Emergence of the Modern Academic Study of Religion: An Analytical Survey of Various Interpretations

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Abstract

This paper discusses various interpretations about emergence of the academic study of religion in the modern world. It is viewed that the expansion of Europe and resultant engagement of European consciousness with religious and cultural otherness played a role. Internally, the Enlightenment movement had prepared ground for a critical and objectified gaze at the phenomenon of religion on the one hand while Romanticism had generated a kind of fascination for oriental religions and exotic cultures, on the other. Similarly, the Christian theology, which had already gone through transformation, is also linked to the whole enterprise either as a disciplinary other or as a participating actor. The paper shows that available interpretations of the development range from viewing it as an encroachment of the scientific project into the realm of religion to a marriage of convenience between science and religion. In the final analysis, an integrative and inclusive view of various interpretive narratives has been adopted. It is maintained that since the modern academic study of religion itself is characterised by diversity of approaches, theoretical perspectives, and regional contexts, therefore, heterogeneity of the narratives regarding its beginnings is but a logical consequence. Still, interrogation into these narratives is useful for better contextual understanding of various epistemological and methodological inclinations prevalent in the academic study of religion in our own times.

Keywords

Religious studies, theology, Religionswissenschaft, religion and modernity, history of the study of religion, Orientalism, religious diversity, methodology.

Emergence of the academic study of religion in the modern world—variously known as Religionswissenschaft, Science of Religion, Comparative Religion, History of Religion, and Religious Studies—has been subject to various interpretations. The interpretive narratives in this context draw on a broad range of discourses such as science and religion, tradition and modernity, and colonial project of the European powers and their encounter with other
cultures and religions of which the present paper ventures to undertake an analytical survey.

**The Question of Beginnings**

Nowadays, it is largely accepted that the study of religion emerged as an autonomous discipline in the latter half of the nineteenth century in Europe.\(^1\) This perception goes back to the nineteenth century itself. As early as 1872, a leading French Orientalist Émile-Louis Burnouf (1821–1907) wrote optimistically:

> The present century will not expire without having witnessed the entire and comprehensive establishment of a science, whose elements are at this moment still widely scattered,—a science unknown to preceding centuries and undefined, and which we for the first time now call the Science of Religions.\(^2\)

The quotation clearly underscores perceived novelty of the development, something happening or about to happen for the first time. Similarly, the renowned Dutch historian of religions Pierre Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848–1920) remarked that

> such men as the Indian emperor Akbar or the Islamic Philosopher Averroes cannot be regarded as precursors of religio-historical studies since their comparison of religions was too limited and their interest not scientific enough; only in the 2nd half of the 19th century the preconditions for the establishment of a real science of religion were given.\(^3\)

It is also interesting to note that in both of the above quotations the enterprise was referred to as “science,” an important hint to disciplinary self-perception, which is also reflected in the then nomenclature for it, namely *Religionswissenschaft* that literally means ‘science of religion.’ The Issue of

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science and religion, or more precisely construing the study of religion as a science will be discussed below in some detail.

Now, some writers even specify the years of inception. Eric J. Sharpe’s *Comparative Religion: A History*, which has become a kind of classic on the subject, can be cited here as an example. Sharpe says that the discipline “did not exist in 1859; by 1869 it did.” This view of precise beginnings is often accompanied by glorification of one or the other figure as father of this field of study. Usually, Max Müller (1823–1900) takes precedence over other contenders like Cornelius P. Tiele (1830–1902). Against this background, Jacques Waardenburg rightly remarks that the emergence of the study of religion passed through a much gradual and complex course, a view which risks to be eclipsed by glorification of this or that figure as the founding father. After all, fathers are sons of forefathers.

However, at the same time this caution against the narrow view of beginnings does not mean to discredit valuable contribution of the pioneers like Müller. Joseph M. Kitagawa and John S. Strong rightly remark about Müller that he was responsible more than anyone else for founding of this discipline and that no survey of its history would be complete without mentioning him. Similar counterbalancing view has been expressed by other scholars. For instance, N. J. Girardot writes:

> While in recent years we have become suspicious of our habitual concern to specify patriarchal progenitors of a discursive tradition . . ., Müller was certainly one of the most noted and influential figures associated with the institutionalized emergence of the “science of religion” or “comparative religions” during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

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On the other hand, Waardenburg is not alone in pointing to the gradual and complex course of events which led to the emergence of the academic study of religion. In fact, Sharpe himself maintains elsewhere that the emergence of this discipline needs to be understood taking seriously the lessons learnt from the history of ideas and the sociology of knowledge. Hence, when it comes to putting the development in its wider historical context, he would leap some two millennia back saying that “a good case might be made out for tracing the origin of comparative religion back to classical antiquity” that is, ancient Greece and Rome. Obviously, such contextualisation postulates the common Eurocentric periodisation which perceives development of the whole human civilisation having passed through the ancient, medieval, and modern phases. In the context of global history of philosophy, John C. Plott et al. have demonstrated how unconvincing this periodisation is with regard to the other important civilisations of the world like China and India. The observation applies equally well to the case of antecedents of the academic study of religion.

Between these two extremes, that is specifying particular years or decades as the starting point and going back to classical antiquity, it is maintained here that emergence of the academic study of religion in the latter half of the nineteenth century was definitely a turning point but not the starting point. It was in the second half of the nineteenth century that the study of religion acquired its institutional character and chairs and professorships for this field started to appear one by one in many important seats of learning across the Western Europe. Some examples can substantiate the point. In 1873, the study of the history of religions was inaugurated in Geneva, Switzerland. Three

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10 Eric J. Sharpe, “The Secularization of the History of Religions,” in Gilgul: Essays on Transformation, Revolution and Permanence in the History of Religions, ed. Shaul Shaked, David Shulman, Guy G. Stroumsa, Studies in the History of Religions (Supplement to Numen) (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 269. Elsewhere, Sharpe has hinted that application of the history of ideas to the history of religious studies is a standing challenge which, however, is beyond the scope of the present study.


12 Interestingly, according to this periodisation any new developments occurring after the modern period fall back somehow on one of the obtained periodical units, usually the modern one. This is done by adding prefix of “post,” or even “post-post” if needed, evading any fundamental deviation from the established tripartite division.


14 It may be noted here that during its heydays the Muslim civilisation had already contributed some descriptive works on religions long before emergence of the modern discipline of study of religion. This historical fact has been endorsed by some established historians of the discipline. See Sharpe, Comparative Religion: A History, 11. See also, Steven M. Wasserstrom, “Islamicate History of Religions?,” History of Religions 27, no. 4 (1988):408.
years later, the Dutch government established four professorships in the field. France established a chair for the study of religion at the Collège de France in 1879, and then at the Sorbonne in 1885.\footnote{See Kitagawa and Strong, “Friedrich Max Müller and the Comparative Study of Religion,” 204–05. Further details about establishment of chairs and professorships for the study of religion can be found in Stausberg, “The Study of Religion(s) in Western Europe (I): Prehistory and History until World War II,” 305–06. Sharpe has detailed institutionalisation of the discipline in various Western countries in Chapter VI of his History under the title “The Quest for Academic Recognition,” see Sharpe, Comparative Religion: A History, 119–43.}

However, apart from the institutional developments which culminated in the second half of the nineteenth century, the critical and objectified approach to religion was a result of much gradual cultural processes going several centuries back. In line with this nuance, Guy G. Stroumsa maintains that in fact it is wrong to think that the academic study of religion emerged in the nineteenth century, rather modern comparative study of religion emerged between 1600 CE to 1800 CE, and that the period between Renaissance and Romanticism is important for its formation. However, Stroumsa is careful to circumvent his claim and remarks that chronological boundaries of the course of any science or scholarship should be understood as continuum.\footnote{Guy G. Stroumsa, A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), viii.} Similarly, Peter Harrison goes back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries while digging up roots of the modern academic study of religion.\footnote{Peter Harrison, ‘Religion’ and the Religions in the English Enlightenment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2.} In keeping with such wider understanding of the development, Slavica Jakelić and Jessica Starling maintain that emergence of the scholarly study of religion as a distinct subject was an outcome of the broader conditions of modernity and the engagement of Western thinkers with religious otherness.\footnote{Slavica Jakelić and Jessica Starling, “Religious Studies: A Bibliographic Essay,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion 74, no. 1 (2006): 194.} In other words, the development needs to be understood both in the context of Europe’s expansion and coming into contact with other civilisations and cultures of the world as well as the cultural and intellectual history of Europe itself. The two aspects can be viewed as the external and internal factors, respectively.

**Encounter of the Western Scholars with Religious Otherness**

Concerning encounter with religious otherness, it is striking to note that emergence of the academic study of religion coincided with major developments of European powers’ colonial project. If inception of the discipline set forth by Sharpe were to be taken literally—that is between 1859
and 1869—then it took place just two years after 1857, the year of War of Independence (or Mutiny from the British point of view) which resulted in formal completion of colonisation of India. It may be mentioned here, though without complete agreement, that Tim Murphey views the academic study of religion as a part of the colonial project. He develops his argument relying on the case study of phenomenological study of religion by Rudolph Otto (1869–1937).\(^\text{19}\) However, in this context Paul Hedges has rightly cautioned against sweeping generalisation in the discourse of post-colonialism and critique of orientalism.\(^\text{20}\) No doubt, the exploration voyages and colonisation had begun since the fifteenth century but at first it largely targeted the newly discovered continents, namely North America, South America, and Australia, or the coastal enclaves of the Old World. It was around the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth century that the European powers like Britain and France, and to a lesser degree Italy and Germany, colonised virtually entire Africa and most of Asia. Now, some parts of the colonised Africa and regions of Asia like South Asia, South West Asia, and South East Asia had been cradles of versatile material as well as higher cultures, including institutionally established and doctrinally profound religions. Against this background, the new religious worlds had come into purview of expanding Europe and the religions of the East were pressing upon the European consciousness. Though at that time the European consciousness presumably gazed at the other cultures as mute object but in fact the others themselves happened to be reflexive subjects. The inter-cultural or inter-civilisational encounters are never one-way traffic. One of the interacting cultures can be at the receiving end but by no way this fact rules out reciprocity of the influences.\(^\text{21}\)

Generally speaking, most of the oriental religions had survived against the political and cultural onslaught of other civilisations. Hinduism had proved its tenaciousness against the indigenously emerging religions like Buddhism and Jainism as well as against religions of the conquerors, for instance Islam. Buddhism had survived successfully in other parts of the world after virtually


complete wash out from its birthplace, India. Islam had managed to remain an important historical force after the fall of its cultural and political capital Baghdad to the Mongols in the thirteenth century. Thus, the nineteenth century colonisers might have got a run over militarily but the cultural and religious scenario was much more complex in the Old World. It can be instantiated that far from being overwhelmed, the indigenous cultures even succeeded in fascinating the European consciousness.  

The interpretation of “Orientalism” singly in terms of dominance and exploitation misses the other side of the picture. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s (1749–1832) inspiration by classical Persian poet Ḥāfīz Shirāzī (1325/1326–1389/1390) as manifested in his Der öst-westliche Divan, 23 Arthur Schopenhauer’s (1788–1860) appreciation of the Upanishads 24 as the greatest source of inspiration and enlightenment for generations to come, and most importantly for the present discussion Müller’s fascination by Indian religious and cultural heritage and the role this fact played in moulding his intellectual development can be mentioned as examples. The expansion of Europe was not simply a project of conquest; it was also an opening up. 25

Understandably, the closed view of the non-Biblical religions under a blanket term of paganism was displaced by recognition of religious plurality—a bedrock presupposition of the enterprise of academic study of religion. Apart from the awareness of the plurality and complexity of the phenomenon of religion, new materials pertinent to the study of religion became available in the nineteenth century. As Joseph M. Kitagawa and John S. Strong note, these materials accumulated from three types of sources: firstly, discovery, careful study, and translation of the religious texts from around the world; secondly, important archaeological discoveries which shed fresh light on the ancient religious worlds; and finally, the explorations and colonisation of the non-European world provided for the ethnological data on the cultures and

23 For a detailed study of Goethe’s access to the poetry of Ḥāfīz and how the former was influenced by the latter, see Masoomeh Kalatehseifary, “Joseph v. Hammer Purgstall’s German Translation of Ḥa’fiz’s Divan and Goethe’s West-östlicher Divan” (master’s thesis, University of Waterloo, 2009).
religions of Africa, Asia, Australia and Americas. Thus, through gradual expansion of Europe texts and materials about different religions of the world became available to a large measure.

The juxtaposition of rich cultures of the world presented a paradox for the Western consciousness: either to confront or converse with the ‘other’. Concerning religion, the lead players tried the both: the missionary movement and the resulting controversies represent the confrontational posture whereas the dialogue of religions and academic study of religion can be viewed as the conversational or understanding stance. In this connection, around the end of the nineteenth century two significant events proved to be the trend setters for the future course of history: the World’s Parliament of Religions convened in Chicago in 1893 and the Congress of the History of Religions held in Paris in 1900.

The World’s Parliament of Religions was basically motivated towards the theme of unity and cooperation of religions and largely attended by the representatives of different religions. Though some scholars of religions took part in this event but their participation was as representatives of their respective denominations. By stark contrast, the first congress of History of Religions was not a religious gathering as such. It was an academic conference through and through, attended by some eminent scholars like Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), Cornelius. P. Tiele and Edward. B. Tylor (1832–1917). Conversely to the case of the World’s Parliament of Religions, the participants of the Congress who were clerics like Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931) attended this event in their capacity of scholars. Thus, the Parliament proved to be the inception of the movement of dialogue between different religious communities, while the Congress signified an important milestone in the history of academic study of religion.

In a way, the two events reflected the emerging Anglo-American and Continental European distinction of approach to the pressing phenomenon of world’s religions. Apparently, the events signified two different endeavours: dialogue of religions and the academic study of religion. However, afterwards

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27 An example of how the missionary activities were countered by the local religious communities is found in Avril Ann Powell, Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India (Surry: Curzon, 1993). See also a helpful review of this book: Christian W. Troll, “New Light on the Christian-Muslim Controversy of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century,” Die Welt des Islams 34, no. 1 (1994): 85-88.

it proved that the distinction extended to the motive behind study of religion(s) itself, the continental scholars mainly advocating the detached scientific research while a good number of Anglo-American scholars willing to accept practical ends like interfaith harmony as a legitimate motive and dialogue as a method in the study of religion. The two approaches point to a difference of attitude towards religious ‘other,’ whether to engage with it or to keep it at distance. Needless to say, both attitudes have their peculiar methodological repercussions for the pursuit of understanding of religion.

Modernity and the Academic Study of Religion

Let us turn towards the internal factors that relate to the intellectual and cultural history of Europe. Apart from the actual encounter with religious otherness and growing realisation of religious plurality, since a couple of centuries the intellectual milieu of Europe had already changed radically. Renaissance, Reform, Enlightenment, and Romanticism movements had deeply affected religious understanding of the universe. Regarding the intellectual milieu of the academic study of religion we have three interpretive narratives. Each of these interpretations emphasises the role of Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Romanticism, respectively. To begin with, Jonathan Z. Smith, who is one of the most important contemporary theorists and historians of the study of religion, sees a connection between the literary impetus of Renaissance and the philological studies, which were prevalent especially in the formative period of the field. He writes:

If some alien, unfamiliar with the fierce eighteenth- and nineteenth century taxonomic controversies concerning the classification of the academic disciplines, were to observe scholars of religion in action, it would have no difficulty identifying the class to which they belong. With respect to practice, the history of religions is, by and large, a philological endeavor chiefly concerned with editing, translation and interpreting texts, the majority of which are perceived as participation in the dialectic of ‘near’ and ‘far.’ If this is the case, then our field may be redescribed as a child of the Renaissance.

It must be endorsed though that Smith puts forward this claim in passing, not as an elaborate and sustained argument.  

Concerning the origins of the modern western academic study of religion, majority of the scholars give special importance to the Enlightenment movement which gave birth to a new intellectual outlook and a range of new academic disciplines through its emphasis on humanistic worldview and trust in reason. To quote Kurt Rudolph: “The origin of Religionswissenschaft in a quite specific period of western intellectual history, namely the Enlightenment, has, in the writer’s opinion, decisively determined its nature and cannot be denied.” According to this line of argument, the push of a steady process of secularisation had put the religious commitments and practices under rational scrutiny, thus increasingly compelling religious communities to explain and argue for their respective convictions. Secularisation is a controversial concept and various sociologists have viewed host of different elements essential to it, for instance, institutional differentiation or segmentation, autonomisation, rationalisation, societalisation, disenchantment of the world, privatisation, generalisation, pluralisation, relativisation, this-worldliness, individualisation, unbelief, and decline of church religiosity. It needs not to be emphasised that virtually all of the above listed tendencies imply, one way or the other, neutralisation of religion or minimisation of its role—at least in the public sphere. Nevertheless, most important for the present discussion is the view of secularisation—and modernity in general—as a process of disenchantment of the world that implies eliminating the mysteries of natural phenomenon by rationalisation and scientific explanations. Now, this process of modernisation and secularisation is counted among the important factors behind coming into being of the academic study of religion.

In this regard, it seems pertinent to refer to Samuel Preus’ book Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud in which he ventures, using Thomas Kuhn’s vocabulary, to trace back the development of a new paradigm for explaining religion. Preus studies nine authors beginning

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33 See for instance, Waardenburg, Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion, 11.
with Jean Bodin (1530–1596) to Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), covering a time span of about three centuries, to show how the early modern European theories about the origin of religion culminated in an approach to religion which was informed by naturalistic instead of theological presuppositions. He contends that work of these authors makes a coherent research tradition that was conducive to a new paradigm for studying religion, a naturalistic paradigm.38

With reference to Preus’ analysis, Donald Wiebe maintains that this coherent tradition of study of religion was a break away from the previous religio-theological approach and that its culmination owes to the Enlightenment critique of religion.39 Similarly, Jakelić and Starling endorse the view that religious studies originated when religion was separated from the totality of social life and defined as a subject of study.40 In other words, emergence of academic study of religion was an outcome of rationalisation and secularisation which established a differentiation between religion and the study of religion. In this light, disciplinary identity of the modern field of academic study of religion clearly emerges over against theological approach to religion which takes for granted certain religious postulates without subjecting them to critical inquiry. According to this view, the phrase ‘science of religion’ renders a new science to the detriment of religion rather than an amicable conciliation between science and religion.

No doubt, there is a grain of truth in the above line of thought and that it is, by and large, the most common view. However, an alternative narrative has been offered by scholars like Hans G. Kippenberg, the former president of the International Association of the History of Religions (IAHR). He highlights the role of Romanticism in the whole development. His book Die Entdeckung Der Religionsgeschichte: Religionswissenschaft Und Moderne41 translated into English by Barbara Harshav as Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age42 is a groundbreaking attempt to make sense of the rise of religious studies.

vis-à-vis modernity. Drawing on Hayden White’s assertion that there can be no history which is not the philosophy of history at the same time, he traces the connection between religious studies as a historical discipline and the philosophy of religion. This assumption leads him to track along the development of philosophical views of religion since the sixteenth century.

Kippenberg’s selection of philosophers is partly different from that of Preus, beginning with Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) instead of Jean Bodin. After succinctly surveying the views of Thomas Hobbes, David Hume (1711–1776), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), he shows how religions were subjected to critical reflection by these philosophers but at the same time seen as comprehensive worldviews and compendiums of human culture which moulded thought, behaviour, and emotions of human beings. Put succinctly by Robert A. Segal, Kippenberg’s thesis is that “many of the leading modern theorists of religion, far from rejecting religion for science and modernity, saw religion as surviving in modernity, and surviving not as mere relic of an outdated past but as an ongoing aspect of culture that transcended the bounds of science.”

Admittedly, this narrative endorses the connection between modernity and religious studies as a subject but it envisions modernity as a complex phenomenon imbued with ambivalences rather than a simple linear process of secularisation or disenchantment through rationalisation. Here modernity is seen as a self-conscious distancing from the past. However, the break with past occurs differently in the domains of scientific knowledge, morality and aesthetics. That is because scientific progress is future oriented and can move on leaving the past behind in the rubric of history whereas in the case of art, morality, and religion such linear development is unconceivable. The separation of these domains, signifying a rift within the present, indicates that modernity does not entail disappearance of religions rather it leads to their

44 Kippenberg, Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age, 1.
reflexive ordering and reordering. Paradoxically, modernity is a break with past yet a continuation of past in present. This is particularly true of the domains of art and religion.

The latent ambivalence of modernity connects to two counterbalancing tendencies pointed out by Matthew Arnold as Hebraism: to act conscientiously and Hellenism: to think impartially. In the history of Western civilisation, this pair of terms refers to the Judaeo-Christian tradition with a belief in personal God and to the non-personal ultimate principle of the Greek philosophy, respectively. Thus, the historical currents of Hebraism and Hellenism extend into the English ethos of modernisation. Likewise, in the German sociological thought, some scholars have held that the notions essential to the function of modern institutions like capitalism, individualism, hard work, and human rights could only be understood in terms of their roots in a particular western cultural history which includes Judaism, Hellenism, Roman culture, and Christianity.

To support his thesis Kippenberg draws on views of Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) and Max Weber (1864–1920). Troeltsch had already argued that the modern world was continuation of the pre-modern one and that particularly the modern phenomenon of individualism had religious roots. To quote directly from Troeltsch: “Modern civilization is certainly characterized by an extraordinary extension and intensification of the thought of freedom and personality...and the one thing that Protestantism has contributed to it is an extraordinarily strong religious and metaphysical foundation.” In the similar vein, Kippenberg notes that Max Weber had traced links between the rise of capitalism and the Puritan Protestantism. Most importantly, for Weber science itself was a product of religious history because science rests on a belief that there are no mysterious or incalculable forces that come into play, a belief which is promoted by certain religions. Thus, Weber reproaches that the modern man fails to see the significance of

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50 Ibid., 228.
religious ideas in our culture.\textsuperscript{54} To put the argument in a nutshell, \textit{there is religion in modernity as there is modernity in religion.}

Taking the lead from such redefinitions of religion and modernity, Kippenberg sees the “Romantic idealization of a unity of spirit and nature”\textsuperscript{55} working behind the reordering of religion in the modern world. It is not surprising, then, that for him the rise of religious studies owes to the Romantic critique of the Enlightenment, not a culmination of the Enlightenment itself.\textsuperscript{56} Two historical facts bring this argument to relief. Firstly, the resurgence of religions since the last quarter of the twentieth century has placed a question mark on the thesis that modernisation necessarily leads to secularisation.\textsuperscript{57} The speculations that the phenomenon of religion would not survive longer or that its role would be wiped off at least from the public sphere proved to be wrong. Throughout the world, different institutional and non-institutional forms of religiosity have staged a spectacular come back, a ‘divine surprise’\textsuperscript{58} indeed.

Secondly, the period of about one century, between the second half of the eighteenth century—the high time of the Enlightenment movement—and the second half of the nineteenth century cannot be simply brushed aside.\textsuperscript{59} Hence, connecting emergence of the study of religion to Romanticism makes sense. However, it has been pointed out that in part same argument can be turned against Kippenberg himself, as there is a gap of several decades between the main figures from Romanticism period like Friedrich Schleiermacher and the institutionalisation of the study of religion.\textsuperscript{60} In this connection mention may be made of the standpoint of A. C. Bouquet who opines that certain elements of romantic outlook somewhat hindered the application of scientific method to religion, and only after throwing off this over-weight better

\textsuperscript{55} Kippenberg, \textit{Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age}, 23.
\textsuperscript{57} The issue of persistence of religion in the face of secularism has claimed scholarly attention. For instance, the 29th Conference of International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR) held on July 23–27, 2007 in Leipzig, Germany was titled: “Secularity and Religious Vitality.”
\textsuperscript{60} See Stausberg, “The Study of Religion(s) in Western Europe (I): Prehistory and History until World War II,” 299.
empirical methods were adopted.\textsuperscript{61} Perhaps it is because of such considerations that Walter H. Capps implicitly adopts somewhat inclusive stance in this regard and writes that religious studies emerged with its distinctive methods “during and following the period of the Enlightenment.”\textsuperscript{62}

Such criticisms apart, the question is what does it signify to count on Romanticism instead of Enlightenment? Obliviously, it points to the survival of religious roots in modernity on the one hand and the rationalisation of religions on the other, a reciprocal appropriation which gave birth to the modern academic study of religion then known as \textit{Religionswissenschaft}. This point of view contrasts the one which sees the emergence of this discipline one-sidedly out of the rational critique of religion. If the interface of modernity and religion as construed above holds water then it implies that the development did not take place clearly over against religion but it was a redefinition of religion itself. Instead of being a science to the detriment of religion, the academic study of religion underscored an ambivalent relationship between the scientific progress and pervasiveness of religion, accepting the existential importance of religion but refusing to endorse its claim to ultimate truth.

\textbf{The Study of Religion as a Scientific or Hermeneutical Enterprise}

Now, let us take up the issue of construing the academic study of religion as a science as hinted at in the beginning of this paper. Troeltsch has said: “No science can escape from the conditions imposed by the constitution of the thinking mind which gives it birth.”\textsuperscript{63} As documented above, the thinking minds in our case were quite confident that they were laying foundations of a new “science.” However, what exactly did they imply by calling the study of religion science is a matter of debate. Müller had himself noted that the very expression ‘science of religion’ jars on the ears of many.\textsuperscript{64} His observation echoes well through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to our times. At the annual meeting of Society for the Scientific Study Religion held in 1993 the presidential address by Eileen Barker was entitled: “The Scientific Study of

Religion? You Must Be Joking! The title of the presidential address underscores the not uncommon perception of religion and science as belonging to entirely different domains of human culture and therefore, juxtaposing them either way with the conjunction ‘of’—science of religion or religion of science—seems to be a contradiction in terms. At least to some degree Müller’s choice of the German word Religionswissenschaft is a source of this confusion. He was German by birth but had naturalised as English. The use of stem ‘Wissenschaft’ by him leaves space for doubt if he had in mind the English usage of “science” which apparently implies a model of prediction and explanation prevalent in natural sciences, or the original German sense of this noun which designates any vigorous scholarly study.

Considering that initially the academic study of religion was starkly influenced by evolutionism—geared to explain religion through the speculated evolutionary stages and thereby unearth its origins—it appears to be a positivistic science following the explanatory model. However, if the Religionswissenschaft be viewed in the broader context of Geisteswissenschaften, social sciences and humanities, a more complex picture emerges. The notion of Geisteswissenschaften was expounded by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), who attempted to develop a distinctive methodology for human sciences in order to raise their status equal to the natural sciences. For this purpose, he propounded the notion of verstehen—interpretative understanding, which contrasted the model of causal explanation common in the natural sciences. In simple terms, his idea was that the object of the human sciences is categorically different from that of the natural sciences. Human actions are meaningful in the sense that they reflect the motives of the human agents behind them, and they need to be understood at a level beyond immediate appearances. They cannot be subjected to explanatory laws in a mechanical way as can natural objects. The world of nature we explain but the world of life we understand. Had Dilthey’s work found acceptance among the scholars the verstehen would have replaced the explanatory model in the cultural sciences. Dilthey’s project, nevertheless, did not reach a breakthrough primarily because it could not rise above the subject-object dichotomy, which having its roots in Cartesian thought, permeated the whole legacy of Enlightenment.

The subject-object dichotomy rests on the assumption that there are objects of knowledge out there to be discovered by the knowing subject. A knowing subject must suspend its subjectivity and submit to methodical procedures in order to get at the “objective” knowledge. This line of thought gives priority to certainty over knowledge and for that matter has been called the Cartesian Anxiety. Recently, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) has challenged the very basis of the subject-object debate saying: “Our line of thought prevents us from dividing the hermeneutic problem in terms of the subjectivity of the interpreter and the objectivity of the meaning to be understood. This would be a starting from a false antithesis that cannot be resolved even by recognising the dialectic of subjective and objective.”

Since interpretive understanding did not succeed in replacing the explanatory model, both approaches existed side by side and competing with each other. This background makes clear why referring to the academic study of religion as a “science” remains ambiguous. It can be understood either in the sense of explanatory science in proximity with the pattern of natural sciences or as a hermeneutical discipline with the objective of understanding and interpreting the phenomenon of religion. If the academic study of religion were to be taken as one species of the Human Sciences as construed by Dilthey, it would be considered a hermeneutical discipline aiming at interpretive understanding instead of a social science modelled along the causal explanations. However, the matter of fact is that scholars in the field are still divided in prioritising causal explanation or interpretive understanding as the objective of the discipline. Each of the two models has its own advocates.

The Link to Christian Theology

It is well known that Müller had employed the dictum *He who knows one, knows none* to stress the importance of comparative understanding of the

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phenomenon of religion. Against the background of the then prevalent notion of natural religion, the dictum can be taken as alluding to a differentiation between religion as a category in singular and historical religions in plural. Natural religion was a historical concept which meant a universal religiosity underlying the plurality of positive or historical religions. Peter Byrne has noted the connection of this eighteenth century’s notion to the emergence of the study of religion in general and with reference to Max Müller and Edward B. Tylor in particular.73 Summarising the thesis of Byrne, Wiebe writes: “The notion of natural religion so important in the theological debates of the eighteenth century…when transformed by romantic and idealist discussions of religion in the nineteenth century, provided a notion of religion that made possible a genuinely scientific study of religion.”74 Thus, Müller’s dictum implied that study of different historical religions was necessary to unearth the characteristics of natural religion while the historical religions were to be understood as concrete instances of that very natural religion, a circular relationship between understanding of religion and religions.

In this context, one is reminded of more or less equally famous dictum of the German theologian Adolf von Harnack, which he expressed at the University of Berlin in 1901: “He who does not know this religion knows none, and he who knows it together with its history knows all.” Needless to state, by “this religion” Harnack meant Christianity.75 Apparently, Harnack’s view is in stark contrast to Müller’s above quoted dictum and it points to a conflict between Christian theology and the then emerging comparative approach to religious studies. However, this is only one side of the coin. Harnack’s dictum also reminds us of the fact that the whole development was connected to the Christian theological milieu. This contention is supported by the fact that Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931), who can be counted among the founders of the discipline, was the Archbishop of Uppsala and one of the founders of the Christian ecumenical movement. Similarly, the pioneers like Norwegian scholar William Brede Kristensen (1867–1953), the Dutch phenomenologists of religion Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950), Cornelis P. Tiele, and Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye all were Christian theologians.

It has been discussed above how Kippenberg sees two apparently conflicting tendencies in the Western civilisation namely Hebraism and Hellenism relevant to the emergence of the modern academic study of religion. Obviously, the Hebraism tendency in the western civilisation culminates in Christianity. Thus, among the historical religions, relationship of Christianity with the discipline of religious studies presents a special case. Non-Christian religions simply counted for subject matter of this discipline, having no connection to the broader historical experience of the West within which it was embedded. By contrast, Christian theology also contributed to its development, one way or the other.

According to Kurt Rudolph “It is today no longer a secret that because of its European origin Religionswissenschaft has sanctioned a concept of religion which was drawn from the western Christian tradition and was then applied on a world-wide scale.” In fact, Rudolph is not alone in pointing out the Christian theological context of the modern western category ‘religion’ which has been instrumental behind the emergence of the enterprise of the academic study of religion. Now, a range of studies has appeared which reveal the western cultural and Christian theological baggage of the category ‘religion.’ This observation does not apply only to the category ‘religion,’ there are several other analytical categories common in the field which have obvious Christian baggage such as “belief,” “faith,” “theology,” “orthodoxy,” “heresy,” “hymn,” “monasticism,” “scripture,” and “salvation.” From another angle, it has been pointed out that the Darwinian paradigm prevalent during the early Religionswissenschaft, which assumed a progressive developmental view of religion underscored the relative superiority of Christianity over other religions, seeing it more evolved than the previous primitive forms of religion. The study of other religions in this way was considered as a fulfillment of the Christian theology.

In this connection, John Milbank’s analysis is quite important. He holds that certain developments in the Christian theology helped create the present secular outlook of religious studies. These developments include a) the development of Christian theology itself into a non-theological mode of

76 Rudolph, “Basic Positions of Religionswissenschaft,” 100.
knowledge which allows reflection while being apart from God, b) and an extension of the first development, the secularisation of theology transferring it from the event-of-divine-disclosure to a second-order deliberation on diverse religious data, and c) the coming about of a new conception of the state, especially its relationship with religion, causing religion to become a private matter but still useful for functioning of the state and maintaining order.\textsuperscript{80}

Such views about the link of Christian theology to the emergence of the academic study of religion might be challenged as totalising and neglecting the equally compelling ideological or social scientific narratives,\textsuperscript{81} which construe Christian theology as its disciplinary ‘other’. In fact, the relationship between Christian theology and the modern academic study of religion has been and continues to be a complex and heatedly debated issue.\textsuperscript{82} It falls out of purview of the present undertaking to squarely address this debate. The point to be made here is that regardless of the various positions, this debate itself bears witness to the Christian milieu in which the discipline emerged and flourished and that Christian theology cannot be straightforwardly considered as the disciplinary ‘other’ of the modern discipline of religious studies.

**Explaining Multiplicity of the Interpretive Narratives**

It has become obvious from the above discussion that multiple factors were operative behind emergence of the modern academic study. Broadly speaking, the discipline owes its existence to cultural experience of the modern European and North American societies, which culminated in novel and innovative ways of interrelating faith and reason, science and religion, and tradition and modernity. On the one hand, expansion of Europe and the resultant engagement with religious and cultural otherness played a role, while the cultural movements like Renaissance, Reform, Enlightenment, and Romanticism prepared ground for a critical and objectified gaze at the phenomenon of religion, on the other. Here, majority of the interpretive narratives emphasise the role of the Enlightenment movement which signified maximum trust in human reason and thereby gave birth to an array of new academic disciplines. However, scholars like Kippenberg see the possible influence of Romanticism movement, which pertained to a kind of fascination


\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 7–8.

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for exotic religious and mystical elements that supposedly permeated the oriental and ancient societies. Some other scholars have pointed out that Christian theology is also somehow linked to the whole development either as a disciplinary ‘other’ or as a participating actor. Thus, we have seen that multiple interpretations concerning emergence of the modern academic study of religion exist ranging from viewing it as an encroachment of the scientific project into the realm of religion to a happy compromise between these two amits of human endeavors.

Interestingly, such bewildering array of views concerning institutional beginnings of the modern academic study of religion in the nineteenth century corresponds with the diversity of the perspectives and approaches that permeate the academic study of religion through the twentieth century to our own times. In fact, the academic study of religion has never been a homogenous enterprise. There has been multiplicity of motivations, methods, choices of materials, and various cultural and socio-political contexts in which the phenomenon of religion is studied. As this diversity is diachronic—encompassing the beginnings of this enterprise and continuing through to the present—it is no less a heterogeneous enterprise today. The feature of heterogeneity has also national and regional aspect. For instance, Michael Stausberg points out the relevance of national and local contexts of various European societies saying that “the establishment of the field in different countries is to a large extent the result of national, or even local, developments including changes in the religious situation in the respective countries.”

Thus, it can be viewed that the modern academic study of religion is not like a bead strunged through with a single thread, instead it is like a bunch of colourful threads twisted together to make a rope in such a way that no thread is more central or essential than any other.

Now, coming back to the question of emergence of the modern academic study of religion, it is viewed that different interpretive narratives delineated above can be seen as a technique used by various scholars to put forward and advocate their respective theoretical and methodological preferences. This point has already been made by Christina A. Banman who views that the notions surrounding the beginnings in the nineteenth century relate to the assumptions, prejudices, and ideologies that permeate the academy today, explicitly or implicitly. More specifically, she challenges Sharpe’s narrative

about the emergence and early history of the discipline in the following words:

I believe that Sharpe’s discussion of the war between science and religion is used to support one side of a contemporary issue in conceptualising the study of religion. Sharpe is not alone in combining elements of the conflict between science and religion, or belief and unbelief, with an allegedly traditional stance of scholars of religion, in such a way as to suggest that religious studies should retain religious truth in the methods, theories, and products of its study.85

However, it is not difficult to see that the argument of Banman can also be reversed, that is, her own standpoint presumes a particular understanding of what the academic study of religion is, or is supposed to be. The examples of such disciplinary debates through the narratives of its origins can be extended. Donald Wiebe maintains that the founders of the modern academic study of religion committed the enterprise to an objective, detached, scientific understanding of religion without any role for personal religious sentiments. Then he argues that endorsing any crypto theological agenda, especially at the methodological level, contradicts scientific study of religion heralded by the first generation of scholars of this field. He terms such proposal “a failure of nerve in the academic study of religion.”86 Similar observation has been made by Michael Stausberg about Stroumsa, when the latter argues that the origins of the history of the study of religion go back to the seventeenth century. Stausberg opines that approach of the scholars whom Stroumsa considers as practitioners of a science, namely comparative religion, was confessional and often polemical.87 Obviously, Stroumsa’s narrative goes back to the seventeenth century because he seems ready to accept some degree of confessional and apologetic motives in the academic study of religion, which Stausberg does not. Here Sharpe, Banman, Wiebe, Stausberg, and Stroumsa are not simply describing history of a discipline, rather they are also arguing, implicitly if not explicitly, as to what the academic study of religion is and what it is not.

Conclusion

Keeping in view the above stated function of various narratives about surfacing of the modern academic study of religion and heterogeneity of this

85 Ibid., 179–80.
87 Stausberg “The Study of Religion(s) in Western Europe (I): Prehistory and History until World War II,” 298.
enterprise, it is espoused that an inclusive and integrative view seems more plausible. Apparently, each of these interpretive lines draws on some particular facet of a multifaceted historical development. Therefore, we do not necessarily have to accept only one particular interpretation and discard the rest. In other words, it can be the case that ‘Interpretation A’ explains emergence of ‘Strand X’ of the modern academic study of religion while ‘Interpretation B’ relates to ‘Strand Y’ of the discipline. As multiple shades of the academic study of religion exist today, search for a singular interpretive narrative of its beginnings is unlikely to come to a concluding point. The very protein nature of the phenomenon of religion implies diversity of approaches to its study and heterogeneity of the disciplinary shades. Thus, any interpretation about the emergence of the modern academic study of religion which relies on a singular explanation is prone to eclipse other more or less equally plausible explanations. It would be tantamount to impose system on a phenomenon which itself is not so systematic. Let us agree with Kippenberg when he says “the more perspectives we have, the more complete is our understanding and the greater our objectivity.”

However, in spite of such inclusive and integrative view of the various interpretations it is not to imply that exploring the circumstances in which the modern academic study of religion emerged is pointless. By interrogating narratives of origins scholars potentially become more apt to “reveal the invisible working and effects of some of the social acts of categorization, identification, memory, and forgetting that we today most take for granted.” To put it differently, exploration of such nuances about beginnings of the modern academic study of religion is important not simply to keep the historical record straight rather it is crucial for a better contextual understanding of various methodological and theoretical issues that perpetuate in the field, such as the relationship between theology and academic study of religion, insider’s and outsider’s perspectives, authority of the believers and scholars, and whether this disciplinary enterprise should be viewed as a social science modeled on causal explanation, or a hermeneutic project which aims at verstehen (interpretive understanding), or some sort of combination of the both.

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