THE STUDY OF RELIGION: NINeteENTH CENTURY SOURCES AND TWENTIETH CENTURY MISCONCEPTIONS

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with the history and historiography of the study of religion. It surveys articles published in one nineteenth century British periodical, *MacMillan's Magazine*, from 1859 to 1870. This survey will demonstrate that periodicals formed a scholarly institution similar to conventional institutions such as universities—an important institution, and primary historiographic source, which has been overlooked in contemporary histories of the nineteenth century study of religion. To illustrate the importance of periodical literature to such histories, major themes used by Eric Sharpe, in his *Comparative Religion: A History*, to characterise and analyse the nineteenth century study of religion, will be considered in light of periodical material surveyed.

This paper is also meant to demonstrate that commonly held notions about the early study of religion, and about nineteenth century scientific theory and method, which currently play a significant part in ideological arguments about the place of religious truth in the study of religion,
could be significantly in error. These notions play an important role in another context: they are necessary to a critical awareness of the prejudices which have descended with modification into twentieth century scholarly work. It is important that we assess these notions carefully.

Some introductory notes, on the nature of nineteenth century periodicals, and on the historical picture generated by accounts which take note of conventional institutions only, are necessary prior to undertaking this survey. In order to assist the reader, some additional comments on the arrangement of material are needed first. Articles have been divided into sections dealing with methodological, sociological, foreign religion, historical, higher critical, and philological topics. This categorisation is meant to facilitate discussion of a large amount of primary material, and obviously reflects to a degree one individual's judgement. However, the categorisation is not entirely arbitrary, since the authors of these articles refer to communities of discussion which they saw as similarly categorised.

The rubrics used to designate each section are the same as those used in the contemporary study of religion. This is not meant to attribute to nineteenth century authors' methods twentieth century definition or sophistication. It is meant rather to facilitate discussion without having also to review the development of disciplines, disciplinary boundaries, and methods, over the past century and more. The articles themselves will make evident that all these approaches were at that time sufficiently self-defined to make the use of such rubrics to denote fields of inquiry reasonable. Since approximately forty articles are to be considered, analysis covers only major aspects of each article's approach, as is necessary to show the range of approaches used and topics addressed. The surprising range of these articles' topics and methods goes a long way towards challenging twentieth century beliefs about the supposed ubiquity of certain nineteenth century biases. These were indeed present, but not omnipresent.

Articles which do not study religion have been excluded, such as religious articles on topical issues, or on church matters important to members only, and those on subjects in related areas, such as ethnography, which present no explicit discussion of religion. Others which permit a role for belief have been included. For example, in some articles a religious assertion will be introduced cursorily, but will play no part in the development of the argument. In others, a thesis is developed upon an assumption which could be considered religious, but which appears to have functioned as a cultural norm of which the author seems unaware.