spiritual'", and then concluded that "the new Pew study found increasing signs of secularism."<sup>3</sup> Scholar S. Brent Plate countered that "we need good writing by people who can make sense of the unaffiliated, not just in the knee-jerk way of saying "we are becoming more secular,"

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jamestown*, xi.

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Zoll, "Study: Americans becoming less Christian, more secular," Associated Press, May 12, 2015, <http://www.seattlepi.com/news/us/article/Study-Americans-becoming-less-Christian-more-6256755.php>.

or as the *New York Times* piece by political reporter David Leonhardt offers its silly title “The Rise of Young Americans Who Don’t Believe in God” (which is not what the Pew report indicated—the report was about religious affiliation).<sup>4</sup>

Events challenge the idea that these concepts are distinct and competing, and invite a more nuanced reading that Plate encourages. The U.S. Supreme Court gave the privately owned company Hobby Lobby the authority to deny healthcare coverage to its employees, including birth control for women, a decision by a “secular” authority upholding the authority of the owner’s “religious” beliefs over the whole range of various beliefs represented by his employees. In effect a secular court determined the public scope of private religious belief. In France the first issue released by the “secular” magazine *Charlie Hebdo* after the terrorist attack depicted the prophet Muhammad declaring: “All is forgiven.” Through a representative of a secular institution, the free press, a decidedly religious message was delivered through the mouth of a religion’s founder. In each instance the boundaries of the concepts of “religious” and “secular”, and the opposition between them, a 20th century paradigm for interpretation, was transgressed.

Throughout 20th century academia secularization theory proclaimed the antagonistic divide to a greater or lesser extent, with some scholars at one end insisting that the early Enlightenment’s emphasis on reason portended humanity’s inevitable evolution beyond religion’s reliance on belief, especially supernatural belief; while at the other end, some maintained that at best “modernity was somehow undermining the social significance of religion.”<sup>5</sup> This “secularization discourse ... [saw] the alleged retreat of religion from state and society to the social periphery and human private sphere.”<sup>6</sup> Religion would confine itself to the setting of individual privacy or die out altogether. Secular forces and institutions would protect the freedom of an individual’s right of belief and worship in the competing marketplace of ideas at the very least, or at most become the conquering ethos.

But, the early 21st century has seen a significant shift in the public arena, as noted above, and even in academia: “[In 1999] Peter Berger, one of the principle architects of secularization theory... publicly recanted his earlier pronouncements concerning the purported link between religious pluralism and secularization... [finding] little evidence of religious decline, except perhaps on the campuses of American universities and maybe also Western Europe.”<sup>7</sup> Others saw how academia’s eyesight needed correction:

In recent scholarship... the relationship between “the secular” and “the religious” is seen to be more intimate, overlapping, and mutually transformative than previously understood. Seldom does “the secular” eliminate “the religious” in society; rather, secularization shifts the social location of religion, influences the structures it assumes and the way people perform their religious functions, or forces religion to redefine the nature, grounds, and scope of its authority.<sup>8</sup>

As an epistemological project had the university so camouflaged “religion” in the guise of “belief” in general, “supernatural belief” in particular, and in the principle of its evolutionary decline that it had blinded itself to actual happenings in the world outside its hallways? Has the academy in general, and the academic

<sup>4</sup> S. Brent Plate, “From the ‘God Beat’ to the ‘None Beat,’” *Religion Dispatches*, May 15, 2015, <http://religiondispatches.org/from-the-god-beat-to-the-none-beat/>.

<sup>5</sup> Gorski and Altinordu, “After Secularization,” 2008, p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation*, 2012. p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Riesebrodt, 2012, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> R. Scott Appleby, “Introduction,” *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, retrieved at: <http://sacred-sovereign.uchicago.edu/rsa-ambivalence.html>.

study of religion in particular, walled itself within the confines of a concept of “Secularendom” not dissimilar in effect to medieval, European Christendom? To historicize the university as an epistemological project can help us understand the development of this condition and open future directions for the academic study of religion.

### **The Development of the University as an Epistemological Project**

From the latter decades of the 20th century and into the 21st, interdisciplinarity has emerged as an approach to analyzing and evaluating the context of academia as an epistemological project, and becomes a trajectory for the production of new knowledge and the construction of new interpretations by breaking through disciplinary constraints formed by that project. Interdisciplinarity is a corrective to discourse by locating it and its lines of inquiry within the allegiances that circumscribe the university context. This includes the way that discourse is influenced by the creation of the modern university from Western, medieval roots and its approach to epistemology and the gathering and ordering of knowledge that has come to characterize it. This includes the way the university gathers, orders, reflects upon, and uses knowledge. The way that interdisciplinarity shines an analytical light on the historical development of the university reveals how it privileges certain epistemological processes and yields over others, while camouflaging what is not within its disciplinary lens. It’s here that discourses and lines of inquiry were produced that effected to a great degree the creation of both the concepts of “religion” and “secular”, and how the binary has changed meaning over time. It effected what we look for and see, how we see it, and what we miss in the “staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions” found in the world.

As an epistemological project, the university is Western, European, commencing in the Middle Ages, and displaying two general intellectual characteristics which continue up to our own day: First, for over almost a millennia now its activity of gathering knowledge from the world has privileged increased specialization and detail. Humanity’s epistemological interests include knowing the parts of its universe in their various particularities. The university reflects this interest. Second, and more relevant to our inquiry is its epistemological activity of reflection upon the details and weaving those parts into an understandable whole. We’re not satisfied with detail but also desire a meaningful whole. This adds “organizing principles” to knowledge gathering to justify the overall ordering. Through reflection humanity seeks to make sense of the “body of knowledge” it gathers, an understandable whole organized into a unitary view. Over its nearly millennia-long development, it became the university’s role to posit and safeguard the way the parts of knowledge gathered could be made into a comprehensible “unitary”. This dual epistemological activity of discrete detail and overarching unity is symbolized today in the individual scholar’s study and the university’s library. The former symbolizes knowledge gathered and ordered into specializations, disciplines, while the latter is pertinent knowledge from the disciplines gathered and ordered and made available in a discernible whole. It is within this context that intellectual discourses and lines of inquiry still develop and are deemed by academics to be of interest or not, including the study of religion. Allegiances form in disciplinary departments, personnel committee decision-making, collegial organizations, academic conferences, and all the various guises of professionalism. Allegiances also form as lines of intellectual inquiry are deemed interesting, and these allegiances can be traced back along the lines of inquiry to rest in loyalties to disciplinary concepts and methodologies, shaped as they are by the university’s unitary organizing principles.

The university's epistemological organizing principles have changed throughout the millennia from the appearance of the first university to today. Initially, it was Christianity that fulfilled the unitary function of epistemology, then philosophy, until today where the organizing principles are supplied by Enlightenment science in its modern form. Throughout its history the university—from Medieval Latin, *universitas*, meaning “universal” and “totality”—developed into the hub of academia and composed a “community of essentially like-minded scholars”.<sup>9</sup> Professional and collegial communities instill allegiances in their members, and in the case of the university, membership in a specific intellectual history and the organizing epistemological principles of any given era.

It is in the unitary epistemological function of the university—what Whitehead called the “Reason of Plato... in formulating judgments of the understanding”<sup>10</sup> of a whole—that the most influence has been wielded in terms of the academic study of religion. Epistemological influences manifest through the organizational form of the university directly shape the nature of the discourse that contributed, perhaps more than any, to the formation of the concepts of “secular” and “religion” in any given era.

In his *Religion in the Making*, Alfred North Whitehead identified three intellectual traditions in the West—religion, philosophy, and science. The development of their epistemological grounding is critical to understand as each will in turn supply the organizing principles for the university's unitary epistemological function. In the West philosophy is rooted in “the attempt to make manifest the fundamental evidence as to the nature of things”,<sup>11</sup> and is driven by the prompts of consciousness as “two factors, interest and discrimination, stimulate each other”.<sup>12</sup> But religion and science are different and more closely mirror one other. For religion in the West, specifically Christianity, epistemology involves the movement from religious experience to formulation: “The dogmas of religion are the attempts to formulate in precise terms the truths disclosed in the religious experience of mankind.”<sup>13</sup> To Whitehead science operated in exactly the same way as “the dogmas of physical science are the attempts to formulate in precise terms the truths disclosed in the sense-perception of mankind.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, in the West and embedded in the epistemology of both religion and science is the movement from experience to formulation; in religion, from experience/encounter with God to creedal formulation, while in science, from the sense-perception experience/encounter with nature to hypothesis and theory. And equally important in the West, and when considering the university's unitary epistemological function, both involve a metaphysic. Science and Christianity each create one.

In its formative stage in Medieval Europe and in the unitary garment of meaning and purpose it wove from its processes of knowledge production, the *universitas* was shaped by the Church and its theology. The university promulgated an integrated view of existence and the knowledge yielded by experience, “the great medieval vision of the essential unity of church and state, with individual monarchs ruling their territories, all presided over by the pope.”<sup>15</sup> Since there were no libraries and few books, formal classroom lectures on classic texts were the university's mechanisms of knowledge production, packaging and exchange, followed by the exercise of “an ancient custom in this city that when a book is finished mass should be sung to the Holy

<sup>9</sup> Joe Moran, *Interdisciplinarity*, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, The Macmillan Company, 1938, p. 67.

<sup>12</sup> Whitehead, 1938, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, The Macmillan Company, 1926, p. 57.

<sup>14</sup> Whitehead, 1926, p. 57.

<sup>15</sup> Alister McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*, HarperCollins, New York, 2007, p. 326.

Ghost.”<sup>16</sup> Even final exams were likened to the Christian Final Judgment. Philosophy may have been a handmaiden of truth but Theology was the Queen. Christianity’s “organizing principles,” its metaphysics buttressed a unitary meaning and purpose within which science was contained. Though there were few theology students in the university, the underlying principle ordering knowledge was that “Faith precedes science, fixes its boundaries, and prescribes its conditions.”<sup>17</sup>

But, what was meant then by the word “religion”? Like a creation story, the etymology of the word yields uncertain, mysterious origins. Fourth century Roman grammarian Servius gave it the Latin origin “*ligare*, to bind, to be the root of *religio*,”<sup>18</sup> though the “testimony” he referenced in Virgil’s *Aeneid* involved the binding entanglement in a sacred thicket. This is the derivation St. Augustine used and which is commonly referred to and used today. But the origin story is more complex. The etymology of “religion” has been traced to “ligament” and “obligation” in Latin, “heed” in English, “to have a care for” in Teutonic and Aryan, and in 17th and 18th century Europe it is “used of outward forms rather than of the inner spirit”.<sup>19</sup> But, as Cicero used it—along with the Latin *ligare*—it offers more interest to the general university context as well as the modern academic study of religion, dominated by “what Jurgen Habermas calls the ‘linguistification of the sacred’”.<sup>20</sup> Cicero “derives *religio* from *relegere*, as meaning *to go through or over again in reading, speech or thought*.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, in its meaning the word “religion” can hold a reflective, hermeneutical and textual quality consistent with the ancient Greek philosophical interest.

But, it is in the development of “religion” as a concept—“both absolute and relative... relat[ing] back to other concepts, not only in its history but in its becoming or its present connections... [and] considered as the point of coincidence, condensation, or accumulation of its own components”<sup>22</sup>—that its scope and usage becomes more important. At the time of the medieval founding of the first universities the concept of “religion” had a cultic meaning referring to ritual ceremony, and the “only distinctively Christian usage was the fifth-century extension of this cultic sense to the totality of an individual’s life in monasticism: ‘religion’, a life found by monastic vows; ‘religious’, a monk; ‘to enter religion’ to join a monastery.”<sup>23</sup> And, the concept of the secular? This was derived from the Latin, *secularis*, as pertaining to time, the temporal, a long period of time likened unto to an era or epoch within which one was living.

Augustine regarded both concepts as spatial domains, the two cities; “their mutually exclusive character... [he] always emphasizes when defining them formally.”<sup>24</sup> Like his adversaries the Donatists, Augustine conceived of these two urban orders as “each contained within its own sociological milieu”.<sup>25</sup> However sociologically distinct, these two orders nevertheless overlapped in the temporal conditions of existence necessarily experienced by us, intertwined and integrated so as to confer a quality to existence. The distinction became apparent only in temporal ways:

<sup>16</sup> Charles Homer Haskins, *The Rise of Universities*, p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> Haskins, 1923, p. 71, quoting Alzog, *Church History* (1876), II, p. 733.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Hoyt, “The Etymology of Religion,” p. 126.

<sup>19</sup> Hoyt, 1912, pp. 126-128.

<sup>20</sup> Habermas as quoted in Jorge N. Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman, “Introduction,” *The Participatory Turn*, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Hoyt, 1912, pp. 127.

<sup>22</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* pp. 19-21.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” p. 270.

<sup>24</sup> R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine*, p. 59.

<sup>25</sup> Markus, 1970, p. 122.

Augustine's theology rejected the dichotomy of sacred and profane displayed in this image [of two distinct cities]. Sacred and profane, for him, interpenetrate in the *saeculum*; the "secular" is neutral, ambivalent, but no more profane than it is sacred... there is a real distinction to be drawn between them, but it is eschatological rather than sociological or historical. They are separable only in the final judgment, and their distinct—but not separate—being here and now in the *saeculum* consists of the relation they bear to that judgment. So in the last resort the Church *is* the world, the world reconciled in Christ.<sup>26</sup>

The two spatial orders were categorized sociologically as opposites but under the temporal conditions of existence they were indistinct. As social orders their opposition would be revealed when time no longer held existence as it does now. To Augustine, maintaining as he did that "religion" involved some kind of binding, the secular was not in opposition to "religion" but to when, at the end of time, the binding disclosed a different order to relationships. In other words, Augustine saw these concepts in terms of allegiances, among other qualities.

The symbol of this admixture of religion and secular in the order in which we currently reside can be seen in the spatial signifier of the monastery and the temporal signifier of the monk's daily life structured by the rule of his order. When he was no longer within that temporal and spatial order the monk had renounced his devotion, his allegiance to residing within both cities until the end of time distinction.

In [the low Middle Ages] *saecularizatio* referred to a monk's renunciation of the rule of his order, his exit from the monastery, his return to the world, and more specifically to his transfer to the worldly or secular clergy that ministered to the laity. Importantly, a secularized priest retained traces of his monastic past: he was required to wear the emblem of his order. This layer adds both a spatial and an individual dimension to the concept, spatial, insofar as the sacred space of the monastery is opposed to the profane space of the world; and individual, insofar as the departure of the monk implies a loss of heart or commitment, if not of belief itself.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the concept of "religion" was composed of the concepts of time and space/place, "components inseparable *within itself* [that is, religion]... [as] what defines the consistence of the concept, its endoconsistency... distinct, heterogeneous, and yet not separable."<sup>28</sup> When the designation of "religion" was given to a time or space/place it was a quality in addition to whatever other qualities the composing concepts possessed in the *saeculum*. Thus, the university as founded in the organizing principles of the Church and its theology resided in both cities.

In the few universities that had opened, the Church oversaw what subjects would and wouldn't be taught, and how subjects would be taught. It granted to the university "the right of making constitutions and ordinances, regulating the manner and time of lectures and disputations, the costume to be worn, the burial of dead... [but in certain matters where] a crime has been committed that imprisonment is necessary, the bishop shall detain the criminal in his prison. The chancellor is forbidden to keep him in his prison."<sup>29</sup> By Augustine's rendering the Church and the university both existed in the overlapping orders of the two cities, but apparently each housed prisoners for reasons delineated by the Church!

This would last intact until the Christian Church fractured under the weight of the Renaissance, and Reformation. The effect on the university's unitary epistemological function is easily camouflaged to those who do not consider that inside Christianity, epistemology adjoins religious experience with formulation. The

<sup>26</sup> Markus, 1970, pp. 122-123.

<sup>27</sup> Philip Gorski and Ates Altinordu, "After Secularization," p. 60.

<sup>28</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, pp. 19-20.

<sup>29</sup> "Statutes of Gregory IX for the University of Paris in 1231," quoted in *The Medieval World: 300-1300*, 1968, p. 303.

Renaissance and Reformation represented a new way of knowing that would have ramifications for both religion and science, and the concepts of “religion” and “secular”.

This new way was characterized by the following elements. The first was the way in which the new thinking changed the space wherein the “religious” life was led. The new thinking added a new territory, “the more dangerous world of the city and the marketplace, exposing its thinkers to pressures and problems”<sup>30</sup> that were different than monastic life. Some have located in Protestantism the seeds of a religious/secular divide. Identifying it in this way is to attach a kind of romanticized, otherworldliness to the Medieval secular/religious relationship as if it were a religion/secular divide that “fell” into the messiness represented by Calvin and Zwingli and those who followed them and were educated in the universities founded after them. But to go through or over again through reading, perhaps a fuller view is to see that the spatial dimension of the concept of religion in terms of where it was lived amidst sociological characteristics and eschatological signifiers, was expanded outside monastic confines (which do not disappear during this time) and into a place/space more accessible to more people. By taking it out of a singular and circumscribed domain it expanded understandings of how daily religious life could be ordered beyond that of the professional or specialist.

One can see a further complexity introduced by the other two elements in this new way of knowing. The Protestant protest involved hermeneutics and the manner in which Christianity’s “two books” were being interpreted: the book of scripture (the temporal world ordered by God’s word) and the book of nature (the domain ordered by God’s work). Up to that time both books intersected in the activity of ritual ceremony, but the epistemological move here was literary and empirical, and radically so. Human active bodily movement would yield to another human activity, the third element, the emergence of the idea of the individual as a central component of Protestantism’s “dangerous idea”.<sup>31</sup> *Sola Scriptura* was not only a cry against abuses of ritual and sacrament, but also a declaration of the sufficiency of the individual to interpret scripture, a hermeneutical de-professionalization, as well as the declaration of the sufficiency of the scripture to be interpreted by individuals rather than the Church. Texts contained meanings that needed to be unlocked through the careful and thorough use of the mind which in turn would build the world in accordance with those meanings. The book of scripture was denuded of its esoteric symbolism as the book of nature was, thereby forming the hermeneutical prerequisites for modern science, now considered to be one of the chief domains of secularity! Cicero’s “religion” added to Augustine’s the element of individual hermeneutical reflection.

This transition yielded a revolution in the university as well. One can easily see why education was critical to upholding the authority of the individual to interpret the “two books”. It was the means to live the Christian life as a discerning pilgrim amidst the complexities of the worldly urban order. To be equipped and able “to read” both correctly was essential. And the transition from ritual and ceremony as the archetypal activity bearing religious significance and marking sacred space and time, to the critical use of the mind as that archetypal activity had far reaching effects on the importance and allegiance of the university’s epistemological yield. Its allegiance to church and theology frayed. Experience and formulation were linked through Scripture, and Scripture interpreted by reflection.

By the time of the Enlightenment, philosophy had dethroned theology in the university as the “universal field of inquiry which brought together all the different branches of learning, a notion of unity in difference

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<sup>30</sup> McGrath, 2007, p. 319.

<sup>31</sup> McGrath, 2007, p. 2: “The dangerous new idea, firmly embodied at the heart of the Protestant revolution, was that all Christians have the right to interpret the Bible for themselves.”



which also influenced the formation of the disciplines within the modern university.”<sup>32</sup> The concept of religion was also changing not only its spatial connotations, as it had in the Reformation, but the meaning of temporality as well. In 1730 Matthew Tindal’s *Christianity as Old as the Creation* “signaled the beginning of the process of transposing ‘religion’ from a supernatural to a natural history, from a theological to an anthropological category,”<sup>33</sup> a process completed when David Hume dispensed with “religion” as an innate belief in a higher power, made it a secondary yield, and raised the “issue of the adjectival form ‘religious’ What sort of primary human experience or activity does it modify?”<sup>34</sup> The transition from the activity of human movement (ritual and ceremony) to the activity of human thought exercised on texts was now complete. From the 1300’s through the 1700’s not only had the religious life expanded its spatial references from the monastery outward to include the city, but it had changed the measuring of time from the juxtaposition of secular epoch and religious fulfillment of time, to the collapse of both into first natural history, and then history; both eliminating any vestige of the Augustinian prominence given to religion/secular time. But, the change portended a lasting revolution paralleling the West’s philosophical grounding in Descartes. What represented the concept of religion was transformed from a symbolic and external activity where body and movement is prominent—cultic ritual activity and the structured activity of monastery living—to an internal activity where the mind and its operations became prominent. From the experience and use of a divine literary source as a hermeneutical tool to understand experience, a belief, set of beliefs, and/or confessional formulation, emerged. One can see a parallel in the university as an epistemological project.

Kant championed philosophy’s organizing principles as the university’s epistemological unitary because he maintained that unlike the theology of Christendom, “philosophy had no specific content”<sup>35</sup> and no higher authority than human reason, the foundation for a more expansive view. Its reflective practice made it ideal for selecting the truths that would unite all the strands of particularized knowledge into a cohesive, tightly stitched garment. Its single-minded allegiance to reason as the means for reflective practice produced knowledge that theology could not with its ambiguous loyalties intertwining knowledge and Christian belief and formulation, that is, “religion” as it was now understood; as though philosophy and the philosophers who practiced it were absent of allegiances?

Here [in “What is Enlightenment?”] Kant outlines a public/private distinction, making the move of identifying the reasons that matter, the best possible justifications, as those that are public—namely, free from religious, familial, revelatory natures: “The public use of reason must at all times be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men; the private use of reason, however, may often be very narrowly restricted without the progress of enlightenment being particularly hindered” (1996a, pp. 59-60, emphasis his). What is important here is both the universalizing impulse of public reason—reasons that would count for all, under all circumstances (“before the entire public of the reading world” [60])—and the connection of public reason with enlightenment, with being educated, advanced and improving. (p. 4)<sup>36</sup>

It was the university’s aim to educate the mind in reflective reason for use publicly. This was the link of education to public ethic represented by Calvinism and supported by the creation of colleges. But in the intellectual history within which the modern *universitas* as an epistemological project was born and raised, the shift included not only Kant’s epistemology but Hegel’s critique of Kant as well. This yielded “the paradoxical

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<sup>32</sup> Moran, 2002, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, 1998, p. 273.

<sup>34</sup> Smith, 1998, p. 274.

<sup>35</sup> Moran, 2002, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Ryan Gillespie, “Reason, Religion, and Postsecular Liberal-Democratic Epistemology,” p. 4.

result of an ambiguous radicalization of the critique of knowledge [which] is not an enlightened position of philosophy with regard to science. When philosophy asserts itself as authentic science, the relation of philosophy and science completely disappears from discussion.”<sup>37</sup> When the allegiances given to philosophy were analyzed, as Marx later did, the stage was set for another shift in the unitary function of knowledge within the university context. Because “Marx conceives of reflection according to the model of production”<sup>38</sup> a context for Western intellectualism was gradually created, Positivism, which camouflaged and confirmed “the [forgetting of the] experience of reflection”. Cicero’s reading of “religion” disintegrates. And without a reflection differentiated from science there is no mechanism for the consideration of one’s allegiances. Thus, in terms of the university’s unitary organizing principles the shift from theology to philosophy was heralded as a triumph of reflection rooted in reason over allegiance rooted in formulation; only to yield, as we will see, to a subsequent shift from philosophy to science and a return to allegiance rooted in formulation.

As theology had previously contested with philosophy and was usurped, so philosophy came to find itself gradually being supplanted by science in the 19th century and in full capitulation in the 20th. Science laid claim to a commitment to objectivity that philosophy could not hold with the same unyielding conviction, and theology could never muster regardless of its insistence on divine strength. As science ascended to prominence in performing the unitary function in the university there were consequences for epistemology and academic study of any kind:

Positivism marks the end of the theory of knowledge. In its place emerges the philosophy of science... Knowledge is implicitly defined by the achievement of the sciences. Hence transcendental inquiry into the conditions of possible knowledge can be meaningfully pursued only in the form of methodological inquiry into the rules of the construction and corroboration of scientific theories.<sup>39</sup>

Philosophy and religion both yield to scientism, which camouflages both:

For the philosophy of science that has emerged since the mid-nineteenth century as the heir of the theory of knowledge is methodology pursued with a scientific self-understanding of the sciences. “Scientism” means science’s belief in itself; that is, the conviction that we can no longer understand science as one form of possible knowledge, but rather must identify knowledge with science.<sup>40</sup>

And although science is “increasingly seen not as a neutral account of phenomena based on the pursuit of pure knowledge, but as a way of making sense of the world, one influenced by the contexts within which scientific problems are framed, discussed, and ‘solved’,”<sup>41</sup> it remains the driving unitary epistemological force in the university, segmented as it is by disciplines; a pervasive influence and allegiance through “... the principle of scientism... [which] is that the meaning of knowledge is defined by what the sciences do and can thus be adequately explicated through the methodological analysis of scientific procedures.”<sup>42</sup> Reflection is framed by science for scientific pursuits justified by science. And without Cicero’s “religion” as reflection, Augustine’s “religion” as binding easily comes to be seen as a competing allegiance, a loyalty that distorts scientific pursuit at best (theology) or undermines it at worst (supernaturalism).

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<sup>37</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, p. 24.

<sup>38</sup> Habermas, 1971, p. 44.

<sup>39</sup> Habermas, 1971, p. 67.

<sup>40</sup> Habermas, 1971, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Moran, 2002, p. 155.

<sup>42</sup> Habermas, 1971, p. 67.

### The Rise of the Academic Study of Religion

In our endeavor to reconsider the concepts of “religion”, “secular” and the relationship between them through historicizing the university as an epistemological project, the rise of the academic study of religion is revealing. From its roots in 19th century linguistics and the social sciences to where it lands today, it becomes paradigmatic for how epistemological allegiances, developed in the modern university, shape how phenomena are seen and what is not seen. For our analysis it is not important to delineate the details of that development, but to look at three events.

The first was the pursuit to create a “science of religions”, the chief characteristic of the 20th century, because so much energy was expended on it. In a now familiar assertion Mircea Eliade gave justification to the endeavor within the university and to his time:

... a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied *as* something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it—the element of the sacred.<sup>43</sup>

Eliade outlined what he thought was being missed in order to argue for the inclusion of the “science of religions” in the university’s disciplinary pantheon. This discourse continued into the 21st century when a gradual refutation of Eliade’s claim coalesced vis-à-vis historicizing critiques from postmodernism, post-colonialism, etc. Social constructionist arguments over the cultural origins of “religion” and the political biases of theories of religion can be summarized in this reconsideration of Eliade: “... by eliminating Mircea Eliade’s conjunction ‘and’ in his well-known title, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, we intend to dispel the notion that these two designators name separate domains that somehow interact from time to time.”<sup>44</sup> Claiming a component of a phenomenon was camouflaged by the existing disciplines, in order to justify a new venture supported by the organizing epistemological principles of the university, science, was deflated by historicizing critiques. The “science of religions” should shift to the study of culture through scientific methodologies.

The second event pertinent to our analysis occurred in the new century. The pursuit to develop a “science of religions” in the 20th century was declared dead in ours. It was in the tone of lament and resignation that the pursuit was declared done:

Our first assumption is that the modern western research university is a purpose-designed institution for obtaining knowledge about the world... [and] is successful only when it is not in service of ideological, theological, and religious agendas. Rather, its primary objective is scientific, that is, to gain public (intersubjectively available) knowledge of public (intersubjectively available) facts... We now understand that we were both deluded by our overly optimistic but cognitively naïve expectations of the development of a truly scientific field for the study of religion in the context of a modern, research university.<sup>45</sup>

The eulogy marked a significant moment in development of Religious Studies in the university context and contained deeper levels of meaning that are explored below.

<sup>43</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. xvii.

<sup>44</sup> Russell McCutcheon and William Arnal, *The Sacred Is the Profane: The Political Nature of “Religion,”* xi.

<sup>45</sup> Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe, *Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion*, p. 1129.

Thirdly, absent of internal reflective practices, the university develops camouflaged epistemological allegiances. Historicizing its intellectual development shows these. The structural organization of the modern university involves delineated disciplines, each of which formulates concepts and methods appropriated to its specialization, divided as it is from others. The knowledge gathered is organized by the principles of science. The academic study of religion is not given status within the disciplinary division of the structure, upheld by organizing principles of science as they have developed in the previous century. Meanwhile, the religious/secular divide is often characterized as the war between religion and science. This war obscures their common intellectual origins in the creation and development of the *universitas*. In the university context, maintaining the political viewpoint of their opposition—religion vs. secular science—threatens to conceal their common epistemological approach in the shared process of moving from experience to formulation. While secularism can be considered as the modern social arrangement devoid of religion, its historical development is much more complex than that, with at least “six significant protean rings in the concept’s trunk”<sup>46</sup> if not more, including as “an epistemology and ontology”<sup>47</sup> in relationship to the development of the Western university. Seeing both religion and the secular as ontologies can, in the context of the university, revive the relationship of religion and science with philosophy which is more consistent with the university’s history. Interdisciplinarity’s historicizing critique of the university project reveals how in ascending to prominence as the unitary function, religion and science in turn, in moving from experience to formulation, also move to swallow philosophy and one another. It might help eliminate embarrassing admissions like that mentioned above, of finding little evidence of religious decline except in the context of the American university, and dangerous omissions of asserting religious decline in Europe.

Without historicizing the university context, endeavors like post-secularism, meant to deal with “religion” and “secular” can come to “perpetuate the secular entrapments that it presumes to revolve... [by] forgetting the secular’s malleable conceptual history,”<sup>48</sup> let alone its binary partner’s similarly complex and incomplete biography. Interdisciplinarity arose as a critique to the university’s epistemological processes and structures to “overcome some of the fragmentation of knowledge”<sup>49</sup> that disciplinary formation produces and upholds. Of course interdisciplinarity contains its own allegiances and trajectories too. “Interdisciplinary study within the humanities is often an attempt to challenge the pre-eminence of the sciences as a model for disciplinary developments”<sup>50</sup> in the late 20th century and into the 21st. Every epistemological project has allegiances that shape what is seen and not seen, and separate what is of interest from what is ignored.

Still, the transgressions of the academic categories of “religion” and “secular” noted at the outset and generating this kind of interdisciplinary critique, yield consequences which can help outline future paths for the academic study of religion.

### **Consequences of an Interdisciplinary Critique**

All the concepts generated and/or used within the university context have been shaped by the intellectual development of that context, including “religion” and “secular.” The mid-1800’s began the century and a half long process that yielded conceptual understandings of the religious and the secular, including those that put

<sup>46</sup> Khaled Furani, “Is There a Postsecular?” p. 10.

<sup>47</sup> Furani, 2015, p. 1 [referencing Talal Asad].

<sup>48</sup> Furani, 2015, p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> Raymond C. Miller, “Varieties of Interdisciplinary Approaches in the Social Sciences: A 1981 Overview,” p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Moran, 2002, p. 8.

them in competition and at odds, those that limited their range as denoting a political accommodation, those which “confer[red] a universal meaning on the secular as the inherent degradation of religion and the rightful home of the natural, rational, and political,”<sup>51</sup> and enough other variations to claim defining the “secular” is as various as defining “religion”<sup>52</sup>; or, that the variability is complimentary. The approach here is indicative of what within interdisciplinarity is called, “deviant”.

Deviant interdisciplinarity presupposes a “parallax view” of intellectual history, whereby the normal account by which disciplines develop and give rise to interdisciplinary inquiry is taken to be only part of the whole story. There is at least one other side, which reflects a different sense of how things came to be as they are and how they might turn out to be in the future... [a kind of] “counterfactual history”.<sup>53</sup>

Four consequences of our inquiry can be drawn that might be considered equally “deviant”. First, from the point of view developed here the university is in the midst of shifting lenses. When phenomena outside the academy repeatedly transgress conceptual boundaries drawn in the academy, an epistemological adjustment is necessary. Conceiving of the concepts of religion and secular as outlining separate territories no longer offers clear focus. Transgression of categories “out there” suggests the need “in here” for methodologies that deal with the transgression of boundaries. Interdisciplinary methodology does this. But, the characteristics of it need to be delineated with clarity by religious scholars and understood and used by them. The methods of interdisciplinarity are appropriate when real world problems contain a breadth which resists the university’s traditional disciplinary structure.

Most interdisciplinary study examines contested terrain—problems, issues, or questions that are the focus of several disciplines... [though] the disciplines are not the focus of the interdisciplinarian’s attention; the focus is the problem or issue or intellectual question that each discipline is addressing.<sup>54</sup>

Interdisciplinary methodologies begin in the field with problems that disobey disciplinary boundaries formed in the scholar’s study. They possess distinguishing characteristics: integration, creativity, and transformation, to name a few. Comprehending how those qualities work in pragmatic epistemologies generated when a problem in the field is engaged by a scholar can aid us in our study.

Secondly, as a historicizing venture, interdisciplinarity represents a caution against reductionism. For example, disciplinarians can become entrenched in their distinctive concepts and methods, their point of view, such that dimensions of phenomena outside those borders are camouflaged. This is implied in Mircea Eliade’s familiar dictum from *Patterns in Comparative Religion* and quoted above. In its time Eliade’s statement was part of the pursuit to establish the study of religion as scientific and within the university’s disciplinary structure. This was challenged for its own reductionism through work on Eliade’s historical and cultural location.

Yet, reductionism can plague equally the critiques themselves. When in historicizing the concept of the sacred, social constructionists, for example, can ignore the historicizing hermeneutic they employ: reducing phenomena down to cultural constructs and political origins. All knowledge contains cultural constructs and

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<sup>51</sup> Furani, 2015, p. 19.

<sup>52</sup> Smith, 1998, p. 281: To the charge that Leuba’s classic list of more than fifty definitions of religion (*Psychological Study of Religion* (1912)) proves the hopelessness of defining and, hence, studying religion, Smith replies, “Not at all! The moral of Leuba is not that religion cannot be defined, but that it can be defined, with greater or lesser success, more than fifty ways.”

<sup>53</sup> Steve Fuller, “Chapter Four: Deviant Interdisciplinarity,” p. 51.

<sup>54</sup> Allen F. Repko, 2012, p. 5.

political origins. Yet, it also includes the university's epistemological organization and the allegiances it develops, strengthens and upholds. An interdisciplinary analysis of the university as an epistemological project does this. Allegiances illuminate some things and camouflage others. In our time this is part of the scientific pursuit recounted above. Reductionism forgets reflection, can define knowledge without considering allegiances, and obscures complexity under the guise of producing clarity.

Viewed through an interdisciplinary critique the eulogy to the project Eliade and others pursued yields a third consequence with deeper meanings that aren't about "religion" and "secular" phenomena "out there", nor even about the academic study of religion. It is about the way science serves as the unitary organizing principle similarly to religion in the Medieval world. Whitehead's analysis—that both start with experience and move towards formulation, and both involve a metaphysic—depicts how in the university context both subsume the other and philosophy. The justification for shutting down the pursuit of a science of religions—that a university's knowledge production is "successful only when it is not in the service of ideological, theological, and religious agendas"—presupposes a naïve understanding of the multivalent realities of allegiances. There are more at work in the university context than those mentioned; first and foremost is the origin of the epistemological organizing principles of any given era, especially our own. Interdisciplinary critique reveals as "cognitively naïve [the] expectations," that knowledge can be gathered and ordered with a complete absence of preunderstandings or point of view, and the allegiances they create. "When we use the word 'interdisciplinarity', we are generally suggesting some kind of critical awareness of this relationship [between knowledge and power]."<sup>55</sup> The way science has subsumed philosophical reflection camouflages the extent of this relationship.

Thus, if we return to Eliade's assertion we find it is both an historic artifact of a project that cannot be fulfilled, and a declaration that phenomena outside the university's epistemological blindnesses—the "staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religion" that Smith noted—are not best accounted for by endeavors formed in disciplinary structures. The statement now foreshadows the delimiting of science as providing the epistemological organizing principles in the university, disciplinary's reductionistic hermeneutic in terms of these phenomena, and begs the need for revisiting concepts in Religious Studies in light of their cultural and historical formation within the university's epistemological privileging. Interdisciplinary critique steers Religious Studies towards anti-reductionist researchers in the past like William James to understand how this can come about. Of course he had his preunderstandings and his own peculiar blindness. But, how did he and others employ techniques outside disciplinary constraints while inside the university context? And, most importantly, how can scholarly work creatively construe the elasticity in concepts (like "religion" and "secular"), effectively contest the university's epistemological organization, and set about expanding knowledge through curiosity and not certainty?

This leads to the final consequence: the academic study of religion needs to encourage and understand methodologies within its own borders that are self-consciously interdisciplinary. We need to know not what they mean, but "how" they mean. To understand events in the world that transgress the categories of "religion" and "secular" as they are currently known and used in the academy, requires methodologies that are hospitable to transgressions, are integrative of knowledge the disciplines produce, and can create new concepts and

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<sup>55</sup> Moran, 2002, p. 3.

methods beginning with an engagement of the problem “out there” before bringing it back for reflection “in here.” There is a general recognition of the interdisciplinary nature of studying religious phenomena. Sarah Fredericks acknowledges that “religious studies itself is inherently multi-and interdisciplinary (p. 161).”<sup>56</sup> Ronald Grimes recently described Ritual Studies as necessarily interdisciplinary.<sup>57</sup> Sarah King effectively employs interdisciplinary methodologies in her research and writing.<sup>58</sup> And, the Participatory Turn<sup>59</sup> and the approaches in Religion and Film<sup>60</sup> are explicitly or implicitly interdisciplinary. But, a more widespread understanding of interdisciplinarity is necessary and can be achieved by studying how our colleagues are doing what they are as interdisciplinarians.

Or, simply stated, it’s not inaccurate to categorize Lou Reed’s *Sweet Jane* either as progressive or an oldie, and something is lost when we do. Still, it could be placed within another context that adds new meaning when it’s heard, a creative integrating of sounds in a new genre, like a mashup.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Sarah E. Fredericks, “Religious Studies,” 2010, p. 161.

<sup>57</sup> See Ronald Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2014.

<sup>58</sup> See Sarah King, *Fishing in Contested Waters: Place & Community in Burnt Church/Esgenoopetitj*, University of Toronto Press, 2014.

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<sup>60</sup> See Ostwalt, Conrad, “Teaching Religion and Film: A Fourth Approach,” *Teaching Religion and Film*, Gregory J. Watkins, editor, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008.

<sup>61</sup> See J. Aaron Simmons, “On Shared Hopes for (Mashup) Philosophy of Religion: A Reply to Trakakis,” *The Heythrop Journal*, HeyJ LV (2014), p. 691. Whereas disciplinary pursuits of knowledge could be likened to single songs in a genre of music and multidisciplinary to a medley of songs strung together from a variety of genres, interdisciplinary is like the modern musical mashup experienced live in a concert venue. The “combinations, or ‘mashups’, of the songs are done in such a way as to allow the songs to remain identifiable and yet significantly transformed by their having been woven together with other songs, usually from very different genres.” The result is new, innovative, and transformative through a thoroughly integrative and creative method.

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