Beyond Blind Faith: Religious Identities under the Conditions of Late Capitalism

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The modern academy has for the most part accepted that religion is a distinct phenomenon and thus needs to have its own discipline. The prevalent opinion still holds that religion possesses an identity of its own and that it can be defined, just like economics, politics, and other disciplines can be defined. Moreover, many modern scholars have assumed that religion has its own distinct essence.¹ This assumption contributed, among other things, to the proliferation of interreligious dialogues, which were, and sometimes still are, based on the definitions of an essence of religion that was supposedly common to all religions. Many postmodern scholars and other members of the contemporary academy no longer believe in such essences. Nevertheless, they also tend to agree that part of the definition of religion is that it is not politics and not economics, to name just two other academic disciplines. This delineation fits, of course, with poststructuralist sensitivities that meaning is produced on the surface, as signifiers define each other in differential relations.² Religion can, thus, be maintained as a discipline even once essentialist understandings of religion have been put to rest.

One of the consequences of maintaining the traditional disciplinary boundaries for religious studies is that it is considered more important to work within the field than to do interdisciplinary work. Organizing interreligious dialogues, for instance, appears to be more important than organizing dialogues that involve religion and other disciplines like economics or politics. As a result, the latter kinds of dialogues are always considered to be somewhat haphazard, requiring more effort, and they are organized only if there is supererogatory commitment to interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work. In this context,


² Cf., for instance, the work of Paul de Man and the early work of Jacques Derrida.
the editors of this volume, for which the research for this chapter was produced, deserve special gratitude as they help broaden the horizons of the study of religion.

If interdisciplinary work is to move out of its marginalized position, however, we need to rethink what sense it makes to maintain conventional distinctions and disciplinary boundaries. Is it true, for instance, that religious phenomena are related more closely to other religious phenomena because they belong to the same discipline, just as economic phenomena appear to be related more closely to other economic phenomena, and political phenomena appear to be related more closely to other political phenomena? Often, the opposite is the case: certain economic notions of the ‘invisible hand of the market’, for instance, are closer related to certain religious understandings of divine omnipotence than to other economic understandings of how markets function. Let me suggest, therefore, that we set these disciplinary categories aside for the moment and examine a few particular approaches to religion, economics, and politics in order to investigate what they have in common and what sets them apart. The ultimate goal of this examination is not to dissolve disciplinary boundaries prematurely, but to take a closer look at how they function and to investigate alternative uses of disciplinary boundaries that ultimately invite and require interdisciplinary work rather than stifle it.

My hypothesis is that certain manifestations of religion have more in common with certain manifestations of economics and politics than with other manifestations of religion. If this is true, scholars in religious studies will have to deal in more serious fashion with the diversity of approaches to religion, which prohibits universal categories of religion. Furthermore, if this hypothesis is true, we will need to be more intentional in searching for kindred spirits across disciplinary boundaries rather than within our own fields. It is my hope that in the end this search will lead us to a broader and hopefully more constructive understanding of the discipline of religion itself.

Broadening the Horizons of the Study of Religion

The basic observation that underlies my argument is that religion, economics, and politics—to name three prominent disciplines that mark our age—bleed into each other in more ways than is commonly recognized. In the United States, for instance, people subscribe to the principle of the separation of church and state, a principle that is anchored in the U.S. Constitution. The historical reasons for the development of this principle are clear: certain ways of relating church and state, as well as religion and politics, in the past have