
An Unsettled Discipline: Reflections and Suggestions in the Study of Religion

Recently, I was reading an essay by John F. Wilson that appeared in the second issue of the *Bulletin* (Wilson, "Ironies," *CSR Bulletin* 1.2 [1970], 3–7). Reflecting on shifts in the study of religion over the previous decade, he wrote, "Surely the gods are laughing, for they must enjoy ironies—especially concerning man's [sic] study of his religions. In a word, the design for the development of this field, so carefully planned during the last decade, now seems faintly anachronistic, even quaint, even while it comes to fruition" (3). He discusses the insecurity of neatly established academic disciplines, where clarity of object(s) and method(s) of study (along with claims to objectivity, disinterested research, etc.) no longer seem as evident or secure as they once did, where student demands require relevancy of study to pressing issues of the day, and a more dynamic, less compartmentalized model of higher education was emerging in the early 1970s.

Religious studies was in an identity crisis. Even as it had finally come to hold a position as a discipline alongside the other humanities and social sciences—perhaps as a result of such success—the study of religion was in transition. Over the past forty years, the discipline has suffered crisis after identity crisis. This is nothing new. We spend a great deal of our time, either within specific subfields or in reflecting on the field as a whole, gazing into the pool of self-doubt wondering who we are and where we should be going. In 2012 these same questions are being asked, with diverse answers. Not only has discourse analysis, genealogical approaches, postmodernism, deconstruction, and critical theory challenged *sui generis* discourse, reified "objects" of study, and scholarly metanarratives (with all the embedded subtexts of such narratives), but even those critiques have been challenged—largely building on the very argumentation utilized by such theorists. Our field is ever-changing, ever-contending. In a sense, we've made little progress since Wilson's reflections—we are still suffering from identity crises. Indeed, some of us flourish because of them!

Perhaps identity crises are not something that should ever be fully resolved. By continually reflecting on the nature of our work, we engage a process of self-reflexivity, reassessing those sacred cows that dominate, direct, and render as "common sense" or "normative" that which resist being critiqued. I like the idea of reading against the grain—an approach that might help us to keep our vitality and critical edge. We should never get too comfortable in our methods, theories, and our conclusions.

This issue of the *Bulletin* offers a set of articles reflect-

ing on various scholarly trends while suggesting new, emerging directions within current scholarship. Merinda Simmons, in conversation with Ann Taves's *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, challenges those presuppositions underlying calls for interdisciplinary research, especially when such research assumes the existence and extent of our objects of study. Bryan Rennie begins by recognizing that the field of religious studies lacks a dominant paradigm. He takes this as a strength—one that should be brought into the classroom context. He suggests that a revised phenomenological approach (what he dubs heterophenomenology) can have pedagogical payoff.

The next three articles emerge from the field of early Christian studies. Randall Reed uses the work of Burton Mack as a lens through which to map analytical boundaries in biblical studies. He explores Mack's call for a theory of religion as both the beginning and end point for enabling historical work; work that is not burdened by hermeneutical circles or theological truth claims, but rather uses such data for explanatory analysis of social formation. Tony Burke, a specialist in early Christian apocryphal material and co-editor of the "More Christian Apocrypha" project, looks at the biases in the study of non-canonical material. At the editors' invitation, he shares his reflections on the need to study apocryphal material as well as in what ways this new and exciting project will hopefully redirect such analysis. Candida Moss sketches out for us the current trends in martyrdom studies. In recent years there has been a flurry of attention given to Christian martyrdom material, in conjunction with reassessments of the historiographic assumptions of past scholarship.

A case analysis by Marianne Fibiger of the migration of a Hindu goddess tradition from Sri Lanka to Denmark, touches on the role of collective memory formation within a diaspora context. Jim Kanaris reviews J. Aaron Simmons's book, *God and the Other*, situating it within broader theoretical debates in Continental philosophy of religion. Our associate editor, Donovan Schaefer, interviews Paul-François Tremlett on his book, *Lévi-Strauss on Religion* (Equinox, 2008). Like other interviews, this one originally appeared on the *Bulletin's* blog. Finally, we offer once again a series of announcements in the *Bulletin's* new section "Field Notes." It is my hope that these articles will contribute to reflections and suggestions in the study of religion, as we continue to work in a thankfully unsettled discipline.

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