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Brent A. Smith <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0568-1717> |

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*Corresponding author: Brent A. Smith,
Religious Studies Program of the Liberal
Studies Department, Grand Valley State
University, Allendale, MI, USA
E-mail: smithbr@gvsu.edu

Reviewing editor:
Peter Stanley Fosl, Transylvania
University, USA

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Transforming discourse: Interdisciplinary critique, the university, and the academic study of religion

Brent A. Smith^{1*}

Abstract: In the book *Interdisciplinarity*, Joe Moran traced the rise of interdisciplinarity as an inherently transformative approach to the gathering and ordering of knowledge in the modern university. Interdisciplinarity challenges the university as an epistemological project by historicizing it as a context for knowledge production. The academic study of religion arose in this setting and has developed within the intellectual forces—the lines of inquiry and allegiances to certain discourses and ways of organizing knowledge—that marked the modern university. Over the past few decades, the concept of “religion” has been historicized and scholars have argued over whether the “sacred” is in the structure of human consciousness or is the expression of culture; whether the “sacred” is its own category or is better left to the various disciplines to account for it; and, how “religion” and “secular” are to be understood. Religious Studies has been called interdisciplinary by some, but the development of the intellectual context of the university as an epistemological project has not been historicized to see how its formation cast discourse in the manner in which it has. Interdisciplinarity can provide that historicizing and open new paths of interest and inquiry in Religious Studies.

Subjects: Arts; Humanities; Language & Literature

Keywords: interdisciplinary; interdisciplinarity; religion; sacred; interdisciplinary humanities



Brent A. Smith

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brent A. Smith entered academia after 26 years in the parish ministry preceded by preparation at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in the early 1980s. His scholarly work has two foci: the first involves concepts and methods in the academic study of religion as they are used to interpret phenomena in the field. Over the last two decades, Religious Studies has steered much of its interest toward studying itself. This generates Smith's second focus. While concepts and methods need critical review, they are created in order to interpret and understand more deeply how others reside inside of events and phenomena that function as religious, and how taking up residence there serves the meaning of their life and work. This article assists the former, the return of the academic study of religion to its chief object of inquiry: human being, being religious.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The twenty-first century has been shaped as much by religion as any other facet of human life, and yet many in the modern university still consider it too narrowly. Even the academic study of religion has spent much of its energy evaluating the scholar's study over events “outside” its halls, or confined its view to what science can uncover. As a context for producing knowledge, the university was shaped by its historical development into a culture that valued certain kinds of knowledge. There are ways to recount that history to reveal what scholarship paid attention to and what was overlooked. Interdisciplinarity represents one of those ways, and in a world inhabited by wide variations of “religion,” can offer more expansive ways to see religion than through a lens dominated by either Western Christianity or modern science, the old ways of the modern university.

1. Introduction

One of my most exciting experiences at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in the early 1980s was a Darwin and Evolution class that mixed divinity school, zoology, biology, history, and social science students. I thought the biggest challenge was developing a language with which to communicate though it was never specifically or formally addressed. It reflected the interest of David Tracy, my intellectual mentor: “Anyone who uses a language bears the preunderstandings, partly conscious, more often preconscious, of the traditions of that language.” (Tracy, 1994, p. 16). The history of language and thinking contains in part why people question what they do, as well as where, when and how they question.

The issue came up 30 years later when I joined the faculty of a public university at the end of the formal process of creating a Religious Studies program as part of the Liberal Studies Department in the university’s college of interdisciplinary study. It was not created as part of the philosophy department or any of the social sciences. This is an important distinction. Questions arose from faculty concerning the development of a Religious Studies program and the questions continue five years later: “Whose religion are we going to be teaching?” “Are we going to be interfaith?” “Can/Must I be a believer/atheist to teach religion?” “How can a public university teach religion?” “Are you going to teach world religions?” “How can a university that takes scientific inquiry/method seriously teach faith?”

During these first few years, I have frequently consulted a collection of essays edited by Paul Ramsey and John F. Wilson, compiled mostly from addresses given at a conference honoring George F. Thomas, the first unit head for Princeton University’s Religion Department established in 1946. Like good historical documents, *The Study of Religion in Colleges and Universities* is as notable for what it omits as it is for what it contains. The essays—authored by twentieth-century luminaries like Krister Stendahl, William Clebsch, Jacob Neusner, and James Gustafson among others—assess the academic study of religion, or Religious Studies or, as many called it then, the History of Religions. As a field it was not in its infancy and yet was still seeking to differentiate itself from theology, philosophy, and the social sciences, and trying to justify its rank as a distinct discipline that could operate as a science. In a contribution entitled, “The History of Religions: Some Problems and Prospects,” H.P. Sullivan of Vassar College wrote:

It would be naïve to suppose—and some historians of religions have been guilty of so supposing—that objectivity or purely “scientific” examination is possible in describing and interpreting religious phenomena. No matter how intellectually cognizant one is of one’s own religious position, there still remains the subtle play of emotions and temperament on one’s perspective and understanding. But not just irrational or nonrational factors may intrude. For there are also the effects of some basic philosophical suppositions to take into account—not simply personal ones, but those of one’s culture ... Especially prominent today is the awareness that the questions which the history of religions has been posing and the categories it has been employing are largely Western ones, conditioned by Western concepts of man and religion. (Sullivan, 1970)

This excerpt contains the issues that have occupied much of Religious Studies in the 40+ years since the collection’s publication: the historicizing of the basic concepts of the field, including the concepts of “sacred/profane,” “religious/secular,” even “religion” itself, and the clash of philosophical category with the relativizing effects of culture and history; the relationship between the possible religious allegiances of the scholar and the scholar’s study of a religious “other,” especially the theological problem endemic to Religious Studies; and, whether a “science” of the study of “religion” is feasible. But, what is omitted is telling too. There is no historicizing of the modern university as an epistemological project within which Religious Studies emerged from the middle part of the nineteenth century to our own day. Tracing the history of the intellectual and epistemological development of the context was lacking.

In my own location within a public university, the creation of a Religious Studies program yielded a variety of responses that can be seen as rooted in the intellectual development of the university as an epistemological project. Some voiced their doubts that religion could be studied without becoming theological proclamation in disguise. There was little to no recognition of the difference between espousing and practicing as an insider, and studying it as an outsider. Terms that were problematic in our field were used as if untouched by history and culture, like “world religions” and “interfaith.” Still others questioned why a program like this would be started when secularism was growing and religion receding. And, of course, there were those who wondered what jobs students would be preparing for other than the clergy. Yet, the issue of how the university intellectually developed such as to value certain lines of discourse in certain ways, while eschewing others, lingered beneath each comment. What remained camouflaged was how the university developed to hold initially Western, Christian theological, then Enlightenment philosophical, and now modern scientific organizing principles as justifying its knowledge gathering and ordering. Historicizing the university context seemed a crucial task, not only for understanding how and in what way the academic study of religion had become what it had, but how Religious Studies could be relevant to a twenty-first century where religion is ever more present, ever more important and ever more various.

The academic study of religion arose and has developed within the intellectual forces of the university and the lines of inquiry and allegiances to certain discourses and ways of organizing knowledge that are characteristic of it. Over the past few decades the concept of “religion” has been historicized, a development launched by Jonathan Z. Smith’s now familiar declaration:

... 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 comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy. (Smith, 1982, p. xi)

While much discourse has been generated by the location of the origin of the concept of religion as the scholar’s study, the observation he offered that preceded that phrase has gotten scant attention: “... 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.” Academicians have argued over whether the “sacred” is ingrained in the structure of human consciousness or is the expression of culture deified; whether the “sacred” is its own category of study or whether it is better left to the various disciplines to account for it; and, how religion is to be conceived of relative to secularization, if at all. But, Smith wrote, from a university scholar’s study. The development of the intellectual context of the university as an epistemological project has not been historicized and analyzed to the extent it needs to be to see how its formation cast discourse in the manner in which it has. Interdisciplinarity can provide that historicizing, and analysis through an interdisciplinary lens can open new paths of interest and inquiry in the academic study of religion, or Religious Studies. That is the aim of this paper.

2. The development of the university as an epistemological project

From the latter decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, 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. In his foundational book *Interdisciplinarity*, Joe Moran traced its rise as an inherently transformative approach to the gathering and ordering of knowledge: “In this sense, interdisciplinarity interlocks with the concerns of epistemology ... and tends to be centred [*sic*] around problems and issues that cannot be addressed or solved within the existing disciplines, rather than the quest for an all-inclusive synthesis.” (Moran, 2002, p. 15). Within the modern university, interdisciplinarity had its origins in the English Department since “it is possible to argue that all the major critical developments and

controversies within English since its inception as a university subject have been related in some sense to the difficulty of containing its concerns with a single discipline and to its interdisciplinary possibilities.” (Moran, 2002, p. 19). It could be said of the phenomenon that formed the object of its study “that literature is about everything ... and this is hard to accommodate within the narrow parameters of a discipline.” (Moran, 2002, p. 21). Yet, in its overall purview interdisciplinary methods involve “some kind of critical awareness of this relationship [between knowledge and power].” (Moran, 2002, p. 3). All of this could be said too about the academic study of religion, its object of study in the field, and academic discourses on that object.

In recent research ventures, Religious Studies and its constituent parts have been called interdisciplinary endeavors. Sarah Fredericks identified it as “inherently multi- and interdisciplinary,” (Fredericks, 2010, p. 161) and while a distinction between multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary needs to be made (see below), it suffices to say now that studying religion seems to transgress the boundaries of disciplinary structures. Studies in religion and film have argued for more functional understandings of religion, recognizing the irony that rooted as religious studies is in textual biases and linguistically based reflections, “we have methods and sources [for understanding and teaching] that do not match well.” (Ostwalt, 2008, p. 38). Those pursuing a participatory turn describe their endeavor in ways that press beyond disciplinary constraints:

... the participatory turn argues for an *enactive* understanding of the sacred, seeking to approach religious phenomena, experiences, and insights as cocreated events. Such events can engage the entire range of human epistemic faculties (e.g. rational, imaginal, somatic, aesthetic, and so forth) with creative unfolding of reality or the mystery in the enactment—or “bringing forth”—of ontologically rich religious worlds ... [something that is] epistemologically constructivist and metaphysically realist. (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008)

And Ronald Grimes writes of his specialty something summing up the methodological trajectory of the field in the new century: “Interdisciplinary in approach and cross-cultural in scope, ritual studies is carried out in the field as well as in libraries; it is ethnographic as well as textual.” (Grimes, 2014, p. 6). Thus, it is important to view the university as an epistemological project through interdisciplinary eyes to see how discourse on the academic study of religion developed in ways that illuminated certain parts of “religious phenomena” while camouflaging others. In order to discern new methodological paths clearly one needs to see where we came from. Thus, with the eyes of interdisciplinarity first trained on the intellectual development of the Western form of knowledge production in the context and culture of the *universitas*, we can see how “religion” was understood in various times and the ways that what it was seen as, developed into allegiances concerning certain lines of inquiry, reflection, and understanding.

The university is a European epistemological project commencing in the Middle Ages, with an early development rooted in the Christian Church’s organizational forms.¹ The Church set the rules of the university, interpreted and enforced laws pertaining to students, faculty, and administration, and meted out punishments, and where and how they would be served. “But, if perchance such a crime has been committed that imprisonment is necessary, the bishop shall detain the criminal in his prison ... [and] the chancellor is forbidden to keep him in his prison.” (“Statutes of Gregory IX for the University of Paris in 1231,” quoted in Cantor, 1968, p. 303). Organizationally, the university developed as a part of Church bureaucracy and became an extension of Church culture.

But more to our interest is that from its beginnings the university has consistently displayed two epistemological characteristics in its intellectual development: first, the activity of gathering together the yield of observations of the natural world which, for almost a millennia now has privileged increased specialization and detail. Humanity’s epistemological inclinations include the desire to know the parts of its universe in their various particularities which the university reflects. Secondly, and even more relevant to our inquiry is the epistemological activity of reflection upon the details and weaving those parts into an understandable whole. This can be called the “organizing

principles” justifying the overall ordering of knowledge in a certain manner. Through reflection humanity seeks to make sense of the “body of knowledge” it gathers, as an understandable whole organized into a unitary view. 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, portion and entirety is symbolized today in the individual scholar’s study and the university’s library. The former is knowledge gathered and ordered into specializations, disciplines, while the latter is pertinent knowledge from the disciplines gathered and ordered and made available in an understandable way as a unitary whole. It is within this epistemological context and culture that 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 disciplinary concepts and methodologies, shaped as they are by the university’s unitary organizing principles.

It is in the unitary epistemological function of the university—what Whitehead called the “Reason of Plato ... in formulating judgments of the understanding” (Whitehead, 1929, p. 11) of a whole—that the most influence has been wielded in terms of the academic study of religion with influences that directly shape the nature of the discourse. It has been the organizing principles of a given era that, more than anything else, have given shape and substance to foundational concepts—like “religion” and “secular”—and the trajectory of discourses concerning them.

In his *Religion in the Making*, Alfred North Whitehead identified three intellectual traditions in the West—religion, philosophy, and science—and the development of their epistemological grounding is critical to understand as each in turn supplied 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,” (Whitehead, 1938, p. 67) and is driven by the prompts of consciousness as “two factors, interest and discrimination, stimulate each other.” (Whitehead, 1938, p. 44). But religion and science are different and more closely mirror one other. For religion in the West, specifically Christianity, the foundation of its epistemology is in 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. [And to Whitehead science operated intellectually] 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.” (Whitehead, 1926, p. 57).² In other words, in the West and embedded in the structural foundation of both religion and science as a means of knowing, 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 creates one while religion, depending upon the tradition, either assumes one (Buddhism) or searches for one (Christianity).

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.” (Moran, 2002, p. 5). Professional and collegial communities instill allegiances in their members, and in the case of the university’s universe, membership to a specific intellectual history and the organizing epistemological principles of any given era.

3. The historical development of the project's epistemological organizing principles

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.” (McGrath, 2007, p. 326). This was the overall organizational form of the structures of the European Medieval world. The university developed within this and in relationship to the era’s general understanding of what “religion” entailed. And of course, the word “religion” had a history.

Like a creation story, the etymology of the word “religion” yields uncertain, mysterious origins. Fourth-century Roman grammarian Servius gave it the Latin origin “*ligare*, to bind, to be the root of *religio*,” (Hoyt, 1912, p. 126) 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; a relational meaning that suggests human allegiance. But, the comprehensive etymology of “religion” is various and has been traced to “ligament” and “obligation” in Latin, “heed” in English, “to have a care for” in Teutonic and Aryan, and in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe it is “used of outward forms rather than of the inner spirit.” (Hoyt, 1912). 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’” (Habermas as quoted in Ferrer & Sherman, 2008, p. 2). He “derives *religio* from *relegere*, as meaning to go through or over again in reading, speech or thought.” (Hoyt, 1912, p. 127). In other words, in its meaning the word “religion” holds a reflective bias consistent with the ancient Greek philosophical interest. The word contains both Augustine and Cicero, a relational and reflective bias in creative, hermeneutical tension.

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 it becoming or its present connections ... [and] considered as the point of coincidence, condensation, or accumulation of its own components” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, pp. 19–21)—that its scope and usage, and this creative tension become 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 individuals’ life in monasticism: ‘religion,’ a life found by monastic vows; ‘religious,’ a monk; ‘to enter religion,’ to join a monastery.” (Smith, 1998, p. 270). It’s interesting to note that the concept of the secular, associated in our time with science and in secularization theory found to oppose religion (a political bias of the public university as a “secular institution”), was derived from the Latin, *secularis*, as pertaining to time. It denoted the temporal, a long period of time likened unto to an era or epoch within which one was living. In terms of the concept of time, “religion” concerned its finality.

In the Middle Ages, the conceptual understanding of Augustine regarding both concepts were held as spatial domains, the two cities; “their mutually exclusive character, which Augustine always emphasizes when defining them formally.” (Markus, 1970, p. 59). Like his adversaries the Donatists, Augustine conceived of these two urban orders as “each contained within its own sociological milieu.” (Markus, 1970, p. 122). However sociologically distinct, the sacred order, the City of God, and the secular order, the City of Man nevertheless overlapped in the temporal conditions of existence necessarily experienced by us, intertwined and integrated so as to confer a distinctive quality.³

Thus, the concept of “religion” was composed of the concepts of time and space/place, “components inseparable *within itself* ... [as] what defines the consistence of the concept, its endoconsistency ... distinct, heterogeneous, and yet not separable.” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, pp. 19–20). 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*. The two spatial orders were categorized sociologically as opposites but under the temporal conditions of existence they were

indistinct. Human beings experienced them as overlapping orders. The university existed in the overlapping spatial order of both God and man.

Since there were no libraries and few books in the Medieval world, 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 Ghost." (Haskins, 1923, p. 61). The Church determined what subjects were to be taught, and not taught.⁴ The Church even determined how they were to be taught. "These are the articles," begins the *Condemnation of Errors at Paris in 1241*, "rejected as contrary to true theology and condemned by Odo, the chancellor of Paris, and the masters ruling in theology at Paris ..." ("Condemnation of Errors at Paris in 1241," quoted in Cantor, 1968, pp. 306–307). The chancellor even had his own prison. And final exams were likened to the Christian Final Judgment.

And, of course, Augustine's concept of "religion" was comprehensively Christian in character and scope, to be defended theologically.⁵ Philosophy may have been a handmaiden of truth but Theology was the Queen, as the Scholastics demonstrated in using the former in service to the latter. And in terms of science, it was understood that Christian doctrines buttressed a unitary meaning and purpose to the knowledge that was gathered. Though there were few theology students in the university, the foundational principle ordering knowledge was that "Faith precedes science, fixes its boundaries, and prescribes its conditions." (Haskins, 1923, p. 71, quoting Alzog Church History, (1876), II, p. 733)

This was the early context of the creative, hermeneutical tension of allegiance and reflection. 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. This shapes the interplay of allegiance and reflection. This became apparent in the fracture that was the Renaissance and the full fissure of the Reformation, which represented a new way of knowing; that is, a new function to reflection that would have ramifications in terms of the intellectual allegiances within the university.

This new way was characterized by the following elements. The first was the way in which the new thinking changed the space and time wherein the "religious" life was led. In the Medieval world that had been life within the boundaries of the monastery and its daily orders. The new thinking added a new territory, "the more dangerous world of the city and the marketplace, exposing its thinkers to pressures and problems" (McGrath, 2007, p. 319) that ordered days in different ways. Looking back, through a twentieth-century lens composed of a concept of "religion" yet to be historicized, it's easy to identify in Protestantism the seeds of a religious/secular divide. But, to identify it in this way is to attach a kind of romanticized, otherworldliness to the Medieval secular/religious relationship as if a clear religion/secular divide that "fell" into the messiness represented, say, by Calvin's Geneva and in the universities founded in his new day. But *to go through or over again through reading*, perhaps a fuller view is to see that the spatial dimension hinted by the concept of religion in terms of its sociological and eschatological significance, was expanded outside monastic confines (which do not disappear during this time) and into a 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 two new elements. The Protestant protest involved hermeneutics and the manner in which the "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). Unto that time both were interpreted symbolically through human active movement (ritual and ceremony), but the epistemological move here was literary and empirical, and radically so. The third element, the emergence of the idea of the individual, can be seen as integral to the hermeneutical shift and the emergence of Protestantism's "dangerous idea."⁶ *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 this task. Hermeneutics became inextricably linked to knowledge. Texts contained meanings that needed to and could be unlocked through the careful and thorough use of the reflection 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 concept of "religion" was added to Augustine's.

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 became 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 use of the mind's reflection 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 began to fray. Its allegiance to the internal processes of reflection began to gain ground. And the importance given to thought and mind was complimented in the primacy of text composed of words needing interpretation to establish and confirm belief. Experience and formulation were directly linked through Scripture. And Scripture was illumined by the nature and extent of the education the individual received.

By the time of the Enlightenment, philosophy as reasoned reflection had dethroned Church theology as the university's "universal field of inquiry which brought together all the different branches of learning, a notion of unity in difference which also influenced the formation of the disciplines within the modern university." (Moran, 2002, p. 4). Simultaneous to this dethroning in the university, the concept of religion was 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." (Smith, 1998, p. 273). This 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?" (Smith, 1998, p. 274). The transition from the activity of human movement (ritual and ceremony) to the activity of human thought exercised on texts was now completed in the origin of concern for words that more accurately corresponded to "the world." So, from the 1300s through the 1700s not only had the religious life expanded its spatial references from the monastery outward to include the city, but also it had changed the conceptions of time from the juxtaposition of secular epoch and religious fulfillment at the end of time, to the collapse of both into first natural history, and then history. It effectively eliminated any vestige of the Augustinian prominence given to religion, and the time and place of overlapping orders, the two cities. 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 are prominent. From an experience with a divine literary source, or from the 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" (Moran, 2002, p. 9) and no higher authority than human reason. It could therefore be the foundation for a more expansive view. The discipline of 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 allegiances intertwining knowledge and Christian belief and formulation; as though philosophy and the philosophers who practiced it were absent of allegiances?⁷

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 epistemological grounding in reason but Hegel's critique of Kant as well. This yielded "the paradoxical 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" (Habermas, 1971, p. 24). 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" (Habermas, 1971, p. 44) a context for Western intellectualism was gradually created, Positivism, which camouflaged and confirmed "the [forgetting of the] experience of reflection." (Habermas, 1971, p. vii). Cicero's reflective reading of the concept of "religion" disintegrates. And without philosophical reflection differentiated from science, there is no mechanism in the university for the consideration of 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 nineteenth century and in full capitulation in the twentieth. 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" (Habermas, 1971, p. 67).

Philosophy and religion both yielded 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. (Habermas, 1971, p. 4)

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';" (Moran, 2002, p. 155) 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." (Habermas, 1971, p. 67).

4. The rise of religious studies in the context of the university as an epistemological project

This is the context within which the academic study of religion came into existence. With the breadth of European colonialism in the nineteenth century came the encounter of Christianity with a whole diversity of spiritual expressions foreign to its theology and metaphysics. Scholars engaged the study of unfamiliar sacred texts as the means to unlock the beliefs of these "others," executing what we now see as a textual bias consistent with what composed religion and a study of it; and linking it

to the origins of interdisciplinarity. From its roots in nineteenth-century linguistics, the study of the spiritual expressions of this whole variety of “others” was taken up by the emerging social sciences as they were launched and developed within the university’s organizational and epistemological structure. Declarations were made by anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and in other disciplines as to what “religion” was, what it involved, how it functioned and where it could be seen. For our analysis here, it is not important to delineate the details of that development, but to look at three developments.

The first was the attempt to create a “science of religions.” It became the twentieth century’s chief pursuit and Mircea Eliade gave justification to the endeavor to his era and within the university:

... 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. (Eliade, 1958, p. xvii)

In this declaration, 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. He took Durkheim’s distinction between the sacred and profane and ensconced it as the foundation of the endeavor to understand *homo religiosus*, and the dimension of religious phenomena the disciplines omitted.

The argument over whether and what was being missed continued into the twenty-first century and as part of the developing discourse a refutation of Eliade’s claim coalesced vis-à-vis historicizing critiques from post-modernism, post-colonialism, et al. Social constructionist arguments over the cultural origins of “religion” and the political biases of theories of religion and its origin 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” (Arnal & McCutcheon, 2012, p. xi).⁸ Eliade’s attempt to delimit a component of a phenomena camouflaged by the disciplinary structures of the university, in order to justify a new venture supported by the organizing epistemological principles of the university, was deflated by historicizing critiques. These critiques sought to correct all of the disciplines and fields in the university by relativizing for each their concepts and methods in culture and history. Part of interdisciplinarity contributed to this critique particularly as it was aimed at individual disciplines. Reconsidering the concept of “religion” and the primacy of “belief” were just a part of this overhauling in what was increasing being called, the academic study of religion or the field of Religious Studies.

The second development pertinent to our analysis occurred in the new century and served as the “bookend” to the first. The pursuit to develop a “science of religions” that had garnered so much energy was declared dead, communicated in the tone of a lament and the resignation of allegiances unrewarded:

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. (Martin & Wiebe, 2014, p. 1129)

Yet, hidden within this eulogy is an evaluation that may mean something more, which will be discussed below.

The numerous events in the early twenty-first century and around the world mark a break in history regarding the twentieth century's point of view concerning the concepts of "religion," the "secular," and their opposition. This is the third event of importance to this critique. "[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" (Riesebrodt, 2012, p. 16). Others also saw how academia's eyesight had gained a much needed correction: "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" (Scott Appleby, 2000).⁹

The religious/secular divide is still characterized in the university and the world outside of it as an opposition, and often as the war between religion and science. This point of view obscures their common intellectual origins in the creation and development of the *universitas*. It also conceals Whitehead's analysis of 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" (Furani, 2015, p. 10) if not more, including as "an epistemology and ontology" (Furani, 2015, p. 1 [referencing Talal Asad]) in relationship to the development of the Western university. Seeing both religion and the secular as epistemologies and ontologies can, in the context of the university, revive the relationship of religion and science with each other and 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 concerning "religious decline" mentioned above.

In interdisciplinary terminology, this last development is an instance where the academic, disciplinary, university-generated epistemological products—supported by the organizing principles of the era, science, as critiqued by Habermas—have been transgressed in the world outside the university. 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" (Moran, 2002, p. 8) in the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Every epistemological project has allegiances that shape what is seen and not seen, and separate what is of interest from what is ignored. "Anyone who uses a language bears the pre-understandings, partly conscious, more often preconscious, of the traditions of that language." (Tracy, 1994, p. 16). Interdisciplinarity developed in the intellectual culture of the university with its disciplinary divisions, and cannot outrun its origins any more than anything else conceived in the scholar's study!

5. The consequences of context for the future of religious studies

The development of Religious Studies within the epistemological project that is the modern university serves as a critique of the discourses within the university as they have engendered allegiances to certain organizing principles reflected in university structures and the kinds of reflective lines of inquiry supporting those discourses. This is what interdisciplinarity can provide by "establishing a kind of undisciplined space in the interstices between disciplines, or even attempting to transcend disciplinary boundaries altogether." (Moran, 2002, p. 15). This "undisciplined space" can be filled with consequences gleaned from looking backwards, to till new land ahead.

First, the eulogy for the pursuit of a "science of religions" is formed by an allegiance to scientism as Habermas described it. When knowledge is circumscribed by science there is a loss of a dimension of reflection. "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.” (Habermas, 1971, p. 67). Martin and Wiebe’s eulogy did not concern the “staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions” Smith alluded to above, and the most significant meaning of the declaration may not have concerned Religious Studies. To this interdisciplinary critique, the statement stands as delineating the limits of science as it has developed within the university as providing the organizing epistemological principles that have supported disciplinary structures. In quoting B.R. Clark from the early 1960s, Moran noted “that once disciplines have established themselves, they develop vested interest, defend their territory and reinforce their exclusivity through particular types of discourse.” (Moran, 2002, p. 14). This helps in understanding why scientists at my university would insist the only academic study of religion is theological; and, why those in the academic study of religion who put their allegiance in science were aggrieved when their loyalties proved misplaced.

Yet, Habermas’ naming of scientism may not be enough. The New Realism in philosophy pushes even further, claiming that “Habermas is too modest and cautious because he does not wish to raise any premature objections against the results of scientific research.” (Gabriel, 2015, p. 49). This is a firm step in philosophy toward its regaining differentiation from science which, with Religious Studies also differentiated from science might prove the kind of tension among the three unitary domains wherein creativity, as interdisciplinarity describes it, can thrive.

Of course, this is not to say science isn’t useful in the role of providing organizing epistemological principles. But, this is to point out that Whitehead’s analysis of science *and* religion holds. Both move from experience to proclamation. And within the university they both, as providing organizing principles, operate to conceive of the other through their own disciplinary categories and methods, and both seek to make philosophy their servant. It is as necessary to acknowledge alterity in university organizational structure as in human existence, to maintain the prospects of creativity and fruitfulness in each.

The world events of the twenty-first century along with the demise of secularization theory yield a second consequence in the context of the academic study of religion. Without a philosophy differentiated from science and an understanding of religion wider than both the others, science as the university organizing principle has leaned into a reductionism not dissimilar to how religion (Christianity) operated at the dawn of the *universitas*. And this shapes how other disciplines come to consider religion in relationship to their object of study. Religion can too easily be maintained as a subset of the scholar’s central allegiances to discipline and university culture: “Understanding religion ... means recognizing its inextricability from culture ... [and] for those engaged in the study of culture and for those engaged in the study of religion, how profoundly each of these two fields is enriched by the conjunction between them.” (Mizruchi, 2001, pp. x–xi). Yet today, how can the conjunction of two inextricable things maintain the differentiation, the alterity that makes for a conjunction?

Interdisciplinarity uncovers reductionism because it sees the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge and locates the origin of knowledge not in disciplinary concerns but in the phenomena itself that is being studied outside the university. To “overcome some of the fragmentation of knowledge” (Miller, 1982, p. 3) that disciplinary formation can produce and uphold, interdisciplinary methodology begins in the field with problems that transgress disciplinary boundaries and transcend disciplinary grasp and comprehension. Thus, 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.” (Repko, 2012, p. 5). It is part of interpreting the new complexities of twenty-first-century events when, for example, the disciplinary concepts established in the twentieth century concerning competing domains of “religion” and “profane” are transgressed. And because, like literature, religion can be conceived of as part of everything, disciplinary structure invites social scientific, philosophical, even theological reductionism regarding religion as an object of study. The history of the university in the twentieth century bears this out. Reductionism conflates the experience into the explanation

and denigrates the way that life always outruns our explanations and analyses. Reductionism is anti-transcendent. New knowledge is always transcendent.

New methodologies used today in ritual studies, religion and film, and the participatory turn employ the characteristics of interdisciplinary methodology—integration, creativity, and the transformation of older epistemologies—in responding to the reductionism. They are integrative, creative, and rooted in concerns arising from the phenomena “out there.”

With one consequence of this interdisciplinary critique being the transparency of the limits of science as providing the university’s organizing principles of knowledge, and another being a response to the risk of reductionism, the final consequence involves a reconsideration of the formation of Religious Studies in order to chart a productive future. Steve Fuller describes “... a set of interdisciplinary projects that aim to recover a lost sense of intellectual unity, typically by advancing a heterodox sense of intellectual history that questions the soundness of our normal understanding of how the disciplines have come to be as they are.” (Fuller, 2010, p. 50). This is one such attempt. The twenty-first century needs a wider, more vibrant, and pragmatically useful way for the university to help navigate a new day where religion is in some places explicitly vibrant, while in others, remains camouflaged when seen through worn out lenses. For example, Eliade’s statement above, which in its time was meant to justify establishing a “science of religions” as a distinct disciplinary pursuit can through an interdisciplinary lens be seen as the early signs of the limits of science as the university’s organizing principles. His declaration that the sacred and profane are opposites, which in the latter twentieth century even becomes the sacred/secular oppositional, may have once been needed to justify foundational concepts in a discipline. But, now the way his research and writing thoroughly and consistently transgressed the foundational opposition he set up, now can be seen as a commentary on the limits of disciplinarity and the modern university as constituted for the era concluding at the end of the twentieth century: “The ideal of European philosophy consisted in believing in the possibility of human thought encompassing all that seems to stand in its way, thus interiorizing what is exterior, transcendent ... [not] want[ing] to conceive of ... anything going beyond the graspable.” (Levinas & Guwy, 2008, p. 298).

Instead, inquiries into the sacred as involved in the profane but from a location transcending it can inform Religious Studies as these are evaluated for their interdisciplinary characteristics. And here the contributions of Merold Westphal, Hent de Vries, Emmanuel Levinas, and others offer another path down interdisciplinarity’s heterodox intellectual history by reintroducing the issue of transcendence in the postmodern world. Westphal, for example, explores “the meaning of divine transcendence” through “notions of self-transcendence,” an instance of the “decentered self [that] is a central theme of postmodern philosophy.” (Westphal, 2004, p. 5). The decentered self, combined with the concept of the sacred as an element in religious phenomena that transcends disciplinarity’s modes of information gathering and scientism’s modes of ordering, opens exciting new possibilities.

In conclusion, the academic study of religion may best be served by a reconsideration of its foundational concepts as they play themselves out in a world where this staggering amount of data, phenomena, experiences, and expressions are in evidence. That reconsideration cannot occur through the modern university’s disciplinary structures buttressed by science as the privileged unitary epistemological domain. Instead, an interdisciplinary critique offers not only evidence for the reconsideration but also methodologies concerning the study of “religion;” and thus, for studying the sometimes competing and even inconsistent experiences of what can only be called by one criterion or another a sacred, variously understood, but yielding human transformation whereby individuals and communities see themselves as residing in various versions of an “unseen order” (James, 1961, p. 59) overlapping the material, profane order we all share.

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Author details

Brent A. Smith¹

E-mail: smithbr@gvsu.edu

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0568-1717>

¹ Religious Studies Program of the Liberal Studies Department, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI, USA.

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Notes

1. Robert De Courcon, Chancellor of the University in Paris and Cardinal Priest, issued statutes in 1215 that exemplify the inextricable organizational conjunction of the Church and the university: "Let all know, that having been especially commanded by the lord pope to devote our energy effectively to the betterment of the condition of the students at Paris, and wishing by the advice of good men to provide for the tranquility of the students in the future, we have ordered and prescribed the following rules ..." ('Statutes of Robert De Courcon for Paris in 1215,' quoted in Cantor, 1968, p. 305). For an even more extensive discussion of the intellectual and organizational development of the university see Smith (2016).
2. When they operate poorly they also evidence similarities. See the discussion of fetishism in Gabriel (2015).
3. Markus' entire quote is thoroughly descriptive of this: "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." (Markus, 1970, pp. 122–123).
4. Concerning Aristotle, for example, "The treatises ... on logic, both the old and the new, are to be read ... [while] on the feast-days nothing is to be read except philosophy, rhetoric, *quadrivialia*, the Barbarism, the Ethics, if they like, and the fourth book of the Topics ... The books of Aristotle on Metaphysics or Natural Philosophy, or the abridgements of these works, are not to be read." ('Statutes of Robert De Courcon for Paris in 1215,' quoted in Cantor, 1968, p. 305).
5. Augustine saw a psychological illustration of the Trinity: "Man is cognizant of himself and in himself he finds a similitude of the Trinity: in the loved, the lover and love; in mind, love and the knowledge thereof; in memory, intellect and will." (Bainton, 1962, 138).
6. 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."
7. Though he differentiates Kant from scientism, Gillespie explains the implications of public and private reason in Kant and in so doing, the allegiance influencing the trajectory of university culture: "Though there are many

versions of public reason ... the primary and perhaps most influential from a deliberative democratic perspective of epistemic common ground as to the constitution of reason comes from Kant's 'What is Enlightenment?' Here, 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.' 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." (Gillespie, 2014, p. 4).

8. Russell McCutcheon leads the efforts of constructionists. Eliade and the Chicago School have been reproached for their own "particular kind of reductionism ... aptly called ... pietistic reductionism (or, alternatively, 'sacred reductionism' or 'enchanted reductionism') [which] treats the religious traditions and developments in the religious world as though they were politically/ideologically neuter" (McMullins, 1989). Ironically, critiques of this whole conversation within the context of the university find that both Eliade's mid-century charges of reductionism leveled at the existing disciplines, and the countercharges of the social constructionists, while "in tension on a number of theoretical and methodological issues ... share at least one common feature: both are interested in delimiting the bounds of an other (the reductionist in the first case, the liberal humanist in the second), who is stuck in the past, as a way of validating their own projects, headed as they are to a better future" (Fong, 2014, p. 1129).
9. "In recent scholarship ... the relationship between 'the secular' and 'the religious' is seen to be more intimate, overlapping, and mutually transformative than previously understood." In addition to Appleby in public theology, Furani writes, "... the *postsecular* arose as a coinage signaling a shift in the fields of inquiry, knowledge formation, and politics ... [whereas] the current usage of *postsecular* ... is a general attempt to work beyond Enlightenment-driven appraisals of religion and outside of the secular's hegemonic, epistemic, and ontological confines" (Furani, 2015, p. 4). This author's perspective is in agreement with Furani's critique.

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