Religion Department Revitalized

By Howard Hunter
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The Department of Comparative Religion is alive and well with the recent hiring of two new full-time faculty members whose areas of concentration are in Islamic Studies and Asian Religions. The Department is eager to add a third new faculty member when that becomes possible. How remarkable this is when one recalls that the Department was slated for extinction just a few years ago.

As the only full-time faculty member and chairman of (then known as) the Department of Religion. I was informed that the Department would be closed and such courses as I, and my part-time instructors would be assimilated into some other Departments. Why, then, is the Department now secure and in better shape than it has been in years? The main reason was that a grant of $2500 was received from the Lily Endowment to study the proper place of a Department of Religion at Tufts. The study concluded that not only should the Department remain but that it should be enlarged! This, along with the sustained support from students, numerous faculty, alumni, and parents of current and prospective students led to the implementation of the suggestions outlined in the Lily Reports. I found the opportunity to encourage and focus the criticism on an invigorating and rewarding responsibility.

What The Department Has To Offer

By Mohamed Mahmoud

The study of religion is a vital component of a liberal arts education. Religion as a belief-system and as an organized social institution has been around for thousands of years and it touches the lives of the vast majority of people in our world - even those who do not believe.

Currently, the courses of the Department of Comparative Religion cover the major Western and Eastern traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism) and we hope to offer courses in the future on indigenous traditions.

The Department’s courses are designed to provide students with a scholarly and impartial exposure to these traditions. Students are provided with the foundational elements and the tools that would enable them to pursue the exploration of religion on their own or in the context of a graduate program if they so wish. Doing a double major (with Comparative Religion and another subject) has attracted many students. Some students have opted for Comparative Religion as a Minor. Comparative Religion courses are increasingly becoming popular among many students who take them to inform themselves about religious traditions and satisfy their requirements in the process.

IS RELIGION DOING MORE HARM THAN GOOD?

By Scotty McLennan

The media constantly reminds us about religiously-inspired violence. Looking back over the last decade, for example, Yigal Amir murders Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and later says that he has “no regrets” because he “acted on orders from God.” He is supported by a militant religious community which earlier spawned Dr. Baruch Goldstein, who killed 35 innocent Muslims at prayer in their mosque. Hamas suicide bombers destroy busses, take lives, and injure scores of innocent Jewish passengers and passers-by in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Claiming that “Allah provides for those who give their lives against the enemies of Islam.”

Catholics have killed Protestants, and vice-versa, in Ireland, and Orthodox Christians have killed Catholics and Muslims in Bosnia, and vice-versa, in the name of their religions. Hindus destroyed a sixteenth century mosque in Ayodhya, India, because they wanted to build a temple to Rama on the same spot. The resulting communal violence and riots killed more than two thousand people. Sri Lankan Buddhists have killed Tamil Hindus while directly appealing to religion. I’m outraged, and
while it's made me wonder if the same people shouldn't work toward the elimination of religion on the face of the earth, or at least to confining it deep within the walls of churches, mosques, temples, and shrines, or within the prayerful hearts of its practitioners.

On the other hand, couldn't this be explainable in terms other than religion? How about politics and economics? Ethnicity and race? Demographics and geography? Isn't religion just being manipulated by politicians and others to gain their own secular ends? Wouldn't we have to say that religion at its core – in its scriptures and founders and purest adherents – is inherently non-violent? Unfortunately, there is a growing body of scholarship which seems to suggest that religion is itself a root cause of conflict. Scriptures speak approvingly of the Hindu god Krishna and Arjuna on the field of battle...of Joshua entering the promised land by fitting the battle of Jericho, knocking down the walls and destroying the defending army, and then mopping up by killing the women and children and all of the animals and then burning the whole city to the ground. Jesus says at one point, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother..." The core of the Sikh community in India, which was founded in the 16th century by the gentle soul Guru Nanak has since come to be known as "the army of the faithful," and uses the double-edged sword as it's symbol.

A group of scholars led by David Little at the U.S. Institute of Peace concluded in a 1994 report that "One must see contemporary religious violence as an expression of tendencies always present in the religious life of humanity." It is no excuse to say that religion gets manipulated and perverted to violent ends by false prophets and unholy followers, nor that its original essence has been lost when it becomes violent.

Instead Little and others ask us to look at how part of religion's special genius lies in its ability to provide persons and groups with a sense of identity or a "place in the universe." In doing this, though, it frequently divides human communities into an "in" group and an "out" group. In conflict situations, distinctions between those who are "in" and those who are "out" are often heightened to the point of demonizing the other. Bosnian Muslim, Catholic Croat and Orthodox Serb speakers have all been heard to say that the others cannot be trusted and tell stories of appalling atrocities committed by these "out" groups. Then armed force becomes legitimated in struggles with "out" groups, almost always framed in defensive terms, even though it might look thoroughly aggressive to an objective observer. This becomes accentuated when connected to land – to the need or "right" to dominate within a given territory, like a Greater Serbia, a Buddhist Sri Lanka, and a Jewish promised land of Israel. There have been historical occasions when both Christian and Muslims have made theoretical claims to the entire world, and in direct conflict with each other at that.

So is this all hopeless, and is religion ultimately doing more harm than good? I don't think so, because for so many of us, probably the great majority of the world, it's through our religious traditions that we learn what it means to be human, to be humane, and caring and loving. Our moral education comes at religious knees. Our spiritual leaders and institutions are constantly being judged against strict standards of hypocrisy and decency, in contrast to people and organizations whose moral shortcomings are often excused by their success in making a profit, defending national security or educating for the cess in making a profit, defending national security or educating for the highest national scores. We need groups and traditions in society which can be judged by ultimate standards and not just short-term accomplishments.
Howard Hunter is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Comparative Religion. He has been with the department from its inception. He has taught numerous courses over the years, including Asian Religions, Japanese Religions, and Spirit and Nature. When he is not teaching at Tufts, he is giving lectures all over the globe, in such places as Rome and Onissa. He teaches World Religions and Asian Religions during the summer term.

Mohamed Mahmoud, Chair, did his undergraduate study at the University of Khartoum in Sudan and his graduate study in England where he did his Ph.D. at the University of Oxford. He joined Tufts with a wealth of teaching experience after having taught at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Khartoum and the Oriental Institute at the University of Oxford. His area of specialization is Islamic Studies and his research interests cover the Qur’an, secularization, modernity, and post-modernity. He is teaching this semester a course on Qur’an and Islamic tradition, a survey course that covers Islam from its formative period till modern times, and a course on Islam and human rights. In the Spring semester, he will teach a course on the philosophy of religion and a course on Islam and modernity.

Scotty McLennan has taught at Tufts for fifteen years, where he has served as the University Chaplain as well as a lecturer in the Department of Comparative Religions. He is teaching a course this fall entitled “Ethics Through Literature.” It examines novels, short stories and plays from around the world and six different religious traditions to reflect on issues of personal character and integrity. He is a project advisor to the “Education as Transformation Project: Religious Pluralism, Spirituality and Higher Education” involving more than 100 colleges and Universities, looking at the impact of religious diversity on higher education and the role of spirituality in the educational process. A national gathering of more than 800 people involved in the project took place at Wellesley College on September 27-28; he presented a workshop there on teaching religion and ethics by the Socratic method. Also one of the originators of an educational campaign at Tufts called “A Year of Nonviolence,” he has helped bring speakers like the daughter of Anwar Sadat, the president of Amnesty International, and a Nobel Peace Prize recipient to campus.

Gary P. Leupp is an Associate Professor in the History Department, and holds a secondary position in the Department of Comparative Religion. Professor Leupp received degrees from the University of Hawaii and University of Michigan, and lived in Japan six years, doing research at the University of Osaka and the University of Kyoto. His published works include Servants, Shophands and Laborers in the Cities of Tokugawa Japan (1992), Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan (1996); and the forthcoming Social History of Race-Mixing and Intermarriage in Japan, 1543-1900 (1999). He has written on many aspects of early modern Japanese social history, including topics of class, ethnicity, and sexuality, and is now doing research on Zen Buddhism in Tokugawa Japan (1603-1868). His course Religion in Japanese History is co-listed as a History and Comparative Religion course.

Margaret D. Hutaif has joined the department this fall as a Lecturer. She is currently teaching “Introduction to the Hebrew Bible,” and in the spring, will teach “Introduction to the New Testament” and “Feminist/Womanist Theologies.” Peggy is a graduate of Wellesley College. She holds M. Div. and Th. M. degrees from Harvard Divinity School. Before coming to Tufts, she taught biblical studies at Stonehill College, and in the Graduate Programs in Ministry at Emmanuel College, Boston.

Joseph Walser has also joined the department this fall as an assistant professor. Joseph did his undergraduate work at Carleton College where he received his B.A. in geology. He then went on to receive his M.T.S at Candler Theological Seminary at Emory University and a Ph.D in Religion at Northwestern University. His area of specialization is Asian religions, particularly South Asian religions, and his research interests range from archaeology to philosophy. This semester he is teaching World Religions and Asian Religions and next semester he will be teaching Introduction to Buddhism and Indian Philosophies.
Judaism has a story of swords being beaten into plowshares, and Hinduism’s Bhagavad Gita of a Sustainer who dwells in the heart of every moral creature and is the purity of the good. Buddhist stories describe how victory can only breed hatred.

Religion cannot ever ignore the social and psychological needs that violence seeks to address, and must draw creatively on its own rich resources for making peace, doing justice, and providing personal security. In our low moments of seeing only the harmfulness and violence of religion, we need to remember the great heritage of ahimsa in Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, and of non-violence in Christianity. We need to tell and relive the stories of Ghandi in India, the Dalai Lama in Tibet, Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States. Then, and perhaps only then, can religion be said to be doing more good than harm.