

Part one

*Religion and religious studies: the irony
of inheritance*

I On sympathy, suspicion, and studying religion: historical reflections on a doubled inheritance

LEIGH E. SCHMIDT

Wilfred Cantwell Smith opened *The Meaning and End of Religion*, published in 1962 shortly before he took charge of Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religions, with a conspicuously slanted account of the scholarly enterprise of studying religion. Privileging experiential faith, Smith reproached "certain scholars," unnamed, for the vanity of their empiricism and historicism, for their underlying irreverence and insensitivity. "Such scholars might uncharitably be compared to flies crawling on the outside of a goldfish bowl," Smith concluded, "making accurate and complete observations on the fish inside, measuring their scales meticulously, and indeed contributing much to a knowledge of the subject, but never asking themselves, and never finding out, how it feels to be a goldfish." Here instead, Smith argued, was a subject that demanded "imaginative sympathy" and "appreciative understanding," even perhaps "something akin to awe" and "experiential participation." Only careless hubris allowed scholars to think that religion was a "field of study" in which "a would-be surveyor" could draw its bounds and stride confidently across it: "One must tread softly here," Smith advised, echoing a line from William Butler Yeats, "for one is treading on men's dreams." Smith insisted that he wanted to hold onto "the hard-won heritage of scholarship and science" in the academy, alongside "the precious heritage of ultimates at the heart of the world's faith." Still, when it came to the study of religion, he clearly wished to put the former in the service of the latter. Critical suspicion and secular scholarship did not measure up well against the higher ideals of sympathetic appreciation and spiritual cosmopolitanism.¹

Smith's effort to historicize the category "religion" was a bellwether move. It augured a whole generation of scholarship in which the skeptical examination of the discipline's categories has been front and center – not

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991 [1962]), 5–8.

only the invention of "religion" per se, but "Hinduism," "Buddhism," "Shinto," "magic," "animism," "totemism," "world religions," and so on. And, yet, the difference between Smith's aspiration for dismantling the category "religion" and the ambitions of most of the subsequent genealogists could hardly be more pronounced. Smith saw the modern Western reification of "religion" as a threat to the living practices of piety and faith – that is, to being warmly religious rather than being mundanely academic. "The rise of the concept 'religion,'" Smith hazarded, "is in some ways correlated with a decline in the practice of religion itself." He saw the modern construction of the study of religion – the fly's way of observing goldfish – as impeding scholars in the field from contributing to what was most urgently needed in the twentieth century: (1) helping imagine a world community in which different faiths and cultures cohered, and (2) finding existential meaning amid modernity's wasteland. Latter-day genealogists – including Talal Asad, Timothy Fitzgerald, Tomoko Masuzawa, and Russell McCutcheon – have found Smith's underlying theological concerns very much part of what needs to be analyzed, another strong indication of the liberal Protestant norms that have for too long shaped the discipline. From that perspective, Smith's emphasis on "faith" – as opposed, say, to practice – was no less a tool of liberal Protestant misrecognition than the abstracted concept of "religion" has been an instrument of colonial administration. In effect, the latter-day genealogists have hoisted Smith on his own petard.²

One of Talal Asad's critiques, in his judicious reading of Smith's classic, is that Smith had been inattentive to the question of secularism, the "Siamese twin" of religion's modern conceptualization. Smith had more to say about "secularism" than Asad acknowledges, not least when it came to seeing religion's reification as a species of secular differentiation and social fragmentation. Smith's wariness of secular methods and separations is not as thoroughgoing as Asad's analysis of secularism's "practical knowledges and powers," but the two theorists are often in sympathy with one another about the vices of the secular. Safe to say the scale-measuring fly on the fishbowl, the stand-in for the enlightened secularist, does not come off well from either of these angles of vision. In the one, it is swatted for missing the heart of the world's faiths; in the other, for refracting every culture through the same modern Western lens.³

² Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 19.

³ Talal Asad, "Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion*," *History of Religions* 40, 3 (2001): 205–22; Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 124–5.

It would be tempting to announce that this chapter comes to the defense of the pesky fly, but that would not be quite right. Instead, it strives to resituate the interpretive tension between sympathetic appreciation and critical suspicion within a longer historical view. Rather than moving forward from Smith's world theology to Asad's postcolonial genealogy, this chapter offers the momentary pause of a backward glance. It looks at the discipline's double inheritance of sympathy and suspicion and explores what those deep-rooted dispositions have bequeathed to contemporary religious studies. An unresolved ambivalence at the heart of the discipline's modern formation, these interpretive postures have been almost endlessly embodied, exemplified, and engaged. Hence, with more than a hint of capriciousness, this chapter takes two nineteenth-century American figures, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and D. M. Bennett, as particularly illustrative of these competing, yet mutually constitutive, perspectives. Both Higginson and Bennett were amateurs, but then so were most learned inquirers in the nineteenth century. Both managed in the fifteen years following the Civil War to make typifying entries into the yet nascent study of religion among American intellectuals. Higginson energetically promoted sympathy as the key to understanding the religions of the world; Bennett advanced freethinking suspicion as the primary instrument for forwarding a natural history of the gods and religions.

I. THE SYMPATHY OF RELIGIONS

In 1871, Thomas Wentworth Higginson – a fiery abolitionist, a respected colonel of an African American regiment during the Civil War, an activist for women's rights, and a voluble essayist – published his most influential piece on religion, "The Sympathy of Religions." He had first focused on the subject during a six-month sojourn in the Azores in 1855–6 as part of a book on the current American religious scene, which he planned to call "The Return of Faith and the Decline of the Churches." (Already Wilfred Cantwell Smith's distinction between living faith and the weight of cumulative tradition has its transcendentalist foreshadowing.) Amid a respite from his abolitionist agitating – a break occasioned by his wife's health – Higginson had used his island encounter with Portuguese Catholicism to stoke his curiosity about religious variety and similarity. He had also found the salubrious climate in the Azores a stimulus to his Thoreauvian side; wandering about the volcanic crags, he was primed to discover religion in "the depth of personal experience," moments of epiphany that he was sure were as

likely to come “on a mountain’s height” as in church. Once back in New England, Higginson never completed his book on the return of faith, and the project was soon shunted aside in the face of more immediate political concerns and crises.⁴

In the years after the Civil War, Higginson returned to these religious questions for the liberal lecture circuit. In his diary, he noted that he began work on the “Sympathy of Religions” on January 24, 1870, and finished a thirty-page manuscript in less than a fortnight on February 4, just in time to present it two days later at Horticultural Hall in Boston. Of the event, Higginson noted simply in his diary: “Read my lecture ‘Sympathy of Religions’ which seemed to please people very much.” The event had indeed gone well enough that he immediately set out to revise the discourse for publication, and it appeared early the next year in the *Radical*, an important literary nexus for liberal clubs and causes. The Free Religious Association, a post-Christian alliance made up mostly of Unitarian intellectuals, soon embraced the lecture as a charter document and started circulating it in 1876 as a tract for the times – one hundred copies for \$3.00. Its influence spread to Chicago, where it appeared in the 1880s as a proclamation of unity and resolve among liberal religionists there, Midwestern heirs of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker. Eventually, it was republished as a philosophical manifesto for the World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893, and Higginson himself journeyed to the gathering to give his latest rendition of what was by then a very well-traveled lecture, a banner of “our Liberal Faith.”⁵

The essay, republished in London in 1872 and translated into French in 1898, even had international reach and became a respected embodiment of the universalism and cosmopolitanism often evinced in the early science of religions. When, for example, Higginson met F. Max Müller on a trip to England, the latter was thrilled to meet the author of “The Sympathy of Religions” and promptly invited him to Oxford.⁶

⁴ See Leigh E. Schmidt, “Cosmopolitan Piety: Sympathy, Comparative Religions, and Nineteenth-Century Liberalism,” in *Practicing Protestants: Histories of the Christian Life in America, 1630–1945*, ed. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Mark Valeri, and Leigh E. Schmidt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 199, 204, 209. This section of the chapter on sympathy is elaborated on the piece on “Cosmopolitan Piety,” in which Higginson’s effort to “appreciate” Portuguese Catholicism is critically examined.

⁵ Thomas Wentworth Higginson (TWH), Diaries, 24 Jan. to 19 Feb. 1870; 5 Jan. 1871, bMs 1162, Houghton Library, Harvard University; TWH, Clippings on “The Sympathy of Religions,” in Scrapbooks, bMs Am 1256.2; TWH, *The Sympathy of Religions* (Boston: Free Religious Association, 1876); *Unity Church-Door Pulpit*, 16 June 1885.

⁶ Mary Thacher Higginson, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson: The Story of His Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 328, 411–12.

That invitation was very much in keeping with Müller's deep attraction to these transcendentalist souls: He had already dedicated his *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873) to Emerson in honor of the Concord sage's own visit to Oxford. Though Higginson often dwelled on religious topics in the *Atlantic Monthly* and elsewhere, he always took special pride in "The Sympathy of Religions" as his "most learned" achievement. Late in life in annotating a copy of his seven-volume collected works for his secretary, he placed this essay among "the very best things I ever wrote," "the most varied & labored piece of scholarship I ever produced." Certainly, his espousal of sympathy had a long and illustrious afterlife – not only as an expression of a universalistic piety but also as a scholarly aspiration.⁷

Not that Higginson had taken out a patent on sympathy. His appeal to this affection set his essay within long-flowing currents in moral philosophy from Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith forward. As theorized in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century discussions of the moral sentiments, sympathy was especially an ethic of fellow-feeling with those in pain or distress. It was the innate human capacity for compassion. (Empathy, it is worth noting, was an early twentieth-century coinage of aesthetic import; it was used initially to connote the viewer's imaginative identification with an object of art. Hence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, sympathy was the term for heart-identifying engagement with the suffering, weak, or sorrowful; it shared no contrastive relation to empathy.) As a social virtue, cultivating sympathy was seen as a way of bridging differences and recognizing common purposes; it was a basis of overcoming isolation through affective connection, of joining people in shared enterprises. Social bonds were formed and sustained through a solidarity of sympathetic emotion – a universal human sentiment more essential to the benign functioning of civic, commercial, and religious life than the particularities of any special revelation.⁸ Sympathy, in short, was a richly complex social and moral sentiment, laden with consequence for imagining relational affinities and interconnections. Largely shorn of its prior occult associations with magical healing and astrological

⁷ TWH, 15 Dec. 1871, bMs Am 784, Box 6, #1077; Inscribed frontispiece, TWH to Eva S. Moore, in *The Writings of Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 7 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900), Houghton Library, *AC85.H5358.C900wb v.7. See also Friedrich Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion: Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution in 1870* (London: Longmans, Green, 1873)

⁸ Sympathy is the subject of a considerable literature, especially in the history of moral philosophy, but particularly helpful and relevant in the context of studying religion is Jennifer A. Herdt, *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

correspondence, sympathy had come to conjure instead the mysteries of social attachments and affections.

Higginson turned to that sort of moral theorizing as a practical paradigm for dealing with the rapidly growing “knowledge of the religions of the world.” His hope was to mold sympathy into a social virtue that would push Christian particularity in the direction of religious openness: “When we fully comprehend the sympathy of religions,” he concluded, “we shall deal with other faiths on equal terms.” He sought through sympathy to release Americans into a global field of spiritual appreciation, cosmopolitan rapport, and eclectic insight. However it lined up with Protestant moral sentiments, sympathy was in Higginson’s liberal, enlightened theorizing intended as a post-Christian virtue.⁹

Higginson’s lecture on “The Sympathy of Religions” opened at sea, passing “from island on to island,” perhaps a literary residue of his excursion fifteen years earlier to the Azores, where he had first sketched out his ideas on the subject. “The human soul, like any other noble vessel, was not built,” Higginson maintained, “to be anchored, but to sail.” The global web of commercial shipping, which so much facilitated the accumulation of knowledge that made Higginson’s religious collations possible, was also present from the opening lines: “It would be a tragedy,” he averred, “to see the shipping of the world whitening the seas no more, and idly riding at anchor in Atlantic ports; but it would be more tragic to see a world of souls fascinated into a fatal repose and renouncing their destiny of motion.” It was an instructive image in which the market’s unceasing transport of cargo paralleled the movement of religions from “stranded hulks” into the flux of endless exchange. In all that sparkling motion of ships and souls, in the twinned fluidity of religious identities and global markets, Christian devotions were no “more holy or more beautiful” than “one cry from a minaret” or the soft murmuring of “Oh! the gem in the lotus – oh! the gem in the lotus.” All sacred incantations were equally conduits of transcendental vision; all were likewise potential commodities for the satisfaction of consumer longing within a global religious bazaar.¹⁰

Higginson’s essay was overflowing with optimism. The fast-growing knowledge of the religions of the world was not ominous or disorienting, but productive of progress, freedom, and concord: “There is a sympathy in religions. . . . [E]very step in knowledge brings out the sympathy between them,” Higginson swore. “They all show the same

⁹ TWH, “The Sympathy of Religions,” *Radical* 8 (Feb. 1871): 2, 20.

¹⁰ TWH, “Sympathy,” 1–2.

aim, the same symbols, the same forms, the same weaknesses, the same aspirations." Certainly, Higginson acknowledged, there were "shades of difference" from one religion to another that were quite recognizable upon "closer analysis," but those differences were nonetheless easy to elide. Indeed, such nuances hardly mattered in the end, for once the learned investigator was alert to all "such startling points of similarity," Higginson asked rhetorically, "where is the difference?" Religions took on the same forms from place to place, and it was the commonality of patterns and not sectarian "subdivisions" that mattered. Religion was not something to put under a microscope; it required instead a sensitive ear in which all religions could be appreciated for their grander harmonies – or, to invoke Wilfred Cantwell Smith's terms, for "the precious heritage of ultimates" that rang through them.¹¹

As Higginson saw it, recognizing these points of unity, these universal commonalities, would lift the human spirit above any single institution, scripture, or tradition. From all religions and sacred books, from the Vedas and the Bible, from Chinese Buddhists and African American Christians, Higginson prophesied, will be "gathered hymns and prayers and maxims in which every religious soul may unite – the magnificent liturgy of the human race." The implications of such religious sympathies were manifest: The cosmopolitan inquirer was not merely invited but enjoined to explore widely, to create a composite scripture out of selected sheaves from the vast storehouse of religious inspiration. That might mean gathering the moral gems of Jesus or stringing together luminous passages from Emerson and Whitman or pulling them all into the company of the Buddha. As Higginson grandly proclaimed, "I do not wish to belong to a religion only, but to *the* religion; it must not include less than the piety of the world."¹²

That grand enlargement of piety represented, to Higginson, a triumph of the human spirit; it meant the ultimate undoing of religious exclusion, partiality, and rivalry. No single faith could claim a monopoly on love, truth, devotion, forgiveness, prayer, honesty, or mystical illumination; "all do something to exemplify, something to dishonor them," Higginson wrote, "all other religions show the same disparity between belief and practice, and each is safe till it tries to exclude the rest." Though he still gave more than an occasional nod to Anglo-American Protestant civilization – in its production of "manners,"

¹¹ TWH, "Sympathy," 2–5; the phrase "the precious heritage of ultimates" is from Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 8.

¹² TWH, "Sympathy," 3, 22.

"arts," and "energy" – that hardly made his argument more palatable to his orthodox brethren. Christian claims about the soteriological uniqueness and all-sufficiency of biblical revelation would yield the platform to the sympathy of religions, to meeting those of other faiths on common ground. As Higginson concluded bluntly of the exclusion of exclusion at the heart of liberal inclusion, "The one unpardonable sin is exclusiveness."¹³

Higginson's promotion of the sympathy of religions achieved an almost proverbial quality in New England's liberal intellectual circles. It was echoed by one inquirer after another as a basis for a world fellowship of faiths. Yet, that enthrallment did not mean the construct went unchallenged among Higginson's compatriots. William Potter, a colleague in the Free Religious Association, found Higginson's view of sympathy Pollyannaish. At best a partial account, Higginson's lecture was said to require "a companion-picture," one of "the 'Antagonisms of Religions.'" "What makes the special religions," Potter reminded, "is not so much the things in which they agree as the things in which they differ – that is, the claims which are peculiar to each religion." From this perspective, Higginson's optimism about "a common ground-work of ethical and spiritual intelligence" had to be matched by a frank emphasis on the conflicts that were constitutive of divergent religions. Another arch-liberal and sometime Harvard professor, Joseph Henry Allen, offered a more pointed critique along the same lines. Noting the religious animosities that circled the globe – from pogroms in Eastern Europe to Muslim–Hindu bloodshed in India – Allen deemed Higginson's concept to be naïve and colorless: "We have not much encouragement . . . for any signs of the 'sympathy of religions.' Each of them, so far as we can see, while it is a living force is far from sympathetic. Nay, it is antagonistic and aggressive." By 1897, William Wallace Fenn, one more Harvard liberal who enjoyed dispelling liberalism's illusions, announced that Higginson's "idea of the sympathy of religions" had produced little more than "a huge cloud of thin but amiable sentiment."¹⁴

¹³ TWH, "Sympathy," 16–18.

¹⁴ William J. Potter, "'Sympathy of Religions,'" *Index* 3 (1872): 329; W. Creighton Peden and Everett J. Tarbox, Jr., eds., *The Collected Essays of Francis Ellingwood Abbot (1836–1903), American Philosopher and Free Religionist*, 4 vols. (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), 1: 321–324; Francis E. Abbot, "A Study of Religion: The Name and the Thing," *Index* 4 (1873): 109; Joseph Henry Allen, "The Alleged Sympathy of Religions," *New World* 4 (1895): 320; William Wallace Fenn, "The Possibilities of Mysticism in Modern Thought," *New World* 6 (1897): 201.

Still, even amid their critiques, it remained difficult for Allen, Fenn, Potter, and company simply to dismiss Higginson's call for sympathetic appreciation. If Higginson had constructed the sympathy of religions as too much a matter of sameness and commonality, they could hardly set aside the parallel aspiration for cosmopolitan affinities and alliances – for a “sympathy of souls.” Higginson uneasily pursued two forms of unity: one chased after religious essences and the distillation of common notions; the other emphasized a sentimental ethics of fellow-feeling and intersubjective communication. Sympathy, so conceived, sought both abstracted comparisons and cosmopolitan relationships. Even those self-critical liberals who took apart Higginson's naïve universalism were reluctant to give up on his hopeful cosmopolitanism. “True sympathy,” Higginson affirmed, “teaches true largeness of soul.” It was, he insisted, the basis for “sympathetic admiration” between people of different faiths, cultures, and races.¹⁵

The fact that Higginson jumbled these two forms of sympathy together – a difference-erasing universalism and a relational cosmopolitanism – took another generation or more of learned reflection to sort out. By the second decade of the twentieth century, though, liberal theorists of pluralism were effectively shifting ground to the sympathetic appreciation of differences rather than the assimilationist celebration of resemblances. Higginson's virtue of sympathy, in other words, was refigured by liberal theorists themselves as warmly responsive to diversity, not sameness. That reconstruction took time, and was uneven, but that self-critical discussion of sympathy was indicative of the internal elasticity of this liberal intellectual tradition. The virtue of sympathy was reworked to recognize what one early twentieth-century elaborator called “the mutual enhancement of diversities.” The only unity of religion worth having, it was now said, was one that respected variety. Higginson's sympathy, in other words, was enriched without being abandoned.¹⁶

The debate about sympathy, about both universalism and cosmopolitanism, that flowed from Higginson's lecture – the whole extended run of affirmations and refutations – had a formative influence on the scholarly study of religion in American culture. It is easy indeed to hear echoes of that exchange in the founding vision of Center for the Study of World Religions, which Wilfred Cantwell Smith would serve so ably and comfortably: “A sympathetic study of other religions” was expressly

¹⁵ Quoted in Schmidt, “Cosmopolitan Piety,” 208, 216.

¹⁶ Schmidt, “Cosmopolitan Piety,” 219–20.

enjoined; “a fundamental unity and reality back of all religions” affirmed; and “a discipline in spiritual communication” across the “fruitful diversity” of faiths avowed.¹⁷ Here are the contours of a distinct nineteenth-century liberal ambition carried into the middle decades of the twentieth century. Call it romantic cosmopolitanism; call it Unitarian free religion; call it a parliamentary mix of Theosophist, Whitmanite, Vedantist, and ecumenical Protestant dreams. It was a form of liberal universalism, to be sure, but it was also a pedagogy of the moral sentiments, a cultivation of sympathy as an affective disposition. The point, in short, was not to be a disengaged fly on a fishbowl; the point was the capacity to feel like a goldfish felt. The study of religion, it was claimed, would be a hollow, distorting, secularizing enterprise without that intuitive sympathy.

II. CONFRONTING THE GODS

Higginson may have published his lecture in a journal called the *Radical*, but then there was D. M. Bennett's *The Gods and Religions of Ancient and Modern Times*, issued in two volumes in New York in 1880 by the Liberal and Scientific Publishing House and running to 1,792 pages. A tip-off that this was not a run-of-the-mill compilation came in the frontispiece to the second volume, where the author appeared in prison garb. Then, of course, there was the note on the title page that the book had been written in the Albany Penitentiary while Bennett was serving a thirteen-month sentence ostensibly for sending an obscene pamphlet through the mails, but really – so he claimed – “for being an infidel editor and publisher.” “The work has been written under some disadvantages,” Bennett explained further, “in prison and the hospital belonging thereto, surrounded by sick and dying men of varied nationalities, colors, and crimes; sometimes twenty of us in a single room. . . . I have not had by me many works I would gladly have consulted. . . . My imprisonment is simply a piece of religious persecution, instituted by orthodox enemies in consequence of my heterodox opinions.” Not many of those who wanted to advance a natural history of religion wrote from prison as Bennett did, but his predicament is a reminder that for those secular freethinkers who pushed for critical suspicion, there was much at stake in taking up (and taking on) religion, not least their own liberty.¹⁸

¹⁷ John B. Carman and Kathryn Dodgson, *Community and Colloquy: The Center for the Study of World Religions, 1958–2003* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Divinity School, 2006), 11–19.

¹⁸ D. M. Bennett (DMB), *The Gods and Religions of Ancient and Modern Times*, 2 vols. (New York: Liberal and Scientific Publishing House, 1880), 1: ix–x.

DeRobigne Mortimer Bennett – one can see why his name was usually shortened to D. M. – was praised by some as an American Voltaire or latter-day Tom Paine, but he began his life as a Methodist Sunday-School kid in a hard-scrapple farming family in rural New York, sixty miles west of Albany. With his family destitute, having lost their farm and any semblance of cohesion, Bennett ended up leaving home at age fourteen when the Shakers in New Lebanon offered to take him into their community. He lasted thirteen years with the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing before the Shaker demand for celibacy proved too onerous. He eloped with another member of the community in 1846, but he continued long afterward to have an almost familial regard for these "kindhearted Brethren and Sisters." An apostate adrift, he settled for a time in Louisville, Kentucky, where he set himself up as a druggist and nostrum seller. It was here between 1848 and 1850 that Bennett discovered the literature of infidelity, particularly Paine's *Age of Reason*. For the next twenty-five years, Bennett fit the bill more of a village atheist than a freethought operative. Struggling in one commercial venture after another – in Louisville, Rochester, Cincinnati, and finally Paris, Illinois – he had squabbled over Christianity with local clergymen but had done little more than that. The change came in 1873. After a drought ruined his latest business of seed farming, he decided to start at age fifty-five his own infidel journal, the *Truth Seeker*. The masthead for the new journal seemed literally to say it all:

Devoted to Science, Morals, Freethought, Free Discussion, Liberalism, Sexual Equality, Labor Reform, Progression, Free Education, and whatever tends to emancipate and elevate the human race. Opposed to Priestcraft, Ecclesiasticism, Dogmas, Creeds, False Theology, Superstition, Bigotry, Ignorance, Monopolies, Aristocracies, Privileged Classes, Tyranny, Oppression and Everything that Degrades or Burdens Mankind Mentally or Physically.

Bennett had belatedly found his métier.¹⁹

Soon moving his new publishing venture to Manhattan, Bennett created a niche for himself in the surprisingly robust world of infidels, radicals, agnostics, spiritualists, and women's rights activists of the 1870s. He also found trouble in the crisscrossing laws aimed at blasphemy and obscenity. At about the same moment that Bennett had founded the *Truth Seeker*, Anthony Comstock, a young evangelical crusader against

¹⁹ See Roderick Bradford, *D. M. Bennett, the Truth Seeker* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2006), 17, 25, 90. I have relied on Bradford for the outlines of Bennett's biography.

all things lewd and lascivious, had incorporated the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. That Comstock soon managed to obtain federal authority as a special agent of the U.S. Post Office gave his vice society unprecedented police power for an evangelical reform organization. Comstock always had a very full caseload, but he had a particular distaste for liberals and freethinkers, whom he viewed as closet smut peddlers and free-lusters in bed with the sex trades. In November 1877, Comstock and one of his deputies arrived at Bennett's office with a warrant for his arrest. In his society's blotter, Comstock noted that Bennett was guilty of publishing the "most horrible & obscene blasphemies" as well as "indecent tracts that purport to be Scientific." The specific offense was sending "obscene matter through the Mail" – in this instance, Bennett's *Open Letter to Jesus Christ* and a pamphlet on sexual reproduction in marsupials. His lawyer got that case dismissed, but Bennett was arrested again the following year for circulating an infamous free-love tract on marriage reform and "sexual self-government," Ezra Heywood's *Cupid's Yokes*. Earlier that year, Comstock had already imprisoned Heywood himself, the president of New England's Free-Love Association, who, in *Cupid's Yokes*, had mocked the "lascivious fanaticism" of the vice crusader and asked the startling question: "Why should priests and magistrates supervise the sexual organs of citizens?"²⁰

This time, no lawyerly intervention helped, and Bennett's case went to trial in March 1879 with freethinkers rallying under a free-speech, free-press banner. That civil-liberties line of argument was at this point no match for the charge of mailing of an obscene, lewd, and indecent book. Bennett was summarily convicted in federal court – a conviction that was then sustained on appeal. His case actually had the effect of significantly strengthening Comstock's legal hand in that a British precedent on obscenity, the Hicklin standard, was now extended to American jurisprudence. A literary work was considered obscene if any part of it was deemed to have a tendency to corrupt the minds of the innocent and chaste. Bennett was sent to the Albany Penitentiary to serve a thirteen-month term, the victim of what he and other free-press defenders were now calling the American Inquisition. There he suffered the wretched indignities of prison life, and certainly his announced infidelity won him no friends among the institution's authorities. "You know," he said to one comrade who visited him at the penitentiary, "I have not been used to being treated and spoken to like a dog."²¹

²⁰ Bradford, *Truth Seeker*, 117; E. H. Heywood, *Cupid's Yokes: Or, the Binding Forces of Conjugal Love* (Princeton, MA: Co-Operative Publishing Co., 1877), 12, 22.

²¹ Bradford, *Truth Seeker*, 181–2, 203, 206.

It was in this setting in these months that he decided to write his really big book on *The Gods and Religions of Ancient and Modern Times*. In all kinds of ways, the two volumes were a mess, a hodgepodge compilation, in which Bennett regularly used long extracts to pad his work and almost randomly inserted encyclopedic tools (for example, an eighteen-page glossary of Norse mythology). Not in a position to have much of a library at hand, he had two kinds of sources from the emergent comparative study of religion at his disposal: The first type was from the Higginson side of the religious spectrum – the works of romantic liberals and Unitarians, including Lydia Maria Child's three-volume *Progress of Religious Ideas* (1855) and James Freeman Clarke's *Ten Great Religions* (1871). The second type was from the works of more secular-minded evolutionists, including freethinker Thomas Inman's *Ancient Faiths and Modern* (1876) and anthropologist E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871). It was from this second set of writers that Bennett took his orientation, boldly positioning himself in the lingering glow of Enlightenment skepticism and the more recent gleam of biological and cultural evolutionism.

Bennett began his natural history of religion with a grand picture of the advancement of geology and paleontology – sciences that he saw foreclosing the biblical account of creation. The opening excursus set up a familiar freethinking opposition: the real knowledge of empirical science displacing the fables and fantasies of religion. "Illusion gives way to reality," Bennett remarked, "and the magic picture disappears." The questions to ask about religion were not theological or exegetical, but evolutionary, social, and psychological: When and why did humans invent religion? Embracing a line of argument familiar from Thomas Hobbes and David Hume, among others, Bennett attributed the primal source of religion to fear and dread, emotional vulnerabilities that were compounded by ignorance of the forces of nature and an anthropomorphizing imagination. Then borrowing another page from Enlightenment histories of religion – the originating power of priestcraft – Bennett postulated that "a special class" emerged to exploit these fears and came to exercise tyrannical control over the common people. "It is this class of self-constituted agents and advisers of the supernal powers," Bennett concluded, "that have invented the almost countless number of creeds and religions which man has been compelled to sustain." In turn, the power of priests had for millennia impeded progress in religion. Though sparks of positive evolutionary development could be discerned – predictably, sun worship was seen as an improvement on fetishism – mostly humanity had awaited the

advent of modern science to make any headway against superstition and priestcraft.²²

The bulk of Bennett's first volume was devoted to the invention of the gods – ancient and modern – in their endless variety from India to Rome, from Africa to North America. The encyclopedic entries went on for hundreds of pages – an undisciplined catalogue that looked well on its way to consuming the first 835-page volume until it finally became evident that all of these other gods were prologue to de-centering and diminishing the Christian God. At best, the Christian faith was but a facsimile of prior mythologies: "JESUS A COPY FROM PAGAN MODELS" read one section head. At worst, Christianity seemed simply to redouble mindless supernaturalism (say, miracles and demons) and oppression (of women and slaves, for example). Perhaps most immediately revealing was Bennett's section on "Bible Obscenity," in which he made a long list of the "coarse narratives" of the scriptures, involving adultery, rape, incest, concubinage, polygamy, and the like. All these lewd and immoral tales made him wonder why he was doing time for mailing a pamphlet on marriage relations in which there was "not one hundredth part of the indecency that the Bible contains." The bottom line for Bennett was this: "The sooner man lets all the gods go to the shades of forgetfulness, ... the better it will be for him and for the world."²³

The second volume did much the same for the various religious traditions that were organized around the vast pantheon of gods. Here Bennett marched his way through the rites, temples, prayers, and scriptures of the religions of the world in both evolutionary and geographic terms, again culminating in a long and critical account of Christianity. By the end of the 957-page second volume, Bennett had set up a monument to freethought, the most sustained critical history of religion yet produced by an American. Why, when he was simply supposed to be making shoes in a prison factory, did Bennett expend so much effort cataloguing the religions of Phoenicia, Chaldea, Egypt, and Assyria – not to mention Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? Why bother obsessively studying religion, the whole human propensity for "the devising of gods," when one found that proclivity so childish? His compulsion was based on a view of knowledge not so much as power, but as liberation. It was not a cynical project of destruction and mockery – or at least not solely that – but instead a humanistic mission of enlightenment

²² DMB, *Gods*, I: 33–7.

²³ DMB, *Gods*, I: 576, 589, 818–19.

and emancipation. The point was to set the human mind free of religious phantoms and those who manipulate them for their own gain and privilege. Bennett quoted the famed agnostic orator Robert Ingersoll to this effect toward the close of his work: "The doubter, the investigator, the Infidel, have been the saviors of liberty." Bennett undertook his project of disenchantment in that heroic, even salvific, light. To write "this natural history of the gods" was to underscore the bleak history of religious violence, bloodshed, tyranny, and persecution; it was to reveal the fearful, ignorant, oppressive roots of America's own inquisition. Religion, in short, deserved not appreciative sympathy of its transcendental flights; religion demanded instead hard-nosed suspicion of its cunning politics.²⁴

III. CONCLUSION

Neither Higginson nor Bennett was a professional scholar. Neither was in danger of being labeled a narrow specialist or succumbing to William James's Ph.D. octopus. As amateurs, neither had anything like the academic standing of that initial generation of university chair-holders in the science of religions, a small handful of whom had been installed by the 1870s and 1880s in Europe and the United States. Yet, the tension between sympathy and suspicion that they dramatized was very much inherited by the emergent discipline. It imbued one formulation after another of what it would mean to cultivate the study of religion in the American university – not as a wing of Protestant theological schools, but as a distinct endeavor within the arts and sciences.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), William James, hoping his lectures might become "a crumb-like contribution" to the new "'Science of Religions,' so-called," confronted this tension directly. On the one hand, he saw this science as having the potential to sift out "a consensus of opinion" and thereby "offer mediation between different believers" – a kind of interreligious diplomacy based on an inductive understanding of the experiential core of religions. The science could conceivably, James suggested, do what Higginson hoped and Max Müller too espoused – that is, help its practitioners discern universal sympathies or ideal essences across religions. On the other hand, James reasoned that this new science might be at cross-purposes with that aspiration; it could well turn out, he remarked, that "the best man at this science might be the man who found it hardest to be personally

²⁴ DMB, *Gods*, 1: 823; 2: 923, 940.

devout." Was there any reason that the science of religions would not fall into line with other materialistic sciences and come to "blunt the acuteness" of "living faith"? "The sciences of nature," James observed, "know nothing of spiritual presences." Understanding the elementary forms of religion – "the purely theoretic attitude," James called it – was fundamentally dissimilar from "living religion." He speculated that "the very science of religions itself" was actually the product of a deeper "antipathy to religion." Was it not finally committed to a view of religion as an anachronism or survival, "an atavistic relapse" that the enlightened have outgrown? Was it not aimed at freeing people of the "groveling and horrible superstitions" that "the cultivator of this science" confronted time and again? In short, James faced at the close of the *Varieties* this troublesome question: Was this new university science one of sympathy or suspicion?²⁵

James highlighted these tensions in the "'Science of Religions,' so-called," without resolving them. They lingered. When Princeton University called the philosopher George Thomas to lay the foundation for a Department of Religion in 1940, he gave an inaugural lecture in which the consequences of secularism and naturalism for the study of religion haunted him. "To ask for an impartial, objective study of religion is legitimate and, in a university, essential," he acknowledged. Yet, he insisted, "The rational analysis of religion which we are undertaking should never be allowed to become a substitute for the *living experience* of religion.... The analysis and evaluation from the outside, from the point of view of the observer, must be supplemented by an attempt to penetrate to the heart of it by intuition and to identify oneself with it in feeling." Thomas ended his Harrington Spear Paine Foundation lecture where Wilfred Cantwell Smith began *The Meaning and End of Religion*, with an emphasis on direct insight and sympathetic fellow-feeling trumping secularism and naturalism. Thomas had no crawling fly on a fishbowl, but he did have an image of an aloof observer scrutinizing a rock or crystal and hazarded that any scholar of religion who similarly contemplated religion "from the outside with cool detachment" would never achieve "genuine understanding."²⁶

No doubt the pendulum has swung dramatically in the last generation away from the sympathies of Higginson, James, Thomas, and Smith. No doubt the critical study of religion has come to depend more

²⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 433, 455–7, 488–95.

²⁶ George F. Thomas, *Religion in an Age of Secularism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940), 23–8.

and more on cutting through such romantic sentiments rather than cultivating them. "Reverence is a religious, and not a scholarly virtue," Bruce Lincoln has tartly remarked. "The failure to treat religion 'as religion' – that is, the refusal to ratify its claim of transcendent nature and sacrosanct status – may be regarded as heresy and sacrilege by those who construct themselves as religious," Lincoln elaborates, "but it is the starting point for those who construct themselves as historians." Perhaps then critical suspicion has finally carried the day – and rightly. Perhaps the field's romantic past has finally been relinquished, the only reverence left is that for academic excellence and deep learning. Perhaps scholars of religion can now be scholars without apology – historicist, empiricist, unsympathetic, even blasphemous and obscene, letting the chips from their workshop fall where they may. And, yet, it would be surprising if such a fundamental ambivalence had resolved itself so neatly, that, with this liberal Protestant genealogy pinned down, religious studies can now march along a critical scholarly path cleverly exposing one truth regime and knowledge/power nexus after another. After all, secular critique has now turned dramatically on itself, and the return of religion seems everywhere apparent, not least across the humanities.²⁷

Even D. M. Bennett, once out of prison, embarked on one last big project, a tour of the globe that he chronicled in a four-volume travelogue entitled *The Truth Seeker Around the World*. Given how he viewed primitives and their gods, his literary traipsing was not a cosmopolitan tour de force. The excursion gave him a chance to visit, as he said, "the numerous god-factories" of other cultures firsthand. Something strange, yet strangely predictable, happened, though, when he got to India: He fell in with Madame Blavatsky, Henry Olcott, and their community of Theosophists, spiritualists, yogis, and Buddhist catechists. He was taken up short by the mysterious phenomena surrounding Olcott in particular, the inexplicable communications from the guide Koot Hoomi, supposedly two thousand miles away in the Himalayas. This was not what his freethinking subscribers back in America were expecting from his globetrotting – a questioning of his own materialism, a slack-jawed amazement at occult powers, a hobnobbing with suspected charlatans. "I am ready to believe Hamlet was right," he claimed, "when he assured his friend Horatio that there was in heaven and earth many things not dreamed of in his philosophy." In 1882, with the backing of Blavatsky

²⁷ Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on Method," in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, ed. Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 1999), 395–8.

and Olcott, Bennett became a member of the Theosophical Society. It turned out for Bennett, as it has often turned out since then, that transcendental aspirations and romantic sympathies were not so easy to dispel. There he was, the old freethinker and erstwhile Shaker, bedeviled by the same curiosities that had smitten Higginson and company. Bennett, too, had come to ask, and perhaps even to intuit, how it feels to be a goldfish.²⁸

Whatever else it implies, Bennett's turn to Theosophy suggests the intimacy of suspicion and sympathy, how quickly liberal secularism could turn into liberal religion, and vice versa. That is the twinned inheritance of the scholarly study of religion: the mirrored reflections of romantic cosmopolitanism and freethinking secularism. Not even in the early twenty-first century, with all our genealogical canniness, is it easy to stand outside that dual legacy or to separate these Siamese twins. Nor is it obvious that we would want to pry them apart if we could and then proceed with one half of the pair over the other. In the charged space between distance and engagement, scholars of religion still make their way: secular, empiricist, historicist, to be sure, but also well aware how limited, fragile, and particular the stance of critical suspicion has been and will be. The science of religions, so-called, was a mixed bag of late nineteenth-century methods, hopes, and perplexities, an untidy merger of transcendentalism and freethought. That mixture was a source not only of contamination and occlusion, but also of curiosity and insight, a crumb-like contribution to the humanistic pursuit of freedom, enlightenment, and cosmopolitanism. Sympathy, it seems only fair to conclude, can now be accorded the discipline's own historical amalgam without sacrificing suspicion.

Select Bibliography

- Fitzgerald, Timothy. *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- The Ideology of Religious Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Harrison, Peter. *"Religion" and the Religions in the English Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Jones, Robert Alun. *The Secret of the Totem: Religion and Society from McLennan to Freud*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Marchand, Suzanne L. *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

²⁸ DMB, *A Truth Seeker Around the World*, 4 vols. (New York: Bennett, 1882), 3: 90–4; 4: 396.

- Masuzawa, Tomoko. *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- McCutcheon, Russell T. *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991 [1962].
- Styers, Randall. *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.