
2010 Presidential Address: “Religion” in the Humanities and the Humanities in the University

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Two basic problems that scholars of religion routinely confront—specifying an object of study and figuring out how to study it—can be construed as opportunities. Scholars of religion typically overcome the difficulties inherent in specifying their object of study by offering a stipulative definition. Doing so, however, artificially stabilizes our object of study and obscures what I believe we ought to be studying: the processes of valuation whereby people decide on the meaning of events and determine what matters most. If we take processes of valuation as our subject matter, we can use historical methods to track how those processes unfold over time in various domains. In addition, as a subject-oriented discipline, we have the luxury of exploring how the processes that lead to the formation of our instable subject matter work at different, albeit connected, levels of analysis. This is an ability that I think at least some scholars in subject-oriented disciplines can and should cultivate as a contribution to interdisciplinary collaborative projects. An analysis of the making of “religion” in the modern university is offered as an example of how we might track a process of valuation over time. A twentieth century (neo-Darwinian) perspective on evolution is offered as a framework for understanding processes of valuation at multiple levels of analysis.

I WANT TO THANK Kwok Pui-lan for her introduction and especially for highlighting the different positions I have held and the roles

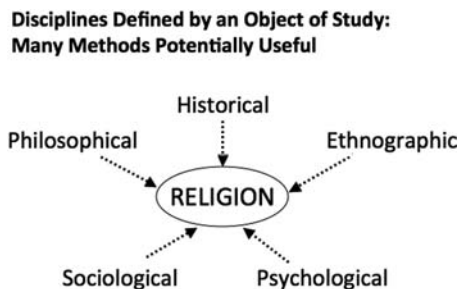
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I have assumed, both institutional and intellectual, over the course of my career. I also want to thank the Critical Theory and Discourses on Religion Group, the North American Association for the Study of Religion, and the editors of two journals—*Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* and *Religion*—for sponsoring a series of stimulating conversations over the past year that have pushed my thinking forward.¹ In these conversations, I was repeatedly questioned about my position and point of view; at times, I felt as if I was supposed to adopt a fixed position with respect to a series of binaries: scientific or post-modernist, critic or caretaker, and religious or nonreligious. In reflecting tonight on the study of religion in the context of the modern North American university, I do not plan to position myself in one place, but rather will shift between three different points of view. Speaking in turn as a scholar of religion and AAR president, as a historian, and as an advocate of increased collaboration between the humanities and the sciences, I want to make the case that our perennial difficulties with two basic problems—specifying our object of study and figuring out how to study it—actually present us with some real opportunities.

PART I: RELIGIOUS STUDIES AS A SUBJECT-ORIENTED DISCIPLINE: TWO OPPORTUNITIES

Let me begin by considering the problems from a vantage point inside the discipline, as a president of the AAR and professor of religious studies. As most of you know, the National Association of Biblical Instructors renamed itself as the American Academy of Religion in 1963, the same year that the Supreme Court issued its ruling in the Schempp case and launched a period of rapid proliferation of departments of religion, especially in public institutions. A few years ago, the AAR conducted a study of the religion major in a wide range of types

¹In particular, I want to thank Bryan Rennie and Ipsita Chaterjee, who organized the CTDR session on the Future of the Field at the AAR Annual Meeting in Montreal; Bryan Rennie and Matt Day, who encouraged us all to expand our efforts in conversation with one another for publication in *MTSR*; and Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler for putting together the symposium on *Religious Experience Reconsidered in Religion*. Participants in the first set of conversations included Nancy Levene, Hans Kippenberg, Kocku von Stuckrad, Gustavo Benavides, Robert Yelle, Ivan Strenski, and Bryan Rennie, and in the second Wayne Proudfoot, Lee Kirkpatrick, Gustavo Benavides, Kocku von Stuckrad, Kim Knott, James Spickard, Tim Fitzgerald, Matt Day, and Finbarr Curtis. I also want to thank Ray Paloutzian, Amy Voorhees, Steven Sutcliffe, Gustavo Benavides, John McGraw, and Tom Tweed for feedback on versions of the plenary and Kevin McCulloch for assistance with the PowerPoint presentation and some of the diagrams now included in the paper.

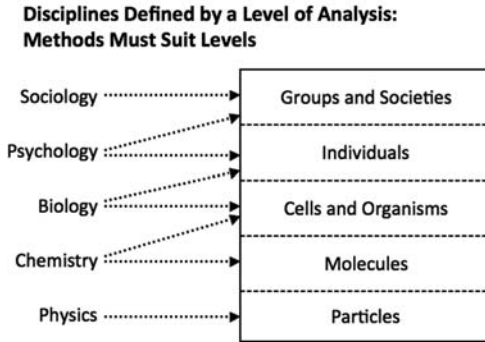


of institutions with the support of the Teagle Foundation. The working group found that over the last fifty years “a remarkable consensus has emerged among religious studies programs in almost every setting—public, private, denominational, and secular—[regarding] certain core concepts [that are widely viewed] as essential to the [religious studies] major.” Among other things, according to the report, we agree that the religious studies major is, by its very nature, intercultural, comparative, and multidisciplinary. Religion majors study “the phenomena of religion” across and within cultures from a variety of theoretical and methodological disciplines.²

I am rehearsing the obvious to make a point about our discipline. Like political science and art history, ours is a discipline that is defined by its object of study. Fields that are defined by their object of study tend to be “raider disciplines” when it comes to theory and method.³ We borrow whatever seems useful relative to our subject matter from wherever we can find it. Such disciplines, to maintain their existence, continually return to definitional questions: What is religion? What is politics? What is art? Subject-oriented disciplines stand in contrast with disciplines that are defined by a level of analysis, such as physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, and sociology. These disciplines typically bring common methods and theoretical assumptions to a range of phenomena at a specific level of analysis, e.g., the subatomic in the case of physics, mental processes in the case of psychology, or group processes in the case of sociology.

²“The Religion Major and Liberal Education—A White Paper,” available online at http://www.aarweb.org/Programs/Religion_Major_and_Liberal_Education/default.asp.

³I owe the phrase “raider disciplines” to David Lake, Professor of Political Science at UC San Diego, who used it to describe his discipline when he introduced himself at the Center for the Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences.



Although many of us in religious studies may grow weary of the interminable attempts to specify our object of study and can feel overwhelmed by the variety of methods that we can bring to bear on it, there are losses and gains in both sorts of disciplines. Biologists, psychologists, and sociologists have the luxury of shared conceptual approaches and levels of analysis within their respective disciplines, but they typically are not trained to work across disciplines and often are hesitant to venture into unfamiliar territory for which there are few rewards.⁴ As a result, we not only have different academic cultures in the sciences, social sciences, and the humanities (Kagan 2009), but also find different mindsets in disciplines defined by their subject matter in comparison to those defined by theories, methods, and levels of study.⁵ The question is how we might take collaborative advantage of these differences.

Object of Study

Let us start with our subject matter—our object of study. I do not think I have to rehearse the problems that we have faced as a discipline with respect to specifying our object of study. These are well known to us, as is the default scholarly solution, stipulating a definition of religion for the purposes of a particular research project.⁶ In stipulating definitions, we tacitly acknowledge and attempt to get around the underlying

⁴Gustavo Benavides notes that there are a few sociologists who are more open to evolutionary perspectives, pointing, for example, to Lopreato and Crippen (1999), Ellis (1996), and Machalek and Martin (2004).

⁵See also Sutcliffe (2008a), for a discussion of these issues that is quite compatible with what is argued here.

⁶The concept of “religion” has undergone such rigorous critique in recent decades that JAAR recently devoted a special issue to “religion and theology after ‘religion.’” For an overview of the

problem that is dogging us: the historical instability of our object of study. What we and our subjects refer to as religion, religions, traditions, the sacred, magic, the occult, superstition, folk beliefs, fetishes, and so on implicitly embed claims about what is, or ought to be, valued. These claims, more often than not, can be located at sites of struggle where people contest the meaning of events and make claims about what matters most in the overall scheme of things.⁷ If our object of study is unstable and shaped in important ways by the point of view that scholars and subjects bring to it, then I think we should give up attempting to solve the problem of defining religion by offering stipulated definitions. Stipulated definitions of religion artificially stabilize our object of study and obscure what I believe we ought to be studying: the processes whereby people decide on the meaning of events and determine what matters most.⁸

Calling for a focus on process in the sense of asking "what counts" and "for whom" is not a new idea, but I think we can push it farther (Lincoln 1996). If we focus on the process, we can start by describing the "site" or "event" we are going to analyze in very basic, generic terms, e.g., two people corresponding, a small group talking, a crowd looking at something, etc. No one would be satisfied with this level of description because it leaves out everything that matters, including claims about what *really* happened, but that is the point. What really happened, what it really means, and whether or why it really matters is precisely what is contested and thus what we have to elicit from those involved in the activity from their point of view.⁹ Thus, we can go on to ask a series of questions:

- What claims are disputants making about what happened or is happening? From their point(s) of view, what forces, powers, or agents had the power to act in this situation? Who or what caused things to turn out as they did?

debate, see Alles (2005); for more recent contributions, see Tweed (2006: 29–53), de Vries (2008: 1–97), and Riesebrodt (2010: 1–45).

⁷As Latour puts it: "The task of defining and ordering the social should be left to the actors themselves, not taken up by the analyst" (Latour 2007: 23). For similar perspectives, see Beckford (2003: 11–29) and Beyler (2006: 6–8, 254–298); the approach advanced here was prefigured in Taves (1999, 2009).

⁸Similar conceptions were discussed at the turn of the century. Psychologist of religion Leuba (1912: 45–52) discussed a number of thinkers who identified the key feature of religion as "the 'feeling of value' or the 'making sacred.'" He attributed the idea that "religion is . . . at bottom concerned not with the understanding of existence but with the valuation of it" to the Danish philosopher of religion Höfding (1906: 107–108, cited in Leuba 1912: 46).

⁹Here and throughout I am presupposing Wayne Proudfoot's distinction between descriptive and explanatory reduction (Proudfoot 1985).

- How do they know this? What resources did they draw upon to make their claims? What kind of evidence do they offer to account for what they think happened?
- What, from their point of view, counts, matters, and is at stake in this activity, or event? How *much* does it matter?

This series of questions shifts our attention to what people think is or should be happening, how they know, and why it matters.

What we as scholars think of as religions, philosophies, paths (*marga* in Sanskrit), etc., could be construed as more or less formalized, more or less coherent systems of valuation that people call upon consciously and unconsciously when making claims regarding what happened, what caused it, and whether or why it matters.¹⁰ They are not, however, the *only* systems of valuation and may be drawn upon by some but not all participants in an action or event. Nor are highly elaborated, formalized, and coherent systems required for people to make such judgments. Indeed, I would suggest that the more formalized and coherent systems stand in explicit tension with less coherent, but more pragmatic, more automatic, seemingly intuitive processes of valuation.¹¹

People constitute the things that matter to them by marking them as special relative to other things in their class and ranking them as more or less special on continua ranging from the ordinary to the totally singular.¹² Through processes of singularization and de-singularization, people move things back and forth along such continua, positioning them in relation to other things and, at the same time, debating their placement with others. People use this process to constitute the things that matter to them in a variety of different domains, not just the domains that scholars might want to consider “religious.” If we are interested in tracking processes of valuation as they unfold over time in

¹⁰Elsewhere I have discussed religions as highly elaborated systems that provide frameworks for assessing, ranking, manipulating, and sometimes transcending things that matter (Taves 2010a). I intend the phrase “in some cases transcending things that matter” to refer to efforts within a tradition to “relativize, interrupt or transgress discourses, including its own” (on this point see, Roberts 2004: 160–161).

¹¹I am alluding here to the distinction between reflective and nonreflective processing that informs discussions in the cognitive science of religion of the gap between the beliefs people consciously hold and their oftentimes “theologically incorrect” implicit beliefs, see Barrett (1999, 2004: 1–19) and Slone (2004). Sutcliffe (2008b: 104–105) discusses the implications of this for the study of religion.

¹²For further discussion of specialness and singularization, see Taves (2009: 22–55, 2010a). Dissanayake (1988: 74–106, 2008) refers to “artifying” as a process of making things special by adding value, which in turn sets them apart from things to which value had not been added. Some theologians are acknowledging the importance of “singularity,” if not “singularization,” from an emic perspective, see, for example, Winquist (1995: 48–50) and Roberts (2004: 162–163, 165).

various domains, we can position ourselves as historians, that is, as scholars who are not bound to any particular subject matter, and track those processes wherever they lead us, whether into the history of religion, science, politics, sports, etc.

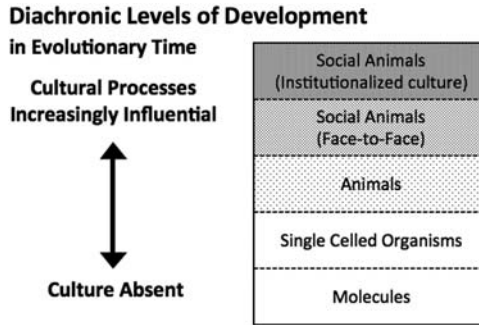
Methods and Levels of Study

If, *in addition*, we want to explain how processes of valuation work, we need additional tools. In theory and method courses, we typically offer our students an array of explanatory options drawn, for the most part, from psychology and sociology. We usually offer these explanations serially as theories of religion—first Marx, then Durkheim, then Freud, then Weber, etc. We happily embrace disparate perspectives, which is good, but I think we can aspire to something more.

Rather than simply borrowing theories and methods from other disciplines and turning our departments into fragmented microcosms of the larger university, I think we can take advantage of the fact that we can approach our object of study at many different levels of analysis and take up the challenge of figuring out how we might relate explanations generated at different levels of analysis. To do so we need to specify these levels of analysis more carefully, specify whether we are looking at the levels over time (that is, diachronically) or in time (synchronically), and consider where culture fits in from both perspectives.

Viewed from the diachronic perspective of evolutionary, historical, and developmental time, we can distinguish between molecular, cellular, organismic, and social levels of analysis. At the molecular or genetic level, we share much in common with other animals; at the biological level, we have much in common with other mammals; and, at the social level, much in common with other primates. Here, though, we need to distinguish—following Bruno Latour and Maurice Bloch among others—between the face-to-face social and the institutionalized social.¹³ If we define culture as “information capable of affecting individuals’ behavior that they acquire from other members of their species through teaching, imitation, and other forms of social transmission” (Richerson and Boyd 2005: 5), it is evident that, while culture is not limited to humans, it plays a much larger role in human

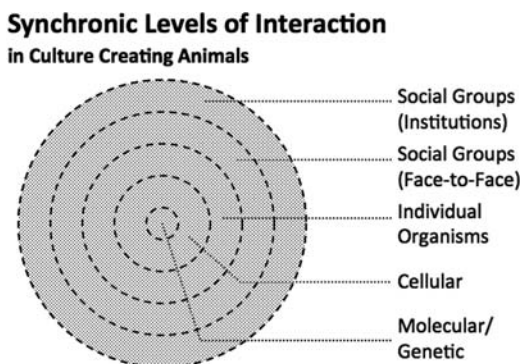
¹³Latour (2007: 64–86) distinguishes between basic face-to-face social skills, evident among other primates, and the complex associations between humans and objects that allow for the possibility of more durable relations, which I refer to here as the institutional social; Bloch (2008) distinguishes between the transactional and the transcendental social.



behavior than in any other species (Tomasello 1999; Baumeister 2005). The vastly expanded role of culture is linked to the human ability to create elaborate institutional formations, including universities and professional associations, which reproduce systems of valuation independent of face-to-face interactions.

If we shift to a synchronic point of view, we can still speak of different levels of analysis from the micro to the macro, that is, from molecules to cells to organisms to groups, but, where diachronically the levels layer one upon the next over time, synchronically the levels appear as nested circles that constantly interact. Thus, viewed synchronically, a molecule, cell, organism, or group is part of a larger set of systems each of which constantly interacts with its environment. From a synchronic perspective, “culture” is not the top level in a stack but, in the case of culture-creating animals, an ability that shapes and is shaped by each of these levels from the molecular to the group. Thus, insofar as cultural information is learned and neurons interconnect in ways that reflect what we have learned, cultural patterns are expressed at the micro level of neural processes as well as at macro levels of individuals and groups.¹⁴

¹⁴In a personal communication, cognitive anthropologist John McGraw commented: “I think ‘culture’ involves something like Hebbian models (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebbian_learning) of memory formation, which dovetail well with connectionist ideas (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parallel_distributed_processing). Both avoid the top down, ‘programmed’ idea of neural functioning in favor of an emergent adaptive system constructed by some relatively simple parameters and rules. Determining what culture is and how it works needs to follow your ‘building block’ approach. Finding those building blocks (esp. by attending to valuation [how/why things tend to ‘fire together’]) leads to an understanding of the bottom-up processes that create systems (how things end up being ‘wired together’) like religions and ‘cultures.’”



As a subject-oriented discipline, we have the luxury, which other disciplines do not necessarily have, of exploring how our subject matter, or better yet the processes that lead to the formation of our instable subject matter, work at different, albeit connected, levels of analysis. This is an ability that I think at least some scholars in subject-oriented disciplines can and should cultivate as a contribution to larger collaborative projects.

PART II: ANALYZING PROCESSES OF VALUATION: THE MAKING OF "RELIGION" IN THE MODERN UNIVERSITY AS A CASE STUDY

I want to illustrate how we might take advantage of these two opportunities—the instability of our object of study and our methodological promiscuity—in each of the next two sections. In this section, I will use the making of our own discipline to illustrate how we can turn the historically evident instability of "religion" as an object of study into an opportunity to understand the way that processes of valuation shaped the formation of disciplines within the modern university. I do so as a historian, not a historian of religion, but as someone who has at times passed as a "regular historian." From this vantage point, I want to suggest that (1) scholars divided "religion"—as an object of study—among several different content-based disciplines within the university and excluded some aspects altogether based on systems of valuation to which many of us no longer subscribe and (2) these divisions and exclusions have stabilized these valuations and obscured the underlying process of valuation implicit in the process of disciplinary formation.

The modern research university with its familiar threefold distinction between the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities

The Study of Religion in the Modern University

1870s-1920s: Period of intensive disciplinary formation

- Formation of modern science and social science disciplines
- Heyday of the 'scientific study of religion'
- 1909: Association of Biblical Instructors founded; renamed NABI in 1923

1920s-1950s: Tripartite curriculum consolidated

- The study and practice of religion is 'exiled' from the tripartite curriculum
- The humanities coalesce in response to the 'value-free' sciences

1950s-present: Religious Studies joins the humanities

- 1963: The Schempp decision; NABI becomes the AAR
- Departments of religion proliferate in public universities

emerged during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. There were three key periods in which academics debated the place of the study of religion in the modern university: the turn of the century, the twenties, and mid-century. The turn of the century was a period of intensive disciplinary formation, particularly in terms of what we now think of as the natural and social sciences. This is the period in which scholars who are viewed as the founders of anthropology, sociology, and psychology, such as Marx, Tylor, Frazer, James, Freud, Durkheim, Mauss, and Weber, wrote many of the classic texts that we assign in theory and method courses in the study of religion.

During this turn of the century period, some scholars thought that the scientific study of religion (modernist, evolutionary, scientific, and shorn of theology and devotion) could replace the old "moral philosophy" as a means both of uniting the curriculum and promoting "a new, more effective form of religious education." Some universities, including Yale, the University of Chicago, and Berkeley, even tried to build programs in religious studies based on the scientific study of religion, but the programs were, in the words of historian Julie Reuben, "plagued by student indifference" and failed to get off the ground. By the 1920s, as scholarly interest in the scientific study of religion declined, administrators located the study of religion outside the regular curriculum, along with theology and devotion, and promoted it as an extracurricular activity (Reuben 1996: 113–118).

The threefold division of the university curriculum into the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities took final shape during the period in which the study of religion was largely exiled from the formal curriculum. Humanities were the last of the three cultures of the

tripartite curriculum to coalesce, in part because they were highly fragmented and diversely aligned. As scientific disciplines promoted themselves as "value-free," however, the humanities (led by literary studies) emerged in the 1920s as the promoter of values and subjectivity in formal opposition to the value-free, objective sciences. The study of religion made its comeback from the extracurricular margins in the sixties, a comeback signaled by the name change from NABI to the AAR (Reuben 1996; Hart 1999).

Even though departments of religion developed relatively late, both the first and second periods left their mark on our present-day self-understanding. The role of the Protestant, university-related divinity school and extra-curricular campus ministries in shaping departments of religion that emphasized the theological disciplines—Christian theology, Biblical Studies, and Church History—is relatively well known. It is this model that the newer conception of the religious studies major has sought to replace. We know too, thanks to the work of Tomoko Masuzawa and others, how the study of Christianity and other religions in the theological curriculum gave rise to the idea of world religions (Cherry 1995; Masuzawa 2005). We have not, however, sufficiently considered the disciplinary legacy bequeathed to us by scientifically oriented scholars of religion at the turn of the century.

In making this claim, I do not mean to suggest that we have not examined many of these figures at great length; rather, I want to suggest that we have not paid sufficient attention to the assumptions about "religion" that were shared by many of the scientifically oriented scholars of religion and that, as a consequence, informed the way that "religion" is studied in the modern university.¹⁵ Several lines of thinking converged to give the study of religion its characteristic shape: the widespread agreement that magic, religion, and science were distinctly different things; the recognition of different types of religions; and the idea that mysticism constitutes the core of religious experience, which in turn lies at the heart of religion.

¹⁵For an overview of the historiography of the discipline, see Sutcliffe (2008b). As he notes, the historiographical literature "tends to be schematic, abbreviated or otherwise not fully developed" (110) and calls for more attention to the interplay between the institutional history of the field and the history of the intellectual ideas that have shaped the field. This account, although still sketchy, does attempt to relate the history of institutional development with the history of ideas about religion.

Magic, Religion, and Science Are Different Things

As [Styers \(2004\)](#) has shown, though classical figures such as Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim, and Mauss distinguished between magic, science, and religion in different ways, they all assumed that these distinctions could and should be made. Moreover, though they made these distinctions at the height of a revival of interest in magic and the occult among the educated classes in both England and France, they nonetheless subsumed the occult, if they mentioned it at all, under the heading of magic and associated magic with the primitive.¹⁶ The net result was a disciplinary division of labor in which anthropology studied religion in primitive cultures, including animism and magic, and folklore studied primitive survivals among the “folk” in the modern, civilized world ([Clements 1988](#)). Anthropology has produced a prodigious literature on shamanism and spirit possession (what in modern contexts we refer to as spiritualism and pentecostalism) that is largely disconnected from religious studies, while folklore has developed techniques for studying orally transmitted beliefs and practices that we now belatedly consider under the headings of popular and lived religion.

In addition to noticing how things got divided up, we also need to notice how this division of labor led to noteworthy exclusions. For example, until relatively recently, esoteric forms of religion have stood outside the purview of the academy ([Faivre and Voss 1996](#)). This is especially surprising given the links between key figures, such as Eliade and Massignon, in the study of religion and esotericism ([Wasserstrom 1999](#); [Sedgwick 2004](#): 109–117, 189–193). The same has been true of movements among educated elites, such as spiritualism, the occult, and new age movements. Finally, research on so-called paranormal and psychic phenomena pioneered by the Society for Psychical Research has remained an odd quirk with no real place in the academic landscape.¹⁷

These distinctions and excisions fit nicely with the distinctions between types of religion prevalent at the turn of the century. The nineteenth century witnessed a gradual transition from a fourfold

¹⁶E. B. Tylor (1979/1891: 112–113), holder of the first chair in anthropology at Oxford, described “the belief in Magic,” which he explicitly equated with “occult science,” as “one of the most pernicious delusions that ever vexed mankind. . . . The modern educated world, rejecting occult science as a contemptible superstition, has practically committed itself to the opinion that magic belongs to a lower level of civilization.”

¹⁷For recent efforts to incorporate metaphysical and new age movements, see [Hanegraaff \(1998\)](#), [Albanese \(2007\)](#), and [Sutcliffe \(unpublished\)](#); on the paranormal and the study of religion, see [Kripal \(2010\)](#).



distinction between Christians, Jews, Muslims, and the rest to the twofold distinction between world religions and local religions that is common today. The program of the Third Congress of the History of Religion held in Oxford in 1908 with E. B. Tylor as Honorary President and R. R. Marett as Secretary highlights an intermediate threefold distinction between primitive, national, and universal religions common at the turn of the century. Of its nine sessions, one was devoted to papers on "Religions of the Lower Culture," including papers on "pre-animism," "mana," and "magic." Six were devoted to the religions of various geographically defined peoples of the world. The eighth session was devoted to "the Christian religion" (geography unspecified) and the ninth to "Method and Scope of the History of Religions," which included papers on the psychological, sociological, and comparative study of religion.¹⁸

In this threefold distinction between the religions of lower cultures, religions linked to particular peoples and/or regions, and what in other contexts scholars forthrightly described as "the 'uniquely universal' religion of Christ," we see the role that comparative theology or what we would today call theologies of pluralism played in the development of the history of religions and religious studies as it is now institutionalized in departments of religion (Masuzawa 2005, xi-xii, 22-23).¹⁹ Here too the net effect is obvious: most departments of religion today reflect this mixed heritage of comparative theology and history of religions

¹⁸*Transactions of the Third International Congress for the History of Religions*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), v, xx-xxxii.

¹⁹George Aaron Barton's *The Religions of the World* (1917), which Masuzawa (2005: 45, note 18) identifies as the earliest world religions textbook, follows roughly the same outline.

Divisions of Religions, ca. 1800-2000

Four-Fold	Three-Fold [ICHR 1908]	Two-Fold [20 th c.]
Christianity	Christianity [non-geographic]	World Religions
Judaism	Religions of Peoples Religions of China and Japan Egyptian religion	["Area Studies"] Religions of China and Japan Religions of South Asia
Islam	Religions of the Semites Religions of India and Iran Religions of the Greeks and Romans Religions of the Germans, Celts, and Slavs	Religions of the Middle East Religions of the Americas
All Others	Religions of Lower Cultures	Local Religions

and devote most of their resources to the study of the “world religions,” which we define based not on logic but on what J. Z. Smith described as a “sort of pluralistic etiquette,” and to “area studies,” which allows us to avoid reference to the religions of peoples (Smith 2004: 169, cited in Sutcliffe unpublished paper).

The idea that mysticism is the core and center of religious experience fits inside the world religions schema and provided a means of linking the world religions. This idea, which depended on the promotion of a narrowed understanding of mysticism, arose in tandem with the psychological study of religion. The narrowed definition was promoted in explicit opposition to a more inclusive understanding of mysticism embraced by a spectrum of folks that the scholars viewed as problematic. At one end of the spectrum, we find occultists, theosophists, and spiritualists, who embraced research on trance, hypnosis, and dissociation as the basis for constructing esoteric disciplines. Adherents of these schools all blurred the boundaries between magic, mysticism, psychical research, and experimental psychology. In the somewhat more acceptable middle range, we find mystically oriented psychical researchers, such as Frederick Myers, who viewed psychology as the link between science and “speculative mystical thought.” Moving to the right, we find Catholics with esoteric leanings, such as the novelist Walter Huysmans, and Catholics drawn to apparitions and what were referred to as the physical phenomena of mysticism, i.e., stigmata, levitation, odors of sanctity, etc.

William James’s chapter on mysticism in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and the Protestant theologian Ralph Inge’s *Christian Mysticism* (1899), both published right at the turn of the century, should be read as explicit responses to the blending of occultism,

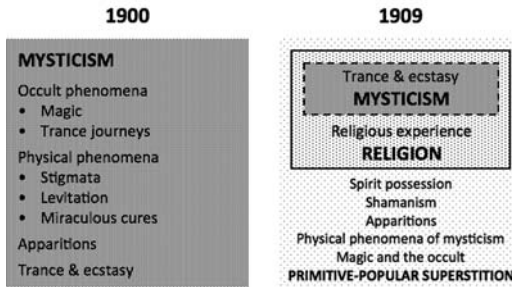
mysticism, and popular Catholicism (Taves 2010c; Schmidt 2003).²⁰ Though I suspect James would be appalled at the way readers essentialized his four marks and divorced mysticism from the psychopathology that he viewed as its "other half," scholars routinely use his stipulated definition of mysticism to narrow its scope, shear it of its occult, pathological, and popular overtones, and locate it within the context of religion-in-general (Jantzen 1995: 330–339).

The visual depiction of this shift on the next page was created not for this article but for a paper on controversies that arose at the Fourth and Sixth International Congresses of Psychology held in Paris in 1900 and Geneva in 1909 (Taves 2010b). Historians have not connected these two controversies, since the first involved psychologists, psychical researchers, and occultists who were studying spiritualist mediums (that is, modern, well-educated British and French "animists") and the second clinicians, psychologists of religion, philosophers, and theologians who were studying religious experience (see, for example, Monroe 2008). The rapid scholarly embrace of a narrowed definition of mysticism obscured the continuities between these disputes. If we take the narrowed definition into account, however, we can see that, while the overt focus of controversy at the two Congresses shifted (from the study of mediums to the study of religious experience), the underlying issue (whether scientists could study the relationship between mystical claims and psychological processes) remained the same.

The point, then, of this section is that "religion" as an object of study and the disciplines that study it were constructed at the turn of the century based on claims about what is or ought to be the case regarding "religion." The turn-of-the-century Congresses, whether of psychology or the history of religions or any number of other emergent fields, were sites of contestation where people with different kinds of

²⁰In his preface, Inge (1899: ix), a British Protestant theologian, explicitly distanced Christian mysticism as he understood it from "the debased supernaturalism which usurps the name of Mysticism in Roman Catholic countries"; the "Fetishism" of Catholic novelists, such as Huysmans and others in "the so-called neo-mystical school of modern France"; and the "dabblers in occultism" enamored with psychical research. In the *Varieties* (1985/1902: 301–303), James indicated, "the words 'mysticism' and 'mystical' are often used as terms of mere reproach." He proposed to "keep it useful by restricting it," defining it for the purposes of his lectures in terms of his famous "four marks" and arguing that "personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness." This contrasts with his 1890 essay on "The Hidden Self" (1983/1890: 248) in which he noted the contemptuous disregard with which the "mass of phenomena generally called mystical" have been treated by scientists and lists "divinations, inspirations, demoniacal possessions, apparitions, trances, ecstasies, miraculous healings and productions of disease, and occult powers" among the phenomena that fall under that heading.

Changing Conceptions of Mysticism



training advanced different views of what these disciplines should study and how they should study it. The process of disciplinary formation, thus, was shot through with valuations. It could not have been otherwise. Our criticism of them pretty much boils down to disagreements over how things should be valued: Is Christianity “uniquely universal,” a singularity that stands apart from all the “national religions” or is it simply one world religion among others, i.e., no more special than the rest? And if we reject the idea of primitive and civilized, are there ways to talk about matters of scale and complexity without valuing the global over the local or vice versa? And what about magic, the occult, and the study of western esotericism? What about relics, amulets, and other objects written off as fetishistic or superstitious? Most of us have made our careers challenging the valuations of our forebears and reclaiming what they rejected for the study of religion.

Though James most likely did not anticipate or intend the effects of the definitions he stipulated “for the purposes of his lectures,” many twentieth-century scholars latched on to James’s definitions in order to set religious experience and above all mysticism apart as special. Others, such as Otto and Eliade, made it yet more special, going so far as to protect it, at least on certain readings of their work, with prohibitions and taboos against comparing or mixing them with other things.²¹ We can understand the critical backlash against Eliade and others as an attempt to make “religion” more ordinary.²² A central question underlying debates about our object of study and the methods we should use

²¹For a nuanced reading of Eliade on these issues, see Rennie (2007).

²²In a recent collection of essays in honor of Jonathan Z. Smith, Braun and McCutcheon (2008, back cover) explicitly position themselves on this sort of continuum arguing that the introductory

to study it, thus, it has to do with its singularity. How special is "religion"? Can it be studied like other more ordinary things?

PART III: UNDERSTANDING PROCESSES OF VALUATION: THE ADVANTAGE OF MULTILEVEL ANALYSIS

Rather than jump into the debate over how special religion is, I want to explore what a consideration of various levels of analysis might add to our understanding of the process of valuation itself. At this point, I am taking off my historian's hat and putting on my interdisciplinary, crazy advocate of the cognitive science of religion hat.

In order to work across levels of analysis we have to confront another of the ghosts from our past: evolutionary conceptions of religion. Many of the classical theorists adopted a stage theory of evolution that presupposed a teleological movement from the primitive to the civilized and tacitly culminated in some sort of singularity, whether Christianity or Western civilization. We need to distinguish, however, between the stage theories that infused late-nineteenth-century scientific views of religion and the neo-Darwinian evolutionary synthesis consolidated during the mid-twentieth century.²³ The latter, which synthesized breakthroughs in genetics with the Darwinian ideas of random variation and natural selection, allows us to distinguish between genetic and cultural evolution (Bowler 2003). In terms of genetic evolution, most evolutionary psychologists assume that we do not differ cognitively from our hunter-gatherer ancestors. Moreover, insofar as humans acquired genetically evolved capacities that allowed the far more rapid processes of cultural evolution to take off, most modern evolutionary theorists would not view the process in terms of teleologically driven stages, but rather as competitive cultural adaptation to particular environments.

The stage theories of evolution that shaped our discipline and modern neo-Darwinian understandings of evolution understand mental processing in fundamentally different ways (Table 1). Where bio-cultural stage

course in religion should take "students . . . inside religion as a set of ordinary human practices rather than initiating them into a sanctum of extraordinary knowledge about extraordinary things."

²³Histories of the field have obscured this important distinction. Sharpe (1986: 47–71) credits Victorian era "Darwinism" with making the comparative study of religion possible, but he does not distinguish between the theories that dominated the late nineteenth century and the neo-Darwinian synthesis of the twentieth century. The former focused on the evolution of culture—not species—and eschewed mechanisms of random variation and natural selection in favor of a view of cultural evolution that progressed in neat steps from the primitive to the civilized, while the latter integrated genetics with Darwin's random variation and natural selection (Bowler 2003). As a discipline, anthropology has faced similar difficulties (see Shore 1996).

TABLE 1. CONTRASTING THEORIES OF EVOLUTIONARY DEVELOPMENT

Evolutionary theory	Development		
	From what?	To what?	How related?
Cultural Nineteenth-century Tylorian (non-Darwinian)	Primitive thought –false associations –magical thinking –childish	Civilized thought –logical –rational –adult	By supersession –among educated: civilized replaces primitive –among uneducated: primitive survives
Biological Twentieth-century synthesis (neo-Darwinian)	Non-conscious processing –fast, pragmatic –time-tested	Meta-conscious processing –slow, reasoned –innovative	Through interaction –levels interact –abilities can be cultivated

theories depicted primitive thought as something that could and should be superseded by civilized modes of thought, genetic evolution conceives the human brain in terms of interactive levels of processing that range from the non-conscious to highly reflective. Nonconscious and automatic forms of mental processing, many of which we share with other animals, are very fast, pragmatic, and time-tested. We rely on the far slower, reflective or meta-conscious forms of mental processing in which we take so much pride for only a fraction of the things we do. Much as we may gain from expanded levels of awareness, we could not function without the intuitive, spontaneous, and practical forms of mental processing that previous generations characterized as child-like and primitive.

This understanding of mental processing has direct implications for explaining processes of valuation, that is, our perceptions of and claims about what matters most to us. This process, which goes on all the time in human communities of various sorts, cannot be equated with religion or religion-like things. Though all of us inevitably participate in the process in one way or the other, the level of awareness and intentionality that we bring to the process varies from moment to moment. Insofar as we are aware of the process, we can make conscious choices about what matters most, and decide how we want to engage in the process reflectively. But the process does not take place exclusively at the level of self-conscious reflection. Both as scholars and human beings, we lace our texts, conversations and behaviors with implicit valuations. Nor are these valuations hidden. Adult humans, pre-linguistic kids, and other animals can and do enact processes of valuation. Because the process does not take place simply at the level of discourse, we can only understand parts of it through the analysis of speech and

texts. To understand the process more completely, we need to understand how it works at various levels of awareness, how those levels relate diachronically, and how they interact synchronically.

Let me pause at this point to acknowledge that I am now stepping across the humanities–sciences divide, but I am doing so in a way that acknowledges the value of both perspectives. Stick with me here, because my goal is not to reject the humanities for the sciences but to build bridges and make connections. In crossing over into scientific territory, I do not want to discount the importance of culture, language, or textual studies or, by extension, deconstructionist approaches to understanding human beings and the worlds we inhabit.²⁴ If from a social constructionist perspective *anything* can be set apart as special or singularized, that does not preclude the possibility that there are species-wide tendencies to set a few things apart as special, culturally specific tendencies with respect to others, and random or idiosyncratic variation with respect to the remainder. Establishing statistically significant probabilities through empirical observation is not the same thing as postulating essences or declaring things to be natural or biologically determined. Moreover, it is easy to imagine how statistically significant probabilities might inform the social construction of claims regarding natures and essences. Just as historical and comparative perspectives provide our primary window on the variation (and stability) of cultural forms across times and places, so too evolutionary and developmental perspectives provide a window on the similarities and differences across species and across the human life span.

Though all human valuations undoubtedly have a biological and a cultural dimension, looking at processes at various levels from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives would suggest that some processes of valuation are more deeply rooted in our evolutionary history than others. Given this, we might hypothesize and could empirically test to see if the level at which a behavior is rooted makes us statistically more likely to set some things apart than others. I will highlight two: mother–infant bonds (the tendency of mammals to bond with their offspring and, thus, set them apart from all others) and play (in which many species create special spaces in which alternate roles and scenarios can be enacted as if real) (Table 2).

Insofar as mammalian mothers bond to their particular offspring and not to other infants that look just the same (to us), then this bond illustrates one very basic way in which mammals set their infants apart

²⁴For a thoughtful discussion of the relationship between scientific and social constructionist approaches, see Hacking (1999).

TABLE 2. THINGS THAT CAN BE SINGULARIZED OR MADE SPECIAL AT VARIOUS LEVELS OF DEVELOPMENT

Developmental layers	Singularized or made special			
	By whom?	What?	How?	Evidence?
Social groups (institutions)	Humans	Stories Alternate worlds Objects	Repetition, preservation Imagination Elaboration	Texts, traditions –future planning –arts, technologies
Social groups (face-to-face)	Humans and other primates	Relations –hierarchies –friendships	Direct communication –domination/submission –grooming, play	Behavior
Mother–infant	Humans and other mammals	Attachments	Hormones, various senses	Behavior Biochemical

from all other infants of their species. This undoubtedly involves a range of processes including hormonal changes, neurotransmitters, and various sensory cues (smell, sound, touch, vision). In highlighting the biological aspects, I do not mean to imply that the biological factors are determinative—adoptions clearly demonstrate otherwise—but they do suggest that mammals are able to set some things apart as special without recourse to language, in contrast to what many of us in the humanities would tend to assume.²⁵

Play is another interesting example. Though the boundaries of what counts as play are disputed, it is clear that a wide range of animal species play. To do so they have to signal their desire to play; they have to be able to convey a distinction between playing and regular, ordinary behavior. When we add in some more specifically human abilities, we get pretend play, that is, the ability to enter into a specially marked space in which we co-create alternative realms where we are bound by agreed-upon rules specific to that space.²⁶ Some researchers speculate that pretend play is the context in which children first practice the skills

²⁵de Waal (2009: 67–68) has suggested that the mammalian bond between mother and offspring may lie at the root of many more highly developed capacities, such as empathy. Cross-species comparisons allow us to better understand the underlying perceptual and emotional processes upon which our linguistic abilities are layered and these underlying processes may make some valuations statistically more likely than others.

²⁶These additional abilities include human language, the capacity for joint intentional action, and advanced forms of theory of mind. Animals signal to one another that their actions are “play” not “reality” by means of various cues, tail wagging, mock bows, etc. (Burghardt 2005). But only animals with the ability to envision alternative selves in alternative “realities” can enter into “pretend” scenarios in which the banana is a telephone and the empty cup is full of tea (Leslie

that prepare them to negotiate complex cultural institutions (Rakoczy 2008). In making up the rules that govern pretend play, young humans learn that specific rules can govern particular spheres of activity and, by extension, how to enter into the culturally specific systems of valuation that govern particular cultural activities and institutions.²⁷

My point is simply this: developmentally, the ability to engage in complex cultural activities is layered on top of more basic processes, such as capacities for attachment and play, with which they constantly interact. These capacities and the mental processes associated with them are not mere survivals of our archaic past, but swift, efficient, time-tested systems of evaluation and judgment. We do not decide that our kids are special, they just are. We do not decide that it is fun to play, it just is. We can over-ride these judgments to some degree using slower, more reflective mental processes, but in most cases we probably cannot and would not want to eliminate them.

The process of formation that led to the current consensus regarding the religious studies major cannot be traced to any one theorist or institutional base, but drew from a range of sources to create what, for U.S. scholars at any rate, seemed like a plausible object of study. Nonetheless, as institutionalized in departments of religious studies and anthropology, there is still a sense in which the Victorian stage theory of cultural evolution lives on in the institutionalized division of labor between departments of religious studies and departments of anthropology. To leave that legacy behind, we need a more nuanced understanding of evolutionary theory and a clearer understanding of levels of mental processing. Insofar as the classical theorists of religion associated the so-called lower religions with more natural, intuitive, and spontaneous systems of valuation that they denigrated as superstitious or primitive, they limited their ability to see those same time-tested systems of valuation at work in themselves and their educated peers. If we choose to focus attention on processes of valuation in whatever context or time

1987). Developmentally, the capacity for pretend play and the deliberative capacities of the autobiographical self emerge more or less in tandem (Leslie 1994; Rakoczy 2008).

²⁷In thinking about the emergence of art from an evolutionary perspective, Dissanayake (1988: 74–106; 2008) links “artifying,” i.e., “making [things] special,” with both play and sacralization. While she concentrates on the more conscious aspects of the process, we also need to understand situations in which people feel that something of value appears or is discovered rather than created or made special by them. This difference, which we typically depict in terms of distinctions between discovering and making, on the one hand, and the imaginary and the real, on the other, is highly contested. Religion—at least the exoteric religion that has been the focus of much research and debate in the West—tends to operate with an assumed dichotomy between the imaginary and the real. Had the occultists not been excised, however, this might not be the case, as they believed that the imagination provided access to the real.

period, we should expect to find an interplay between faster, more intuitive and slower, more reflective forms of mental processing. Insofar as these more basic processes of valuation are deeply rooted, we should not expect that they will go away; their shape will just shift with cultural fashions and in response to more elaborate systems of valuation that attempt to subordinate them to ostensibly higher values.

CONCLUSION

So let me conclude by putting back on my AAR President, professor of religious studies hat and say what I think this all means for departments of religious studies, especially those that are involved in graduate education.

- (1) Understanding processes of valuation can be approached from many directions and will need to be a collaborative effort. Knowledge of particular languages, cultures, and traditions of reflection on what matters most is a crucial component of the collaborative task. This is the bread and butter of religious studies departments and something we would give up at our peril.
- (2) Insofar as we want to describe and analyze these traditions of reflection as part of a process of valuation, we can focus on sites of controversy where people's assumptions about the meaning and value rise to the surface. We should not expect that disputants would necessarily view themselves or the sites of contestation as religious. We can select sites where some, all, or none of the participants characterize what matters most to them in religious or religion-like terms, depending on what matters most to us. In setting up studies, we should formulate our own claims in the active voice. These are all issues that can be taken up in our courses on method.
- (3) Finally, we can attempt to explain what is going at these sites by offering explanations of how the process is working at multiple levels from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. This is an opportunity that is open primarily to fields defined by their subject matter and will require that we prepare at least some of our students to collaborate with others outside the humanities. Opening ourselves to the interplay between biology and culture at multiple levels has the potential not only to enrich the study of religion but also to build bridges between the sciences and the humanities in ways that could enrich the university as a whole.

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