A LOOK AT THE PAST, FACING FORWARD
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THE PAST

We have spent most of the day celebrating the past and those of us privileged to have taught in the RS Department in its earlier years—and in the process getting a good sense of those now teaching in the program. I know Rita and Rebecca really hoped that I’d now “face forward.” But as I tried to imagine how to go about doing so, I realized I’d have to begin by once again looking back --in the hope that doing so might either make visible a trajectory that has some kind of inherent momentum that would itself suggest a probable future or some possible likely futures OR might reveal that there’s a kind of essential core to the teaching of religious studies that just needs to be made clearly visible – and reaffirmed.

So I want to begin with my version of the past, of the history of the field over the last 50 years as I lived it and now understand it, which means o this is going to be a somewhat autobiographical, somewhat narcissistic, account. As soon as I say FIFTY years I am making it evident that I want to talk about more than the history of our department here, since the RS department at SDSU was started in 1969 and so is only 45 years old. But since I began teaching in the Department of Religion at Rutgers in 1963, for me the past is a 50 year past

But actually 1963 is really important not because it was the year Chris Downing began teaching-- but because of two much more important events: 1963 was the year in which the US Supreme Court affirmed the appropriateness of teaching the comparative study of religion in publicly supported institutions of learning – thereby providing a charter for programs like the one here at SDSU (as the department’s current catalogue statement acknowledges) and the one at Rutgers where I began my career.

1963 was also the year that the American Academy of Religion, the AAR, was established. It met for the first time that fall, in Chicago. I was there and I still remember the palpable excitement of the occasion. The AAR was a successor to NABI, The National Association of Biblical Instructors. Its institution marked a recognition that what was needed was a professional organization that would focus on the teaching of religion in colleges rather than in seminaries; that would focus on the teaching of religion in a way that did not assume a Christian
perspective; and would situate the study of religion primarily in the humanities rather than in the social sciences (as did the slightly older Society for the Scientific Study of religion.)

I hope you get that this was BIG – that 1963 was a kind of watershed year, that it initiated a perhaps still not fully accomplished project of trying to distinguish clearly between teaching about religion and teaching religion.

As I look back to those early years I remember clearly how excited we were - knowing that we were engaged in something NEW. And by WE I mean EVERYONE! I recall with much gratitude the generosity, the immediate inclusiveness, on the part of revered older scholars to those of us just beginning our careers. This was something that of course didn’t stay the case as the field became more established, as the AAR became what it is today, an organization that now gathers together THOUSANDS of scholars at its annual meeting. But it was true then! This was a HEADY time!

It was a time of almost seismic shifts in the teaching of religious studies – although just how radical the changes beginning then really were is probably only visible retrospectively. Indeed, they became fully visible to me really only as I began putting this talk together. So let me try to make them visible to you

When I began almost everyone teaching RS had come from programs in theology at private universities, many of which had themselves begun in colonial times as divinity schools-- and at those schools it was expected that students would first get the equivalent of a masters degree – rather weirdly at that time called a bachelor of divinity degree--before going on to a doctoral program. (I was, for instance, the first student admitted to the Ph.D. program at Drew without such an intermediate degree.)

Or else the instructors in these newly created departments of religious studies would have come from philosophy departments (and might have philosophy Ph.Ds.)--as was the case here at SDSU, where Ray Jordan & Allan Anderson had both been members of our philosophy faculty before creating the religious studies department. This transition symbolized a recognition of RS as itself a respectable humanities discipline – that no longer needed to HIDE under the rubric of philosophy. (The process was somewhat similar to what happened in German universities in the earlier 1800s when psychology emancipated itself as a specific field of study, rather than simply a branch of philosophy.)
When I began it was also true that a religious studies faculty would be almost entirely MALE. (Again, a personal note – I was the first woman admitted to my graduate program – a year later Yale Divinity School admitted its first female doctoral student.)

All this this showed - the almost taken-for-granted Christian starting-point, the philosophical bias, the male perspective – were all reflected in WHAT was initially taught in these programs and HOW it was taught.

The wording of the Supreme Court ruling pretty much insured that a course on world religions would be a core element of religious studies programs in state universities. But given the backgrounds and the training of the faculty in these programs it nevertheless remained the case that these religions would be taught as “other” – taught from the perspective of the western monotheisms. (I don’t think any of us who first taught in these programs had ourselves as undergraduates or as graduate students ever taken a course in world religions!)

Given our backgrounds, it was also natural that the focus would fall on the elite and intellectualist and ‘perennial philosophy” version of these religions – and thus on TEXTS. The popularity of Huston Smith’s beautifully written Religions Of Man gives testimony to this, as does the acceptance of an approach like that represented by Mircea Eliade that emphasized universally occurring themes rather than particularity or historical context.

So this is what most of us faculty brought to the table in the 1960s.

BUT this WAS the 1960s, a time of radical ferment on university campuses.

It was the era of the civil rights movement--that Big Year, 1963 was also the year of the Birmingham Church Bombings and the Birmingham March.

It was the era of the Vietnam War and of the protests against it.

It was the era of beginning of what we now call the “second wave of feminism” - something my students were touched by well before I was. I can still remember coming back to campus after a year’s leave in the fall of 1968 and discovering that all the women students had decided they were lesbians – that to love themselves AS WOMEN meant loving WOMEN. And perhaps more germane to my main point here, that they were asking new questions. I still remember how flummoxed I was when, while I was teaching I and II Samuel, one
student asked me how Bathsheba felt when King David called her to his bed. I realized it had never occurred to me to even consider that!

I mention all this to communicate that, almost irrespective of where we faculty were coming from, our students were focused on ethical and existential concerns.

And there were a LOT OF THEM! Indeed – and this may be hard to imagine now – during the 1960s Religion was one of the most popular majors at Rutgers! Students who in other times might have turned to philosophy, didn't because philosophy then was mostly British analytic philosophy. Students who in other times might have been literature majors weren’t, because in the English department the focus was more on literary criticism than on literature. Students who in other times might have been psychology majors were turned off by the dominance of behaviorism. And even many pre-med students chose to major in RS because medical schools wanted students with humanities backgrounds.

This is, of course, an exaggeration – but in a way in that era we WERE the humanities!

Not surprisingly, the curriculum expanded in relation to these student enthusiasms. Of course we still taught world religions and the Old & New Testaments, but we added courses (and these were the heavily-enrolled ones) in ethics (social ethics, biomedical ethics), in liberation theology, in goddesses, in myth & ritual, dreams & visions, and many “religion and” courses (religion & literature, religion & psychology, religion & society, religion & politics.)

And some of us moved beyond the lecture or seminar formats we’d earlier taken for granted as what one did in a classroom. We, somewhat hesitantly, added slides and music; we experimented with encounter-group kinds of things.

Another sign that things were changing was the increasing visibility of women faculty (tho NOT actually on my campus) – culminating in the creation of the Women’s Caucus at the 1971 AAR meeting and my being elected then to become the AAR’s first female president – and faint signs that WE were going to bring new perspectives to just about everything!

Not too surprisingly, as we added students and especially majors, we also added faculty. Indeed, for the next 8 years we added a new tenure-track faculty every year after my arrival as only the second member of the department (and the
one already there when I arrived had been more invested in his role as college chaplain than as an academic.)

The new instructors were younger than I; many were themselves caught up in the 60s. We had a wonderful sense of building something together. We held weekly colloquia at which we discussed the hot new books or drafts of our own scholarly writing. We were ambitious for ourselves and for the field; we probably thought of ourselves more as scholars than as teachers.

And similar things were happening, so it seemed, everywhere.

AND THEN IT ALL CAME TO A HALT!

As I try now to understand this, I think there were two simultaneous but not directly related causes. One was, what some might call (& did), the over-reach of student activism. In the spring of 1970 (in the aftermath of the American incursion into Cambodia and the killings at Kent State & Jackson State), students closed down our campus.

Well, not just our campus. Hundreds of universities, colleges, and high schools closed in response to a student strike that involved over four million students.

This happened at exam time. There were no final exams; there was no formal graduation. The students went on to demand a say, a Big Say, about curricular content, about admissions, even about faculty retention and hiring. This frightened many of the older faculty – and caused divisions even among us younger ones.

And this was aggravated by – this won’t be a big surprise to those with memories of what happened later here – BY A BUDGET CRUNCH. And where a year earlier all those young tenure-track faculty could have taken for granted that each, one by one, would get tenure – now it was suddenly clear they would be competing with one another –that at best one out of three would get to stay!

It became ugly – the two younger members of our department who had been most receptive to what the students were up to, most involved in agreeing, for example, to mentor non-credit, non-official, student-directed courses were denied tenure. I’d been equally involved but by this time had tenure– and in that sense was safe – but I no longer felt at home in a department I had played such a big
part in creating. So I left and came here to SDSU

WHEN I ARRIVED, IN 1974, THE DEPARTMENT HERE WAS ALREADY FIVE YEARS OLD. This means I wasn’t here when Ray Jordan & Allen Anderson made that move from the Philosophy Department and together created this one, with Ray rather reluctantly agreeing to serve as chair – because of course there had to be a chair and Allen made clear it wasn’t going to be he!

For me, coming here, I have to admit, was a culture shock. Though in retrospect I realize it was more the times that had changed than that California was all that different from the East Coast. Of course, I SHOULD have realized this then, given what had led me to leave Rutgers.

The curriculum here was not all that different; the backgrounds of the instructors were not all that different. Though the faculty WAS different in several ways. They didn’t seem to me to be as collegial as we had, at least early on, been at Rutgers. There was more of a sense that each was going his own way, teaching his thing in his way, often to a coterie of his students. (I imagine you can hear that I am using the male pronoun deliberately!)

They also seemed more insular, less part of what I call “the conversation,” participation in which back east had been so taken-for-granted. They were mostly not very engaged in scholarly research. They were not at all interested in being part of a faculty colloquium like the one we’d had at Rutgers. Most didn’t even go to the national AAR meetings. But they were clearly good teachers, dedicated teachers, maybe even more deeply involved with BEING TEACHERS (rather than scholars), with their students, more comfortable with nurturing the spiritual lives of their students, than had been true back east.

What was MORE different, was the students. For one thing, there were very few majors – and among those majors quite a number were planning on going on to seminary, planning on becoming ministers, something that had never once been the case at Rutgers!

This relates to the more striking difference – students now (and I’ve come to realize it was more a NOW than a HERE) were not in college primarily to discover themselves or how to make the world a better place – but to prepare for a career, for the job that a college degree would make possible. (Obviously, this was NEVER everyone – I and all of us had students as deeply engaged with those
more existential questions as any I ever had earlier.) But - Remember that budget crunch? Obviously that recession of the early 1970s hadn’t hit just Rutgers, hadn’t hit just university budgets– it made everyone more attuned to practical needs.

SO: fewer majors. AND so many of the students in the lower division courses were there mostly to fulfill a distribution requirement. For many it must have seemed that a course in world religions would be an easier way to do that than a course in philosophy (and religion teachers might be less demanding, too, mightn’t they?

This inevitably skewed the curriculum – we had to put so much of our resources – that is, faculty time – into that ever more popular world religions course! And we had to let those classes themselves get HUGE! Too huge to permit any meaningful discussion. We even (and this hurt!) had to resort to machine-graded multiple-choice exams.

Yet in other ways it was EXHILARATING to be here - because of those same students! At Rutgers just about all of my students had come from Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish families, though the students themselves were mostly no longer practitioners or believers. At SDSU my classrooms were full of Asians, Native Americans, Hispanics, Muslims - and of students deeply involved with eastern religions or shamanism or some form of New Age spirituality.

One had to teach differently – especially the introductory world religions course. Often there were students in my class who knew much more than did I about Buddhism or Shinto. Or students who were excited to be learning about ancestral traditions that their parents had not shared with them. (And this could get sticky sometimes too! I remember one summer during the Iran-Iraq war teaching the Islam part of the World Religions course to a class that included a large number of Muslim students, about half Sunni and half Shia – and wondering if I was going to get out of there alive!)

During the 1970s and the 1980s, the department continued to grow – and the newer faculty were more research-oriented, more involved with the AAR, very much in touch with all the new things happening in the field of RS elsewhere – and they included women!

So our curriculum changed along the way, and how we understood and taught the already-established courses also changed, as did our pedagogy. We
were beginning (some of us more than others) to move beyond a focus on texts, beginning to pay more attention to ritual, including domestic rituals, to the diversity within religions, to the syncretism that is so much a part of religion-as—lived. We were beginning to pay more attention to indigenous traditions, beginning to take more interest in the rich diversity of the ways religion was being lived right here in our own city, in San Diego.

I think we were also beginning to be aware of the importance of being conscious of our own standpoint & willing to articulate it — how it both limits and enriches what we can see about the religious experience of others, how adopting an academic secular approach to the study of religion and religions is NOT the “objective” Archimedean standpoint we might once have taken it to be. We were beginning to be aware of the western assumptions we brought to our teaching — and how “religion” itself is more a scholarly construct, than a universal category. We were beginning to reflect on the complexities of Insider and Outsider — and even on how inadequate this binary actually is. Though I would also say all this was happening in a fairly muted way.

So although the 1970s and 1980s weren’t exciting years, they were good years - consolidating years. (And for me personally they were the years during which I wrote what I think of as my most important books, beginning with THE GODDESSS – books that, more than I quite realized at the time, represented a real innovation in how their interweaving of personal and scholarly material.)

AND THEN AGAIN IN 1992: DISASTER

Another budget crunch, one that this time led the then President of SDSU to decide that in order to cut the his budget to the degree demanded by the Chancellor, he would completely eliminate some departments--including (as I imagine all of you know) OUR department, SDSU’s Religious Studies Department.

So, from having been at one time (in my mind at least) at the very heart of the university, religious studies was now being viewed as fully expendable!

As you all know, this ended up not quite happening. Briefly, the possibility of merging us with the philosophy department was put forward: I had to explain that religious studies by now was more closely allied with anthropology than with philosophy! But when three of us faculty over 60 were persuaded to retire, the department itself was saved
And slowly rebuilt. It took seven years before a new tenure-track faculty member was brought into the department. Slowly, but solidly, beautifully.

I have not been part of that, since I was among those more or less forced out. Though this turned out not to mark the end of my academic career, it did mark the end of my religious studies teaching. Yet thanks to Alan Sparks & Linda Holler, I was invited to come back every spring from 1995 to 2004 to give an annual lecture and so I did have the opportunity to keep in touch with what was going in the department.

THE PRESENT

And now another 10 years have passed – a full 40 now from when I first came to SDSU in 1974! I am not really in the field anymore. I don’t even go to AAR anymore. In a sense I’ve become an OUTSIDER to a field I helped SHAPE. (Though I do still teach some of the same material I taught when I was here – but from a mythological studies rather than a religious studies perspective, and that, I have learned, is a big difference.)

So to get a sense of what is going on now in the RS department here at SDSU I have had to look at the catalogue. I regret now that I didn’t ask Rebecca Moore or Risa more questions, since catalogues aren’t necessarily the best indicators of how an academic program is really functioning. For instance, I became aware as I was putting this talk together that I don’t even know how well the department is doing in terms of how many majors it currently has.

But I did look at the catalogue with some care and was somewhat surprised by how much emphasis there still seems to be on the three monotheisms and at least as the catalog describes these in still very text-based and seemingly insular ways. I read on and then was enormously pleased to discover a course on the “Abrahamic Faiths” that explores the rich interactions between these three traditions. Soon I came across a somewhat parallel course that brought together study of the several “Religions of India” and then another on “Religions of East Asia” that explores the complex relations among Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. These courses suggested an alignment with my conviction that what makes being in this field so exciting today is the ever-growing recognition of mutual influences – long ago and still today – and of how syncretism characterizes so much lived religious experience.

I was also delighted to see lots of those “religion and” courses so much of my own teaching has always focused on religion & psychology, religion & the
sciences, religion & film, religion and hip! hop! (!) - and also impressed by the inclusion of courses on myth on ritual, on death & dying, on violence, on goddesses, on black religions, on atheism.

All very *au courant*, current, timely--and suggesting more recognition of the importance of INTERDISCIPLINARY approaches to RS than was true when I was here. It’s so clear that teaching RS today requires our integrating what’s going on in anthropology, sociology, history, literature, popular culture, even neuroscience.

I was surprised also, however, by some omissions: No ethics! Nothing specifically focused on religion & society or religion & politics. No religion and art or religion and literature! Yet I well understand that what gets included in a curriculum at any given point is largely shaped by the backgrounds and interests of the current faculty. I also remember how dismayed we were, in that way back then time, when on two separate occasions official outside reviewers of our program would make suggestions about what we should be doing that were far, far from our own vision.

**SO: THIS IS THE HISTORY - OR A VERSION OF THE HISTORY, MY VERSION OF THE HISTORY**

WHAT DOES IT SUGGEST ABOUT THE FUTURE?

I will be very tentative here. I don’t think there’s a clear trajectory. I think much will depend on what happens in the culture at large – in the academic world, in the United States, in the world.

But I’m more persuaded than ever of the IMPORTANCE and VITALITY of Religious Studies. I’m aware of the excitement in the sub-fields I continue to more or less keep up with. In Biblical Studies, for example, there is a growing recognition of the enormous impact of interaction with the Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Greek worlds, there are furious debates (about things that seemed so settled 50 years ago) about when monotheism really began, about how much of the biblical history is fictive, about when the canonical texts were put together. The field is ALIVE right now in such an exciting way! And this is true across the board.

I believe that we now live in a global world in a sense never as true before – which makes the importance of being able to enter, imaginally and empathically, into the worldviews, the lived experience, the most deeply held convictions, of
others even more imperative than ever before.

I look at the newspaper each day and I am reminded over & over again what a hot topic religion still is. And how resurgent (in ways that amaze and actually frightens me) fundamentalist literalism seems to be: here in our country, in India, in Islam, almost everywhere. I think of, the extraordinary polarization here in America over issues like abortion, contraception, and gay marriage – and how these get framed as religious issues. I think of the enormous uproar in India over Wendy Doniger’s new book, The Hindus: An Alternative History. I think of the conflicts between Islam and the West that reach right into Europe itself, for instance in the headscarf controversy in France.

Indeed, in some ways, it seems to me the question ‘HOW TO TEACH ISLAM, ” may be the question that makes most visible all the problematic elements involved in teaching in our field today. It brings to the fore all the Big Questions about insider/outsider, Orientalism, the historicity of traditional narratives, diversity within a tradition, the relevance of sociopolitical contexts, relationships to other religious traditions, the salience of gender – on and on. It was an issue during all the time I was at SDSU and is one where I teach now. It may be at rest here for now – but I believe it remains a very sensitive, a very tender, issue.

As I look toward the future, another thing that I imagine will happen is that we’ll be teaching and learning in different ways. Many of which those more tech-savvy than I might be better able to envision. But even I can see how access to the web can enable both faculty and students to more directly access how religion is actually being lived today by ordinary people in almost any part of the world we might be interested in. Our students may well be ahead of us here. I believe that their confident engagement with the internet, with the creative learning it encourages, will mean we faculty are going to have to learn once again to respond to student innovation--I would hope with grace, appreciation, excitement.

Oh, and of course, I have FEARS, too – about the ever-increasing emphasis on “accountability,” the ever-shrinking resources devoted to the humanities. This list too could go & on.

BUT, YOU KNOW, THIS ISN’T REALLY WHAT I WANT TO SAY ABOUT THE FUTURE

It’s details — and there’s nothing wrong with this kind of speculation – about what we imagine may happen, about what we hope or fear can happen --but
what I really want to say is much simpler.

What the future most asks of us, is I believe, that we remember how important what we teach and study is – and that we teach and study in a way that communicates and honors that importance.

In a sense I think I’m calling us back to where my students were in the 1960s, to their recognition that the questions we are addressing in RS are the Big Questions – about meaning and purpose, about our relationships with one another and with the natural world.

Jonathan Z. Smith once said that what we’re really called to teach is not so much religions as religion. By which he did not mean that our aim is to make our students more religious, but rather to help them appreciate the depth of the questions that religion asks and offers putative answers to, to introduce them to the images, stories, & rituals humans have so variously created to express these questions & to put forward responses. That is, to appreciate the role religion has played and plays.

Those of you who know me well will know I couldn’t possibly lecture for an hour and not somehow bring in Freud! So here he comes! Freud, I want to say, is right: the oldest and most urgent human longings are those that religion has sought to respond to - and those longings are still the most urgent.

So for me this is not a LINEAR story – it's not a progress story – but it’s not a failure story either. It’s a circumambulating one. Recognizing that led me to return to my 1974 AAR Presidential Address (the year, remember, of my arrival at SDSU) that I began by inviting my listeners to try to return imaginally to those urgencies that had pulled them (and me) to religious studies in our own “once upon a time.”

We KNEW then how important teaching this, studying it, was.

We need to remember that it still is!