RELIGIOUS HISTORY, DISPLACED BY MODERNITY

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The vanishing of ‘history’ from religious studies

Religious studies are flourishing again. Fifty years ago most scholars were convinced that religions definitely belonged to the past and were of interest only to a tiny group of specialists. Today religious studies are pursued by a host of people in a range of departments. Because of the relevance of cultural issues to the contemporary world, religions have moved from the periphery to the very center of public and academic concern. Their startling resurgence has given rise to a growing number of studies that explore this phenomenon in fresh, new ways. Among the many publications that have appeared recently, I would like to draw attention to a volume edited by Mark C. Taylor, which appeared in 1998. Entitled Critical Terms for Religious Studies, it describes the field in terms of 22 notions — some of them old acquaintances, others newcomers — from ‘belief’ to ‘writing’. Each article analyses the theoretical value of one of these notions, examining it “in a particular religious tradition.”

Another volume, which appeared recently and which is entitled Guide to the Study of Religion likewise explores such notions as ‘classification’, ‘comparison’, and ‘gender’ — 31 notions in all. Examining the concepts in the two volumes, I was struck by the absence of both ‘history’ and ‘tradition’ from each; ironically, only ‘modernity’ has survived. As it happens, though, the essay on ‘modernity’ by Gustavo Benavides in Critical Terms is not a bad substitute for the two ‘missing’ essays. Benavides conceives of

2 Critical Terms p. 18.
modernity as a self-conscious distancing from the past — a break different in the domain of knowledge than in the domain of morality or aesthetics. Since modern reflexivity is self-referential, the separation of these domains has not led to the disappearance of religions altogether, but to their “reflexive ordering and reordering” (G. Benavides).\(^5\) (This, sadly, would have been a perfect point of departure for an essay on the ‘history’ or ‘traditions’ of religions!)

In his preface to *Critical Terms*, Taylor argues for a position that makes the lacuna plausible: ‘religion’ is not a universal phenomenon, but rather the product of a complex Western history. He refers to Jonathan Z. Smith’s essay ‘Religion’, which also appears in this volume. The essay is particularly valuable, since J.Z. Smith elaborates in it on his provocative sentence: “there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study.”\(^6\) Smith’s essay in *Critical Terms* traces, step by step, how the use and understanding of the Western term ‘religion’ has been expanding since the sixteenth century, and also how it became a category imposed from the outside on native cultures, and claimed as something universal and natural to everybody.\(^7\) This observation of Smith’s and Taylor’s is in line with a major issue in historical studies today: the break between facts and words and between the past and the present. A dilemma haunting anthropologists\(^8\) and historians haunts students of religions too: namely, that evidence cannot be clearly be distinguished from representation. Taylor conceives of the issue in terms of ‘invention’: “Far from existing prior to and independent of any inquiry, the very phenomenon of religion is constituted by local discursive practices. The investigators create — sometimes unknowingly — the objects and

\(^5\) *Critical Terms* p. 189.


\(^7\) *Critical Terms* p. 269.