

Fathoming Religion Studies: Treading on the spider's web

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■ Introduction

For Wiebe (2005:98), the term Religious Studies⁴⁸ is so ambiguous that he is unsure whether it is responsible to talk about a separate discipline going by this name at a university. For him, the question is about the difference between the academic study of religions and the study of religions at any other institution of education? It is merely by consensus that the name of the endeavour to study religions academically has ended up as Religious Studies. It is according to Wiebe (2005:98) impossible to define Religious Studies.

48. Scholars alternate between Religion Studies and Religious Studies. I here prefer Religion Studies. When I use Religious Studies in this chapter, it reflects the position of the particular scholar who is cited. In this case, Wiebe prefers Religious Studies.

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What follows here is not an attempt at doing the impossible but rather an attempt at providing a context within which Religion Studies can be located and function.

The premise for the discussion that follows is that religion is part of human fibre. To have a religious inclination is part of being human. It does not imply that all humans are religious. It merely assumes the potential that all humans have to act religiously should they wish to. Stated differently, it assumes that the human brain can acquire religion (cf. Boyer 2001:4). Secondly, the assumption is that religion is not only an isolated element coconstituting with other elements the human functionality. Religion is interconnected to all aspects related to human behaviour. One consequence of this assumption is that it is not easy to define religion as an entity easily separable from other aspects of existence. Smith (1991:53) indicates how many cultures do not have a word to indicate what we today denote as 'religion'. This implies that some cultures hold a close connection to what we refer to as religion and ordinary existence to the extent that it is impossible to separate the different spheres of existence.

This does not imply that the human functionality can be divided into many separate, loosely connected spheres as Western anthropology attempts to do. Human functionality does not consist of the sum of religious, physical, emotional, rational, economical, innovative, creative, reflective and other spheres. The human condition is that of interrelatedness of all of these spheres. Engaging with religion is like treading on a spider's web: Many related issues pick up the vibrations of the engagement. This chapter attempts to create awareness of the interrelatedness as well as to suggest an approach of acknowledging the width as well as the depth of Religion Studies. In this regard, the concept of conditionality as introduced by Kobus Krüger is helpful.

Studying the breadth of Religion Studies emphasises the reach and connections that religion has. The vast terrain of multiple connections spanning human existence is like the individual

strands of a spider's web. Religion has to do with education, law, human sciences, economy, ecology, theology and many other fields. This has implications for the way in which Religion Studies functions at a tertiary institution of learning.

I do not consider only the breadth of Religion Studies. The depth of Religion Studies is equally important. The depth of study refers to the quality, intensity and details of studying different religions. To what extent can other religions be studied and can remarks be made before it becomes biased. The point of departure in this research is that religions can be studied conditionally.

Just like treading on a spider's web can be a perilous activity, so studying religion has pitfalls of which to be aware of. Three pitfalls are identified here:

1. ***The part can easily be mistaken for the whole:*** Studying religion can easily mislead the researcher into thinking that the religion at hand is the only true religion. Smith (1991:41) refers here to the 'reification' of religion. Religion is studied as a *res*, an object to be analysed. The connections and relations of religion are then ignored. Religions should be studied within their contexts. Each and every religion carries its own truth and validity. In this regard, Smith's (2000:35) distinction between first and second-order classification is helpful. Religion as first-order classification is the name given to the associated religious-type activities in which people engage. Religion as a second-order classification refers to the concept itself as a generic description of all these activities put together. When discussing religion, this distinction should be kept in mind. Smith (1991:1-3) differentiates ways in which the term religion can be used. When talking about religion, we need to make clear what we are talking about. For instance, are we talking about one specific religion or about the concept of religion as such?
2. ***The researcher can be insensitive:*** A second pitfall may be that, when studying religion, researchers can easily end up being insensitive to what effect their words or actions may have on adherents of other religions. In line with the metaphor, a word of warning to tread lightly would be appropriate.

3. *When everything is religion, nothing is religion:* The multiple relationships in which religion stands can easily be confused with religion itself. Religion does not possess the mythical Midas touch. Everything that is touched by religion does not become religion. The autonomy of the different disciplines with which religion is connected must be maintained. The disciplines then interconnect without giving up their own identity. In the same way, the scholar of religion does not become a quasi-sociologist or quasi-artist by studying the relationship between religion and sociology or art.

The end goal of the study of religion is neither the cognitive awareness of the existence of different religions nor the emotive realisation of the existence of a greater concern for all humankind. Rather, the aim is to envision how religion can contribute to social cohesion and peaceful coexistence, irrespective of the religion to which people belong. In this regard, Smith's (1991) suggestion of an alternative concept to religion is an important principle throughout this argument. This goal is especially relevant to Religion Studies located at a university in SA where minds are formed to enable human beings to contribute responsibly to the well-being of all in human society.

In order to achieve this goal, it will be important to identify the connections religion has. Being aware of the interrelatedness of religion creates awareness of the role that religion plays in society. This opens up new fields of investigation. Scholarly research into the connections that religion has is important to fathom the reach of religion. For this task, Religion Studies must prepare itself.

■ **Related terminology**

□ **Religion or religious studies?**

The traditional way of referring to the study of religions is Religious Studies (cf. the concise description of the origin of the name in Beyers 2016a:2). The discipline Science of Religion

was introduced during the 20th century. It is mostly used in the English-speaking world, especially North America. The word 'science' is considered to have too much baggage to be used indiscriminately for a discipline of scholarship. Therefore, the term Science of Religion has been substituted by 'Religious Studies'. Gradually, a state of affairs developed where the discipline Science of Religion came to exist in parallel with Religious Studies.

The term Religion Studies is a recent addition to the plethora of names used for the discipline. Religion Studies is mostly used to refer to the study of religion from an educational perspective. The difference between Religious Studies and Religion Studies can be explained based on a semantic argument. 'Religious' in Religious Studies is an adverbial description of the nature of the study undertaken, emphasising the manner in which the study will be conducted. This can easily lead to the perception that a biased understanding will be the result. With Religion Studies, religion is used as a noun indicating the object to be studied, emphasising the object to be studied without the suspicion of any bias. Wiebe (2005:99) indicates how the terms Religion or Religious Studies were used interchangeably in the history of the development of the discipline. In this contribution, the signifier Religion Studies will be used.

For Wiebe (2005:99), it is important to note that Religion Studies assumes a position of investigating religion as a social phenomenon, shedding the theological cloak regarding which some might question the study of religion at a university. The purpose of Religion Studies is to reach an academic and critical understanding of religious traditions without creating the perception of nurturing faith. Studying religion at the UP is done from a nonconfessional and unbiased position. Religion Studies at the UP is, in line with the description by Wiebe (2005:99), not a faith-based study of religion as theology and religion education would attempt. There is no instruction in religion but only teaching about religion (Wiebe 2005:100). Without

the confessionally bound position associated with seminaries, the scope of studying religion academically is opened up to include a wide variety of possible approaches and connections. It is in this context that Wiebe's comment (2005:98) about the impossibility to define Religion Studies as an academic discipline must be seen. Regarding this, Benson's (1987:92) description is valuable. He describes the connectedness of Religion Studies as '... disciplines gathered around the complex phenomenon of religious belief and practice'. As indicated above, the concept of conditionality is helpful in describing this multiple connectedness of Religion Studies.

□ **Conditionality**

With conditionality, Krüger (1995:101) refers to the interwovenness of religious traditions in the past. This historic connection opens up the possibility of dialogue between religions in future. Based on commonality in the past, religious divergences to enrich one another the moment they interact. This does, however, not imply a greater common metareligion acting as a common ancestor to all existing religions. Religions as belief systems do not necessarily share a common historic denominator. The concept of familiar traits uniting religions into different families (see Smart 1986:46) is not necessarily ignored. In contrast, religiosity may suggest common notions instilled in human spiritual awareness. What then is connected? Is it humans, the adherents of religions that are connected? Is it the common interest of human beings in something greater, or is it the different notions of transcendence that are connected?

Krüger (1995:102) indicates that conditionality implies the unifying interest among human beings in becoming free. This freedom, according to Krüger, implies being free from the oppressive and manipulative social system characterised by causality and determinism. Under such conditions, humans are pretexted as to what gives meaning to humanity. Meaning is in fact derived from critical engagement with the metaphysical (Krüger 1995:103).

In this way, traditional religious systems can be restrictive in providing meaning to human existence. As these systems originated in a particular context (in the past), meaning has faded away over time with only the system remaining, prescribing to adherents different means to find meaning in life.

Based on Krüger's theory of conditionality, this study departs from the assumption that reality must be viewed holistically. Knowledge does not originate and exist in a vacuum. When studying religions, the context and interrelatedness of all things cannot be ignored. This implies that a particular choice is made in order to understand reality. Reality is connected.

□ The relationship between theology and religion studies

In comprehending Religious Studies,⁴⁹ Whaling (2001:229) indicates the extent and reach of Religious Studies. Five traditions can be identified. Religion Studies is concerned with all the world religions, which include the major world religions but also the minor traditions as well as the 'dead' traditions that no longer exist. Whaling also includes the primal religions as well as the new religious movements. There is also an argument to make, of which Smart (1991:16) is an exponent, to include in the scope of Religious Studies the world of no religion, namely secularism and ideologies (i.e. Marxism, capitalism, etc.).

Christianity is one of the traditions included in the scope of Religion Studies. The understanding of the existence of and the relationship between Christianity and other religions falls within the field of theological consideration. As Religion Studies at the UP is located within the FT and Religion, special attention to the relationship between Theology and Religion Studies is required here.

49. Whaling prefers Religious Studies.

As the relationship between Religion Studies and Theology has been discussed elsewhere, I make only brief references here (compare Beyers 2016a). Religion Studies is hosted at the UP in the Faculty of Theology and Religion. What are the implications of the connection between Theology and Religion Studies? For Ford (2005:91), the task of Theology is to train people for a specific profession. The task of Theology at a university is to provide the professional labour force that society needs. As Theology is concerned with religion, students need to be educated to cope with the quite often pluralistic religious nature of society. South African society is no exception. Religion Studies assists Theology in order to prepare students for operating within the field of religion.

Braun (2000:7) describes the differences between Theology and Religion Studies by identifying two extremes. Here, the difference between the insider and outsider perspectives (emic and etic) comes into play. The outsider studying religions has a descriptive approach while the insider may tend to explain rather than just describe. For Braun, Theology takes on an explanatory role while Religion Studies tends to be descriptive only. The result is that Religion Studies ends up with almost all of reality within its scope (Braun 2000:7). To this, I come back later.

It seems that the same thing that separates Religion Studies from Theology in fact becomes the element that binds the two together. Religion Studies investigates human expressions of encounters with that which is considered of higher value. The human actions are important. Smith (1991:19) contends that religious humans are concerned with God and that the observer to the encounters is concerned with religion. The accusation can indeed be made that Religion Studies makes religion devoid of all gods and only emphasises human actions, as Friedrich Heiler claims (see Pannenberg 1973:366). The result would be that Religion Studies is indeed viewed as a humanistic science. Religion Studies, however, never negates the existence of that which is considered of higher value. This would be against the nature of Religion Studies to make judgmental statements about religions.

Both Religion Studies and Theology are concerned with that which is considered of higher value. Theology focuses on the transcendental and Religion Studies focuses on the human response to the awareness of the existence of what is considered of higher value. This corresponds to Theo Sundermeier's (1999:17) definition for religion.

Religion Studies is not interested in judging whether religions are true or not. Ninian Smart (in Connolly 2001:xii) confirms the descriptive nature of Religion Studies. Theology might be interested in the question of truth. To Religion Studies, all expressions of religious encounters are true and valid and are not to be evaluated and judged. In this sense, Religion Studies retains its descriptive function.

Based on the differences mentioned above, it seems that Theology and Religion Studies are indeed not a good fit. Christianity is one religion among many, especially so in the multireligious environment of SA. In Africa, Christianity still carries the label of the religion of the colonial oppressor which causes suspicion about what Christianity wants to say about other religions. The link between TRS can easily be viewed as an attempt at getting to know other religions only in order to prey on their weaknesses and convert their adherents. This would imply a hierarchical social structure where other religions are viewed as inferior to Christianity. Civilisation is then equated to being Christian. These misperceptions need to be rectified. Through a process of decolonisation, the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions in Africa needs to be redefined. Religion Studies can play a vital role in this regard. By presenting knowledge about the other, Religion Studies breaks down borders between religions and create an awareness of a shared interest in and shared obligation to take up responsibility for social wellbeing.

Theology is no longer indigenous to Christianity (Olson 2011:13). Theology is increasingly perceived to be part of the academic activity in various religious traditions. Many religions

contemplate the existence of the transcendental and the human relationship to the transcendental. It would then be possible to have Jewish theologians converse with Muslim theologians and even Hindu, Buddhist and Christian theologians. Part of the changes in the social structure of postcolonial SA is a religious freedom guaranteed by a democratic constitution that permits freedom of affiliation and freedom of expression. This new freedom indeed encourages scholars to discuss and express freely the different ways of perceiving the transcendental.

Of course, it has to be acknowledged that Religion Studies originated from a theological background (Chitando 2008:106). Breaking the stronghold of Theology on Religion Studies is part of an ongoing postcolonial process. Chitando (2008:107) reminds us of the efforts that have been made at institutions of higher education in Africa since 1960 to replace the academic discipline of Theology with Religious Studies as a conscious effort to break with Western academic dominance. When Religion Studies is located at a Faculty of Theology and Religion, some suspicion might still linger, but in the long run, the positive interaction between Theology and Religion Studies will prove to be fruitful to both.

The scepticism concerning the relationship between Theology and Religion Studies to which Chitando (2008:107) refers might be waning. Africa has fully embraced Christianity. In fact, Christianity in Africa is growing. Theologians abound in Africa. There has indeed been progress in terms of discussing the relationship between Christianity and other religions in Africa. Christianity is not the only religion in Africa. The relationship that Christianity has had with Islam and Traditional African Religion has been in the academic spotlight for some time. The postcolonial endeavour has made some progress in this regard. The emergence of New Religious Movements and the syncretistic formation of subjective and elective expressions of spirituality still need attention. Theology and Religion Studies can in this regard play an important academic role in studying these new religious expressions.

In conclusion to this section, it must be reiterated that, in a multireligious environment like SA, a growing awareness of religiosity requires knowledge of religions. Growing amounts of religiously motivated conflict and violence intensifies the need for knowledge on religions. In SA, the case is no different. Chitando (2008:118) indicates how the fact that students in SA in particular have been exposed to religious education from an early age in missionary schools or churches in local communities has contributed to the increasing interest in religion. This growing interest in religion is confirmed by the growing number of students registering for courses presented on religion at the UP. Olson (2011:13) indicates that this growing interest in Religion Studies is a world-wide phenomenon due to the fact that students no longer want to study Christianity in isolation. Connolly (2001:1) confirms this tendency of increasing interest in studying religion.

The growth in interest in religion is not only reactionary. It is not only the need to comprehend the reasons for religiously motivated violence that drive the study of religion. There is also a proactive tendency. Religions together realise that, in order to bring about transformation in society, to establish social justice and to alleviate poverty, religions need to take hands and cooperatively bring about change responsibly. In this sense, there is also the positive motivation for religions to understand one another.

■ What is religion?

The easy answer would be to state that Religion Studies is concerned with studying religion. This, however, begs the question as to what religion is? It remains extremely difficult to define religion (Smith 1991:17). To this, Braun (2000:4) and Schilderman (2014:176) concede. For Smith, the inadequate existing multitude of definitions for 'religion' is an indication that the term should be discarded as it has become unusable. It is not the purpose of this discussion to attempt addressing the problem of defining religion.

This has been dealt with elsewhere (cf. Beyers 2010:2). Cox (2010:3-7) suggests that studying the groups of definitions has more value than studying the definitions themselves.

Smith's (1991) explanation of how religion ought to be viewed is a valuable indicator for how to treat Religion Studies. Understanding religion is never an unbiased endeavour. The culture of the researcher always plays a role. Culture contributes to the spectacles through which religion is viewed (Smith 1991:18). For too long, Smith argues (1991:52), has Western understanding determined the way in which religion is perceived, what can be deemed religious as well as the relationships between Religion Studies and other disciplines. Western thought has produced names for the world religions. The way of studying religions is the result of the Western scholarly processes.

A Western understanding of what constitutes religion caused scholars to divide the world into religious (i.e. everything resembling Western and European traditions and culture) as opposed to no-religion (i.e. everything non-Western) parts. Alongside this process, the Enlightenment developed the notion that knowledge resides only in facts. Facts can only be studied empirically. A study of the transcendental is therefore redundant since the transcendental proved to be inaccessible to empirical scrutiny. In contrast, human reaction and responses to the transcendental can be studied empirically.

Smith (1991:53 fn. 2) suggests that, instead of referring to religion, it is more appropriate to talk about 'cumulative traditions'. Traditions have contexts and history. The concept of religion tends to call to mind a structured system of beliefs. This includes the understanding of faith. There are more words to refer to these phenomena that Western minds have provided with names over time (Smith 1991:52). Smith suggests piety, reverence, faith, devotion, God-fearing. These terms do not necessarily call to mind an organised system.

The value of Smith's suggestion lies in the fact that the context of Religion Studies at the UP. is ambivalent.

A concept that has a Western bias such as religion is studied at an educational institution with a Western history within a continent that is everything but Western. Africa can be many things to many people but being exclusively Western is not one of them – or this is no longer the only way of thinking about Africa. In an era of postcolonialism, it is necessary to think anew about studying traditional concepts.

After carefully indicating that the concept of religion is in fact a concept originating from a Western (modern) stance of naming and analysing the human environment and behaviour, Smith comes up with a solution as to the problem of transposing the (Western) concept of religion onto world religions. His (Smith 1991:50) suggestion is to discard the term religion altogether. His argument maintains that the term religion is misleading, confusing and unnecessary. The term religion hampers the understanding of people's faith and traditions. This hampering is caused by our attempt to conceptualise faith and traditions into what we refer to as religion. As indicated earlier, Smith recommends the terms piety, tradition, faith and religiosity in the place of religion. Wiredu (1998:32) argues that (an) African understanding(s) of religion differs from (a) Western understanding(s) of reality. Laws applied to activities in the physical world in Western understanding do not exclude activities ascribed to spiritual activities in an African understanding.

The problem is, however, that, by discarding the concept of religion, the discipline of Religion Studies loses focus as to what ought to be studied. Religion Studies is neither anthropology nor Theology. Where anthropology focuses on studying human behaviour in all its forms from a purely humanistic point of view, Religion Studies concentrates on the spiritual behaviour of humans without studying the transcendence to which human spiritual attention is directed as Theology would attempt. Religion Studies studies the congealed traditions that communities inherited and apply to their own current needs. The separate belief systems and their relationships are still within the scope of Religion Studies. Smith's suggestion can be employed as a method of studying the

belief systems (or religions) of the world. The value of Smith's analysis lies in making scholars aware that studying a religion is not complete without taking note of the religiosity or cumulative tradition lying at the foundation of the religious expressions. In this way, Religion Studies at the UP. still studies religion but now, following Smith's notion, also takes heed of the religiosity underlying religious expressions.

The way in which Smith presents the object of study as cumulative traditions, piety or religiosity is important in an African context. Since the concept 'religion' has convincingly been proven by Smith to have a Western origin, it by default does not apply to what we want to study in an African context. Smith's suggestion for alternatives to religion is relevant to Religion Studies in Southern Africa.

Smith's analysis seems to be a new formulation of phenomenology as already suggested by Husserl. Husserl's understands that studying religion means that the assumptions of the researcher are put in brackets, referred to as *epoche* (cf. Krüger 1982:17-18), and that the researcher sees the phenomena as they present themselves. The researcher also asks what lies beneath that what the senses permit the researcher to engage with, referred to as intentionality (cf. Krüger 1982:17). These views of Husserl lead to not only studying religion but also religiosity, faith, piety and traditions. Studying and defining religion is determined by the specific approach (either sociology, psychology, philosophy or theology (cf. in this regard Cox 2010:3-7).

The discussion on what constitutes religion inevitably leads to the question on how to study religion, in particular in Africa. Surely, exchanging existing terminology with new semantic modified alternatives will not suffice.

■ How to study religion?

It is important to differentiate between approaches, theories and methods. An approach would indicate the broader field within

which the object of study is placed. Braun (2016:1) understands under 'approach' a specific disciplinary position (i.e. history, linguistic, sociology, psychology, anthropology or theology). Connolly (2001) extends this list by including several other more possible approaches (i.e. feminist and phenomenological approaches). An approach would be the lens through which a researcher views the topic at hand. A theory of religion is required in order to study religion. The theory becomes the matrix or background against which the research is placed. The theory represents the understanding of the researcher as to what constitutes religion or history or the social role of religion and how it functions. Braun (2016:1) believes that Religion Studies has become theory-orientated due to the fact that there are so many definitions and methods of studying religion.

As to methods employed, studying religion would refer to a particular way of gathering and disseminating information. Olson (2011:13) indicates that there are a huge number of different methods to be applied in Religion Studies. In this regard, the research done by Stausberg and Engler (2011) and Chryssides and Greaves (2007) on the multitude of methods and approaches in Religion Studies is very helpful. As to what method to apply, two principles identified by Creswell (2015:48) are important. The topic to be investigated dictates the method to be utilised. The skills of the researcher also determine the method to be used. When studying religion, it is religion that determines the methods. At times, a combination of methods may be the best option. In this regard, Connolly (2001:8) recommends scholars of religion to simultaneously be 'specialists' and 'generalists'. One single method (the specialist way) is inadequate in investigating religious elements to their fullest. Therefore, whether studying a single element or a combination of elements, it would be advisable to utilise multiple methods (being a generalist).

The approaches, theories and methods to studying religion can vary. The task of Religion Studies is, however, never to present only historical, chronological facts but in fact to create a model for understanding the processes leading to the development of

religions and their connections to other religions. An understanding of what constitutes religion is necessary in order to understand how religions relate. A method remains a tool in order to unveil knowledge. A method can become a means in itself and distract the researcher from investigating material unbiased.

In discussing approaches to studying religion, Connolly (2001:2) states that, within different approaches, a variety of perspectives can be embedded. All approaches (naturally this does not apply to the theological approach) are outsider approaches (Connolly 2001:2). This reveals something of the approach of researchers within Religion Studies. Researchers are rarely religiously committed to a religion under scrutiny. In this regard, the different models that Smart (1986:208–209) identifies are relevant regarding the religious affiliation of the researcher. It remains important that any research be accessible to religiously as well as non-religiously orientated researchers.

In discussing approaches to studying religion, Connolly (2001:4) uses the image of a map. Approaches are like maps in the sense that they try and identify the territory, in this case, of religion. Maps have limitations in the sense that they can (speculatively) try and explain uncharted territory and even be conflicting in terms of identifying the boundaries of religion. The bottom line that Connolly (2001:4) makes, and this corresponds to Krüger's theory of conditionality, is that it is difficult to indicate where the study of religion begins and where it ends.

What is, however, helpful is to identify ways in which religion manifests in human existence. In this regard, Ninian Smart's suggestion (1991:6–12) is helpful in identifying seven areas where traces of religion can be experienced: mythical (narrative), ritual, social, ethical, doctrinal, experiential and material.

It is not the purpose here to present an exhaustive list and analysis of methods to be utilised in Religion Studies. It is, however, important to emphasise the fact of multiple methods and the fact that the material at hand should determine the methods to be utilised.

■ Entering the spider's web

When Connolly (2001:2) refers to the different perspectives embedded in the various approaches, the image of a spider's web comes to mind. As has been mentioned in a previous section, religion can be viewed from different perspectives. Also important is to remind ourselves of conditionality. Religion as human behaviour does not function in isolation. Close connections with other elements exist naturally. In this section, I discuss the different relationships in which religion stands, not as a complete analysis but merely as a brief overview of the range of possible relationships. Indeed, knowledge does not originate or exist in isolation.

Religion Studies does not intend teaching in religion but teaching about religions (cf. Wiebe 2005:101). This teaching is, however, not only focussed on conveying empirical and theoretical knowledge about religion. According to Wiebe (2005:101), the tendency worldwide is that Religion Studies introduces students to engagement with basic human social issues such as freedom, meaning, ethics, love, death and justice. In the case of Religion Studies at the UP, a conscious attempt is made to contribute to social cohesion through conveying understanding of the religious other. Not only knowledge of other religions is encapsulated in the curriculum, but the result of and response to the existence of such knowledge becomes the invisible curriculum.

I now proceed to illustrate how religion in its interrelatedness to other elements functions like a spider's web. I take a look at religion from the perspective of the main approaches, namely anthropological, philosophical and sociological (including education, law and politics). In each case, the different perspectives associated with the approach will be highlighted. Connections to other fields of interest, which does not necessarily represent an approach to studying religion, will also be mentioned.

□ Anthropological approaches

When identifying the anthropological approaches to studying religion, Gellner (2001:29, 37) indicates that ethnography and cultural studies are perspectives from which religions can be studied. Religion is part of human behaviour and culture (cf. Beyers 2017 for an analysis of the connection between studying religion and culture). If religion is seen as a segment of culture, studying religion is an anthropological and ethnographic exercise (Gellner 2001:1). Religion does have a social role in society. In each society, these roles differ. What is important about the place and function of religion in society is, as Gellner (2001:22) indicates, that anthropology requires a holistic approach. Social activities, like religious activities, must be investigated within the social context within which they operate. Religion is connected to other aspects of society and this interrelatedness (read 'spider's web') needs to be recognised. Gellner (2001:22) points out that, when religion is studied from an anthropological approach, it must be viewed together with, for example, agriculture, politics, magic and medicine. These aspects do not necessarily support one another but can in fact oppose one another. Thus, medicine in society can be the result of scientific research and experimentation while religion in the same society would prescribe magical potions in order to arrive at healing, thus presenting an alternative to medicine.

The task of the anthropologist is to interpret events, actions and words in a society. The source to be interpreted is accessible through empirical analysis. The task of anthropology does not, however, stop with recording these empirical data but continues to the interpretation of such data (Gellner 2001:29). This is especially helpful in investigating rituals with religious meaning in societies. The phenomenological approach dovetails here with the anthropological approach as phenomenology (which in essence has a philosophical foundation) is indeed interested in the way things present themselves. The meaning attached to the phenomena is just as important as a description of the phenomenon.

Erricker (2001:73) discusses phenomenology as approach when studying religion. Phenomenology is interested in how things present themselves and how this should be understood.

Religion Studies at the UP has a proud tradition of phenomenology. Through comparative investigation, different phenomena of various religions have been analysed and discussed. Since it is a university in Africa, the tendency is to focus on Traditional African Religion and its phenomena as present in society. With a strong connection to Theology at the UP Religion Studies also tends to conduct research from a theological approach, investigating phenomena in light of biblical insight.

□ Philosophical approaches

In the history of the discipline of Science of Religion, there was a stage when the discipline was referred to as Philosophy of Religion. This is indicative of a period during which reflection on the phenomenon of religion played an important role. Shortly after the Second World War, the exposure that Europeans had had to cultures and religions from all over the world led to a serious reflection on what others believe and why (cf. Wiebe 2005:98). This was not only an interest in the content of other religions but also a (philosophical) question as to their origin and nature.

In introducing the philosophical approach to studying religion, Fisher (2001:118) identifies the following branches of a philosophical approach, namely logic, epistemology, ethics and metaphysics. With logic, Fisher refers to the thought process of arranging arguments coherently and testing the argumentation as to proving a premise. This approach is not meant to be a personal attack on any adherent of religion but only analysing statements made by adherents of various religions.

Metaphysics is the philosophical concern with reality. Fisher (2001:120) describes the typical questions that metaphysics asks as follows: Do I exist? What makes me me? What will happen to

me when I die? The questions directly related to religion explore the existence of God and the harmony of the cosmos, the origin of life, et cetera. Some adherents of religions experience this kind of interrogation as disrespectful to their integrity and therefore blasphemous. Sensitivity is necessary when disseminating the results of investigating religions.

The third branch is epistemology. This branch of philosophy is interested in the manner in which we come to have knowledge. Important is to keep in mind is that, as pointed out earlier here, knowledge does not exist in a vacuum. Knowledge originates and exists within a context (Fisher 2001:120). Knowledge grows organically as people remember and build on the knowledge of previous members of society. This confirms what Smith (1991:53) refers to as 'cumulative tradition'. Knowledge is accumulated and simultaneously discarded as answers are no longer possible within a particular paradigm, necessitating a new paradigm. The result is that there is no final answer to questions. Answers apply to specific contexts. When studying religion, the knowledge that we gain does not relate to the beliefs that people have. Knowledge is of a different nature than belief. Knowledge can be true or false whereas belief cannot be judged with the same measure.

The fourth branch that Fisher (2001:121) identifies is ethics. This relates to values by which people conduct themselves and go about performing their duties. Applied to religion, ethics is the rules by which people conduct their religious life. This must, however, be qualified as religious life is not to be distinguished from life in general. Ethics in the study of religion also relates to the manner in which the researcher engages with adherents from religions. There is an acceptable way of ethical research. Ethics as a religious element can also be applied to studying phenomena in society. The way human rights are applied within a community is based on religious convictions. The way in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning members of society are treated is based on religious ethics. The treatment of the ecology is based on religious convictions. The way in which legislation addresses social matters such as abortion, euthanasia and

poverty is influenced by religious ethics. Ethics is an important element in the study of religions.

□ Sociological approaches

Religion is part of human social behaviour. The Durkheimian premise ([1912] 2001:315) of the social function of religion cannot be ignored. When studying religion, the visible traces of religion within social structures and behaviour come into play. Northcott (2001:193) introduces sociological approaches to studying religion. Studying religion may lead to insight into the relationship and reciprocal influence between religion and social structures, ideologies, culture, class and group interactions.

For Northcott (2001:201) there are four social categories where religion interacts with society:

- social stratification (class, ethnicity)
- bio-social categories (sex, gender, marriage family, childhood, ageing)
- patterns of social organisation (politics, economics)
- social processes such as boundary formation (globalisation, intergroup, interpersonal).

As a fifth category, I would like to add secularisation as social process in which the decline and consequent influence of religion in society is studied.

In all of the categories identified and mentioned above by Northcott, the underlying principle is power. Religion does become a facilitator to power in society. Through religiously based principles, power is exerted on society, either through social stratification, separating classes and ethnic groups or demarcating the social roles of individuals such as the aged, women, children, sick and the poor. Religion can even play a part in political structures. Where a theocracy is perceived to be the best way of governing society, religious principles determine the manner in which a society is governed. Religious structures and political government structures then overlap. As to the influence of religion

on the economy, Weber's (1930) theory on the contribution of Calvinism to the establishment and expansion of capitalism is a standard example. The way in which religions interact in society (or the lack thereof) falls within the scope of Religion Studies.

From a humanities point of view, the relationship between religion and social expressions of religion is important. The relationship between religion and art or religion and music is an important field of study for Religion Studies, as is the study of the psychology of religion. The migration of cultural groups is also an important element to study. With cultural migration (either forced or voluntary), the influence of religion upon a society (either country, cultural community or urban environment) is important for social studies.

Secularisation is a specific phenomenon to study in society. Whereas religion had played a determining role in society for a very long period, the social function of religion has been perceived to recede in recent times. There have been several theories as to the reasons for this. Berger (1967) states that religion will disappear from society at the rate that the influence of religion is decreasing. Luckmann (1971) has a variation on Berger's theory by indicating that religion will indeed disappear from public life but will continue to exist in the private sphere. Upon this, Berger (1999) surprises by apologising for his theory based on information of the 1960s and reformulates a theory, indicating that religion will actually grow. This led many scholars to start talking about the era of post-secularisation or sacralisation. What becomes apparent is that the form and function that religion will take on under this new dispensation have changed. It would be more appropriate to talk about religiosity. As an indication of the reaction of religion to secularisation, Krüger, Lubbe and Steyn (2005:291) identify three reactions, namely atheism, alternative spiritualities and fundamentalism. Studying religion in society will henceforth include studying atheism, new religious movements as expressions of the alternative formations of religion as well as the backlash to restore an idealised era where religion influenced society from a fundamentalist point of view.

□ Religion studies and education

It is unclear whether the relationship between Religion Studies and Education warrants the existence of a new field or approach. Education may not be seen as a separate approach when studying religion, but it does come into play when religion in society is part of educational formation. SA has a Constitution warranting freedom of affiliation and expression, subscribing to religious freedom. To govern this freedom, the Department of Education follows the regulations as set out in the National Policy on Religion and Education (2003). This document differentiates between religious education, religious observances and religious instruction. Teaching learners about different religions is part of the responsible activities in a community to make people aware of the existence of differences, also in terms of religious convictions. This is the task of education and should be done by trained educators.

Adherents to religion cannot be denied participation in religious observances. These observances may be conducted at schools but must be tended to by religious leaders. Learners may also not be forced to participate in any observance.

As to religious instruction, the task of nurturing faith in a particular religious community is not the task of the education system but should rather be relegated to the religious community and be done by the religiously trained.

□ Religion and law

Religion as part of society stands under the guidance and protection of the legal system. The protection of religious affiliation is warranted in Chapter 2 (Bill of Rights) of the South African Constitution (Coertzen 2014:127). Religious beliefs and obligations can at times clash with legal prescriptions. In such cases, special permission from legal bodies are required in order to continue with religious activities. In this regard, the use of trance-enhancing drugs by the religious community known as

Rastafarians is a good example. This group has been involved in a legal battle to legalise the use of dagga for religious purposes within Rastafarian belief (Williams 2017).

The law determines the legal status of religion within society. It is also the law that states and protects the rights of religious minorities in societies. In this regard, the status of immigrants and their religion must be protected by law. This becomes part of the discourse on the protection of human rights.

Religion has a dual nature. It needs to direct its attention at the spiritual realm while remaining anchored in the physical realm of this-worldly laws and obligations. In this sense, the duality of religion as a liminal case between the divine and mundane must be recognised.

□ Religion and science

Studying the relationship between religion and science is a growing field of interest. In using the term 'science', I refer to natural sciences without implying that religion cannot be studied scientifically. This exactly is the point of contention. The modernist differentiation between empirically based facts and unproven opinion creates a schism between religion and natural sciences (cf. the main arguments on the relationship between religion and science in Stenmark 2010:278–295).

A possible point of contact between religion and natural sciences might be the mutual concern for the natural environment (cf. Beyers 2016b). Religion and natural sciences share in the responsibility to take care of created reality which is perceived to exist independently of any divine intervention. The relationship between human beings and nature has been ambivalent. During the modern era, humans were perceived to be the dominant being, ordained by divine command to govern over all of creation. This created a distance between humans and the natural world, and creation was viewed as being at the disposal of human need. It was only later, with the arrival of postmodern thinking, that a new relationship between human beings and the natural world

was envisioned. Humans are now perceived to be part of created matter. Realising the shared destiny for human beings and created matter has led to new thinking on a responsible relationship between the two. New tendencies have encouraged a spiritual bond between humans and nature, connecting humans through religious connotations to the created matter that surrounds us. Studying religion can include an awareness of ecology.

□ Religion and politics

Religion and religions can play an active role in politics. Religion can be employed by politicians to manipulate people into either voting for a certain political party or supporting suggested legislation. This is not a new phenomenon. Since ancient times, the gods were consulted on political decisions. What we witness in modern times is, however, an abuse of religion in order to coax people in order to gain their political support.

Framing political speeches in a religious discourse or referring to cultural values in order to force people on emotional grounds to support political decisions is a dishonest but tragically effective use of religion by politicians (cf. Beyers 2015:18–19). The reasons why politicians make religious references may be a combination of the following:

- Religious gatherings form excellent platforms for political activities.
- A holistic understanding of reality in some cultures causes no objection to mixing contexts. No differentiation between politics and religion can be argued under this understanding of reality.
- Communities may be accustomed to the influence of religion in politics. It may be a social acceptable way of conducting politics.
- Political and religious discourses touch on deep human concerns. Religion and political group formation may act as identity markers in society and can therefore not be ignored.
- Religion acts as a core cultural identity marker. Imploring religion connects people to their cultural heritage.

- Religious jargon within political discourse lays a subtle claim to divine approval of political decisions. Political opponents are portrayed as agents of evil, as opposed to religious good.
- Religious communities are already existing, well-organised groups, ready to employ government policies.

□ Religions and economy

I have already made reference to Weber's (1930) theory of religion about the emergence of the economic model of capitalism. What also comes to mind is the way in which religion itself has become commercialised. Prosperity theology contributes to the commercialisation of religious goods (Gbote & Kgatla 2014), and people give money to the church under the assumption that blessing will follow in their lives. Religion started commerce in commodities such as books on religious topics, relics, objects needed to perform rituals, guided pilgrimages and retreats as ways of spiritual enrichment, all ways of making money in the name of religion.

Religions also became part of an alternative culture. Through projects funded by institutions, religious communities started caring for the poor and needy in society. Religious institutions took on the responsibility of relieving poverty, enabling people to survive in a world driven by buying, selling, possessions, assets and ignoring the poor. The way in which religions drive these campaigns of caring for those in need in society has become a focal point for Religion Studies.

■ Conclusion and recommendations

The process followed here to identify and discuss the relationships in which religions are involved betrays a modernist understanding of reality. The segmentation of reality into different spheres is a typical modernist understanding of reality in order to get a grasp on reality. Dissecting reality into different spheres may cause one to understand the different elements in society, but it does not mean that one fully comprehends the meaning stemming from

the relatedness of the different elements. This can be compared to separating the different strands in a spider's web, thinking that, by separating the strands, one will reach a better understanding of the working of the web. In effect, one only gains knowledge of one strand without comprehending the influence that all strands have on one another. The metaphor of the constitution of an onion applies here: Can you find the essence of an onion by peeling away its different layers, or can you find the essence of an onion by viewing all the layers combined?

This critical remark does not undo the discussion above. The purpose was not to comprehend religion but indeed to indicate the breadth and depth of the reach of religion on reality and the ways in which these can be studied.

Another danger to be aware of is that it might seem as if Religion Studies is presented here as a hand maiden to other disciplines. Smart (1986:164) refers in this regard to the ancillary function of Religion Studies. This may create the perception that Religion Studies is a discipline only in relation to other disciplines. Religion Studies does in fact have its own field of research and interest as well as methods. Religion as expressed by humans does remain the focal point of Religion Studies.

When studying religion in Africa, the context (all interrelatedness) must be kept in mind. Religion Studies in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the UP must bear in mind that religion cannot be viewed as a Western concept only. Western methods and approaches must also keep track of other possible ways of understanding and studying religion in all its relations. Religion must be studied from a postcolonial perspective. This means that any study of religion must be aware of the new configuration of relations in which religion exists.

■ Summary: Chapter 8

Any attempt at understanding religion proves to be a perilous undertaking. Understanding Religion Studies as it is envisioned to

function in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the UP already implies some perils. To fathom the breadth of Religion Studies is like treading on a spider's web: There are so many interconnected elements related to this field of study. The metaphor of a spider's web is utilised to portray the interconnectedness of religion to other elements. Kobus Krüger's concept of conditionality is utilised to describe this interrelatedness. There are many possible approaches to studying religion. This research highlights the anthropological, philosophical and sociological approaches. The relationship between religion and several other disciplines (i.e. education, law, science, politics and economy) is illuminated. Religion Studies at the UP should be aligned with the post-colonial demands for a particular way of doing research in Africa.

Chapter 8

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