

**Conclusion**  
**Whither Religious Studies?**  
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**Chapter Summary**

Religious studies is a challenging and relatively young academic field. Eric Sharpe (1933–2000) identified Max Müller as the key figure in its development, claiming that the “science of religion” began with Müller’s insight: “he who knows one, knows none.” Thus recruiting an entire generation of scholars to his cause, Müller established the study of religion, as distinct from theology, in the Western academic tradition. Sharpe lamented the lack of formal comparative religion studies in Germany faulting Adolf von Harnack as indicative of the narrowly confessional attitude theologians held on religious studies.

Hans Rollman, however, has argued that contrary to the impression created by Sharpe, it was not Harnack’s intention to discourage the study of world religions but to point out that they need to be studied in their entirety; in essence, Harnack believed that the study of religion is too important to be left to theologians. Unfortunately, Harnack’s ill-advised retort regarding Christianity to Muller’s comment noted above—“anyone who does not know this religion, knows no religion, and anyone who knows Christianity, its history and development, knows all religion”—continues to create the impression that he was theologically biased and opposed to the comparative approach to religious studies.

Ninian Smart’s inaugural address at Lancaster University in February 1968 marked a significant event in what became the development of religious studies. He attempted to articulate his vision for the field by outlining the scope and methods he thought most useful for studying religion(s):

1. He began by locating his new department in a historic and disciplinary context, as akin to both anthropology and history. One must study religions, he argued, not simply one particular religion.
2. To study religion requires understanding the discourse of religious people and texts; religion is to be studied historically, phenomenologically, sociologically, anthropologically, psychologically, and philosophically. It must also engage modern atheistic thought and engage other religious traditions not just Christianity.
3. The study of religion must be conducted in a secular, i.e., pluralistic, environment. He argued that all worldviews are open to question and debate and that all alternative perspectives should be critically examined.

Shortly before his death in 2001, Smart defended his basic argument about the nature of religious studies, stressing the importance of empathy for understanding religions and the need for what he called a “plural, polymethodic, non-finite” approach to the subject.

The development of religious studies in Britain and North America from the 1960s to the present seems to confirm Harnack’s fears about the dangers inherent in the new field. In Britain, religious studies developed against the background of a growing wave of immigrants so that the growth of departments of religious studies had an immediate and practical appeal in terms of helping the British understand their new neighbors. In North America, the decline of traditional churches helped

create the force behind the growth of religious studies departments in the 1960s and 1970s. Expediency and the need to attract students led to a rapid retooling of theologians as experts in world religions. New waves of immigration to North America have also impacted the study of religion.

Perhaps even more important than immigration, however, is the globalization of the economy with its social and political implications. We no longer live in religiously homogenous societies; rather, our emerging reality is a multicultural and multireligious one.

Kurt Rudolph recognizes the weaknesses of existing religious studies programs and points to an alternative format. In his view, the big mistake scholars have made is to attempt to study “religion” rather than “religions.” This mistake was enshrined in Smart’s conception of Lancaster University’s department of religious studies where, Rudolph suggests, Smart declared that “religion contains both an inward and an outer aspect both of which deserve equal attention.” Consequently, says Rudolph, students did not study “religions” but “religion.”

Hexham suggests that one of the main weaknesses of Smart’s approach to religious studies is that he never did fully articulate what he meant by the “inner aspect” of religion beyond general references to the importance of empathy and “imaginative participation.” We cannot study religion in the abstract and to attempt to do so invites disaster. Rudolph contends that what we can and must study are religions. Yet many, if not most, religious studies departments in the English-speaking world have forgotten this.

A second weakness of Smart’s approach is his commitment to making the study of religion “multidisciplinary” without adequately explaining what he understood by the term or how he thought it ought to work in practice. Hexham argues that the problem with this reality leads to the study of religion wherein one become the jack-of-all-trades yet master of none so that so-called religious studies “experts” today are often unable to clearly articulate the differences between various religious traditions yet are teaching courses that require such. For Hexham, this comes perilously close to “academic fraud.” Thus, he insists, if religious studies is to survive, a serious discussion is needed regarding both its scope and its methods. Why is it acceptable in a world that requires nothing but the highest of training standards in most vocations/disciplines, that prospective instructors in the humanities such as religious studies are required to meet only minimum standards? That such a condition exists underscores the troublesome reality that, whereas on one hand, society is minimizing the importance of accurate, credible instruction with respect to religious studies, on the other hand, anyone alive today knows full well that religion is playing an increasingly prominent role in the modern world.

Hexham believes that what remains for the next generation is to renew Ninian Smart’s vision for religious studies without the fatal flaw of an ill-defined multidisciplinary perspective. An interdisciplinary approach—grounded in a limited number of distinct disciplines where one is dominant yet informed by a good grasp of a second or more—appears to offer the best hope for reforming religious studies and reversing the anything-goes attitude that prevails today.