‘THE BEST LACK ALL CONVICTION, WHILE THE WORST ARE FULL OF PASSIONATE INTENSITY’: 50 Years and Waiting for a ‘Second Birth’ of Religious Studies

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INTRODUCTION

The first part of my title, as many of you may well recognize, is from William Butler Yeats’s famous poem, “The Second Coming,” which was published in 1920, in response, most literary critics suggest, to the end of World War I as well as to the success of the Russian revolution. Yeats writes the poem to give expression to a foreboding he feels regarding the emergence of what he takes to be a dangerous totalitarian ideology. Harold Bloom (1970: 317-325) points out that it was only at the last moment that Yeats changed the wording in the title of his poem to “The Second Coming” from his original expression, “second birth,” thus giving a Christian inflection to his poem. His original intent, in other words, may not at all have been Christian. One can only speculate that perhaps his switch to “Second Coming” was to intensify the imagery of that “rough beast” slouching “…towards Bethlehem” to be born as nothing less than the apocalyptic image of the Anti-Christ!

In any case, when I first learned about the title of our gathering, namely, “Religious Studies 50 Years after Schempp: History, Institutions, Theory” and the

year 1963, the first thing that popped into my mind was Yeats's poem. Why? Because I personally remember that year, not because of the Schempp decision, although we all had heard about it when it was handed down by the United States Supreme Court in June 1963, but because of several other events in 1963. A few months before the Schempp decision, on April 16th,1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., released his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" to the mainline clergy in Birmingham, Alabama, and on August 28th,1963 the historic "March on Washington" took place in Washington, D.C., the fiftieth anniversary of which we celebrated just last month. More than that, on November 2nd,1963, President Ngo Din Diem of the Republic of South Vietnam was assassinated, and shortly thereafter, of course, on November 22nd,1963, President John F. Kennedy, was assassinated.

I was somehow involved personally in all of these events in 1963 as a young professional just getting started with my professional career, and as I thought about what I want to say in my presentation to all of you today, it occurred to me that whatever I think about religious studies in the modern state university, or about theory of religion and religious studies in the American academy, and about the role of teaching and research in Asian religious traditions, cannot be properly contextualized or nuanced without some reference to my own personal

life trajectory and a sense of foreboding about that time that still remains with me, not unlike the foreboding that Yeats attempts to articulate in his famous poem.

With that in mind, I, therefore, have crafted my presentation around three kinds of reflections. The first involves sharing with you some personal reflections, and I ask for your forbearance in my use of a first person or autobiographical idiom for some of what follows. In addition, towards the end of this first part, I'll offer some academic, or, if you will, third person reflections about departments of religious studies in modern state universities, especially in the early years after 1963 (up to the beginning of the decade of the 1970s). The second portion of my remarks will be some reflections on what I consider to be a possibly dangerous or unfortunate wrong turn during the period of serious consolidation of graduate training in departments of religious studies that began to take place in the 1980s and 1990s, and that threatens even now the possibility of a provincial dead end for our field. Finally, in the third portion of my remarks, I want to offer some reflections about what I see as some problematic and challenging developments in the study of Asian religious traditions, especially in relation to Islamic and Hindu traditions in our current scholarly work.

I shall conclude my remarks by returning to the title of my presentation today with reference to the second part of my title, namely, "50 Years and Waiting for a 'Second Birth' of Religious Studies."

PART I: SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

My motives for "doing" religious studies had, of course, a good deal to do with my personal, intellectual and spiritual formation about things religious, and such interests led me to enroll in Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1960 to pursue a degree—in those days called a Bachelor of Divinity (or BD) but later officially changed to a Master in Divinity (or MDiv.). My wife and I moved to New York City in 1960 to pursue that interest, with me in full-time enrollment at Union seminary, and my wife teaching public school, first in Queens and later in New Jersey. In our first year in New York, however, I underwent a severe personal crisis, which profoundly changed my life. My older brother, living in Florida with his family in those days, attempted to take his life by swallowing a bottle of rat poison. He was unsuccessful on that occasion and was hospitalized in critical care in a local hospital. His family was unable to pay for round-the-clock nursing care, which he required, and I was asked by his wife to provide that service. I spent several days in my brother's room, and by the time that period ended I was almost in as bad shape emotionally as he was. In trying to understand everything that was happening at that point in my professional and personal life, I signed up for clinical training the next summer at St. Elizabeth's Mental Hospital in Washington, D.C., and during that time I was also put in touch with the New

York Psychoanalytic Institute in New York City. After many interviews with various social workers I was accepted for psychoanalysis at the Institute, and the beginning of my psychoanalysis coincided with my third year at Union. It was a traditional Freudian analysis, five days a week, which continued for just under five years, the period of time it took for me to complete my Ph.D. in religion at Columbia. In other words, my motivation for graduate study in religion was dictated to no small degree by my need to stay in New York City to complete my psychoanalysis, and my graduate and doctoral training paralleled precisely the years of my psychoanalysis. I have often debated in my mind which training was more valuable. Both, in fact, I have come to realize, were crucial for my personal, intellectual and spiritual formation.

In any case, I had to make some sort of a living during those years after Union Theological Seminary when I was pursuing doctoral studies at Columbia, and so I was ordained by my home presbytery, the Presbytery of Chicago, in the summer of 1963 and appointed half-time assistant pastor of University Heights Presbyterian Church in the Bronx, across from the uptown campus of NYU. My wife and I also by then had two of what would eventually become in time three daughters. For the next four years I was full-time in the doctoral program at Columbia, pursuing my psychoanalysis five times a week in Manhattan, and working weekends plus one night a week up at the church in the Bronx. My wife

in those busy years worked in the Nursery School of Riverside Church. My most vivid memory of that first summer of 1963, as a young and newly-minted ordained Presbyterian minister, was an invitation I received from my older colleagues in the Presbytery of New York City to attend with them the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. We charted a bus like so many other groups around the country on that hot August day, and we carried a huge banner that read, “The Presbytery of New York City Demands Racial Equality.” We weren’t close enough actually to see Martin Luther King, Jr., deliver his “I have a dream speech,” but we listened to it on the loud speakers with thousands of others on that day.

In terms of my graduate study, I was initially interested in Ancient Near Eastern Studies and was appointed tutor in Old Testament and Hebrew. Very soon, however, I shifted to history of religions at Columbia with a focus on the South Asia sequence, pursuing classical Sanskrit, Vedic Sanskrit, Pali, modern standard Hindi, Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, Tibetan and the general history of religions with a focus largely on South Asia. Eventually I became a preceptor, and then temporary lecturer, in Oriental Humanities at Columbia University and Barnard College.

In my psychoanalysis I was learning the process of dream interpretation and the rigors of five days a week of psychoanalysis. It was old style on-the-couch

analysis with the analyst sitting behind. My analyst barely said a word to me in the first years of my analysis, and we didn't start to put things together in the transference-analyses until some time in the third year or thereabout; although I do vividly recall that day in 1963 towards the end of my first year in analysis when a phone call suddenly interrupted my psychoanalytic session, and my analyst passed on the message that he had just received, that President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated.

And, of course, as a good liberal young Protestant pastor in those years when the mainline Protestant churches still exercised considerable influence on American civil society, many of us in the Presbytery of New York City joined demonstrations against the War in Vietnam, and some of us as well against Columbia University when it was learned in 1967 that Columbia University had a secret contract with the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) for developing nuclear weapons research for the U.S. Government.

I completed my psychoanalysis in December of 1966, received my Ph.D. in spring of 1967, and was appointed assistant professor of religious studies in the newly organized and brand new Department of Religious Studies, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, flagship of the UT system, founded in the 1967-68 academic year. The department had three new faculty: Ralph V. Norman, a graduate of Yale Divinity School in philosophy of religion and religion and

literature, David Dungan in New Testament studies from Harvard Divinity School, and myself in history of religions with a focus on South Asia from Columbia. The year before (1966-67) the old Tennessee School of Religion had been closed down, to be replaced by a new academic structure in the College of Arts and Sciences, namely, a department of religious studies, a re-organization model that was beginning to occur across the United States in the years after 1963, legitimized at least ostensibly and oddly enough on a few lines or comments in the Supreme Court Schempp decision, the main portion of which had to do with prayer in the public schools.

All three of us in the new department of religious studies were products of liberal Protestant, Ivy League institutions, and our task was to do something innovative in terms of the academic study of religion in the modern research university that would clearly distinguish that sort of study of religion from what had been occurring in theological seminaries, churches and the old Tennessee School of Religion. It was an exciting time, and we had the task of developing a curriculum for religious studies from the ground up, with Ralph Norman devising courses on philosophy of religion, religion and literature, and so forth, with David Dungan translating New Testament studies into courses on Christian Origins and Mediterranean religious traditions, and me devising courses on Hindu and Buddhist traditions in South and East Asia. We had all been influenced by

Wilfred Cantwell Smith's book, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962) and, therefore, studiously avoided the "world religions" approach typical of the old Schools of Religion and the accompanying "-isms" terminology (Hindu-ism, Buddh-ism, and so forth). We were determined to develop a program in religious studies that would be clearly distinguished from the older Protestant theological models under which we had all been trained, and let me say by way of clarification that we were critically self-aware of what we were doing in that regard, contrary to much that has been written to the contrary by Jonathan Z. Smitth (2010:1139) and a host of others in more recent years, who claim that the effort was a "Protestant Christian project" that was "largely unacknowledged." Smith's comment is a simple falsehood. We were all fully aware of what we were doing and why. Very much the same sort of critical rethinking was occurring across the country at large private and public state research universities in those years, for example, UC Santa Barbara (founded in 1964), Indiana University, Bloomington (founded in 1967), UT, Knoxville (founded in 1967), the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (perhaps the oldest religious studies department, founded way back in 1946), the University of Virginia, and so forth.

But let me return to my years at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. After my first year, I was awarded a Danforth Fellowship for travel and research in Asia and appointed postdoctoral fellow in the old College of Indology (now called the

Department of Ancient History and Culture) at Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India, and my family and I spent a full academic year in India. On our way to India in 1968, we encountered massive student demonstrations in Japan, and even more massive demonstrations against the university and the Government of India at Banaras Hindu University. The influence of the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, which had begun already in 1964, had clearly triggered, or, at least mirrored, university unrest throughout the world, and during our year in India (1968-69) Columbia University in New York City finally also exploded beyond small demonstrations into massive student unrest that encompassed the entire university. When we returned to the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, for the 1969-70 academic year, even the southern conservative University of Tennessee was in radical revolt. But notable also was a strange correlation, almost a Weberian “elective affinity”, between the Civil Rights movement, which by this time had generated a militant Black Power dimension, the exploding unrest on many university campuses against the War in Vietnam, the growing women’s movement, the emerging sexual revolution, an intense drug culture, and all of these together with suddenly and remarkably expanding enrollments in religious studies courses. For some reason in the popular militant student mind, religious studies seemed to provide an appropriate institutional space or locus for expressing the radical need for new “anti-systemic

movements," to use Immanuel Wallerstein's idiom of world-systems analysis. (Wallerstein 2004: 67-73)

The killings at Kent State University by the Ohio National Guard on May 4th, 1970, in response to a student demonstration against the Nixon administration's expansion of the War in Vietnam into Cambodia, had a direct impact on what was soon to happen at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, some days later in that same month of May. In later May of 1970 Billy Graham held a 10-day Crusade for Christ at UT, Knoxville, in the huge football stadium, Neyland Stadium, an incredible spectacle of the mixture of church and state, made dramatically more explosive by the decision of President Richard M. Nixon to make his first appearance on a university campus at that Crusade for Christ on May 28. Student demonstrations had begun already with the announcement of the Crusade itself but became even more intense when it was announced that the President of the United States would be attending.

By that time our small Department of Religious Studies had increased to five members, including Charlie Reynolds, a specialist in religious ethics, and David Linge, a specialist in western religious thought. Charlie Reynolds, a religious activist at that time, immediately started working with the students to arrange a demonstration during the appearance of the President at the Crusade event, and the rest of us in the department decided to attend the event but not to get

involved in the demonstration itself. Unfortunately, David Linge and I made the mistake of sitting in the same section of the stadium reserved for the demonstrating students. It was planned that it would be a silent demonstration with students holding up signs saying, Peace Now. As soon as President and Mrs. Nixon appeared, however, the students forgot the plan for a silent protest. They began shouting antiwar slogans along with a variety of obscenities. The good Christians sitting in other sections of the football stadium that evening starting singing “Amazing Grace,” in response to the shouting students. President Nixon did speak for about ten minutes over the roar of the students and the singing Christians! Later that evening Charlie Reynolds and many of the students were arrested under an old Tennessee law prohibiting “interruption of a religious service.”

The next morning I received a call from our department chair, Ralph Norman, informing me that the Dean of Arts and Sciences, Alvin Nielsen, had been visited by the Tennessee Highway Patrol with a picture of me and my colleague, David Linge, sitting in the section with the demonstrators. They had issued two “no name” warrants for our arrest and asked Dean Nielsen if he recognized either of us in the picture. The Dean told the troopers that he had no idea of who we were. He, then, immediately called Ralph Norman with the advice: ‘Tell Larson

to leave Knoxville as soon as possible, since they'll probably identify him within the next few days.'

Just a couple of weeks earlier I had received a letter from Chancellor Vernon Cheadle of the University of California, Santa Barbara, telling me that I had been appointed associate professor with tenure at UC Santa Barbara for the 1970-71 academic year. I had been invited to interview that year (1969-70) along with a number of others for a position in South Asian religions at UCSB, and it was late in spring of that academic year of the Billy Graham Crusade that UC Santa Barbara had finally been able to offer me the position. We had planned to leave for California in mid-June of 1970, but the arrest threat led to our family departing Knoxville and heading for California in the very first days of June.

Moving from Tennessee to UC Santa Barbara, however, proved to be even more turbulent, an example of how a metaphorical cliché, namely, "jumping from the frying pan into the fire" had recently become literally true, since on the night of February 25th, 1970, students of UC Santa Barbara, in the adjacent community of Isla Vista, in which students of UCSB for the most part lived, had burned down the Isla Vista Branch of the Bank of America, as a symbolic act of violence again American capitalism and American Neo-Colonialism. The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, had been for me a totally unexpected experience of what it would be like to be in a department of religious studies in a

large state-funded public research university, but the move to UC Santa Barbara was a whole new degree and scale of social protest and anti-systemic rebellion. The California State Highway Patrol had more or less taken over the campus at UCSB, the National Guard was poised to enter the campus; and Ronald Reagan, the Governor, who had already sacked Clark Kerr, president of the UC system, was enraged at the University of California. I learned that the reason why my appointment was delayed until late in the spring was because all searches had been put on hold from the time of the burning of the bank until near the end of the spring quarter.

In early June of 1970, then, as we drove across country to our new home in the Santa Barbara area, demonstrations were building in Isla Vista over the next big conflict, whether to allow a small tract of land in Isla Vista called Perfect Park to continue as a park for student demonstrations, reaching a climax on June 10, 1970, just as we were arriving at our destination in California. CBS World News with Walter Cronkite each night showed lines of California Highway Patrol vehicles entering Isla Vista and the UCSB campus. Hundreds were arrested, and the campus was in complete turmoil. Again, however, as at the University of Tennessee, there was an interesting correlation between religious studies and what was happening on the campus and the surrounding community. Bomb scares requiring evacuation of the university library almost every day, along with

continuing angry student demonstrations in front of the administration building of UCSB, were conjoined with massive expanding enrollments in religious studies courses. In my first year, I offered a course entitled, “Yoga Traditions of India,” and in those early years at UCSB It always enrolled between 100 and 200 students, an interesting (and distressing) mix of radical student activists, stoned out students of meditation sitting in *padmāsana* on the floor in front of me just beyond my lectern, drug addicts of one kind or another, and the endless parade of dogs that students brought to class in those days, who happily barked from time to time and on occasion even copulated much to the amusement of the students in the class. When I asked my chair, Bob Michaelsen, what to do about the dogs, he chuckled and replied, “Just yell, ‘ get that son of a bitch out of here!.” *Sic transit gloria mundi!* So much for the academic study of religion and departments of religious studies in the modern state-funded public research university, at least in that first decade and more after 1963, until well into the late 1970s.

Bob Michaelsen, the first chair of the department of religious studies at UC Santa Barbara finished his term in 1970, and I succeeded him as the second chair of the department from 1971-1976. These were largely consolidation years when the faculty was greatly expanded with the addition of Raimundo Panikkar, Ninian Smart, and a number of others in various fields, both disciplinary

appointments (for example, philosophy, theory, sociology, and so forth) as well as cross-cultural tradition areas (for example, Jewish traditions, Native American traditions, East Asian traditions, and so forth). We developed a full curricular program in religious studies, minor and major programs, and full M.A. and Ph.D. programs under the general heading, "Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Studies in Religion." Comparable full programs were also being developed around the country in those years from the late 1970s through the 1980s and 1990s. Unique to UCSB was our emphasis on primary languages taught within the department, including Greek, Coptic, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Pali, Arabic, Tibetan and Chinese. Also unique to UCSB was a major effort to explore the nature of graduate education in religious studies, a year-long assessment of graduate study in religion entitled, "The Santa Barbara Colloquy: Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone," sponsored and generously funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. In addition to resident faculty, scholars in religious studies came from throughout the United States (for example, Cathy Albanese, James Robinson, John Carman, Jacob Neusner, Eric Sharpe, Jonathan Z. Smith, Mark C. Taylor, John Wilson, Clark Roof, et al.) The results of that Colloquy were published in a special double-issue of the interdisciplinary journal, *Soundings* [(Larson: 1988) [Vol. LXXXI, No. 2-3, Summer/Fall 1988], edited by me in 1988. In my view, it represents perhaps the best collection of essays on issues and

problems related to establishing cross-cultural and interdisciplinary graduate education in religious studies in American higher education. I know of nothing comparable since that time. By 1995 the UC Santa Barbara department of religious studies was ranked among the best in the country and continues to be highly ranked among the best up until today.

My own career took yet a final turn, still in religious studies, but expanded during the final eight years of my full-time active career to my growing involvement in India and India studies and to my appointment as the first Rabindranath Tagore Professor of Indian Cultures and Civilizations, and Director of India Studies Program, at Indiana University, Bloomington, from 1995 to 2003. I say “still in religious studies,” since I was privileged to join one of the other major departments of religious studies in a public research university, namely, IU, Bloomington’s department. Although my primary task was to develop India Studies (or South Asian Studies) at IU along with a new independent India Studies Program, my professorship was actually located in the department of religious studies, with adjunct appointments in philosophy and comparative literature.

Before leaving this first section on personal reflections, I want to offer a brief observation about departments of religious studies in modern research universities with full programs (undergraduate and graduate programs, up to and

including the Ph.D.) In recent years, we now finally have some reliable statistics about the condition of religious studies in American higher education, largely as a result of the detailed surveys of the National Research Council and related agencies. Many of you will have undoubtedly followed some of the results of this data collection. By way of a brief overview in my own attempts to pick through the various findings, the following points are instructive for the comment I wish to make. Altogether some 171 institutions have been surveyed using some twenty+ distinct criteria. Among the 171, 40 institutions have been designated as "top ranked institutions" that can be ranked for the study of religion. Among these top-ranked institutions, only some thirteen have self-identified themselves as "departments of religious studies," the others retaining self-identifications as "departments of religion," or "divinity schools."

Among the 20+ criteria for ranking, if one takes just two of the criteria, namely, (a) how faculty around the country rank institutions nationally, and (b) research productivity of faculty members in ranked research universities (the top 40), the most highly ranked are the following [in alphabetical order, but with the place in ranking for the two criteria also listed]:

Brown University	(3)	(5)
Duke University	(1)	(1)
Emory University	(4)	(7)

IU, Bloomington	(12)	(17)
Princeton University	(1)	(1)
Stanford University	(10)	(14)
Syracuse University	(9)	(7)
UC Santa Barbara	(11)	(21)
University North Carolina, Chapel Hill	(1)	(1)
University of Pennsylvania	(10)	(3)
University of Virginia	(14)	(18)
Yale University	(4)	(5)

Harvard University and the University of Chicago are not included because they both continue to self-identify as Divinity Schools, thus being incomparable statistically with the listings of independent or free-standing departments of "religious studies"/"religion".*

[* N.B. These summaries are from "The Chronicle of Higher Education," September 29, 2010. There are more recent surveys, but some later changes in selection and application of criteria have been disputed by many institutions.]

Such rankings are, of course, debatable and at best rough approximations. My only comment, however, is that just four of the institutions listed are state-funded public research universities, namely, IU, Bloomington, UC Santa Barbara, the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and the University of Virginia. Funding and endowments probably have a good deal to do with the fact that

there are so few “top ranked” state-funded public research universities. In any case, much depends on whether one is an optimist (half-full) or pessimist (half-empty) in such matters. I am inclined to the pessimist perspective and think that it’s surprising that only four state-funded public institutions have made it into the top rankings in the last fifty years. An optimist could suggest, of course, to the contrary that it’s amazing that within fifty years four state-funded public research universities could actually have reached the top rankings from a starting-point of the complete absence of a department of religious studies for the most part.

PART II: AN UNFORTUNATE TURN IN THEORIZING ABOUT “RELIGION”, “RELIGIONS”, AND “DEPARTMENTS OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES”

Let me turn now briefly to the other two sets of reflections that I want to place before you on this occasion. I say “briefly” for two specific reasons. First, it’s relatively easy and straight forward to assert what I have in mind; and second, I gather that we’re here for this conference to debate these very issues and, hence, there’s little need for me to go on at great length about what we’ll be discussing extensively throughout our sessions together.

First, then, what do I have in mind when I refer to what I said earlier is a possibly dangerous or unfortunate wrong turn during the period of serious

reflection and consolidation of graduate training in departments of religious studies that began to take place in the 1980s and 1990s? I have in mind what I take to be the implicit (and frequently explicit) attempt to de-legitimize a cogent use of the term "religion" beyond a narrow western intellectual framework, and, more than that, an attempt to de-legitimize a broadly based cross-cultural and interdisciplinary graduate training in departments of religious studies in state-funded public research universities. I see these two sorts of de-legitimizing in the work of [in alphabetical order) Daniel Dubuisson (2003), Timothy Fitzgerald (2000), D. G. Hart (1999) , Richard King (1999), Russell McCutcheon (1996), Jonathan Z. Smith (1982, 1998, 2010), Donald Wiebe (1999, 2012) , et al. These books, I should perhaps add, are not by any means identical in content. All range into interesting and diverse areas of the field of religious studies. In my judgment, however, each of the books also includes a clearly articulated delegitimizing discourse about the field of religious studies and graduate training in religious studies.

Quite apart from what appears as almost an obsessive anti-Christian (or at least anti-Protestant) bias, what is much more worrisome in these two sorts of de-legitimizing discourse is what Robert Segal (2010: 85-91, especially 88) has insightfully characterized as the "conflating of discovery with invention." That is to say, because they have noted, quite correctly, that the notion of "religion" was

discovered in certain sorts of intellectual reflection arising in the Mediterranean of Late Antiquity, largely in late Jewish and early Christian theologizing—see, e.g., W. C. Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion* and many other books before and after—they have drawn the remarkable (and clearly erroneous) conclusion that "religion" is an abstract category concept that is the imagined "invention" of the western scholarly community, and, more than that, that as an "invented" 'construct' it is "owned" by the western scholarly community, especially in its "Protestant Christian theological project." (J.Z. Smith 2010: 1139) Jonathan Z. Smith has been in many ways the most vociferous spokesperson for this sort of confused conflation, and let me allow him to speak for himself in this regard.

> Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. (Smith 1988: 234)
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> ….
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> As an aside I may add that there is no more pathetic spectacle in all of academia than the endless citation of the little list of fifty odd definitions of religion from James Leuba's *Psychology of Religion*…that religion is beyond definition, that it is fundamentally a *mysterium*. Nonsense! We created it and, following the Frankenstein-ethos, we must take

> responsibility for it. (Smith 1988: 235, repeated essentially the same in J.Z. Smith 1998: 269-284, and especially p.281, and again in 2010))

When I first heard and read this prophet-like pronouncement at our "Santa Barbara Colloquy: Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, " (Larson 1988) when we were all working carefully to consolidate and frame in an intellectually responsible manner our efforts to develop graduate education in religious studies in departments of religious studies, and when I have read and re-read these sorts of pronouncements again and again from other theorists—for the most part those mentioned just above—who offer the same sort of arguments and who assert that "religious studies" is a "would-be" discipline "with, at best, only a mongrel, polyglot, jargon" and with a subject matter that has only vague abstractions like "ultimate concern" and "transcendence" in its lame attempts at definition, while also wanting to consider itself "scientific" in some sense, I was at first nonplussed (J.Z. Smith 1988:235, or Donald Wiebe 1999:275-270 and again L.H. Martin and Donald Wiebe 2012: 587-597). What in the world does one do with theorists who seriously think about "religion" and "religious studies" in such terms? Then, like Peter Berger, some years back, similarly nonplussed by the Fundamentalism project, which was seriously put forth with a straight face as a cogent research venture, I had an "Aha!" experience! I asked myself a simple question: what if we take Jonathan Z. Smith's comments, *mutatis mutandis*, and simply substitute the

word “Asia” as a general category concept. What emerges is something like the following: [“Asia is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Asia has no independent existence apart from the academy…. [Is] Asia is beyond definition?, …[I]s it fundamentally a *mysterium*? Nonsense! We created it and, following the Frankenstein-ethos, we must take responsibility for it.”

I can think of no stronger proclamation of the worst sort of intellectual and colonialist discourse, a discourse that leads to an endless and repetitious in-house conversation, based almost exclusively on secondary sources, obsessed with historical, linguistic and scientific debates within a remarkably provincial western intellectual horizon, that finally loses touch with anything remotely resembling the attempt to understand or explain what Schleiermacher once referred to as that “…red-hot pouring of the inner fire, the fire which is contained to a greater or lesser degree in all religions.”

I offer in evidence of my worry about this sort of de-legitimizing discourse the issue of JAAR, Volume 78, No. 4, December 2010, that explicitly addresses recent theorizing in religious studies and concludes with Jonathan Z. Smith’s “Tilich [‘s] Remains”, the entire issue of which contains not a single theorist from India, NAWA (North Africa and Western Asia), China, Japan, Korea, southern

Africa, Southeast Asia—for example, theorists such as Daya Krishna, T. N. Madan, Partha Chatterjee, Rowena Williams, Veena Das, Tu Wei-ming, Vinita Sinha, Ren Jiyu, Ashish Nandy, Tariq Ramadan, and any number of other theorists, who have written extensively and in an original fashion about “religion” and “religious studies” from dramatically different presuppositions, published often in American sources and thus readily available to American and European scholars.

I can only conclude that if we continue to follow along this line of in-house “we own it” theorizing, we will end up walking out of our various departments of religious studies, muttering in utter bewilderment Claude Welch’s remarkable lament at the end of his study of graduate education in religious studies that “…nothing appears in a program in religious studies that could not appear elsewhere!" It’s no accident, I think, that those who have taken this sort of turn in thinking about religious studies have turned away from graduate education in religious studies as well as from religious studies as an important and distinct subject matter in the modern research university.

Long ago at the beginning of the twentieth century, Rudolf Otto argued persuasively that the primary task of the student of religion is to understand and explain “…moment[s] of deeply held religious experience.” (Rudolf Otto 1950: originally published 1923: 8) He went on to comment: “Whoever cannot do this,

whoever knows no such moments in his experience, is requested to read no farther." (Otto 1950: 8). Similarly I recall an interesting passage from the writings of W. Brede Kristensen. .

> Let us never forget that there exists no other religious reality than the faith of the believer. …if our opinion of another religion differs from the opinion and evaluation of the believers, then we are no longer talking about their religion. We have turned aside from historical reality, and we are concerned only with ourselves." (Kristensen 1954: 27).

Needless to say, I profoundly disagree and reject the "we own it" path of theorizing—amusingly characterized by my former colleague at UCSB, Ninian Smart, some years back as "spreading darkness"—and look for a 'second rebirth' of the study of religion that revisits and rigorously seeks to understand and to explain that "…deeply held religious experience" and to deal as well with such "vague" notions as "ultimate concern" and "transcendence", and I am convinced that it is important that this task be properly pursued within the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary framework of independent departments of religious studies in state-supported public research universities. If you think that this can be accomplished better elsewhere, then I say: Be my guest, go do it elsewhere! But let us do our thing as well in graduate departments of religious studies in state-funded public research universities in which we recognize that we "own" only a

small portion of the land and that we are still struggling to discover the rest of the territory with colleagues elsewhere, indeed, everywhere in the world!

PART III: SOME REFLECTIONS ON SOME PROBLEMATIC BUT CHALLENGING DEVELOPMENTS IN THE STUDY OF ASIAN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

This, then, brings me to my final reflections, directly following upon what I have just been discussing, but now directed to teaching and research in regard to Asian religious traditions, and with special reference to Islamic and Hindu religious studies. Through my nearly half-century of full-time teaching and research on Asian religious traditions (1967-2013) in state-funded public universities, both at the beginning in the early and mid 1960s and now coming near the end of my career in the second decade of the twenty-first century, there have been demanding challenges having to do with how to understand the role and function of religion in dramatically distinct geopolitical or world-historical moments. At the beginning was trying to teach Asian religious traditions in the context of the War in Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., the social upheavals of 1968, and the great expansion of American higher education, including the emergence of departments of religious studies in state-funded public research universities. The challenge in those early

years was to fashion a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary curriculum for the study of religion that could match the pressing need for a broader re-conceptualized understanding of the role and function of religion beyond the parameters of pre-World War II America and its mainline liberal Protestant self-understanding along the lines of an anti-totalitarian Niebuhrian Christian realism, a Barthian "Barmen Declaration" neo-orthodoxy and a Tillichian "Protestant Principle" of idolatry critique. In Pre-World War II America the study of religion was indeed, a "Protestant Christian project" in the apt words of Jonathan Z. Smith. Smith's only mistake is to have applied that characterization anachronistically. As D. G. Hart (1999: 177ff.) has shown with considerable evidence, that intellectual world ended after Schempp, and one might add, after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. I am inclined to think, contra to some in the field of religious studies, that we were quite successful in re-fashioning the academic study of religion in those years after 1963, and by the 1980s and 1990s we had indeed established a significant number of graduate programs in religious studies in major research universities that have trained a generation of sophisticated professional scholars with recognized expertise in the religious traditions of North Africa and West Asia, southern Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, North America, and western and eastern Europe. Moreover, I am inclined to think that the books and articles published by scholars of religious studies, both in quality and quantity, are

equal to publications in any of the many fields in the public research universities. My knowledge in such matters, of course, is anecdotal and limited to the sorts of things I read regularly, but I suspect that most competent academics, who read widely in the academic study of religion, would concur in my assessment.

Now at the end of my career in this second decade of the twenty first century, I find myself challenged (and vexed) by what I would call a gigantic “Blowback” geopolitical or world-historical moment, to use the idiom of Chalmers Johnson (2004). The War in Vietnam has been succeeded by the Iranian Revolution, two Wars in Iraq, the War in Afghanistan, a Civil War in Syria that may soon transmute into a War in Syria, the terrible tragedy of 9/11 that inaugurated our new century, a swing to the right in many forms of Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jewish religious sensibilities, a Great Recession that ends but nevertheless never seems to end, an economic system of international finance capitalism that appears to be heading towards a mimesis of what happened to the international socialist system between 1979 and 1981, and deeply divided polities in Europe, the United States, India, North Africa and West Asia, southern Africa and Latin America.

Moreover, the Blowback to which I refer is occurring in the academic study of religion in our religious studies programs. There is a serious and growing disconnect between departments of religious studies and believing communities.

Evangelical Christians, conservative Hindus, conservative and radical Muslims all complain, and not without justification, that they no longer see themselves or their traditions adequately portrayed in American religious studies scholarship. We need to listen to this sort of critique and to respond in detail in a manner that maintains communication with believers in our various religious traditions. Likewise, a different sort of disconnect occurs among scholars in departments of religious studies. Many of us recognize profound misunderstanding, and even more than that, religious behavior that deserves rigorous critique and condemnation, but we find it difficult to say anything critical in order to uphold some supposed standard of scholarly objectivity that requires us to be balanced, neutral and objective and to always say nice things about religious traditions, even when we know full well that to tolerate the intolerant is to make a vacuous mockery of tolerance itself.

Just as we needed to refashion and re-conceptualize the study of religion after 1963 in departments of religious studies in state-funded public research universities, so a similar re-fashioning is needed now. In this regard I have found refreshing Tariq Ramadan's notion of what he calls the "Islamic referent" in his recent book, *Islam and the Arab Awakening* (2012: 96-140). Instead of endless academic wrangling about the "category" of "religion" or the meaning of "religious studies," or whether there is such a thing as "religion," Ramadan argues that in

addition to the beliefs, practices and history of Islamic religious traditions, there is a simple dimension of what he calls the “Islamic referent” having to do with the basic identity of what it is to be a Muslim. It is a subtle, elusive quality of a Muslim’s life, linked to the sociology, psychology, economic decision-making and theological understanding, but transcending, or, if you will, completing or fulfilling all of these other qualities of what it is to be a Muslim that must be understood if one is to make sense of the Arab awakening. I am inclined to think that such a “referent” is relevant with respect to other adjectives, for example, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, agnostic, atheistic, and so forth.

Such, it seems to me, is the sort of re-conceptualizing and re-fashioning that we need to do in the study of Asian religious traditions, and any and all other religious traditions, together with a willingness to make critical distinctions and assessments of the religious sensibilities and behaviors of those whom we study, along with a careful and critical look at ourselves, if religious studies is to find a “second birth” in this foreboding time in which we live.

My career is nearly over. The task, to which I refer, is really yours now.

My former colleague and old friend, Bob Michaelsen, enjoyed the following Zen poem. I like it too, and let it be an epitaph for me when the time comes:

Riding the wooden upside-down horse

I’m about to gallop through the void.

Would you seek to trace me?

Ha! Try catching the storm in a net.

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