Definitions, approaches and methodologies in the study of religions

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Introduction

In the recent past the study of religions has been established as an independent discipline, thanks to the development of the scientific approach. Ever since the study of religion became a discipline independent of Christian theology in Europe and North America, students have been keen to examine it from different perspectives. New theoretical approaches and definitions have developed, and methodological tools evolved in the study of religious traditions. Today, the world’s religious traditions are studied as an academic discipline. This chapter will briefly explain the different disciplines engaged in the study of religion as they attempt to answer questions like: What is religion? How does a particular religion operate? It will then outline a methodological approach. In doing this, a number of prominent thinkers will briefly be mentioned. First I raise some difficulties encountered as scholars attempted to define what it was they wanted to study.

Definitions

Ever since the study of religion became an independent discipline in universities, students of religions have been grappling with issues of definitions. Scientific study based on ‘rationalism’ and ‘empiricism’ finds religious traditions a difficult proposition. How can we define what is not ‘concrete’ data? This poses a serious doubt, not about the subject matter, but about the scientific base for its study. For Wilfred Cantwell Smith the very term ‘religion’ is ‘monolithic and static’. He is not against defining an academic study of religion, but maintains that it should be about the ‘living traditions’, the faith components of believers. Words like ‘faith’ and ‘traditions’ convey that religions are living, vibrant and dynamic. A study need not fall within the framework of rationalism and empiricism. Definitions arise by studying the living religious communities and traditions. Such data will be
fluid and changing. It can meet the objectives of serious study but will not provide an exhaustive definition.

The study of religion

Studies are made in many ways and from many perspectives. Often they are guided by the scholars’ branch of specialization, such as anthropology, philosophy, sociology, theology, psychology, phenomenology and so on. Therefore it is important to see the various studies of religions from their different disciplinary perspectives.

The early phase of the scientific study of religion was primarily classified into three broad parts – history of religion, comparative religion and philosophy of religion – that often related to each other. The history of religion approach tested the authenticity of the data of religious traditions. By using comparisons, these historical materials were systematically classified. Then they were interpreted from a philosophical perspective.

One of the founders of the contemporary study of religions, Max Müller (1823–1900), used comparative mythology as a scientific tool. After establishing the historicity of other religious traditions, he rejected Christian claims that divine revelation was exclusive to Christianity. His comparative studies marked the beginning of a system of comparative philosophy, mythology and even theology. P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848–1920), another formative scholar in contemporary religious study, pursued his interest in the philosophy of religion by examining the awe towards the sacred experienced by adherents. However, he found it extremely difficult to handle such subjective data in philosophy. For him all deductive knowledge must begin by studying the manifestations of religious phenomena through historical, comparative and empirical methods.

Anthropology of religion

Anthropology of religion emphasizes that religious traditions are not just conceptual belief systems but rather a way of life in which beliefs are embedded in and formed by the practices of faith – the rituals, symbols and religious artefacts. Anthropology attempts to analyse the system of meanings that exist in religious symbols, and their relationship to society. Some anthropologists took a functionalist approach. This means that they were less interested in the origin of religion and more concerned with what these beliefs and practices do for individuals and societies.

Radcliffe-Brown’s The Andaman Islanders (1922) was a classic example of interdisciplinary scholarship, combining sociology with psychology. Radcliffe-Brown insisted that the function of religion is to support society’s cultural system.
Social anthropologists, such as E. E. Evans-Pritchard, see an awareness of the development through history as an important tool of analysis when studying language and experience. So anthropology of religion involves the observation of social life, its structures and patterns. An observation of religion helps to determine the nature of the society in question. The discipline is therefore primarily an interpretative method. It studies all aspects of culture: myths, folklories, symbols, rites, beliefs and language. Claude Lévi-Strauss analysed the complex and interrelated systems of society, understanding religious structures as the basis of social phenomena, such as kinship, marriage and language. He maintained that seemingly dissimilar belief systems had the same underlying structures. This structuralist approach has been criticized as reducing religious phenomena to mere systems of culture. It cannot fully explain religious myths, symbols, folklore and beliefs, although seeing religious traditions as part of the structure of cultures can demonstrate the ways in which religion is used to communicate knowledge and control behaviour.

**Psychology of religion**

The study of the psychology of religion emphasizes the varieties of religious experience. It looks at the importance of religion for the individual, and the range of religious manifestations. It is unique among the scientific approaches in that it places the upmost priority on the person’s religious quests. Psychologists of religion go beyond reason and recognize that there is a force, consciousness, which tries to apprehend the infinite in a limited way. They consider that religion deals primarily with those human experiences that go beyond our understanding. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James (1842–1910) based his thesis on empirical data gained by case study. He defined religious experience as gradual, unified consciousness, through which the person grasps spiritual realities.

Experiences of the infinite recounted by religious people arise from feelings of awe, fear and fascination in the presence of the sacred, which Rudolf Otto defined as the *mysterium transcendentum*. Such sacred experience suggests the idea of the holy that encounters reason and accommodates morality. Those who have had such experiences are understood to bring them into their daily lives, to infuse the ordinary, everyday with the sacred – a dialectical relationship that changes the understanding of both parts of life.

The fundamental questions that concern the psychology of religion are those that relate religious experience to social and psychological behaviour. To this end, it observes individuals’ religious experiences and religious traditions. Yet experience alone cannot be the criterion of religiosity. Studies should also take into consideration other religious phenomena, such as doctrine, dogma, rites and rituals.
Sociology of religion

Early sociologists of religion regarded religion as the mainspring in the functioning of human society. The discipline emphasizes the dimension of power and social change; it also stresses the sources of social and psychological integration. Michael Hill observes that the study of religion has four main areas: religious organizations; religion and social change; religion and social cohesion; an integration of the three. Some sociologists of religion recognize religion simply as a way of maintaining social cohesion. Others recognize that it plays this role among others.

Émile Durkheim is concerned with social reality and sees religion as an agent of collectivity. For him social life is inherently religious. Rituals are the celebrations of social life, and through them a group affirms social solidarity. He also claims that religious traditions are solely the product of society and have no basis in revelation.

Max Weber, though, accepts the idea that the belief system begins with the supernatural. He finds a link between religion and such cultural institutions as economic behaviour. His case study of Protestant ethics investigated the relationship between Calvinism and early forces of capitalism. Opposing Weber, Karl Marx (1818–83) claimed that religion is only an ideological superstructure supporting the class system. To him, religion is always concerned with the self, a self that cannot fully grasp socio-economic realities and therefore does not address them adequately. It has been observed that while Marx regarded religion as a social smokescreen, and Weber saw it as a social starter-motor, Durkheim saw religion primarily as a form of social cement.

Theology of religion

The theology of religion was first developed by Christian scholars studying the religions of others in the light of Christian theology. The need for Christian theology to interact with other religious traditions has helped it to understand the myths and symbols of those traditions, as well as helping those traditions to interpret such myths and symbols from an inclusive perspective. Theology of religion today focuses on religious pluralism. Cantwell Smith insists that dialogue must become more universal in order to arrive at a global theology: a dialogue not only between Jews, Christians and Muslims but between Hindus and Christians – broadly speaking, between the Oriental and Semitic faiths. The theology of religion aims to acknowledge the claims of other religious traditions and understand them to be distinct. Tolerance is needed, not just towards other faiths but towards their theological interpretations as well. The theology of religion has often been dominated by Christian terminology and assumptions. In recent years attempts have been made to develop categories that are better shared by all religious traditions.
Definitions, approaches and methodologies

Philosophy of religion

Philosophy is the oldest discipline used to study religion. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) argued that the philosophy of religion evaluates religious concepts, beliefs and practice within a framework of morality. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) broadly agreed but refused to accept that religions could be reduced to moral life alone. Georg Hegel (1770–1831) went further and said that religious concepts and beliefs are embedded in particular traditions and can only be understood in the context of their culture. For Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72) religion is a human product, a projection of the imagination. He and Marx felt that religious beliefs are an idealized projection of people’s hopes, fear and desires. Today philosophy of religion has moved on from defining abstract ideological understandings of the ultimate reality to attempting a more classified understanding of religious life.

Methodology

Having discussed a number of disciplines that include the study of religion, it is now appropriate to look at the systematic study of religion as an independent discipline, but one that draws on the disciplines mentioned already but employs a specific method of its own. The methodology of the study of religion is both historical and phenomenological.

A religion has meaning in a contemporary context in part because of its connections with the past. The study of the history of religions examines events in the past. This historical approach is brought to bear on other parts of the methodology, such as attention to believers’ interpretations, in order to gain a broader understanding. A history of religion goes beyond articulating meanings. The task of phenomenology of religion is to classify widely divergent religious data in such a way that an overall view can be obtained about its religious content and value. It provides a method for investigating the ways in which we know reality. On its own, phenomenology of religion can be subjective, but when studied alongside history it provides a critical approach to the study. There are six methodological resources used in the study of religion, which are described here in brief.

Description

A systematic treatment of the religious traditions is gained by describing accurately the tradition and the meanings and structures as understood by believers. Description needs insight and intuition, giving due consideration to the nature of the data and to its own place of reference. Historical study does not tell the reader what is true or false, but it must evaluate the historical data in order to understand the phenomenon more critically.
Understanding

For the religious historian understanding is central to all insights. Scholars must exercise respect and tolerance for all religions and recognize where commitment to a particular faith might influence their understanding of the thoughts, feelings and actions of members of a different faith tradition. One way of doing this is to participate in the life and the rituals of the religious tradition under study. The task of deep understanding involves creative and objective participation that includes having a critical and unbiased attitude. But there are certain limitations. How can we understand fully the experience of another person through participation? Though there is no simple answer, we must avoid presuppositions if we are going to participate meaningfully.

Epoche

The literal meaning of *epoche* is ‘abstraction’ or ‘suspension of judgement’. By suspending judgement, we try to interpret a phenomenon just as it is, and to free ourselves from our presuppositions. *Epoche* enables us to put ourselves in the position of the believer. It does not question the truth of religious tradition, but rather listens to the experiences of truth that the believer describes. This is an important step to take because religious people are as important as religious doctrine. It is through believers that beliefs, doctrine and rituals have survived through history. In taking this approach we are aiming to avoid judging the value of a religious tradition. For the convinced believers of a different tradition this can appear difficult and even dangerous. However, the suspension of judgement can better equip students to engage in comparative theological debate about relative values at a later stage, because they have honestly tried to understand a different tradition.

Eidetic vision and intention

The term ‘eidetic vision’ is derived from a Greek noun, *to eidos*, meaning ‘that which is seen’, and hence also means ‘form’, ‘shape’ or ‘essence’. In phenomenological parlance, eidetic vision is the observer’s capacity to see the essentials of a situation. Having suspended prior judgements in the *epoche* stage, eidetic intuition investigates the meaning of a religious phenomenon and its relevance to believers. Its ultimate objective is to gain insight into the essence of the forms and structures of religious traditions.

Anti-reductionism

Anti-reductionism is a strategy aimed at avoiding reducing religious content to a mere academic category during investigations. Though any amount of description might not be capable of fully explaining a religious phenomenon,
one must exercise restraint when interpreting the description of the believers. Anti-reductionism demands that a religious tradition be understood in its own context of reference.

**Personal dimensions and experience**

The study of religion must have a ‘personal’ approach. We will never be able to describe the essence of religious traditions unless we give due consideration to the experiences of individual believers. Their experiences provide a continuity of religious traditions from the past to the present. Personal faith is the core of truth. Therefore it is essential that investigations lead us to understand the religious person. The search for objective truth and personal dimensions of a religious faith must go hand in hand in the study of the history of religion.

**Conclusion**

The study of religion, its historical development and methodological issues, should help not only to understand one’s own religion, but also those of others. Students should not assume that they are capable of discovering everything about a religious tradition if they do not belong to the religious tradition they are studying. At the same time, they should not shy away from such work, as long as the methodological tools are employed with sincerity and integrity. This helps to understand and strengthen scholarship.

It is my conviction that the careful and thorough study of religions is of great practical benefit in a multi-faith world. A greater understanding of each other can encourage not simply an empty tolerance of difference but also a peaceful and harmonious life together. Gaining a respectful appreciation of another’s religion enables us to develop an understanding of those also created in the image of God, and thus broaden our experience of the divine. Serious scholarship can bring a positive perspective to bear, demonstrate the contributions religious traditions bring to the world and further enhance those contributions.

**QUESTIONS**

1. What religious tradition would you like to understand? How might you apply the methodology mentioned here to its study?

2. Some people think that studying another religious tradition following this methodology might be seen as a betrayal of their own faith. How would you answer this concern?
Further reading
