Religious history as religious studies

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Available online: 21 Jun 2012

To cite this article: Kathryn Lofton (2012): Religious history as religious studies, Religion, 42:3, 383-394

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2012.681878

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ABSTRACT  What is the relationship between religious studies and religious history? Academic historical thinking emerged in part to repudiate ecclesiastical traditions of history, making the difference between religious history and histories of religion a question of denominational rivalry more than a difference in sect. Scholars working in the academic study of religion and the academic study of history have increased self-consciousness of this contingency but have not developed an account for the consequence of history as the primary mode for our thinking. As a result, scholars of religion frequently fall silent in the wake of postcolonial critiques of religious subjects, believing their work is adequately buttressed when this history (the history of the relationship between colonial oppression and religious classification) is acknowledged. Yet this is only the beginning of our work. Religious history cannot evade the methodological challenges of religious studies precisely because to identify an object as religious is to begin an inquiry into the subject of religion itself. Using the example of the year 1893, the author seeks to demonstrate how scholars of history might justify their subjects as religious, and how scholars of religion might consider their concept of history.

KEY WORDS  1893; academic study of religion; colonialism; comparison; history; method; religious history; World’s Parliament of Religions

When I am teaching a course in religious studies, I think sometimes of the mid-20th century abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock. As a young man, Pollock had been taught by the Midwestern painter Thomas Hart Benton, a Works Progress Administration artist known for Technicolor coloration and cartoon figuration. Pollock’s drippy action canvases seem about as far away from Benton’s rural murals as McDonald’s French fries are from pierogi: same medium, same materials, but vastly different answers to the question of what to do with them. Yet Pollock never disavowed Benton. I read somewhere that Pollock even went so far as to say he always worked within Benton’s influence. ‘He haunts me,’ is the phrase I remember Pollock using. I teach history within religious studies, I think sometimes of Pollock, and I think of history as my Benton. It haunts me.

I am a scholar of religious studies. This means that I was trained to identify and examine the repeated recurrence of an aesthetic, anthropological, demographic, economic, historical, philological, philosophical, political, and sociological formation that has been labeled – and debated relentlessly in that labeling – as

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religion. For some, the mere naming of religion immediately suggests a failure of thought. Those scholars see the critical invocation of that term as a mistake; there is no religion, they argue, there is something else that has been coded as religion – something else like a political ideology, or materialist fact, or a colonial bureaucracy. (Fitzgerald 2000; 2007; McCutcheon 1997; 2001) As a result of such interventions, scholars trained in the contemporary study of religion are not merely devoted to the pursuit of patterns, but also rather nervous about these devo-
tions. Religion thus becomes a category of faith and faithlessness as students of it bandy between confidence in the utility of the comparative study of religions and real worry over the potential hegemony of the designating observer or the potential vacuity of the designation.

In my own scholarship, I have found it most productive to describe religion as a repertoire of a wide variety of material formations orienting communities toward immaterial power (Campany 2003; Satlow 2006; Tweed 2006). Any study of these forms requires careful genealogical consciousness, since no subject ever diagnosed within the study of religion is untouched by the histories of imperialism that extracted materials for comparison and classification. (Chidester 1996; King 1999; Lopez 1995; Reinders 2004; van der Veer 2001) Twenty-first century scholars of religion research and write in the wake of Edward Said’s (1978) diagnosis of the Orientalism at the heart of Western conceptualizations of the East, Talal Asad’s (2003) tagging of the formations of an idealized secular epistemology that pervade descriptions of modern identity, and Tomoko Masuzawa’s (2005) unearthing of the Protestant suppositions in the comparing of religions. Religion as a description of human behavior was created through colonialism and its governments, its sciences, and its theologies. To be trained as a scholar of religious studies is then to practice a postcolonial methodology of a profoundly colonial subject.

The recognition of this legacy should not conclude the study of religion in a cul-de-sac of remonstration. The identification of colonial inheritance is merely the beginning of the enterprise, albeit one that will haunt the subsequent study with its imperial ghosts (Smith 1998). Although university programs for the comparative study of religions existed in the United States since the late 19th century, only in the wake of several Supreme Court cases in the 1960s (see, for example, Abington v. Schempp) did universities designate departments of religious studies with the express purpose to teach about religion. Such departments developed mission statements that articulated a series of intellectual boundaries as integral to their organizational identity, including claims that their approach to religion would be academic and not devotional; that they promoted awareness of religions and not acceptance of religions; that they sponsored the study of religions and not the practice of religions; that this education was about exposure not imposition, education not denigration, information not conformation. (Haynes and Thomas 2007: 90) Religious studies emerged in part as an intentional negation of what were understood to be religious modes of studying in an effort to encourage approaches disentangled from religious ones. For some of its exponents the emergence of religious studies as a distinct departmental space included the belief that the ‘religious’ was an affect that could be eradicated.

To offer an aggregate profile of resultant religious studies departments is difficult because every college and university possesses a slightly different institutional, political, and regional religious history. Yet a study of religious studies reveals that aggressively evading the religious has not eliminated the intimate relationship
the study of religion has with religion itself. To emphasize awareness, exposure, education, and information is not to assure a neatly irreligious vantage since these same emphases mark any number of meditative and missionary enterprises. Nonetheless, departments of religion were organized by their participating scholars into classificatory grids carefully constructed to focus on religion as an object that could be removed from its religious formats. Students of religion may specialize in a geography (i.e., scholars of Latin American religions), in a single tradition (scholars of Islam), in a methodology (anthropology of religion), or in a particular intellectual lineage (religion in Western thought). Departments of religious studies resemble curio cabinets, with each office becoming a sort of miniature exhibition not unlike those diorama and fairs that first introduced 19th-century Western audiences to certain Eastern objects as ‘religion’ (Burris 2001). From office to office, vastly different definitions of religion may be expressed; from office to office, vastly different religions may be exhibited. The touring student is a curator and tourist, naming the subject ‘religion’ through an implied comparison. Just as no art gallery names ‘art,’ neither do most departments name ‘religion,’ deciding instead that the collection itself is the thing.

To describe the cabinet that contains these curiosities is the identification of what religious studies is. And I would argue that what connects these scholars is that effort to name what it is we share: the effort to define religion. Religious studies departments are confederacies of difference gathered together to determine the subject of religion. This should be a project conducted in collaboration, conducted in the space between offices – between our specialties – and therefore across chronologies, across geographies, across cultures and scriptures. To be sure, such liminal traveling has its dangers. As we move between the offices, we toy with a local colonialism of our own, wandering in and out of one another’s libraries, monographs, and geographies to sample, to compare, to consider: What do you have there? What are you doing with it? How does your religion work? In this practice of encounter, there is enormous opportunity in discerning, for instance, how sainthood functions through comparative studies of Roman Catholicism and Sufism. But there is also the ever-present fear that we will collapse one cultural specific into another cultural specificity, concocting an eliding imperialism ornamented by optimistic promotions of cultural awareness, education, and diverse exposure. Yet this risk is our organizing obligation.

History departments also organize themselves as set of serial expertise, with individual scholars representing geographies and tropes of postulated chronologies from the imagined past. But the conjecture of a certain methodological posture in history-department hallways creates different stakes for interpersonal, intellectual encounter. Undergraduate and graduate programs in history usually include course work on research methods in history, a course that is usually the shared pedagogical work of a faculty conceived to be equally capable of its instruction. Of course, it would be wrong to presume that everyone in a history department practices the same method, and historians have been the source of productive rumination on the problematic philosophical assumptions of a variety of historical conceits (Iggers, Wang and Mukherjee 2008; Novick 1988; Trouillot 1995).

Alongside these capable works deconstructing any idealized notion of history there have also been studies that have identified the role of religious history – and, especially, church history – in the formation of academic departments of history and their conceptions of objectivity (Clark 2011; Marsden 2006;
Shepard 1991; Smith 2004). This religious archaeology of the ‘objectivity question’ offers a powerful vantage from which to observe how positivism was a reaction against theism. Even as historians currently purvey diverse modes of historical inquiry, there remains an extraordinary confidence within history departments that all objects – especially the object religion – may be objectified through the methodological scrutiny of history itself. It is this confidence in a common mien that unites history departments in their understanding of method.

Departments of religious studies have no such assurances. Our ordering fact is that we do not, ostensibly, share a disciplining method, but rather that we share a relation to a maddeningly problematic, inciting, and freighted object: religion. Whereas in a history department it may seem conceivable that a scholar of medieval China may never engage with a historian of modern-day Venezuela, in a religious studies department this would be a role-specific failure.

What, then, do I do when I teach religious history from within the context of religious studies? What does it mean to claim one specific method (i.e., history) in order to name an object (religion) that should be the result of interdisciplinary analysis? If it is correct to expect the study of religion to be, as noted above, ‘between the offices,’ do we do a disservice to that subject when we decide exclusively upon a single method rather than to also include others: others like those of anthropology, economics, literary criticism, neuroscience, or sociology?

Furthermore, what is it to tackle an object (religion) with its own contesting notions of history? Many religious organizations maintain elaborate archives, and many more contain complex commentarial traditions itemizing interpretive differences from one epoch to the next. Newer scholarship has begun to excavate the meaning of history in specifically religious contexts, to exciting comparative effect (Berkwitz 2004; Gesick 1995; Maffly-Kipp 2010). These monographs demonstrate how history cannot be conceived as solely the domain of academic writers, but has been produced by and conceived through religious contexts. What is intriguing for my immediate purposes is not the possible difference between religious histories and those produced in academic contexts, but the ways in which those histories are contingent upon one another. Academic historical thinking emerged in part to repudiate ecclesiastical traditions of history, making the difference between religious history and histories of religion a question of denominational rivalry more than a difference in sect.

To repeat, again, the organizing inquiry: what is it for me to teach the history of religions in the context of religious studies? Is this a form of religious history? Responding to this inquiry requires thinking through the object designated by religion and the method designated by history. In his ‘Theses on Method,’ the scholar Bruce Lincoln decided that ‘history is the method and religion the object of study’ (Lincoln 1996: 225). Lincoln designates history not only because it is, to him, a right strategy, but also because it is, for him, a right sensibility. Later in his theses, he remarks: ‘Reverence is a religious, and not a scholarly virtue’ (Lincoln 1996: 226). Lincoln’s use of history – like his use of reverence – is a 19th-century sort of optimism, believing that emphasizing history and eschewing reverence (an eschewal he believes deducts obviously from the emphasis) will smother all pieties in a righteous rationalism.

But is this not, too, a piety? And, more precisely, do our methods not define our objects? In her appraisal of Lincoln’s theses, Nancy Levene suggests Lincoln’s division between method and object improperly formulates each. She writes:
…to understand history purely as ‘method’ can make no sense of history’s own specificity, its own concept – it can make no sense of the ways in which both the history of the temporal (the human) and the history of history (of this particular scholarly practice) will coincide just as much in expelling (in saying, I can’t see) as they will in ‘probing beneath the surface’ (in saying, here is what I can). Conceiving of history (or theory) as method makes no sense of the history (or theory) of method – the method of history. (Levene 2006: 92)

Levene’s inversion of Lincoln’s formulation invites us to interrogate the ways scholars of religion have sought to objectify their subjects. In such efforts at objectification, scholars of religion have imagined that they were making themselves students of religion and not religious students, that they were historians of religion and not religious historians. That our colloquial vocabulary has led us to call ourselves ‘Departments of Religious Studies’ or ‘American religious historians’ is a comic bit of right wrongness: the boundaries between religious students and religious studies, religious historians, and religious history, is assiduously maintained.

In all this maintenance, do we not perhaps protest too much? Once we recognize that history is itself an object, we will be less fearful of the proximities between religious history and religious studies. Then we may ‘recognize that the history of religions may only ever be the history of religion, the history, in short, of history as the concept and the content of one particular way of being in, and seeing, the world’ (Levene 2006: 93). History here is not just a single strategy of organizing thought, but also a description of thinking itself. While historians have identified documents and practices in cultures across time and place that they have declared ‘history,’ Levene invites us to ask from what vantage, from what philosophical sensibility, we seek and name such objects. Just as scholars of religion have explained the production of religion as a so-called ‘modern’ concept, so too is history ‘one particular way of being in, and seeing, the world,’ a way of being that is impossible to distinguish from its creation of a particular concept of self, the world, time, and change. So I refer here to Lincoln’s enshrinement of ‘history’ as indicative of attempts to identify history as a concept that can supersede geography, chronology, race, and gender, to be a universal practice of the intellectual at work. Yet this itself is a particular notion of history, one which is only commensurable in a very particular notion of the West.

Scholars working in the academic study of religion and the academic study of history have increased self-consciousness of the complicity of their work but have not developed an account for the consequence of history as the primary mode for our thinking. As a result, scholars of religion frequently fall silent in the wake of post-colonial critiques of religious subjects, believing their work is adequately buttressed when this history (the history of the relationship between colonial oppression and religious classification) is acknowledged. Yet this is only another beginning for our work. ‘Theory and method in the study of religion – in the history of religions – has kept its eye steadfastly on what it sees as its other (and the other that is itself),’ Levene concludes. ‘It must now try to account for – and not just attempt to transcribe – what, and how, it has seen’ (Levene 2006: 97).

With this invitation to account for what and how in hand, I seek to consider an event from the annals of American religious history in order to think about how we name what we study when we study religion in history. Although my analysis will focus intentionally on the local history and particular historiography of one
event, my intention is to use this analysis as an illustration of how the discipline of history may be an object for the field of religious studies – how indeed it may be the object for religious studies to wrestle to the ground as the figuration that haunts our abstractions.

What object might we select to interrogate the relationship between history and religious studies? Any example chosen carries with it the freight of its own selection, and here our selection will be doubly marked since we want it to be some specific documentary thing, but also something we might demarcate as obviously historical. What makes a subject an appropriate historical object? We think we know what is obviously historical: something that is from the past; something that is component to a chronology; something that is marked as significant to the process of that chronology. Given that my office in the religious studies curio cabinet is that of history of religions in the United States, I will select a subject from that canon, although my hope is that the methods of my selection supersede the localism of my object.

For nearly every American religious historian, the year 1893 immediately conjures one strong image: the World’s Parliament of Religions at Chicago World’s Fair. The faces of that gathering supply a certain commemorative iconicity, with leaders in a variety of regalia staring back at us in a familiar large black-and-white portrait of the parliament reprinted in many textbooks. For historians working within other American archives, however, 1893 could signify many possible specters, transactions, or locations. For American cultural historians 1893 might be the year when Thomas Edison finished constructing the first motion picture studio. Political historians might observe that it was the year when Grover Cleveland succeeded Benjamin Harrison as President. Military historians could examine how U.S. Marines overthrew the government of Queen Liliuokalani of Hawaii, and economic historians might describe the Panic of 1893 that resulted in a national depression. Western historians never forget 1893 as the year of Frederick Jackson Turner’s lecture, ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’ that signaled the close of the American West as a territorial imaginary. Finally, sports historians might draw our attention to Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, where the first recorded college basketball game took place when the Geneva College Covenanters bested the New Brighton YMCA on 8 April. Each of these descriptions offers a bit of 1893 trivia – a data spot requiring historical interpretation to discern why Cleveland, Liliuokalani, and Turner came to matter enough to remember, to explain what statehood, depressions, and movie studios tell us about society that persist in our thematic and epochal histories, as well as in our critical genealogies of experience and interpretation.

In this gathering of such trivia alongside certain historical designates we can see some false segregations. I designate that an economic historian would be more invested in the Panic of 1893 than she might be in the sports industry inaugurated at Beaver Falls, or the pro-business Bourbon Democrats represented by Grover Cleveland. Yet a certain historical sensibility – a certain common sense – tells us that any approach to economic history would inevitably take up data from locations beyond the New York Stock Exchange, just as we might imagine that there is more than military history to be told of Hawaii from 1893. This ‘common sense’ is nothing more – and nothing less – than the seeming naturalism of history as a certain form of thought, one which discriminates and distinguished on terms simultaneously axiomatic and unjustified. Illuminating stark divisions between economic history
or military history only allows us to understand the ways objects become slotted into subfields, and how subfields can both exhibit and strangle the dynamism of objects delimited by them. What, finally, makes Edison consigned to cultural history and a financial depression the subject of economic history? Nothing inherent to Edison himself; rather, what makes Edison consigned anywhere are the questions posed to Edison by the historian deciding her subject. These decisions often possess a sensibility rendered self-evident but worthy of more elaborate parsing: How do we decide what makes something subject to which histories?

This is perhaps most apparent when looking at those sacred histories mentioned previously that are produced by religious orders themselves. Histories internal to religions, such as those developed by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), confirm the scriptural and ritual narratives embedded within that tradition. Mormon historians might ask questions of the subject Edison focusing on how electric light affected Mormon communities, or whether Mormon theology endorsed watching movies. If FARMS and other ventures in religious scholarship seek to confirm narratives for a given community, then their questions might be said to derive from an established teleology from the past in which the religious actors always sought to make sense of their theology, and in which theology always adequately reasoned religious action. Religious histories external to religions, namely those authored by purportedly secular authors to benefit non-sectarian institutional advancement, answer questions seeking to satisfy the professional standards of referee and appraisal. Sectarian scholarship is then about the preservation of the sectarian object, whereas academic scholarship seeks to preserve the integrity of the scholastic method. At least, these are the terms of our current fences, terms upheld by Bruce Lincoln when he speaks of ‘history is the method and religion the object of study.’

Such assertions must be made with some trepidation, especially in our 21st-century moment in which the demarcation of historical fact and theological argument, the historical and the religious, is increasingly an ambiguous one. Are we now so certain that we can protect our objects from religion through our methods of history? To pursue those hermeneutic ambiguities, let us focus on naming the questions of religious history within the academic study of U.S. religions. What questions has the World’s Parliament of Religions answered? How does that Parliament become component to American religious historians and their syntheses?

Of interest for these explorations is the promotional language surrounding the Parliament, and how this contributes to accounts of and for it. The Parliament was an event touted and celebrated, promoted and promulgated in the moment of its occurrence. The 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions is that rare event that became as productive for historians as it was to contemporaneous chroniclers, expositors, and organizers. From its sheer persistence as an incantatory year in surveys and textbook syntheses, it seems obvious that the Parliament offers an ideal fin de siècle bridge.

Described by its primary organizer, Charles Carroll Bonney, as the ‘actual beginning of a new epoch,’ the Parliament of Religions stood as the American articulation of a hopeful modern internationalism. Faced with an astonishing influx of immigrants and their foreign faiths to American shores, the gathered Parliamentarians provided a rhetorical rebuttal to the nativism that festered in American industrial centers. In the dramatic architecture of Chicago’s new White City, representatives of over a dozen faiths converged in the pursuit of world religious unity, or, in the
terms of its Swedenborgian leader, ‘to unite all religion against all irreligion’; to set forth ‘their common aim and common grounds of union’; to help secure ‘the coming unity of mankind, in the service of God and Man’; and ‘to indicate the impregnable foundations of theism’ (Bonney 1894: 82–83, 87–89). Through its expositions and exhibitions, the predominantly Christian organizers of the Parliament sought to connect diverse objects in a common quest for peace and reconciliation.

In one event, every thread of subsequent historiography may be and has been read: the mystique and manipulations of pluralism (Seager 1995); the pervasive persistence of American Protestantism (Goodpasture 1993); the inclusivity, exclusivity, decline, and fall of liberalism (Bishop 1969); the optimism of ecumenism (Feldman 1967); the appeal of the East (Bramen 2000; Jackson 1981); and the classifications of the West (Burris 2001; Masuzawa 2005). Through the expository format and missionary advocacies of the Parliament, through its exhibitions and exoticism, its formalism and Midwestern populism, the World’s Parliament becomes the right pivot for its contemporaneous advocates and for its subsequent historians, signaling the change over time every historian of U.S. religions needs in their plot to plot modern religious experience. From the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions, historians of U.S. religions can narrate the sepia past into the corporatism, the missionary internationalism, and the ecumenism of 20th- and 21st-century American religion. Here the utilitarian grounds for the Parliament as a narrative keystone are ones of familiar historical justification. In a class on the history of religions in America, the World’s Parliament of Religions provides the right epochal shift, the right object to propagate right change at the right time.

To contest the Parliament’s historical importance for religious history, we might call up any number of alternative incidents, suggesting different objects to propagate different ideas of religious and historical change. We might note, for example, that in 1893, Charles Fox Parham was licensed as a preacher. Such a licensure might then become emblematic of the Pentecostal pervasion of the century to come. Focusing instead on the role of American religion in international affairs, I could observe that Henrietta Szold co-founded the Zionist Association of Baltimore in 1893. Alternatively, 1893 might be taught through an examination of Russell Conwell’s Philadelphia congregation, how it swelled to over 3000 Baptist members with his combination of worship and community ministries. Such a description could flag the persuasive power of prosperity gospel in the next millennium. Students of religion and American politics might observe how Methodist ministers founded the Anti-Saloon League, continuing the genealogy of voluntary efforts that connect antebellum benevolent societies to 21st-century nongovernmental organizations. Or we might tell how, when she was nearly 30, Alma White received the ‘second blessing’ of sanctification that characterizes the Methodist and Holiness tradition, becoming an itinerant preacher and a purveyor of white supremacist Protestantism that would format certain notions of race and American religious identity during the civil-rights era. I could report on the heresy case of Charles Augustus Briggs who, after denying the authenticity of certain Biblical passages, was in 1893 suspended from the ministry in the Presbyterian Church, or I could offer a bird’s-eye view of Booker T. Washington’s most famous address, offered at the Cotton States and International Exposition, flagging the emergence of secularism in the first and the central role of economics for religious life in the second. I could eulogize the liberalism of Episcopalian Phillips Brooks who died in 1893, or I could memorialize the church history of Philip
Schaff, who served as President of the American Society of Church History until he died in that year. In each of these historical objects, something in the histories to come could be documented in that same distilled year of 1893.

We return time and again to the Parliament as a prime object of 1893 because these events – Alma White’s awakening and Phillip Schaff’s demise, Philadelphia church growth and Henrietta Szold’s organizing ability – cannot seem complete as historical events. They are, in some sense familiar to the vocabulary of historical discernment, not as significant as that Chicago gathering. How do we name this significance? For both students of religion and students of history, I would argue that it is important to find documents, events, and advents that for which their indicative qualities can be justified beyond the limited chronological realm of their claimed occurrence. An indicative object points to something else. In history, an indicative event usually signifies something seemingly larger – a movie studio points to expanding media technologies, for example, or a sporting event signifies the professionalization of collegiate athletics. In religious studies, indicative objects usually represent something about a broader social whole – a Biblical passage suggesting a broader theology, or a personal reading practice indicating a longer ritual process around scripture. Equally important in the naming of the religious studies subject is that it is also comparative – that it is something that can tolerate the procedures of comparison, the parsing into identifiable features that may be examined alongside one another.

In each of these claims – the claims on behalf of indicative quality and comparative prospect – religion and history are hard to distinguish as methods from one another. ‘Comparison, the existence of similarity, is the inescapable presupposition of historical research,’ explains Jonathan Z. Smith (1978: 242). Perhaps the most differentiating aspect of religion as a method is how it emphasizes repetition within contextual change. It might be argued that for a large number of ritual communities, the naming of a present premised on an unchanging tradition is requisite. If history in the academic sense marks difference – marks change over time – then religion is in part distinguished from history for its invocation of social forms iterated through repetition. History may be, as the axiom goes, always repeating itself. But religious actors, commentators, and authorities articulate the importance of that repetition as in part a practice of preservation. Religious subjects are curators of their own archives; their religion is their reiteration and repetition (and, yes, revision) of past precedent, established canon, and known tradition in the dynamism of a lived religious present. All religions do not possess the same concept of history – indeed, it may be argued that some religions have no concept of history at all – yet every religion is in its very categorization as a religion also an idea of history itself.

The World’s Parliament of Religions offered an exhibition of religion as a discrete concept, classifiable and identifiable, and it pronounced its own exhibition to be of epochal consequence. And so it becomes more often than not a signifier of either the imperial practices of Protestant organizers or an exhibition of plural futures. Yet both of those historical readings are, in some sense, inadequate accounts for the event. What, after all, was the subject of the World’s Parliament of Religions? Religion. What organized their meeting? To decide what religion was. In that meeting, every participant was understood – and defined themselves to be – student and object, scholar of religion and believer in religion. Their work was between their offices, too: to conjure together the subject of their common
banner, their common gathering. The Parliament thus becomes a metonym for religious studies departments themselves: a ‘museum of faiths’ assembled to share, to learn through that sharing how their individual repositories may be resolved in the public sphere conjured through the very exhibitionist project of that event and of the process by which religion becomes identity iteration requisite in the modern nation-state (Ziolkowski 1993).

In 1893, outside the Parliament, evangelists Dwight Moody and A.C. Dixon preached against its inclusive ethos, commanding that a different version of Christianity – one a lot more like Charles Parham’s and Alma White’s – reclaim America from the incursion of diversity that event represented. That we do not select White’s blessings, or Moody’s sermons, or the remittance of a religious authority, or the formation of this association or that league as our emblematic 1893 tells us quite a bit about what we have wanted religions to be, and where we have wanted our histories to end. The problem of 1893 is the problem of deciding what definitions of religion we deploy to name the significance of religious subjects that are also, always, iterating on their own behalf. Inside the Parliament, Eliza Sunderland argued that: ‘A comparative study of religions furnishes the only basis for estimating the relative worth of any religion.’ In order to comprehend any one religion, she continued: ‘The study of all religions is the only road’ (Sunderland 1893: 630, 631). Religious history cannot evade the methodological challenges of religious studies precisely because to identify an object as religious is to begin an inquiry into the subject of religion itself. If the subject of history brings us to characters and advents from the past, then the methods of religion draw our gaze to the indicative, comparative, and repetitive projects these very characters launch in their Parliaments, leagues, and missionary propositions. The object of religion and the method of history are inextricable; they concomitant and complicit in their concept and study. Religious historians must understand that it is their obligation to offer their own religious studies. They can do this through the methodical exposure and comparative discernment of the objects that they designate for their study. This cannot be a solo venture. We must fight to find one another between our offices, to discover through our conversations not only what our religions are, but also what concepts we possess in our effort to name them, to study them, to (as the injunction goes) historicize them. Only then will we begin to do an adequate job to name their concepts of thinking religiously. Along the way, we will perhaps see our own.

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