Analyzing the Place and Role of Deference in the Academic Study of Religion:
Theorizing Critical Alternatives to Deference Towards Religion

By
Caleb Shields
Dept. of Religious Studies, University of Colorado at Boulder

Defended November 8, 2013

Thesis Advisor:
Dr. Gregory Johnson, Dept. of Religious Studies

Defense Committee:
Dr. Gregory Johnson, Dept. of Religious Studies
Dr. Deborah Whitehead, Dept. of Religious Studies
Dr. Najeeb Jan, Dept. of Geography

Table of Contents

<u>Prologue</u>

Let us take a look at religion in places we are often unwilling to travel in our own thought, places where, for example, religion looks, sounds, and feels markedly different from how we often approach the topic from the perspective of the academic study of religion. Clearly, it is not the case that a single attitude *about* religion prevails within any department, and surely such a consensus would undermine academic engagement with such a diversified topic in the first place. However, it is my perception that some examples of religion, and conceptions of religion, have a very difficult time being fit into the style of learning that we typically engage in religious studies. This thesis project is my attempt to articulate the nature of this incongruity and to theorize its significance. My modest goal is to think creatively about fresh approaches to the field and to religion in public life generally.

Before attending the University, the primary focus of my life was directed almost entirely toward music. I was intending to apply for one of CU's music programs, while at the same time, the topic of religion slowly started to gain greater interest within my own experiences. In retrospect, it seems hardly coincidental or surprising that just around the time of 11th and 12th grade an explosion of social media started to make itself a visible force. Within that context, I should be careful to announce that I first encountered a response *to* religion on YouTube, and I should be honest enough to remember that the very first time I met a deliberately, fully proclaimed, *religious*, in this case evangelical, presentation, was on Santa Monica's 3rd street Promenade just past 1:00AM in the morning. At this particular venue, it is a rather difficult task to parse out just exactly who isn't *preaching* on the 3rd St promenade – some people are preaching for cash, others for

charity, and a few preaching for God only knows what – perhaps just for the sake of venting. Furthermore, what is truly interesting is to examine what exactly grabs the attention of the audience that gathers around these speakers. It would seem as if all one really needs is a microphone and stacks of provocative information; so it was the case here, late one Friday evening – and in Los Angeles, you can count on big numbers to fill the streets on weekends until early morning – *all* the characters come out at night to speak what's on their minds.

As I passed by one particular man's energetic and impassioned presentation I began to listen more attentively. I slowed my pace and started to realize the content of his topic: A markedly anti-abortion, anti-gay, anti-Muslim, anti-atheist, anti-evolutionist diatribe. At the same time, I found myself far outside and distant from the protection of others who hold similar personal values to my own. Looking back at this incident, my first experience with religion may have been rather standard considering others' introductions to religion. And, I wonder how many people derive a majority of their knowledge about religion simply from walking by corner preachers, or similarly, by listening to other polemics or blaring media responses.

It would only be fair to candidly admit that directly after this experience, which included a rather aggressive, though admittedly naïve response to his pronouncements on my part, I became undeniably defensive about my own value systems, my own convictions, my own sensibilities – and, just in the thick of high school, smack-dab right in the middle of watching the world open up around me, the exposure to more components of reality, I remember feeling vulnerable.[1]

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[1] Since then, more or less two topics had been resonant in how I thought about religion before attending the University: homelessness and university ministries. As for the latter, college-aged evangelists have

An entire community, an underworld as far I was concerned at the time, complete with funding, sponsors, websites, scheduled protests, happened to be operating in such close proximity to my own life that it was impossible not to feel personally affected by it. Of course, this experience was a not singular one. It was not my only exposure to religion. However, that experience *was* my first independent response to a particularly vocal and intense public religious expression. I should also mention lastly that I wished I could have stepped into this 'preacher-man's' shoes (I now know that his name is Luis…I had interviewed him for a documentary short film I subsequently on the "Effects of Religion on our Society") Most importantly, at that moment, I wished that I could have somehow traded consciousness with him. It is within this context that I wish to posit the following thoughts.

Sociologist Max Weber posits *three tools of sociological inquiry:* Verstehen, Ideal-Types, and Values. The first principle of *verstehen* (understanding) "presumes that we cannot explain the actions of humans as we explain occurrences in nature" (Pals 153). It is therefore imperative for Weber that we "feel our way intuitively…into the minds of others. By acts of imagination rather than reason, we re-create their thoughts in our own minds" (Pals 154). This is not to be mistaken with something purely intuitive nor "an exercise in the art of imagination." For Weber, rather, this *is* a rational approach, and a sensitive one at that: "a systematic, rational method of explaining human actions by discerning the role of motives or meaning where they figure as causes" (Pals 154). So, as

countless times approached me, sometimes not however, and it would stand to reason that the goal is conversion – getting numbers. They would seem to be wondering if you *know* the truth about life, which of course one wouldn't by simply failing to affirm any knowledge about God. Furthermore, a college evangelist may be sincerely motivated to helping people answer life's most difficult and complex answers. Surely, these intentions are well meant – however, always being left with "I'll pray for you" seems to have had contributed an amount of anxiety in my own life for having personally burdened some random person with attempting to reconcile what they may soon realize is an irreversible disposition.

an apparently burgeoning young sociologist, I became profoundly interested in how other people perceive and understand the world.

<center>Introduction</center>

In the social sciences and humanities alike, "religion" as a category has been left largely unhistoricized, essentialized, and tacitly presumed immune or inherently resistant to critical analysis. The reason for this failing on the part of the academy, this general lack of analytic interest, and the obstinate opacity of the subject of religion, are no doubt many and complex. But the complexity may begin to yield to critical pressure if we are to subject this discursive formation as a whole to a different kind of scrutiny, a sustained and somewhat sinuous historical analysis.

<div align="right">

-Tomoko Masuzawa
(2005, pg. 1)

</div>

Religion is a complex and sensitive topic. If theories of religion are not critically engaged, then the study of religion effectively places a shield around the object of its study. In this thesis I will argue that it is imperative for religious studies to be critical – *critical* in the academic sense of a robust, unfettered, un-beholden engagement with a topic. This argument is derived from my observation that a frequently uncritical mode of deference exists in the field. Deference, it should be noted, exists on a spectrum – on one end explicit theology and on the other end a rather meek, sensitive engagement with the topic. Some scholars within the field have expressed misgivings about the deferential nature of our discipline. For example, Tomoko Masuzawa writes, "…it appears that certain institutional circumstances of 'religious studies' impart some disincentive to proceeding with critical reflection" (2005, pg. 10).

Until and unless the discipline moves beyond this paralyzing habit, scholars of religion will not significantly contribute to shaping public perceptions of or policies about

religion that are critical. To borrow Tomoko Masuzawa's words again, "The present study is a proverbial small step in the direction of critical investigation" (2005, pg. 10).

Method

In the following section of this essay, I will explore aspects of the history of the academic study of religion in the United States. This will draw attention to where deference towards religion in the academy is derived. Addressing the issue, I dedicate considerable space to analyzing several different approaches of contemporary scholars to the place and role of deference within the academic study of religion, including those of Russell T. McCutcheon (2003), Timothy Fitzgerald (2000), Tomoko Masuzawa (2005), Bruce Lincoln (2012).

Deference to religious claims in the context of academic study yields various problems. Attempts made to navigate between modeling direct and forthright conversations about religion while simultaneously aspiring to appeal to religious sensitivities often bedevils efforts to address religion in the public sphere. Thus, I provide an analysis of the AAR's (American Academy of Religion) curriculum for introductory courses on religion in public schools. The purpose of such an investigation is to expose where deferential modes of thinking about religion are deployed in public venues – in this case, public schools.

The third section of this essay provides a theoretical alternative definition of religion that is critical. Positing a critical alternative to thinking about religion can be a remedy for deference towards religion.

In the fourth section, then, I will explore the approaches of contemporary groups whose approach to the study of religion is markedly in opposition to the deferential engagement that characterizes much of the discipline. This section is dedicated to understanding where and how critical theories of religion are solidified in practice.

<u>History of the American Academy of Religion</u>

Perhaps the only sound way to proceed in our discussion about the role of deference in the study of religion is to provide a brief history of the discipline itself:

> As we all know, the modern university – with reason (not faith) as its core principle, under patronage of the state (not the church), with arts and sciences (not theology) at the center of its curriculum, designed to produce civil servants and citizens (not priests) – emerged in the nineteenth century and replaced an older institution of the same name, which had taken shape in the middle ages.

(Lincoln 2012, pg. 131)

It is Bruce Lincoln's contention that to understand this transition from "an older institution of the same name" would be an oversimplification – giving sole credit to enlightenment values. Of course, other 'trends' (romanticism, nationalism, idealism, capitalism) surely contributed also. But it is Lincoln's primary contention here that, very simply, "rather than being central to the institution's mission, raison d'etre, and organizing apparatus, 'religion' – whatever that means – increasingly became available as an object of study and, as such, excited considerable interest" (Lincoln 2012, pg. 131). Essentially all pioneering disciplines that came to prosper in this new setting dug into critical interrogation of religion in some way. "More characteristic of nineteenth-century developments is the introduction of a critical perspective on religion in older disciplines...but above all in the emergent disciplines of the social sciences such as

anthropology (E.B. Tylor's theory of animism, J.F. MacLennan on totemism); folklore (Andrew Lang, Wilhelm Mannhardt); sociology (Durkheim, Mauss, Weber); and psychology (Freud and Jung, of course, but also Wilhem Wundt and William James)" (Lincoln 2012, pg. 131). Later in this essay I provide an analysis of sociologist Max Weber's contribution to contemporary theory on religion.

Our first glimpse of sensitivity in the field of religious studies will be focused on what then (now) became (is) a growing concern: job security – in this context as a direct concern over lines of inquiry that were openly hostile and which would cost scholars any hopes for a university career; job security spawned a certain restraint or discretion. According to Tomoko Masuzawa:

> Given this institutional reality, the absence of any systematic critical investigation into the discursive formation of "world religions" seems at once predictable and inexcusable. At the outset of the present investigation therefore lies this basic recognition: if a scholar of religion, of whatever kind and of whatever persuasion, is in fact making a living in this lately prominent domain of world religions discourse and capitalizing on its impressive market value, one cannot assume that this line of work is intellectually responsible just because it is economically viable. (2005, pg. 9)

Clearly, "others practiced a less agonistic style of critique that refused to reproduce the idealized self-understanding of the religious, in favor of novel perspectives that could be warmly appreciative of religion, if demystifying (Durkheim, James, Max Müller, also others like Malinowski)" (Lincoln 2012, pg. 132).

European approaches continued from the 1820's through the 1930's, "after which critical impulse faded as many concluded its work was done...Whatever the reason virtually all the disciplines turned their attention to other issues, and few scholars saw any need to develop a field specifically devoted to the study of religion" (Lincoln 2012, pg. 132). It had been roughly a quarter of a century until a discipline of religious studies took

shape – and when it did, it did not occur in Europe where it had begun. Interestingly, the

discipline in fact materialized in the United States, "where attitudes toward religion

consistently were – and remain – kinder, gentler, more cautious, and more reverent"

(Lincoln 2012, pg. 132).

What is now understood or at least argued to be one catalyst for this new

American discipline, a specific text and event – "a paragraph Associate Justice Tom

Clark inserted into the majority opinion he delivered in *Abington School District v.*

Schempp, the case that ruled Bible readings in public schools to be a violation of the First

Amendment. The passage reads:

> It is insisted that unless these religious exercises are permitted a "religion of
> secularism" is established in the schools. We agree of course that the State may
> not establish a "religion of secularism" in this sense of affirmatively opposing or
> showing hostility to religion, thus "preferring those who believe in no religion
> over those who do believe." (Zorach v. Clauson, supra, at 314). We do not agree,
> however, that this decision in any sense has that effect. *In addition, it might well
> be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative
> religion or the history or religion and its relationship to the advancement of
> civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its
> literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such
> study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular
> program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.*
> But the exercises here do not fall into those categories. They are religious
> exercises, required by the States in violation of the command of the First
> Amendment that the Government maintain strict neutrality, neither aiding nor
> opposing religion.

(Lincoln 2012, pg. 133)

After the *Schempp* decision was handed down on June 17, 1963, and before the

year had ended, prominent figures in the National Association of Bible Instructors

(NABI) took action "designed to exploit the opportunities they perceived in Mr. Justice

Clark's opinion" (Lincoln 2012, pg. 133). At that time NABI was one of two American

societies dedicated to promoting study of the Bible in higher education. Of the two

groups however NABI was markedly more conservative than its rival (the Society for

Biblical Literature).

> Its goals were summarized in the group's motto: "To Foster Religion in
> Education," the Bible here being understood as the foundation of (proper)
> religion. Within months, this group renamed itself the American Academy of
> Religion, in which guise it played the formative role in creating the discipline
> knows as "religious studies." Today it boasts "over 10,000 members, who teach in
> some 1,000 colleges, universities, seminaries, and schools in North America and
> abroad." Its mission statement is deliberately bland and inclusive, accurately
> reflecting the nature of the field that NABI helped to invent and foster, in which
> affection for religion in general replaces fervor for the Bible.

(Lincoln 2012, pg. 133)

Very keenly, what Lincoln is calling the NABI/AAR group recognized that in order to

effectively move from its "institutional backwaters," they gave themselves a superficial

makeover – "one that would make it a bit less exclusive, sectarian, and scripturally

grounded, a bit more tolerant, ecumenical and open" – they effectively succeeded in

moving themselves into leading state universities and research centers "where it could

establish a friendly haven for religion (and for the religious) in the previously heartless

academy while also gaining access to state and foundation funding" (Lincoln 2012, pg.

134). The effect of this situation is twofold; and, working within the framework

established by the *Schempp* case, "it founded a discipline that was deliberately

ambiguous in its dispositions, neither explicitly confessional nor – in the words of Justice

Clark – "showing hostility to religion." On one hand, religious studies gave privilege and

assumed discretion in its treatment of religious concerns and phenomena, "with the result

that it cultivated an ethos of inoffensiveness and a general intellectually timidity"

(Lincoln 2012, pg. 134). In the Plenary Address delivered by Jonathan Z. Smith at the

AAR's annual meeting, 2010, he adds that, "well one may have wished for set of more

sophisticated formulations – this court decision enabled a new range of institutional forces including, bluntly, many new employment possibilities. For example, according to a contemporary survey there were 25 programs in religious studies, including denominationally funded ones at public colleges and universities in 1960, 3 years prior to *Abington.* The second edition of the same survey, [in] 1967, four years after *Abington*, there were 135. The groundwork, it seemed to me, then, was there laid for the development of a generic study of religion. But that expectation has largely remained unrealized."[2]

On the other hand, one must recognize that the model of religious studies that the AAR had contrived went beyond respectfulness to religion, but instead, and also, advanced an approach that was "actively sympathetic," i.e. deferent. On both accounts however, between generating an ethos of inoffensiveness and actively sympathizing with religion, "both produce the same anomaly: a field of 'religious studies' that is virtually unique, in other words a discipline consciously designed to shield its object of study against critical interrogation" (Lincoln 2012, pg.134).

Moving now into the late 1960's, mostly beyond NABI's prior orbit, students of this new discipline embodied questions about personal faith, "students who were curious and/or conflicted about their own religious commitments and longings, which is to say, starry-eyed seekers of all sorts (this was, after all, the 1960s!)" (Lincoln 2012, pg. 134). Furthermore, introductory classes into religious studies seemed to appeal to this type of audience. Standard introductory courses on "world religions" offered a variety of consumable phenomena – *a veritable mall of attractive and exotic goods.*

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[2] http://vimeo.com/20286150

Most importantly, then, "little attention was devoted to the institutional side of religion that so many found alienating or offensive, or to[o] potentially embarrassing details of the historical record. Rather, discussion tended to dwell on the eternal search for meaning: a *meaning* simultaneously transcendent and most profoundly human, and a search troped as most often successful" (Lincoln 2012, pg. 134). In fairness, select classic critical theories did exist in the field – Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, for example- "but always buffered and offset by the much more edifying (i.e. supportive, even celebratory) approaches of, inter alia, Kierkegaard, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, T.S. Eliot, Clifford Geertz, Huston Smith, Joseph Campbell, and Mircea Eliade, whose superior sensitivity and depth could be used to rebuke the critics as providing smug but shallow forms of reductionism associated with materialism, the social sciences, and the ills of a fallen modernity" (Lincoln 2012, pg. 135). Since then, further trends that demonstrate deference in the field are becoming more visible. The friendly havens of religious studies classrooms, on many campuses, "welcome[s] not only vague and amiable seekers but those of firmer convictions, who expect – and sometimes demand – confirmation of the truths they bring into the classroom" (Lincoln 2012, pg. 135). As Lincoln subsequently suggests, "countervailing such developments, there has been some renewal of critical approaches, now inside the discipline." My conclusion will be focused on these more critical groups and their approaches.

It is not my intention here to ground my entire argument on the basis of a traced theological past which effects what we now call the secular study of religion – though it is an important issue to be aware of; rather, I happen to be concerned with attempts made to 'beat-around-the-bush' of this theological past. And, I am very interested in how

scholars of religion model politically appealing research and methods which always

seems to pretend not to be involved with theology or at least a theological or broadly

Christian origin. Timothy Fitzgerald, for example, writes,

> The more the researcher distances himself or herself from the explicit or implicit theological domination of 'religion', adopting for example sociological or anthropological critical perspectives, the more irrelevant the concept of religion will become, except as an ideological construct of western and western-dominated societies from which the scholar has progressively freed him or herself and that itself requires critical analysis.
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> <div align="right">(Fitzgerald 2000, pg. 8)</div>

Adding contextualization, he writes,

> ...Ecumenical liberal theology has be disguised (though not very well) in the so-called scientific study of religion, which denies that it is a form of theology and at the same time claims that it is irreducible to sociology either. In this context, an essentially theological enterprise has been repackaged as an academic analysis of things that can be found in the world, objects called variously religions, religious systems, faith communities, and so on. These objects are thought by some religionists to possess dimensions. Sometimes they are imagined to be organisms or seeds that can be planted and replanted, taking root in the local cultural soil or being colored by the cultural environment. The reason they can take root in these different soils is that all humans everywhere are believed on this kind of theory to have a natural faculty for cognizing the Infinite, and 'the religions' are particular forms or expression by which these cognitions or special feelings are given tangible expression.
>
> <div align="right">(Fitzgerald 2000, pg. 7)</div>

In order to provide a transition here from a summary of the discipline into a more detailed

synopses of more specific examples regarding how this "veritable mall of attractive and

exotic goods" manifests in the classroom, let me look for one last time at Jonathan Z.

Smith's Plenary Address at the 2010 AAR conference: "We largely train our students and

behave ourselves as if the study of a particular religious tradition always along with its

attendant philologies is our vocation – as if generalization, comparison, or theorizing are

but occasional avocations" (Smith 2010). Let me proceed by detailing this very issue.

What Tomoko Masuzawa clearly reveals then is the invention of "world religions" in the academy. What she argues is that located within the structure of these "world religions," or these major religions (which almost without exception include Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism) are included in some way or another generally homogenizing distinctions about East and West:

> The demarcation, in any event, is articulated from the point of view of the European West, which is in all known cases historically aligned or conflated, though not without some ambiguity, with Christendom. These inherently asymmetrical, unilaterally conceived systems of classification exude a pretense of symmetry that appears to balance "East" and "West". This binary may be put in terms of biblical revelations versus wisdom religions.

(Masuzawa, 2005, pg. 3)

This homogenizing tendency is something not to be confused with deference toward religion but it may very well be the catalyst for such an issue. In other words, homogenizing what constitutes 'religious' is not deference, rather neglecting a critical response to that issue surely would be. Homogenization is demonstrated furthermore in introductory textbook maps of all the world's religions (literal maps). There are two discernable problems here: the first problem is that research methods presume what constitutes 'religious' per se, for example, "in some localities, being religious – or, to put it more concretely, practicing or engaging in what has been deemed 'religious' – may be related to the question of personal and group identity in a way altogether different from the one usually assumed (i.e., assumed on the basis of the western European denominational history of recent centuries). In some cases, for that matter, religion and identity may not relate at all" (Masuzawa, 2005, pg. 6). As Timothy Fitzgerald notes also:

> Sometimes 'religion is used to refer to soteriology, in the sense of a personal quest for salvation located in a transcendent realm. This often carries with it the notion of religion as a private assent to doctrine, an individual commitment to a

church, a realm of personal choice and commitment belonging to a mode of being that is hived off from the realm of so called secular values. Deriving to a great extent from Protestantism, this notion of a private faith commitment, a personal adherence to a doctrine of salvation, is also associated with the idea of a private experience of God…There are of course many serious philosophical objections to the attempt to define religion – an its distinction from non-religion – in this way. To subscribe to those objections is not to deny the importance of individual experience, either in the Protestant notions of faith and personal encounter with the living God or in the more ancient traditions of mysticism. But locating the essence of religion in the private consciousness of individual actors is itself a theological claim, and it wraps the whole definitional problem in circularity…This circularity becomes even more evident when such a soteriological definition of religion is applied uncritically to other cultures.

(Fitzgerald, 2000)

The second problem that a map of this kind clearly demonstrates what Masuzawa's noted as the binary between East and West, that is, "at its simplest and most transparent, this logic implies that the great civilizations of the past and present divide into two: venerable East on the one hand and progressive West on the other" (Masuzawa, 2005, pg. 4). Let me be clear that this is not a passive aggressive swing at orientalist tendencies within the humanities more broadly, rather it is my intention to describe the extent to which the division between what has been named as the East and West modes of religion is mapped, literally. "As a rule, both the map and list [index or table of contents] admit to situations of 'significant overlap,' that is, the situations of coexistence or intermixture of traditions that in principle – so it is implied – distinct. This overlap inevitably compromises the clarity of representation considerably and, despite the palpable intentions of the mapmakers, no comprehensive view-at-a-glance of the religious condition of the world is to be obtained from such graphics" (Masuzawa, 2005, pg. 5).[3]

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[3] Weber goes on to make the observation in *Economy and Society,* for example, that actions are done based on particular, identifiable causes, i.e., instrumentally rational actions, value-rational actions, and traditional rational actions. This *methodological individualism* is essential for then being able to chart where social values are sustained and what kinds of rational actions sustain and spread them. The second tool of

Lastly, summarized by Russell T. McCutcheon, a central component of this essay supports the following:

> Applying a theory of social formation to an academic discipline in order to understand the role played by various rhetorics in creating and sustaining seemingly coherent social identities. These identities, like all social identities, come with issue of turf and privilege and the never-ending threat of fracture and dissolution. What's more, just as formerly unrelated and historically discrete essays can be revised and reworked based on concerns not apparent to the author at the time of their writing, so as to reappear as ordered chapters in a book, the apparent homogeneity of these social identities is a continual, hindsight concoction.

(McCutcheon 2003)

A few questions however need to be addressed here. Are these "seemingly coherent social identities" synonymous with the term 'religion' or 'the religious' as its own social group? Secondly, when McCutcheon writes that "*these identities, like all social identities, come with issue of turf and privilege and the never-ending threat of fracture and dissolution*," and if in fact 'the religious' does constitute its own social identity, exactly how realistic is this threat of "fracture and dissolution"? Lastly, McCutcheon writes in summary, that regardless of "*formerly unrelated and historically discrete essays [that] can be revised and reworked based on concerns not apparent to the author at the time of their writing…. the apparent homogeneity of these social identities is a continual, hindsight concoction.*" Thus, even after revision and regardless if these social identities were in fact accurate, social identities remain rather homogenous in subsequent research and scholarship – perhaps these social identities, as may be the case for 'the religious,' are effectively canonized in contemporary theory on religion. Still,

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sociological inquiry is, then, *Ideal-Types:* "The key is that the ideal-type furnishes a conceptual framework into which all cases can be brought for analysis (Pals 156)." It is not a challenge, then, to see Weber's influence in the scholarship that Masuzawa and Fitzgerald both criticize.

We see in both Carrasco and Eliade references to the "provincial" nature of scholarship with which disagree, and they both refer to such things as "expression of the sacred," "modalities of the sacred," "religious experience," "religious imagination," "depth of genius," etc.…[and] Because "treating religious symbols as religion" is utterly meaningless to me, I became curious as to how it could be meaningful to someone else."

(McCutcheon 2003)

The purpose of providing such an analysis of the history of the AAR in conjunction with responses to some of the deferent tendencies therein is to explain, and add clarity to, where exactly deference stems from: where is deference derived and what are some responses to it? The second component of this conversation includes a discussion and analysis of *where* and *how* deference towards religion is deployed outside of the university.

We already know that deference exists in university classrooms. I happen to be, here, much more curious about attempts made to address religion in the public sphere and I concluded that examining religious studies curriculums for public schools is highly relevant to this essay.

<div align="center">AAR and Public Education</div>

Creating models for religious studies curriculums for public schools K-12 has been undertaken by the AAR. The mission statement for the AAR's public affairs appendage states:

Over the years, the AAR has engaged in a number of initiatives to broaden the public understanding of religion, including promoting teaching about religion in public schools; facilitating access by journalists and public officials to scholarly expertise on any religion or religious practice; and advocating on behalf of its members for government support of research and teaching about religion.[4]

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[4] https://www.aarweb.org/about/public-affairs

Isolating one component of the AAR's numerous initiatives to broaden the public understanding of religion, the analysis in the following pages focuses on teaching about religion in public schools. The primary source document that I will be citing is, "Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Schools in the United States," produced by *The AAR Religion in the Schools Task Force*. I will be focusing on two particular components of this text: first, the section, "Why Teach About Religion;" and second, "How to Teach about Religion." The second component also addresses hypothetical answers to "frequently asked questions."

Very simply, the question, "why teach about religion," has an equally simple answer: "that there exists a widespread illiteracy about religion in the United States… Second, there are several consequences that stem from this illiteracy including the ways that it fuels prejudice and antagonism, thereby hindering efforts aimed at promoting respect for diversity, peaceful coexistence, and cooperative endeavors in local, national, and global arenas."[5] My first and most crucial challenge: is there any evidence for these claims? I am very curious to know exactly how religious illiteracy 1) fuels prejudice and antagonism, 2) hinders diversity, 3) peaceful coexistence and 4) cooperative endeavors in local, national, and global areas. It sounds good, and intellectually intuitive, but simultaneously I remain dubious that such issues have evidence to support them. How would one go about gathering and calculating such evidence? The issues at hand do not seem to be the product of ignorance about religion; rather I would contend that a serious lack of critical thinking is at this issue's base. Furthermore, issues like prejudice,

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[5] https://www.aarweb.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Publications/epublications/AARK-12CurriculumGuidelines.pdf

antagonism, diversity, and peaceful coexistence seem to be derived more often than not from religious forms of fundamentalism, or fundamentalism in general.[6]

The third component of the section, *why teach about religion*, suggests that, "It is possible to diminish religious illiteracy by teaching about religion from a non-devotional perspective in primary, middle, and secondary schools" (Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States 2010, pg. 6). Accordingly, "religious illiteracy is defined in this document as a lack of understanding about the following: the basic tenants of the world's religious traditions and other religious expressions not categorized by tradition; the diversity of expressions and beliefs within traditions and representations; and the profound role that religion plays in human social, cultural, and political life historically and today" (Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States 2012, pg. 4). At first glimpse, it appears that the AAR addresses issues that this essay is sympathetic towards, i.e., religious expressions not categorized by tradition, diversity, and the 'profound' role that religion plays in political life. However, what the following analysis of the section, *how to teach religion*, will make visible is that attempts made to navigate between teaching about these highly important and complex issues while teaching them simply enough for high school students to absorb requires that the instructor falls back on oversimplified methodological approaches to the topic of religion. As we will see, even the frequently

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[6] I have always been interest in such groups (those that manifest extremism or fundamentalism in some way or another) on the basis of 'how they know what they know' – the epistemologies of their thoughts are very complex issues indeed. Perhaps one plausible answer or approach to this issue would be to recognize that in many conditions we find brilliant minds with nowhere for them to be cultivated – someone with big questions, fundamental questions. Lets take the example of the film American History X – the profile of a young man, clearly intelligent, whose only possible outlet for expression is through the lens and practice of a neo-Nazi gang. He was born into this culture, and influenced by his older brother – the leader of this Venice Beach skinhead gang, Danny begins to manifest some serious questions within the context of Mein Kampf. This is the world that he knows.

asked questions that either implicitly or explicitly house critical perspectives about religion, for example, does God exist, why do people still believe in religion, are religion and science incompatible, are responded to in a fashion that seams to either protect the religion from such interrogation, or plays the part of "devil's advocate" on behalf of the religion. (These "frequently asked questions" are almost entirely related to Christianity). Exploring approaches to teaching about religion as suggested by the AAR's curriculum for teaching about religion in public schools will highlight some of the major controversial aspects within those approaches.

The "Approaches to Teaching About Religion" section of the document notes that, "Teachers are expected to teach about religion in a variety of ways in their classrooms. The three most common methods occur when 1) the curriculum demands coverage of the historical origins of religious traditions or their contemporary relevance; 2) the novels or stories they teach have explicit religious themes or allusions; 3) their students raise questions based on their own experience and knowledge" (Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States 2010, pg. 9). In order to properly address these potential circumstances, teachers can draw from three approaches to religion that are commonly taught in public schools. These approaches include the historical, literary, and traditions-based methods. Most interestingly, in reference to the above-mentioned approaches to a variety of questions, curriculums, and expectations in the classroom, "how teachers [then] respond to these expectations differs greatly, and the choice of approaches used by teachers is influenced by their subject area, their training, and their own personal values" (Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States 2010, pg. 9). Odd, it was my idea that personal

values had nothing to do with and had no place in how one goes about teaching religious studies – of all topics. Analyzing these approaches, however, will reveal the same problems that I have already written about in my introduction, i.e., world religions, homogenization, and deference.

I'll begin with the historical approach:

> Religions do not evolve in a vacuum, and looking at the historical circumstances that shaped the development of a tradition or worldview can help students see that religions are complex webs of practices and values within a variety of expressions rather than monolithic, fully formed sets of ideas and beliefs.

> (Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States 2010, pg. 9)

Let us also remember that, for Weber, "Society as he saw it, is best understood as a tapestry of quite different but tightly interwoven strands of human activity, each strand twisting over and under the next" (Pals 2006, pg.150) i.e., "religions are complex webs." Furthermore, the historical approach posits that, "the origins of a religion and its development are presented in historical context with the political and cultural influences represented as central to understanding how that religion emerged, gained followers, and spread" (Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States 2010, pg. 9); and, returning to Pals: "The status of religion in this regard is equivalent to that of other human behavior" (Pals, 150). Strangely enough, after the document gives a snapshot of each approach, the authors of the AAR document follow up with the potential weaknesses of such an approach. The weaknesses and theoretical criticisms of the approaches listed never seem to hold much sway – perhaps the purpose for considering the three popular approaches to religious studies in public schools is to suggest the best possible approaches to questions involving religion – approaches that are

simple yet effective enough. In fairness, the AAR document does understand for example

that, "students rarely learn how religions continually evolve and change beyond the

eighteenth century, nor are they given the necessary tools to knowledgeably consider and

evaluate the roles religion play in modern cultures." In addition to that issue, "teachers

report that they lack the knowledge base in religious studies required to address the

historical complexities of religion adequately" (Guidelines for Teaching About Religion

in K-12 Public Schools in the United States 2010, pg. 9). Perhaps the most fundamental

problem with teaching about religion in public schools is that, on the one hand, we have a

serious need to address widespread illiteracy about religion, and on the other hand, we

have a serious lack of properly and adequately trained teachers to do the teaching. The

AAR seems to be working with the resources that are present in this sad reality about

public education. In this sense, I am rather sympathetic to the role of deference in the

study of religion – deference towards religion, here, is a product of a lack of resources no

doubt. Both the literary and traditions-based approaches to teaching about religion are

hindered significantly by these circumstances.

> Through employing the literary approach,
>
> Teachers help students gain an appreciation of the way that religion infuses all aspects of culture by seeing how religious allusion and metaphor can become a common language that is shared by a people. Looking at a particular story where religious expression is a theme helps students see the very specific way that individuals experience their religion and helps to reinforce the idea that generalizations about religion are often flawed.
>
> > (Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States 2010, pg. 10)

I submit two essential questions here: 1) what exactly is "religious expression" and, 2) if

teachers wanted to reinforce the idea that generalizations about religion are often flawed,

how could teachers then make the case that understanding and *appreciating* the way

religion infuses *all* aspects of culture would remedy those 'flawed generalizations'?

Lastly, the traditions-based approach is often used as the basis for comparative

religious studies in lower grades.

> The focus is often on certain categories that apply to many religious traditions, such as beliefs, texts, rituals, origins, and holidays, or on essential questions that religions address related to the purpose of life, how one should live, and various interpretations of identity. This approach can help students see common themes in religious traditions and can provide a useful framework for understanding the varieties of religious expression.

> (Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States 2010, pg. 10)

The weaknesses of this approach, it seems to me, should be fairly obvious considering

our previous conversation about 'religious maps.' The traditions based approach in this

sense can "exaggerate the commonalities among traditions. Additionally, the categories

for comparison are themselves often shaped by particular religious assumptions (e.g. by

including categories such as 'founder' and 'sacred text') that are not universally relevant

and which therefore promote a biased and limited framework for analysis" (Guidelines

for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States 2010, pg. 10).

Returning here to the incongruity between the need to teach about religion and the lack of

teachers who are capable to do it – the traditions-based approach however "*can* provide a

useful framework for understanding the varieties of religious expression"; still, that

framework is very simple, maybe too simple.

In conjunction with the three above-mentioned approaches to religious studies in

public school, I would here like to briefly address the "frequently asked questions"

section within the text with regard to how the responses to these questions either

explicitly suggest a particular 'approach' or how such a response more covertly and implicitly demonstrates deference towards the religion being discussed. It will however be more productive here to discern the sensitivity regarding 'difficult questions' within the texts instruction of how one primarily goes about answering those 'frequently asked questions.' I am choosing not to focus on the individual questions per se, considering that I already mentioned them in this section's introduction; it is hard enough to analyze the 'directions' component for going about answering the 'frequently asked questions.'

> Because of the level of sensitivity about religion, teachers may try to avoid addressing these questions for fear of offending or giving wrong information. Teachers may also fear that they will cross the line of what is constitutionally acceptable. When addressing difficult questions, teachers should help students remember that the goal of the academic study of religion is understanding, not agreement, and that different religious views may and often will conflict with on another. Nor is the academic study of religion designed to answer the same types of questions that religious communities answer for believers. Questions about what is the 'right' or 'true' belief are theological questions and not ones that teachers can answer for students.

> (Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States 2010, pg. 15)

It should be fairly apparent that what constitutes a 'difficult question' is rather vague. In an analysis of this nature, it is difficult to infer deference towards religious claims; rather it is more useful here to make the observation that teachers' inabilities to work through theirs and their students sensitivities about religion, if it should be the case, renders various attempts to navigate the difficult questions regarding 'truth', 'faith', and 'belief' – inappropriate questions – within, also, necessarily uncritical and divergent modes of reflection. Thus, as an attempt to remedy this issue, the next section of my thesis draws attention to one scholar's theory of what constitutes a religion – or 'religious'. His theory

includes a markedly critical set of criteria for anything that could necessarily be called a religion.

The former two sections of this essay were dedicated to two primary questions: 1) Where is deference towards religion in the academic study of religion derived? 2) In which public venue does deference towards religion have the most serious implications for the academic study of religion more broadly? The next sections of this thesis attempt to chart alternative approaches to the study of religion that are necessarily critical.

What makes religion Religion?

The task of theorizing a critical definitional approach to religion is imperative. In this section of my essay I will draw from two lobbies on the 'critical spectrum' in order to reconcile both "popular" and "academic" approaches (I use the term loosely with regard to Dawkins and Hitchens) to the topic. The following passages explore the voices of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Danniell Dennett (the 'popular critics') and Bruce Lincoln (the 'academic'). The aim of this section is to provide a working definition of religion that is necessarily critical.

Clearly, even within the academic study of religion there remains no consensus as to exactly what religious is – a single definition of religion not only doesn't exist, but such a narrow definition would probably hinder the academic enterprise entirely. Though it remains difficult to draft a singular definition for religion, we understand that certain criteria must be addressed for constituting religion. But, the way in which we hope to

define religion needs to be critically responsible, not catering to the previously mentioned homogenizing tropes.

Granted, religion is broad; should our definitions be broad also? But, religion is, at the same time, quite narrow and specific; shall our definition be narrow (hopefully it would be specific)? How, then, can scholars of religion design a *form of definition* that is sensitive and aware of this duality. Let us keep in mind, however, that for Bruce Lincoln, "any definition that privileges one aspect, dimension, or component of the religious necessarily fails, for in doing so it normalized some specific traditions (or tendencies therein), while simultaneously dismissing or stigmatizing others." (Lincoln, 2003) However, famous for choosing one negative aspect of religion, or "cherry picking", Dawkins and Hitches, most notably, are criticized for privileging *one aspect, dimension, or component of the religious*. But do their definitions (if you choose to call it that) "necessarily fail"? Or, does their criticism hold actual value?

The following paragraphs of this essay will explore this contention in more detail. For now, let us examine the claims about religion voiced by three of the most famous contemporary atheists, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris. The following is a transcription from "The Four Horsemen Discussion":

> Dawkins: One of the things we've all met is the accusation that we are strident, arrogant, or vitriolic, or shrill… What do we think about that?
>
> Dennett: Well, I'm amused by it because I went out of my way in my book to address reasonable religious people, and I test flew the draft with groups of students who were deeply religious – and indeed the first draft incurred some real anguish and so I made adjustments and made adjustments and it didn't do any good in the end because I still got hammered for being rude and aggressive – and I came to realize that it's a no-win situation, it's a mugs game. The religions have contrived to make it impossible to disagree with them critically without being rude. They sort of play the hurt feelings card at every opportunity - and you're faced with a choice of, well, am I going to be rude, or am I going to articulate this

criticism…? I mean, am I going to articulate it or am I just going to button my lip?

Harris: Well that's what it is to trespass a taboo. I think we are all encountering the fact that 'religion' is held off the table of rational criticism in some kind of formal way even by, we're discovering, our fellow secularists and our fellow atheists – leave people to their own superstition even if its abject and causing harm, don't look too closely at it.

("The Four Horsemen Discussion," 2009, Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, Hitchens.)

Perhaps even suggesting that the above "issues" are even "issues" in the first place may be too far-fetched for some scholars in the academy to admit. But is the academic study of religion precisely the "place" to forward such confrontation, or are there better, more effective 'institutions' that can address these 'issues?' Modeling such blunt criticism towards religion within the field will likewise only limit the discipline's ability to inform broader debates about religion. In my conclusion however, I summarize the critical platforms that actually do exist in the field of religious studies and that model perhaps a more thoughtful approach to the role of deference to religion than, say, Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens would. For now, however, let us examine one approach to religion - one that is sympathetic to the criticisms lobbied by 'The Four Horsemen' while also framing theirs, and others', frustrations within a much more sophisticated understanding of the cultural, social, and political constitutions of religion. This next section explores an arguably reasonable critical definitional approach to religion.

Thus, an extrapolation of Bruce Lincoln's suggested components of religion to be drawn into any definition about the topic, namely 'practice' and 'discourse,' "a proper definition of religion must therefor be polythetic and flexible, allowing for wide variation and attending, at a minimum, to these four domains:"

1) A discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status. 2) A set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by a religious discourse to which these practices are connected. 3) A community whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices. 4) An institution that regulates religious discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value.

At this point I think it would be beneficial to proceed in a review of the four 'domains' that Lincoln describes – "[all] necessary parts of anything that can properly be called a 'religion'". (Lincoln, 2003)

The first domain can be understood in conjunction with the title *discourse*. For Lincoln, any discourse is not primarily meaningful; rather discourse, in the religious context, can become religious *vis a vis* a claim to authority or truth. This authority may be claimed to be God-given, and its truth claims operate in a purely transcendental level. Interestingly, Lincoln provides a distinction in this category between what may be detected as purely reasonable assertions about what is true, and what then is, not unreasonable, but transcendent.

Astrophysicists, for instance, do not engage in religious speech when they discuss cosmogony, so long as they frame their statements as hypotheses and provisional conclusions based on experimentation, calculation, and human reason…But should they ground their views in Scripture, revelation, or immutable ancestral traditions, in that moment their discourse becomes religious because of its claim to transcendent authority.

(Lincoln, 2003)

For Lincoln, then, the essential component of religious discourse, moving past what qualifies discourse as religious in this regard, is how religious discourse functions [also on itself]. Within the tradition, and to the extent that these propositions successfully claim such status (as true), contestation and interpretation proceeds to happen within the realm

of hermeneutics. Insofar as these truth-claims successfully claim such status, these claims become part of the tradition's discursive or conversational vocabulary – always then subject to interpretation, "but never [to be] ignored or rejected" (Lincoln 2003). Thus, "religious discourse can recode virtually any content as sacred…for it is not any specific orientation that distinguishes religion, but rather its meta-discursive capacity to frame the way any content will be received and regarded" (Lincoln 2003). Does this mean there is a potential for 'the religious' in anything?

The second domain, *practice*, is in one respect markedly similar to our analysis of discourse: "no practices are inherently religious." Rather, any practice that is connected to a religious discourse, "practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subject" (Lincoln 2003) thus becomes religious. *Practice* has another function: "religious practices, which generally divide into the ritual and ethical, render religious discourse operational." It may be fair to call this the *transactional* domain. By the term, 'operational', Lincoln argues that in practice, discourse moves from the realm of speech to that of embodied action:

> As such, they have a transitive character, being the way discourse acts on the world, including the people through whom this action occurs. At the same time, they are reflexive in nature, being the way human subjects act on themselves in sustained projects of religiously motivated and informed programs of self-perfection.
>
> (Lincoln 2003)

The third domain is titled *community* – a group in majority comprised of subjects who revere the same texts, adhere to the same precepts, and engage in the same sorts of practices. "Even when they disagree with one another, their disagreements are framed by reference points on which they can occur."

All this creates the basis for strong sentiments of affinity that are also fostered by specific aspects of discourse and practice, like regular assemblies of worship, prohibitions on intermarriage with outsiders, or threats of excommunication for various infraction. Individual and collective identities come to be embedded in groups that are bound together in this fashion. Borders, simultaneously social and religious, hold members of one group separate from those whose beliefs and practices differ sufficiently that they can be marked as other. Even seemingly trivial differences – those of diet and dress, for example – can assume enormous import in the construction of alterity. But the fact is, they are hardly trivial, for practices understood to be governed by sacred injunctions constitute the observant as faithful and righteous, radically different from nonobservant outsiders, who are constituted as neither.

(Lincoln 2003)

I would like to draw attention to necessary othering function of *community*: a group whose codified practice and information upon which that practice is authorized not only constitutes strong affinity, a pathway around disagreement, but also poignantly declares identities on the basis of a sacred constitution – there must exist the "other" for community to exist (let us recall within the previous domain, "a set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper subjects).

The last of these four domains is *institution*: the institution is an entity concerned with, among many things, regulating the three primary domains – the religious institution is also focused on reproducing and modifying religious discourse, practices, and community as to assert their continual relevance which of course includes confirming their eternal validity and transcendent value. Institutions in this sense range from quasi-political to explicitly political entities. "Coherence over space and continuity over time are secured by formal or semiformal structures staffed by officials, experts, and functionaries authorized to speak and act not only on behalf of the community, but also on behalf of the tradition or religion itself" (Lincoln 2003). The important component of institution is that it houses leaders – leaders who are responsible for preservation,

interpretation, and dissemination of the group's defining discourse – "Sometimes they derive considerable wealth from such services, and they are regularly caught up in serious contradictions…between their own corporate self-interests and those of the community, and that between the need to accommodate change while preserving claims to eternal truth" (Lincoln 2003). Such an analysis of one approach to 'what makes religion religion' per se provides a "reality check" - a reality check in sense of not theorizing to the extent that we overlook the components of power and authority that accompany religious systems. Let me provide an example of a "reality check".

For Weber, "social values or beliefs acquire reality only insofar as they gain assent in the minds of individuals" (Pals 2006). That's all well and good. However, it is probably absolutely critical that we understand exactly *what kind* of individuals those are. These *bearers* "are the custodians of cultural values; they shape society as much as it shapes them and others" (Pals 155). Are these willing and informed custodians of cultural values? Are these not often the poor, laypeople that are always so easily persuaded by the prophets' *charisma*?[7] Another, perhaps more conceptual, 'reality check' would also draw attention to the *fact* that *some* religious systems effectively control human lives, and that these institutions make claims to authority and power which is a business caught up in securing their own political longevity. Since these systems (as political systems) could probably care less about starvation, health, poverty, knowledge, all of human suffering for that matter, how then can we ever take seriously definitions of religion that exhibit deference towards those very same organizations? This is an issue that has motivated this thesis almost entirely.

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[7] "The ideal-type Weber frames for this critically important process is, as noted, the 'routinization' of charisma—the transformation of the prophet's inspirational gift into something permanent, something fixed in the bureaucracy of an institution" (Pals 168).

Let us now examine how Max Weber's third tool of *sociological inquiry, values,* has not only played into this problem but how it has arguably set the stage for such a problem to exist. To make an assessment about the value of religious life or behavior is for Weber inappropriate. Like other sciences, his approach must be a value-free endeavor – "he held that facts and values are quite different things; confusing them is an error of the first order" (Pals 157). Weber makes the observation, then, that "the same distinction applies in the university classroom. The vocational duty of a professor requires that personal value judgments not be mixed into classroom lectures. Students, after all, are 'captives' of a sort—subject to the instructor's assessments of their work and too uninformed to offer persuasive views of their own" (Pals 158). This is undisputedly the case of the modern university however its implications are nothing short of frustrating – that students are too uninformed to offer persuasive views of their own is simply not true. Though Weber problematizes this notion in his argument, it seems however as if it *is* the best possible model to strive for (his own methodological ideal-type). This discussion can be interpreted more clearly from Pals: "In promising to explain reality as accurately as possible, without inserting personal opinions into the accounts, we affirm the value that science places on factual truth over the value of our personal or political interests" (Pals 158). It is my contention that Bruce Lincoln effectively navigates this (historical, rather outdated) tension between factual truths and *personal opinions* – as if the two were mutually exclusive. But Lincoln goes beyond personal opinions towards religion – he includes observable facts about the authority and power schemes of religions, without which, religion would cease to be religion.

The analysis of one critical approach to religion is useful on many levels – here, however, such an analysis is useful to the extent that it is employed by groups internal to the AAR and which seek to voice an alternative critical approach to the study of religion. The purpose of the following section is to explain how and where critical theory moves into action in the approach to the study of religion.

Critical Alternatives

In this section of my thesis, I will be providing an analysis of contemporary groups that put into practice – as best they can – a particular type of critical theory that this essay has previously discussed. Interestingly enough, and surely this could be a point of contention – the groups that do in fact exist and who have made it their mission to proceed critically in research on religion, are still housed within the structure of the AAR. And, while the AAR has been largely criticized for further and further compartmentalizing smaller and smaller sub-disciplines of religion, it is ironic here to make the observation that the North American Association for the study of Religion (NAASR) for example is also cornered off in some sub-conference within the academy. However, revealing the academic groups that direct their own attention, and others for that matter, to the general deference towards religion and thus a general lack of critical engagement with the topic will demonstrate that my essay is more than a call-to-arms but that the observations I have made are actually being considered by groups and put into motion. These groups, it should be noted, still however represent a minor voice within the academy. The first group that I will discuss is the North American Association for the Study of Religion.

A brief history of NAASR, written by Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe, opens

up a very familiar conversation about the history of AAR and all its Protestant baggage

that came along with it. In the words of its mission statement, NAASR seeks,

> To encourage the historical, comparative and structural study of religion in the
> North American community of scholars, to promote publication of such scholarly
> research, and to represent North American scholars in the study of religion to, and
> connect them with, the international community of scholars engaged in the study
> of religion.

> (Establishing a Beachhead: NASSR, Twenty Years Later 2004, pg. 1)

Now, upon receiving an invitation into the AAR in 1985 as a "related scholarly

organization," the initial letter of invitation to prospective members of NAASR noted that

it had increasingly

> Become apparent to a number of scholars, especially those engaged in the history
> or religions, comparative religions, or the scientific study of religions, or simply
> those who [felt] the need for theoretical work in the field, that the American
> Academy of Religion [had] become such a complex and competing repository of
> interests that the academic study of religion was in danger of being lost in the
> process.
> (Establishing a Beachhead: NASSR, Twenty Years Later 2004, pg. 1)

Notably, by the 1960's, the religious objectives that had been established by NABI some

time ago, came under review "because of the increasing diversity of religious views

among the Association's members and because of changes in the academic study of

religion." Unfortunately, "the Academy fell back into the arms of religiously oriented

interests where is has largely remained to this day" (Establishing a Beachhead: NASSR,

Twenty Years Later 2004, pg. 2) Thus, there were some members in the AAR who grew

frustrated with this religious influence. What is important to note here is that the founders

of NAASR did not attempt to form their group in direct opposition to the AAR – they

rather sought to complement it. Simply, the group "sought to establish an alternative venue in which to work toward the establishment of a sound, academic study of religion."

NAASR proceeded in a markedly, or perhaps rather a more nuanced fashion, that is; "rather than continuing the conventional academic tradition of presenting successive days of individual papers on unrelated topics, initial program proposals included invited speakers, panel presentation on specific topics or themes, e.g., extended critiques of recently published studies of theory and/or method, and structured occasions for both formal and informal discussion" (Establishing a Beachhead: NASSR, Twenty Years Later 2004, pg. 2). The group has also effectively established annual meetings with such groups as the American Academy of Religion (AAR), the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR), and also the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR).

NAASR is perhaps most interesting in the context of this essay in its emphasis on critical theory and engagement with the topic of religion. They would seem to be one of a select few groups that demonstrates a response to deference to religion in the Academy.

The AAR also hosts a group worth noting: Critical Theory and Discourses on Religion. Presumably, NAASR members and burgeoning advocates for critical theory of some kind or another largely inhabit this group:

> This Group seeks to provide a forum in which scholars of religion from a wide range of disciplines can examine and question their disciplinary presuppositions. The work of this Group can be placed under three main rubrics:
>
> > Critical investigation of the categories generated and employed by the discourses on religion, such as experience, the sacred, ritual, and the various other 'isms' that can be found in classic and contemporary studies of religion
> >
> > Analysis of new and neglected theorists and works central to the critical study of religion, including those produced in cognate fields such as anthropology, political science, or literary theory

> Theoretically-informed examination of elided and often neglected themes in religious studies, including class, race, gender, violence, legitimation, and the material basis of religion.
>
> (https://www.aarweb.org/publications/critical-theory-and-discourses-on-religion-0)

Let me focus now on the third rubric, which among many things includes violence and the material basis of religion. Lincoln earlier draws attention to the problems inherent in the institutional aspect of anything that can be properly called religious and it has honestly been my observation that this issue has predominantly characterized my conception of religion. Thus, the Critical Theory and Discourses group draws attention to the notion that, "critical theory draws on various methods employed from the fields of sociology, anthropology, history, literary criticism, and political theory in order to bring into scrutiny all kinds of discourses on religion, which span from academic to nonacademic as well as from religious to nonreligious."[8] Surely this subset group within the AAR – a group that on many levels resonates with, or that explicitly is derived from NAASR – houses what seems to resonate with the model of critical analysis that my essay is attempting to call for. Such groups, as mentioned above, put into practice the critical theoretical framework for religion posited earlier.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

This thesis has argued that deference towards religion exists within the academic study of religion. External to the university (though not entirely), deference towards religious claims is present in public school curriculums for religious studies. My attempts

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[8] https://www.aarweb.org/publications/critical-theory-and-discourses-on-religion-0

made to remedy the issue are structured within two questions: 1) How can we model a working definition of religion that is critical? And 2) what groups exist external (though not entirely) to the university and Academy which deploy such a critical theory – how does critical theory function in practice?

My primary conclusion is that a significant amount of deference and sensitivity to religion exists in the academic study of religion. The difficulty in proving such an assertion was no doubt in exposing through analysis where exactly deference to religion can be detected – whether it be in popular methods and approaches to the theory of religion or whether deference can be detected in the history of the academy itself.

Explaining exactly why I have found it imperative to study such a problem would require that I explain my frustration regarding a serious lack of pedagogy that should accompany the study of religion – of all topics. Arguably, if there is any topic that scholars need to be critical about, it is religion. Students of religion, then, need to be equipped with a substantially more well rounded set of analytical tools, which would serve them well in critical thinking about religion.

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