Diminishing religious literacy: methodological assumptions and analytical frameworks for promoting the public understanding of religion

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Religions have functioned throughout human history to inspire and justify the full range of agency, from the heinous to the heroic. Their influences remain potent in the 21st century in spite of modern predictions that religious influences would steadily decline in concert with the rise of secular democracies and advances in science. Understanding these complex religious influences is a critical dimension of understanding modern human affairs across the full spectrum of endeavours in local, national and global arenas. An important dimension of diminishing religious illiteracy is to provide resources for *how to recognise, understand, and analyse* religious influences in contemporary life. This chapter provides a methodological framework for understanding religion in contemporary human affairs through the overarching theme of conflict and peace.

For a variety of reasons dating back to the Enlightenment (including Christian-influenced theories of secularisation that were reproduced through colonialism) there are many commonly held assumptions about religion in general and religious traditions in particular that represent fundamental misunderstandings. Scholars of religion are well aware of these assumptions, and have articulated some basic facts about religions themselves and the study of religion that serve as useful foundations for inquiry (see AAR, 2010).

First and foremost, scholars highlight the difference between the *devotional expression* of particular religious beliefs as normative, and the non-sectarian *study of religion* that presumes the religious legitimacy of diverse normative claims. The importance of this distinction is that it recognises the validity of normative theological assertions without equating them with universal truths about the tradition itself. Unfortunately, this distinction is often ignored in public discourse about

religion. For example, religious leaders and practitioners are often looked to as 'experts' of their tradition. This is problematic because their experience as devotees is limited to a particular theological or interpretive strand of the tradition as represented by their sect and community. Unless they have *also* pursued education about their tradition from a non-sectarian Religious Studies framework, they will not be exposed to the diversity of interpretations represented among other sects and even within their own.

In a second example, there is a great deal of contemporary debate about 'what Islam teaches' regarding the proper dress and behaviours for women. In truth, there are a variety of theological interpretations of the tradition that lead to different, sometimes antithetical, practices and assertions. Equally common is that differing communities will have similar practices but with diverse theological justifications. For instance, there are self-proclaimed feminist Muslims who dress modestly and work as homemakers *and* self-proclaimed conservatives who serve as professionals in a variety of fields and dress in what is known as Western business attire. Although there are many theological claims about the proper roles for women in Islam, functionally, there are a variety of often competing interpretations within the tradition (and within *all* religious traditions) about the 'proper' gendered roles for both sexes.

In both examples, it is appropriate for members of a particular community to assert the orthodoxy or orthopraxy of their theological interpretations of the tradition, but it is important to recognise the difference between a theological assertion of normativity and the factual truth that multiple legitimate perspectives exist. The latter represents the non-sectarian study of religion. This is the approach promoted here, and the one most appropriate to advance the public understanding of religion.

There are three other central assertions about religions themselves that Religious Studies scholars have outlined, and that flow from the recognition of the distinction between devotional expression and the non-sectarian study of religion outlined above: first, religions are internally diverse as opposed to uniform; second, religions evolve and change over time as opposed to being ahistorical and static; and third, religious influences are embedded in all dimensions of culture as opposed to the assumption that religions function in discrete, isolated, 'private' or separable contexts.

Religions are internally diverse

This assertion is a truism, but requires explanation due to the common ways that religious traditions and practices are frequently portrayed as uniform. Aside from the obvious formal differences within traditions represented by differing sects or expressions (for example, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant for Christianity; Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism for Hinduism, etc), there are differences within sects or expressions because religious communities function in different social/political contexts. One example is the debate mentioned above regarding the roles of women in Islam. The following assertions are also commonly repeated: 'Buddhists are non-violent', 'Christians oppose abortion', 'Religion and science are incompatible', and so on. All of these comments represent particular theological assertions as opposed to factual claims representing the tradition itself.

Religions evolve and change

This is another truism, but again, requires explanation due to the common practice of representing religious traditions without social or historical context, and solely (or primarily) through ritual expression and/or abstract beliefs. Religions exist in time and space and are constantly interpreted and reinterpreted by believers. For example, the Confucian concept of the 'mandate from heaven' evolved within dynasties, geopolitical regions and historical eras, and continues to evolve today. Another example is that the practice of slavery has been both justified and vilified by all three monotheistic traditions in differing social and historical contexts. Finally, in a more specific example, the Southern Baptist Convention in the US passed a series of resolutions in the 1970s supporting the moral legitimacy of abortion, and reversed those resolutions in 2003 (for a full text compilation of all the Southern Baptist resolutions on abortion from 1971 to 2005, see www.johnstonsarchive.net/baptist/sbcabres.html).

Religious influences are embedded in cultures

Religions are collections of ideas, practices, values and stories that are all embedded in cultures and not separable from them. Just as religion cannot be understood in isolation from its cultural (including political) contexts, it is impossible to understand culture without considering its religious dimensions. In the same way that race, ethnicity, gender,

sexuality and socioeconomic class are always factors in cultural interpretation and understanding, so, too, is religion.

Whether explicit or implicit, religious influences can virtually always be found when one asks 'the religion question' of any given social or historical experience. For example, political theorists have recently highlighted the ways that different interpretations of secularism have been profoundly shaped by varied normative assumptions about Christianity (Taylor, 2007; Casanova, 2012; Hehir, 2012). This is just one representation of a fundamental shift in political theory that is challenging the legitimacy of the longstanding assertion that religion both *can be* and *should be* restricted to a private sphere and separated from political influence.

Modernist claims predicting the steady decline of the transnational political influence of religion that were first formalised in the 17th century have been foundational to various modern political theories for centuries. In spite of the ongoing global influences of religions in political life throughout this time period, it is only in the aftermath of (1) the Iranian Revolution in 1979, (2) the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent rise versus the widely predicted demise of religion, and (3) the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks in 2001 and 2005 that political theorists in the West began to acknowledge the highly problematic ways that religions and religious influences have been marginalised and too simplistically rendered.

This shift paves the way for multi- and cross-disciplinary collaborations with Religious Studies scholars across the full range of social science investigations in order to explore the complex and critically important roles that religions play in our contemporary world.

Definition of religious literacy

The following definition of religious literacy is one that I articulated in 2006 and has been adopted by the American Academy of Religion (AAR) to help educators understand what is required for a basic understanding of religion and its roles in human experience (see Moore, 2006, p 1 and AAR, 2010, p 4):

> Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary

manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.

Critical to this definition is the importance of understanding religions and religious influences *in context* and as *inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience*. Such an understanding highlights the inadequacy of understanding religions through common means such as learning about ritual practices or exploring 'what scriptures say' about topics or questions. Nevertheless, these are some of the most common approaches to learning about religion, and lead to simplistic and inaccurate representations of the roles religions play in human agency and understanding.

Cultural studies

The cultural studies approach to understanding religion that forms the analytical and methodological foundation for the approach promoted here assumes the basic elements of the study of religion outlined above, and frames them within a postmodern world view with the following specific characteristics. First, the method is multi- and interdisciplinary, and recognises how political, economic and cultural lenses are fundamentally entwined rather than discrete. For example, economic or political dimensions of human experience cannot be accurately understood without understanding the religious and other ideological influences that shape the cultural context out of which particular political or economic actions and motivations arise. This is the methodological framework related to the third tenet of Religious Studies above: that religions are embedded in culture, and that 'culture' is inclusive of political and economic influences.

Second, the method assumes that all knowledge claims are 'situated' in that they arise out of particular social/historical contexts and therefore represent particular rather than universally applicable claims. This notion of 'situatedness' is drawn from historian of science Donna Haraway's assertion that 'situated knowledges' are more accurate than the 'god-trick' of universal or objective claims that rest on the assumption that it is possible to 'see everything from nowhere' (1990, p 191). Contrary to popular opinion, the recognition that all knowledge claims are 'situated' is not a manifestation of relativism whereby all interpretations are considered equally valid. Rather, 'situated knowledges' offer the

firmest ground on which to make objective claims that are defined not by their detachment, but rather by their specificity, transparency and capacity for accountability.

Regarding the study of religion, this understanding of 'situatedness' offers a tool to recognise that religious claims are no different than other forms of interpretation in that they arise out of particular contexts that represent particular assumptions as opposed to absolute, universal and ahistorical truths. (For example, claims such as 'Islam is a religion of peace' and 'Islam promotes terrorism' are equally problematic and need to be recognised as particular theological assertions as opposed to ultimate truths.)

Third, this notion of situatedness applies to the texts and materials being investigated, the scholarly interpreters of those materials, and all inquirers regardless of station. The method recognises that all forms of inquiry are interpretations filtered through particular lenses. By acknowledging this fact, an essential dimension of the inquiry itself is to identify those differing lenses and make transparent that which would otherwise be hidden.

Fourth, the method calls for an analysis of power and powerlessness related to the subject at hand. Which perspectives are politically and socially prominent, and why? Which are marginalised, or silenced, and why? Regarding religion, why are some theological interpretations more prominent than others in relationship to specific issues, in particular, social/historical contexts? For example, what are the factors that led to the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan, and why did their interpretation of the role of women in Islam, for example, gain social legitimacy over other competing claims within the tradition itself?

In another vein, what are the converging factors that lend social credibility and influence to some religious traditions over others, and which dimensions of those traditions are interpreted as orthodox and which heretical, and by whom? What were the conditions that allowed Muslims, Christians and Jews to live together in relative harmony in medieval Spain, and what are the religious influences that have contributed to shaping contemporary tensions in the Middle East and more globally regarding the 'War on Terror' and the 'Arab Spring'?

Fifth, this approach highlights what cultural anthropologists know well: that cultural norms are fluid and socially constructed, even though they are often interpreted as representing uncontested absolute truths. This dynamic tension is powerfully demonstrated in social science theorist Johan Galtung's three-pronged typology of violence/peace.[1] This framework also provides an excellent foundation for discerning and representing the varied ideological influences of religions in human

affairs. What follows is an overview of his typology and examples of how it can be useful for highlighting the significance of religious influences in human experiences across time and place.

Johan Galtung: direct, structural and cultural forms of violence and peace

Often referred to as the 'Father of Peace Studies', Norwegian theorist Johan Galtung has developed a three-pronged typology of violence that represents how a confluence of *malleable* factors merge in particular cultural/historical moments to shape the conditions for the promotion of violence (and, by inference, peace) to function as normative:

- *Direct violence* represents behaviours that serve to threaten life itself and/or to diminish one's capacity to meet basic human needs. Examples include killing, maiming, bullying, sexual assault and emotional manipulation.
- *Structural violence* represents the systematic ways in which some groups are hindered from equal access to opportunities, goods and services that enable the fulfilment of basic human needs. These can be formal, as in legal structures that enforce marginalisation (such as Apartheid in South Africa), or they could be culturally functional, but without legal mandate (such as limited access to education or healthcare for marginalised groups).
- *Cultural violence* represents the existence of prevailing or prominent social norms that make direct and structural violence seem 'natural' or 'right' or at least acceptable. For example, the belief that Africans are primitive and intellectually inferior to Caucasians gave sanction to the Transatlantic African slave trade. Galtung's understanding of cultural violence helps explain how prominent beliefs can become so embedded in a given culture that they function as absolute and inevitable and are reproduced uncritically across generations.

These forms of violence are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Galtung provides a representation of these intersecting forces in the following commentary on slavery:

> Africans are captured, forced across the Atlantic to work as slaves: millions are killed in the process – in Africa, on board, in the Americas. This massive direct violence over centuries seeps down and sediments as massive structural violence, with whites as the master topdogs and blacks as

the slave underdogs, producing and reproducing massive cultural violence with racist ideas everywhere. After some time, direct violence is forgotten, slavery is forgotten, and only two labels show up, pale enough for college textbooks: "discrimination" for massive structural violence and "prejudice" for massive cultural violence. Sanitation of language: itself cultural violence. (1990, p 295)

Galtung's typology provides a helpful vehicle to discern the complex roles that religions play in all three forms of violence as well as in their corresponding forms of peace. The formulations of cultural violence and cultural peace are especially helpful and relevant. *In all cultural contexts, diverse and often contradictory religious influences are always present.* Some will be explicit, but many will be implicit. Some influences will promote and/or represent socially normative beliefs while others will promote and/or represent marginalised convictions.

For example, in Galtung's illustration cited above, religions functioned to both support and challenge the moral legitimacy of the Transatlantic slave trade, and religions continue to function to support and thwart structural and direct forms of contemporary racism. Similarly, religions currently function in particular ways to shape and support as well as to challenge prominent economic theories and their policy manifestations. In a final example, normative cultural assumptions about gender roles and sexuality in particular social-historical contexts are always shaped as well as contested by diverse religious voices and influences. One has to simply look for these voices and influences in any context and about any issue to find the ways that religions are embedded in all aspects of human agency and experience.

Implications

This method challenges many commonly reproduced assertions about religion that are widespread. Below are two of the most common.

The assertion that 'extremist religion is a perversion of faith' is one of the most common and implies (1) that 'extremist' is both negative and uniformly definable; and (2) that 'faith' is 'good' unless corrupted. This is an excellent example of a theological as opposed to factual assertion. How both 'extremist' and 'perversion' are defined is a matter of theological interpretation and always contested. Faith is not always used to promote human wellbeing, and 'extremism' is not always negative. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr, was accused by white Christian clergymen in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 of

being an 'extremist' for agitating against racial injustice. His response was framed in his famous 'Letter from a Birmingham jail', and reads, in part, as follows:

> So I have not said to my people: "Get rid of your discontent." Rather, I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. And now this approach is being termed extremist. But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal...." *So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?* (Martin Luther King, Jr, 'Letter from a Birmingham jail'; emphasis added)

In another example, world leaders across the globe are using the good/bad binary that this assertion represents to justify state-sanctioned violence against those they deem to be 'terrorists' or 'extremists'. Following the 9/11 attacks on US soil, former President George W. Bush famously designated the leaders of Iran, Iraq and North Korea as representing the global 'axis of evil' in his 2002 State of the Union Address (see Bush, 2002). This rhetoric was used to designate those who 'harbour terrorists' and 'promote terrorism' in contrast with those who promote 'justice and freedom'. He used this rhetoric to justify the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

In March 2011, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad justified his violent crackdown in Dara'a against peaceful Arab Spring-inspired protestors by stating through a spokesperson that demonstrators had been infiltrated by 'extremists' who were threatening the state (see Abouzeid, 2011). At the time of writing, he continues to maintain that rebel fighters are 'terrorists' and 'extremists' as justification for his violent actions that have been condemned by the United Nations (UN), the Arab League and the European Union (EU).

Whatever one may believe about the legitimacy of violence, the use of these binaries serves to mask the conditions that make extreme action feel credible to significant numbers of people. I return to Martin Luther King, Jr, in another salient excerpt from the same letter quoted above:

> You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.

The assertion that a given religious group or religiously associated activity represents 'extremism' is a theological claim, not a statement of fact. So, too, is the assertion that 'extremism' represents a 'perversion' of faith. This distinction does not mean that normative claims are invalid; it simply challenges the legitimacy of equating normative theological assertions with universal truths. Understanding this point leads to other questions regarding the social/political contexts and conditions that inspire both religious 'extremists' and those who label them as such. This can, in turn, lead to a better understanding of how religions function in particular contexts and as embedded in social/political/cultural life. Simplistic binaries mask many things, including the complex and diverse roles that religions play in human experience.

Many commentators and analysts continue to draw distinctions between what they deem a 'political' representation of religion as opposed to a 'religious' representation. This distinction is based on the assumptions that (1) religion is defined as ritual practice; and (2) that religion as ritual practice is distinct from other forms of political, economic and cultural experience. The basic tenets of Religious

Studies outlined above challenge this distinction and don't require repetition here. It is important to note, however, that when this distinction is employed in discourse or analysis, it serves to reinforce the notion that 'religion' is not and should not be sullied by political instrumentalities. It promotes an inaccurate and problematic view of religion, thus masking the more complex roles that religions do play (and have always played) in all dimensions of human agency.

Conclusions

This framework represents the following methodological and analytical assumptions about religion:

- there is a fundamental difference between the devotional expression of a religious world view as normative and the study of religion which recognises the factual existence of diverse devotional assertions;
- religions are internally diverse;
- religions evolve and change;
- religious influences are embedded in all aspects of human experience;
- all knowledge claims (including religious ones) are socially constructed and represent particular 'situated' perspectives;
- there is nothing inevitable about either violence or peace; both are manifest in three intersecting formulations: direct, structural and cultural, and both are shaped by conscious and unconscious human agency where religious influences are always operative.

Religion remains one of the most misunderstood and misrepresented dimensions of human expression, yet it has a tremendous impact on human behaviour and self-understanding. Much of this misrepresentation and misunderstanding stems from Enlightenment definitions of secularism that spread widely through colonialism and remain deeply embedded in cultures throughout the globe. The framework for understanding religion in contemporary life summarised here helps identify those misrepresentations while simultaneously offering a way to better understand the multivalent dimensions of how religions function in contemporary life. These foundations provide the best tools to understand the complex roles that religions play in human experience, and understanding them will help diminish the negative consequences of widespread religious illiteracy.

Note

[1] Although his own representation of religion is problematic in that he falls victim to making universal claims about religion based on a specific interpretation of one tradition, the typology itself is extremely useful when a more sophisticated and complex understanding of religion is employed.

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THREE

Religious literacy in the context of Theology and Religious Studies[1]

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Theology and Religious Studies

In the UK 'Theology and Religious Studies' has become a catch-all phrase for the academic study of religion. Several universities have a Department of Theology and Religious Studies (King's College London, Nottingham, Leeds, Chester, Glasgow, and several others), advocacy for the field is carried out by a body called Theology and Religious Studies UK (TRS UK, formerly the Association of University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies, or AUDTRS), and in 2000 representatives of British university departments of divinity, theology, religion, religious studies, biblical studies and various combinations of those terms met under the auspices of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and agreed on a benchmarking statement for the field using the phrase 'Theology and Religious Studies' as their heading.[2]

The document that the QAA process produced showed the great variety in the field, but also the mutual recognition among different types of department and approach. For some who took part in the process of consultation it felt like the 'coming of age' of a new paradigm, of Theology *with* Religious Studies, which had been slowly worked out over many years. As one summary noted: 'There is less tension between the disciplines in Britain than there is elsewhere' (Ross, 2007).

Nevertheless, the phrase 'Theology and Religious Studies' is sometimes still taken to paper over a strong contrast. On one side of the contrast, 'Theology' might be said to assume the faith of the person doing the studying, while 'Religious Studies' might be said to bracket the student's faith or lack of faith, and to be a self-consciously neutral discipline. Or 'Theology' might be said to be the internal discourse of a specific religious community, properly at home in that community's seminaries, while 'Religious Studies' is a discourse belonging to the public at large, properly at home in a secular university. Or Theology