Religionswissenschaft and its challenges to the Study of Religions.
– A theoretical and philosophical study on religion.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is threefold: (1) to give a historical background of the concept of religion; (2) critically examine the challenges in the Study of Religions based on David Thurfjell and his essay Religionswissenschaft and the challenge of multi-religious student groups; and (3) to offer a solution that might improve and turn the Study of Religions into a more fruitful field. The results show that the concept of religion is the result of the developments in Western Europe and Christian theology. Secondly, the results illustrate that the methodologies of the department for the Study of Religions at Södertörn University College are seriously flawed. Finally, some personal suggestions and reflections are made that might improve the methodologies of the field.

Key words: Religion, religionswissenschaft, study of religions, deconstruction, postcolonial theory, universal, religious, secular, David Thurfjell
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Introduction

“At present, let us consider the word and concept of ‘religion’ itself. The term is notoriously difficult to define. At least, there has been in recent decades a bewildering variety of definitions; and no one of them has commanded wide acceptance. In some cases of this sort, a repeated failure to agree, to reach any satisfying answer or even to make any discernible progress towards one, has turned out to mean that men have been asking the wrong question. In this instance one might argue that the sustained inability to clarify what the word ‘religion’ signifies, in itself suggests that the term ought to be dropped; that it is a distorted concept not really corresponding to anything definitive or distinctive in the objective world.”

The concept of religion is one among many things people seem to take for granted as if it is a fixed thing. Not only have I noticed this tendency in random conversations with random people, but I have also noticed it among fellow students – and more surprisingly – among scholars of religion as well. There are students and scholars of religion setting out on religious studies as if there is an essence of religion visible only to their eyes. I must come forward and confess that I find these tendencies rather disturbing and tragicomic, since a phenomenon is being studied which cannot even be defined to start with. It is said that we study religion, but then again, what is religion?

It was during a course in my second semester as a student of religion that I encountered the problematic concept of religion, and the challenges concerning the modern study of religions. This was also the moment I realized that up until that moment I actually had no idea what the concept of religion entailed. One course was about religion and politics. The lecturer had spent the last four hours on the subject of religion in today’s modern world. It actually hit me at the end of the day, and I still remember the disappointment and frustration I felt. I was disappointed and frustrated because what my lecturer had been referring to as “religion” for the past four hours was actually Christianity, and what he had been referring to as the “world” was actually demarcated around the West (Western Europe and the USA). Subsequently, I posed the following rhetorical question: What is religion? Given my experience, it was something Christian and Western.

In another instance I had a close Muslim friend of mine read a paper I wrote about the Islamic prayer based on Karl Marx, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim’s views on religion. He got furious and asked me if “this” was what I was learning at school. He said that the theories of these thinkers cannot be applied

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1 Smith 1962:17.
to Islam, since this sort of thinking has its roots in a specific historical Euro Christian context. Though I initially tried to defend both my education and paper; I realized in the aftermath that the man had a point – that the theories of these men could not be applied to Islam, which confused me even more since their theories were about religion. (One might think that Islam is a religion which is why I ended up being confused)

Considering the short introduction given above, this study will first give a historic background of the concept of religion by turning to some of the most established scholars of the field. Secondly, and more importantly, this study aims to deal with the consequences the concept of religion has had on the department for the Study of Religions within which I study. The aim is not only to, somewhat dramatically put, to offer the abolishment of the term religion which clearly rests on Western bias as will be illustrated later on, but also to offer a constructive critique that will help us better understand the multiple faiths out there in the world. Despite my dislike of its concept, however, the term religion will be used in this study in order to ease the reading.

**Background**

I am of Turkish origin, born and raised in a secular Muslim family in Sweden, which is one of the – if not the most – secular county in the world. Considering the different contexts within which I was born and raised, there have been some inevitable clashes. As a practicing Muslim, I have faced challenges in the private – as well as in the public sphere. The challenges in the private sphere could be anything from growing a beard to wanting to marry a veiled woman, whereas the challenges in the public sphere could be anything from refusing to serve alcohol at work to different views on gender roles. In short, I have felt misplaced both in time as well as in space due to my background. The clashes are simply everywhere! This study deals with one of the most difficult challenges I have faced so far, and yet again felt the sense of being somewhat lost: namely my education. Therefore, it is important to note that this study is not solely the result because it is part of the educational curricula where I study; this study is also an opportunity for me to put what I have learned into practice. More importantly it is an opportunity for me to make a point, to actually say something, or to at least give it a try. It is also for these reasons that this study should be taken seriously because the points that will be made will not only belong to a Muslim man in his mid-twenties, but also to a student of religion which consequently makes it a voice from the inside of the field of the Study of Religions.
Since this is my third and final semester as a student of religion I decided not to focus on something trivial. (E.g. different opinions on whether smoking is permissible or not in a Muslim context) Instead, I decided to focus on the very subject we claim to study – religion (Or, more precisely, focus on our ways of studying and understanding it/them). This is for the simple reason that I personally believe that the concept of- and the study of religions are even more interesting than the actual religions we study within them. Therefore, the concept and the study of it have deserved to be put into critical scrutiny. For the last three semesters the subject of religion has troubled my mind and my studies as well. It troubled my mind because I realized that the foundation of my own personal belief was shaken, driving me to the verge of almost identifying myself as someone confused, jumbling between atheism and theism. This was according to some hardcore religious and somewhat conspiratorial friends of mine, the main purpose of the study of religions. To return, it also troubled my studies not because the educational content was always too difficult to comprehend, but simply because I had a very difficult time agreeing on what was being said and taught. The last three semesters have taught us students to approach our studies objectively and critically; now is the time to investigate and question the field in the same vigorous spirit.

**Purpose of study**

The purpose of this study is threefold: (1) to give a historical background of the concept of religion; (2) critically examine the challenges in the Study of Religions based on David Thurfjell’s essay *Religionswissenschaft and the challenge of multi-religious student groups*; and (3) to offer a solution that might improve and turn the study of religion into a more fruitful field. The questions this study aims to answer, then, are the following:

- What are the challenges for the Study of Religions conducted at Södertörn University College based on the analysis of Thurfjell’s essay?
- What does indeed happen to *Religionswissenschaft* when taught to multi-religious student groups?

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2 Apparently I am not the only student who due to the field of the Study of religions has been reflecting over my own situation. Please see: Eklöf, Ida (2010). *Jag önskar de hade en varningstext; du kommer att börja grubbla! Om religionsvetenskapssstudenters reflektioner kring sin egen livsåskådning.*

3 Thurfjell is a historian of religion, associate professor and researcher in the Study of Religions at Södertörn University College.

4 Thurfjell 2011.
Disposition

The structure of this study divides into five sections. Sections one will along with the introduction delineate the purpose of this study, methodology and material, and the theoretical framework. Section two will give a historic background of the concept of religion in order to better illustrate the line of point. I will for this, as previously mentioned, turn to well known scholars of religion and their deconstruction of the concept of the phenomena which we today call religion. In section three which is the longest in this study, I will offer the analyses and results of Thurfjell’s essay. The conclusion and my personal reflections and suggestions will follow in section four, and section five brings this study to an end with a list of references.

Demarcations

Due to the theoretical and philosophical nature of this study it becomes highly difficult to mark out distinct demarcations as in, say, an empirical study. Thus it is important to stress that this is no empirical study; it is a theoretical and philosophical study dealing with various theories on religion where I will not give myself into the impossible quest of trying to define what religion is, since “it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define.”\(^5\) The results should therefore not be considered as some kind of empirical truth or statement but rather as a theoretical discussion. Furthermore, this is not a study concerning religions (Christianity for example) per se; it is rather a study concerned with the academic field under which religions are studied. Hence no detailed account will be given on what many refer to as “world religions”\(^6\). I find it important to stress that this study will only deal with Thurfjell’s essay, and will therefore not make any attempts to address the entire academic field of the Study of Religions in the Western academia. The sole concern of my critique is with the department where Thurfjell teaches and I study. To paraphrase, the results of this study are not universal. Some might rightfully question whether every member of the department at Södertörn shares Thurfjell’s views put forward in his essay, and I am sure there is a difference of opinion even among them. However, Thurfjell does speak for the entire department in his essay which is why I take it for granted that the ideas delivered in his essay are of predominant interest. Finally, I must be clear that neither is the purpose nor the attempt of this study groundbreaking. Numerous studies dealing with this subject have been brought forward by acknowledged scholars of religion with the oldest one dating back to the 1960’s.\(^7\)

\(^5\) King 2013:5.
\(^6\) The notion of “world religions” is another problematic concept which has been delineated by Tomoko Masuzawa in her book *The Invention of World Religions* (2005).
\(^7\) There could of course be works dating further back which I am not aware of.
Material and methodology

Material

The material that was chosen for this study was collected for two reasons: (1) to give a historic account on the concept of religion and to reflect over the developments that have occurred regarding its definition; and (2) analyze the challenges in the Study of Religions by focusing on Thurfjell’s essay.

Now, as previously mentioned, I am no pioneer writing on this subject. There have been many important scholarly works conducted long before I even thought about the idea of writing about it. These scholarly works will naturally form the foundation of this study. The collected material consists of scholarly works in the form of articles, essays and books. These sources are of primary importance and interest, and are the following: Richard King, Orientalism and Religion (2002); S.N. Balagangadhara, The Heathen in his Blindness (2005); Talal Asad, Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam (1993); and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion (1963). These were selected and gathered as primary sources for the simple reason that they are all part of the postcolonial critique targeting the concept of religion, showing us why it is a controversial concept used in the Study of Religions, and how it blocks our understanding of non-Western religions (Such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism). The selection of works above will primarily be used in the background chapter, since they all deconstruct the concept in one or many similar ways. What is interesting with the material is that some of the mentioned scholars belong to the Western academia, addressing critique to their own field. This is also what makes these sources reliable.

David Thurfjell’s essay will be of outmost importance as it is the main focus of this study. I will with a critical approach attempt to analyze his essay and point out what I feel are the weaknesses of the Study of Religions as it is at Södertörn University College. I will here make an independent attempt to come to my own conclusions based on my own analysis of his essay. In other words, I will try to illustrate what I find troublesome in the field by pinpointing the issues. For material of secondary importance, please see the list of references that can be found in section five.

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8 Also see Timothy Fitzgerald, The Ideology of Religious Studies (2000).
9 Wilfred Cantwell Smith is an exception and does not belong to the postcolonial critique. However, his work has contributed massively to postcolonial thinkers, and will, therefore, be used in this study.
10 The concept of Western vs. non-Western religion is problematic itself, considering that many religions originated in the non-Western parts of the world. The religion of Christianity is no exception, even though many take for granted that Christianity is essentially a Western religion.
Methodology

As the headline above obviously implies, this subsection will describe the methodologies that were applied when dealing with the selected material. Due to the limitations of time and space, it was necessary to employ methods that would ease the processing of the massive works conducted on this subject. Two methodological approaches were singled out: Qualitative content analysis and deconstruction. The former will be applied when processing the formerly conducted works by scholars from the field, and the latter will come in handy when analyzing and breaking down Thurfjell’s essay in order to better understand it.

As I had to be very selective when going through my material, the qualitative content analysis enabled me to analyze the content of my material without having to actually deal with the entire writings.11 The subject is simply too grand for a simple study as this one. Thus it became perfectly appropriate to apply the qualitative content analysis on this study. Deconstruction is the second methodology, and simultaneously, also the purpose of this study. Due to the complications I have had in explaining it, I will try to give a simple account as possible. Jonathan Culler writes: “The practitioner of deconstruction works within the terms of the system but in order to breach it”12, which is exactly the purpose of this study: namely to breach the system of the study of religions by deconstructing Thurfjell’s essay. Deconstruction is about breaking something (a text, a concept and etc.) down into fragments in order to analyze the underlying reasons that eventually led to the construction of it in the first place. In other words, “deconstruction reverses the hierarchical opposition of the causal scheme”.13 That is, deconstruction is about de-constructing something that was formerly constructed.

However, every methodology has its own inadequacies. There is yet a fully perfect methodology to be found. When deciding your own methodological approach, I think it is important to decide on the one/-s that will generate the most useful and reliable data. Now, what are, then, the shortcomings of the methodological approaches applied in this study? Despite its advantages, qualitative content analysis falls short in some aspects: (1) the interpretation of data is often closely linked to the researcher which creates a risk that the analysis of the data would also reflect the researcher’s own identity, background

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13 Ibid. p. 88.
and convictions. In other words, whether the researcher is objective or not should be questioned\(^{14}\); (2) there is a risk that the meaning of the data can be lost or altered; (3) and the explanation of data can be overly simplified.\(^{15}\) I would deny myself if I claimed that this study is not personal. The analysis will reflect my own identity, background and my own convictions; that is also the purpose of this study, since my aim is to - as mentioned in the introduction - to make a point. However, my data consists of not only one, two or three sources, but several more dealing with the same subject and reaching the same results. Thus my data has established its own place in the discourse of the study of religions. Therefore, my personal convictions will not be a challenge to this study but rather an advantage, since the data converges with my own personal standpoint.

**Theoretical framework**

I will in this section try to delineate the theoretical framework of this study which immediately turns out to be a difficult task. As already mentioned a couple of times, this is a theoretical and philosophical study, meaning that this study is itself a theory, trying to theorize on already existing theories. Therefore, it becomes challenging to give a convincing and concrete explanation of the theoretical framework. I would suggest that the main theory is the postcolonial critique against the concept of religion, claiming that it was constructed in a specific Euro Christian context, and thus serving the interests of those who constructed it. Consequently, the modern field of the Study of Religions has put the West and Christianity in a privileged position as opposed to non-Western religions. In Richard King’s words, “The concept of “religion” is the product of the culturally specific discursive processes of Christian history in the West and has been forged in the crucible of inter-religious conflict and interaction. The term thus implies a pluralistic context. As Balagangadhar points out, Christianity has generally served as the prototypical example of a religion and thus as the fundamental yardstick or paradigm-case for the study of “other religions”. This being the case, one should acknowledge that the comparative study of religion remains founded upon a conceptual framework that is unmistakably theological and Christian in orientation.”\(^{16}\) The inevitable result of this is weak understandings of other religions.

To elucidate the theoretical framework even further, I will turn to Talal Asad – an anthropologist and one of the leading figures among the postcolonial critics, whose theory/critique will be of much use in

\(^{14}\) Denscombe 2009: 399.

\(^{15}\) Ibid. p. 400.

\(^{16}\) King 2002:40.
my deconstruction and analyze of Thurfjell’s essay. In his famous essay *The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category* (1993), Asad argues against the notion of religion as a universal category “…not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.”

According to anthropologists of the 20th century, there is an autonomous essence to the phenomenon of religion meaning that it should not be reduced or mixed with other spheres such as politics for instance. In Asad’s opinion, this leads to a definition of religion as something universal transcending all kinds of historical and cultural barriers. Asad explains these ambitions as following: “It may be a happy accident that this effort of defining religion converges with the liberal demand in our time that it be kept quite separately from politics, law, and science-spaces in which varieties of power and reason articulate our distinctively modern life. This definition is at once part of a strategy (for secular liberals) of the confinement, and (for liberal Christians) of the defense of religion.”

Furthermore, Asad notes that “…this separation of religion from power is a modern Western norm, the product of a unique post-Reformation history.” Simplifying it even further, the definition of religion as a universal category has been the intellectual endeavor of the Christian West. Therefore, it becomes highly problematic when this definition is being employed and applied on to other religions of different histories and cultures. Asad illustrates his point by explaining that Western attempts to understand Muslim traditions lead to failure because of their assumption that religion and politics are two of the same. Religion and politics are not kept separately as they have been in the West. Subsequently all “…religious discourse in the political arena is seen as a disguise for political power.” This is problematic because the Euro Christian West is projecting its own image and history on non-Western traditions and religions, and therefore fails to understand them. The separation of religion from the other spheres (especially power) tells us a lot about the troublesome history of the Euro Christian West considering all the religious conflicts that afflicted many parts of Europe. Consequently, there is an assumption that this could be a problem in other religions and traditions which it necessarily does not have to. However, if we shall return, the most problematic assumption is that all parts of the world and therefore all kind of religions and traditions have undergone the same developments as the West which is misleading. The separation of religion from all kinds of spheres that are considered to be secular is, as has been delineated, a Western norm. It becomes highly problematic when attempts to understand other

17 Asad 1993:29  
19 Ibid. p.28.  
20 Ibid. p.28-29.
religions are made from this perspective because the religious-secular binary is not universal either. This will also be the main focus when I will give myself into Thurfjell’s essay because this is exactly what he sets out to do: To understand religions and traditions solely from his own perspective, and maybe even personal convictions.

The concept of religion and previous research

Before going on to analyze Thurfjell’s essay, I think it would be a good idea to first touch the concept of religion. The task of this section will be to apply a qualitative content analysis on the deconstructions of the concept of religion made by scholars of religion. The purpose of this will then be to illustrate the great variety of implications the concept has had throughout history. For this I will turn to the help of Richard King, S.N. Balagangadhara, Talal Asad and Wilfred Cantwell Smith.

The word “religion” is originally from the Latin religio which in Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s words has been “…a term that eventually was used in a great variety of senses, even by a single writer, without precision.” Unfortunately, little progress has been made even till this day in attempts of reaching consensus on a term that is fully adequate. The etymology of the term religion had actually not much to do with Gods in its Latin usage in Greco-Roman times, since it was more concerned with traditions. Religion implied to carry on the teachings and practices of one’s own ancestors; and this was because religion was a social duty, an obligation upon the individual that the traditions lived on. Thus religion was something inherited from the traditions of one’s own family which consequently defined religio as traditio (tradition).

An important development in the usage of the term came during the establishment of Christianity. Christianity was what Smith called a new kind of religion. This so called new religion also brought with itself the notion of the church (ecclesia). These developments introduced the concept of a systematized and coherent religion contrary to the highly unstructured religions of the Greco-Roman times. Thus emerged “…a religio of one set of people, clearly and radically distinct from the religions of outsiders.” The Christians could now distinguish themselves from the traditional cults and their practices going so far as claiming the Christian Church’s worship of God as vera religio (true religion), and the traditional cults for being falsa religio (false religion). This notion was brought forward by the

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21 Smith 1962:19
24 Ibid. p. 27.
25 Ibid. p. 27.
Christian writer Lactantius who suggested that the only one and true God could be worshipped through the Church, which consequently led to the introduction of monotheism on a serious scale, giving Christianity exclusivity contrary to the highly polytheistic religions of the Greco-Romans.\textsuperscript{26} This is also illustrated by Balagangadharana, who writes: “Christianity was the religion of the humankind…Christians claimed that they were religio; second, a ‘religio’ of all peoples…Thus, a fundamental shift was wrought: religion was countered to tradition.”\textsuperscript{27} In short terms, it becomes obvious how the original term *religio* of the Romans which originally referred to tradition, was now redefined as Christianity.

The notion of “true religion” was also posited by St. Augustine “…suggesting for the first time on a serious scale that there is an ideal, a perfect or essential relationship between man and God that ought to subsist.”\textsuperscript{28} According to Smith, St. Augustine implied that all worship is of something good. The interesting part here is that St. Augustine did not share the concept of religion as we know of it today; his definition was more concerned with religiousness then it was with true contra false religion. In contrary to Lactantius belief, St. Augustine meant that all worship of the one true God was essentially something good, and had necessarily nothing to do with Christianity. What Christianity did was to takeover this definition and turning it into Christianity. In other words, Christianity made an already existing truth their own.

During the Middle Ages the term took another shift. This time religion was designated to monastery life, monks and nuns, distinguishing the “religious” from the lay Christian.\textsuperscript{29} Firstly it was designated to a set of practices and attitude; secondly it was designated to a specific group of people and their beliefs; and thirdly it was designated to the people taking monastic vows and devoting their lives to their religious beliefs. Furthermore, Smith writes that the term faith was more central to Christianity than was the term religion at that time.\textsuperscript{30} However, what is interesting with the Middle Ages is not the new additional definition of the term religion, but it is that there was never a book written specifically on “religion” during an epoch considered to be the most religious in the history of Christianity.\textsuperscript{31} One theory could be that they simply did not feel the need to because Christianity had established itself not only as a religion, but as ‘The Religion’. Therefore, there might have not been any need to discuss any further on its concept, since the concept was corresponding to Christianity and vice versa.

\textsuperscript{26} Smith 1962:27 and King 2002:36-37.  
\textsuperscript{27} Balagangadharana 2005:51.  
\textsuperscript{28} Smith 1962:30.  
\textsuperscript{29} Smith 1962: 31.  
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid. p. 31.  
\textsuperscript{31} Smith 1962:32.
In contrary to the Middle Ages, writings on religion characterize the modern time beginning with the Renascence, continuing with the Reformation and Enlightenment and so on.\textsuperscript{32} During the Renascence, the idea of religious universality was delivered. Religion was considered to be something innate in every human being meaning that religion was a unique human feature guiding one to the divine. Religion was something every individual could experience but in different levels of genuineness. Therefore, \textquotedblleft…all religion is to some degree good religion.\textquotedblright\textsuperscript{33} However, those who experience religion in the highest degree of genuineness are those who do so in accordance to the ways of Christ meaning that Christianity was the peak of genuine religiousness.\textsuperscript{34} Christianity was once again posited more privileged than other religions.

The Reformation is known for its theological clashes between the Protestants and the Catholic Church. The conceptual debates were not about true religion contra false religion; they were about true Christian religion as opposed to false Christian religion. The famous Protestant thinkers of this time (Luther, Zwingli and Calvin) gave the term religion another dimension whilst they were in theological disputes with Rome. The Reformers, as the three mentioned men were, were critical to the organizations (namely the Church) for mediating between man and God.\textsuperscript{35} From Smith’s view, these thinkers considered religion as something inner and personal, and \textquotedblleft…the nearest equivalent concept in modern English is that of piety.\textquotedblright\textsuperscript{36} Furthermore, Smith notes: \textquotedblleft It is significant that each of the three uses religio and pietas as at least correlative, and at times as equivalent.\textquotedblright\textsuperscript{36}

However, things took a crucial turn from the seventeenth century and onward. There had been a diversion from understanding religion as something personal to a depersonalized system of ideas. As Smith puts it: \textquotedblleft We may observe the change in the application of our term from the dynamics of the heart to impersonal system: from singular to plural; and from a Platonic to a propositional conception of truth.\textquotedblright\textsuperscript{37} Put in simple words, religion meant to worship, but this changed when the ways of worship were instead named religion. New ideas, attitudes and conceptions of truth would challenge the past concepts of religion in some decisive ways for our comprehension of it today. Religion was conceptualized as a system of ideas in a plural sense. The application of the term had changed focus from \textquotedblleft…the dynamic of the heart to impersonal system; from singular to plural; and from Platonic to a

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{32} Ibid. p. 32.
\bibitem{33} Ibid. p. 33.
\bibitem{34} Ibid. p. 34.
\bibitem{35} Ibid. p. 35.
\bibitem{36} Ibid. p. 36-37.
\end{thebibliography}
propositional conception of truth.”

The practices which were believed to guide people to adoration of God, as in Church practices for example, were not religio per se. They were rather ways that would lead one to religio, meaning that religion was the same as religiousness. Later on with the wave of intellectualist thought, these practices were defined as a system of beliefs and practices. Thus religion was systematized. Since there were many ways of being religious according to different levels of genuine religiosity, which they all were systematized, there were now religions in the plural. Religion was no longer corresponding to ones religiousness but to a set of practices and beliefs. This created an environment in which religions now had to claim the truth, which is illustrated by the work of Hugo de Groot where he makes a shift from “the genuineness of Christian religiousness” to” the truth of Christian religion”.

Furthermore, religion became a set of doctrines, meaning that the truth of a religion was its doctrines. Consequently, religion had become something one believes or does not believe, in contrast to have meant something one would do in order to reach what (God) one believes in. Religion had undergone a change from being something one would do into something one would believe in. What is interesting with the concept of religion as a systematic entity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is that it served religious conflicts among different groups. The notion of “world religions” was introduced when writing derogatorily about other religions: “One’s own religion may be piety and faith, obedience, worship, and a vision of God. An alien ‘religion’ is a system of beliefs or rituals, an abstract and impersonal pattern of observables.” The idea behind the usage of the concept of “world religion” or “the religions” (in plural) was to distinguish oneself from the rest, presenting itself as the true one, and painting “the others” as false. This is also why many writings in this period were apologetic and polemic, criticizing one and each other.

The last shift I will focus on is the implications of the concept from the perspective of the Enlightenment. It has already been clear that the concept of religion during the Enlightenment referred to various systems people believed in. The next important change came with Hegel and his student Feuerbach: namely the notion that there is an essence of religion, suggesting “…that religion is a

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40 Ibid. p. 39.
41 Ibid. p. 40.
43 Ibid. p. 40-44.
something with a definite and fixed form, if only one could find it.”  

How one can make such a claim without first finding it is a mystery itself. Religion had been distinguished from other spheres as something definitive with a fixed form. This definition also served the post-Christian society in the West, since religion no longer was considered to be related to anything else, and was to be thought of as something people did in their private spheres. Thus was the secular sphere created, and the religious sphere pushed out the private. It is also on this point Asad directs critique to Geertz’s attempts of giving religion a universal definition. Asad means that religions are intimately linked with societies and societal changes, and should therefore be studied as part of the rest of the society. However, the universal definition of religion as something distinct and practiced in the private sphere assumes that all religions are essentially the same, which is quite misleading.

It is important to stress that it was also during this time of period (The Enlightenment) that the Study of Religions was born as an academic field. Unfortunately, these features also become evident in the following section where Thurfjell’s essay will be analyzed.

Analysis and results

The previous section has illustrated that the concept of religion is a unique affair of Western intellectualism and Christian theology. The purpose of this section is to deconstruct and analyze the Study of Religions based on David Thurfjell’s essay. Before going any further I believe it would be appropriate to remember the questions in focus: **What are the challenges for the Study of Religions conducted at Södertörn University College based on the analysis of Thurfjell’s essay? What does indeed happen to Religionswissenschaft when taught to multi-religious student groups?**

The Study of Religions as a field should not be confused with theology, since the former is a secular discipline with no religious affiliations. This is no strange considering the ending of the previous section. As a student of religion I have on numerous occasions been told by my teachers to distance myself from theology as it has no scientific ground. How one studies religion scientifically is another unsolved mystery to me, since religion, in my humble view, represents everything that is unscientific. This is, of course, if religion is not reduced to something distinct out there, which I will return to later on. As delineated by Willy Pfändtner in his paper *The End of the Age of Constantine and the Dawn of*

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44 Smith 1962:47; moreover, it is worth mentioning that this notion has been applied by many Western scholars from different disciplines. For more on this, please see Pals, L. Daniel (2006), Eight Theories of Religion.


46 King 2002:41.
Religious Plurality (The Changing Role of Religion in Pluralist Society)\textsuperscript{47}, it is well known among scholars of religion that the concept of religion is a modern Western construction.\textsuperscript{48} It is equally important to note that not only is the concept of religion something Western in essential, but even the Study of Religions is a modern Western invention covered by Richard King in his article \textit{The Copernican Turn in the Study of Religion}.\textsuperscript{49} It is from these angels that I am going to take a closer critical look at Thurfjell’s essay.

David Thurfjell proposes in his essay \textit{Religionswissenschaft and the challenge of multi-religious student groups}\textsuperscript{50} a pedagogical method that will help turning multi-religious student groups into assets by “…tackling feelings of exclusion among students who do not share the secular post-Judeo-Christian worldview that is often taken for granted in European curricula.”\textsuperscript{51} I am one of those students who have felt excluded\textsuperscript{52} throughout my time as a student of religion, and I am also one of those students who do not share the secular post-Judeo-Christian worldview. It is exactly for these reasons that this study should be taken seriously given that there is a genuine will to turn multi-religious student groups into assets. I remember reading the essay sometime during my second semester and concluding that I would never have had decided to study religion had I read it prior to the start of the course. This was because of the great disparities between my own convictions and those of the department. I was simply not convinced whether their way of studying religion was appealing to me. On the other hand, I am not sure I would have been able to comprehend the content of Thurfjell’s essay with not prior academic background. Hence should this essay be the starting point, which I will come back to further on. However, Thurfjell points at \textit{Religionswissenschaft}\textsuperscript{53} as the solution for the challenges that emerge from the contact with multi-religious student groups. He describes it as a platform with rules, and goes on to explain that these rules are only there for pragmatic reasons.\textsuperscript{54} I would like to disagree on this point, and state that there is more to these rules than just simply being there for pragmatic reasons. I will try to illustrate how Thurfjell simply contradicts himself in this short essay. Here follow the rules:

\textsuperscript{47} Pfändtner 2012.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid. p.4.
\textsuperscript{49} King 2013. This article will be published in an extended form in Richard King (ed), \textit{Theory/Religion/Critique. Classic and Contemporary Approaches}, Columbia University Press.
\textsuperscript{50} Thurfjell 2011.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid. p. 209.
\textsuperscript{52} I would like to clarify that I have not been excluded as an individual but simply as a student who necessarily does not agree with all of the theories and methodologies applied in the department.
\textsuperscript{53} Religionswissenschaft (German) means religionsvetenskap in Swedish and the scientific study of religion in English.
\textsuperscript{54} Thurfjell 2011:212.
**Rule 1: self-reflection and contextualization**

“The first rule concerns self-reflection and self-contextualization. No position – philosophical, religious or scholarly – is accepted as default. All students have to make an intellectual attempt to distance themselves from their own position, to reflect upon the presuppositions that they bring into their study of religion and to articulate these presuppositions as clearly as possible. Also, everyone has to think about their own background and to historically contextualize their own views and expectations concerning religion and to think about how their history of community, upbringing, religious affiliation, media consumption, and personality have affected their expectations of the field of study.”\(^{55}\)

**Rule 2: non-confessionalism**

“The second rule is that of non-confessionalism and non-normativity. In order for Religionswissenschaft to work as an open platform for learned discussions about religion, it is crucial to emphasize that our task is not to contribute to the thoughts and practices of religious practitioners of any religious denomination; neither is it to provide arguments to those who combat religion in society. It is not our task to evaluate religion nor to contribute to it. Although our findings may inform and be of relevance for various religious practitioners, theologians, or critics of religion, and although we, as individuals, may engage in such apologetical concerns outside the seminar, they have to be left out of the discussion when we practice Religionswissenschaft.”\(^{56}\)

**Rule 3: the ‘as if’ – approach**

“The third rule for our undergraduate courses in Religionswissenschaft could be described as the acceptance of methodological perspectivism. While the students’ own personal beliefs and values are left outside the seminar discussions, they are encouraged to try to think within different frameworks of thought as if they accepted the premises upon which these frameworks are based. The idea is that you need not accept the presuppositions of a position to understand and try out its ways of reasoning. Hence, you need not abandon your own view of life, but you cannot choose to not listen to and try to think from the point of view of other perspectives. Studying Religionswissenschaft at the undergraduate level hence becomes like an intellectual play in which the students move in and out of different perspectives.”\(^{57}\)

Let us now go through these rules carefully. These three, so called pragmatic rules, suggest that no philosophical or religious position should be accepted in terms of self-reflection and contextualization in

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\(^{55}\) Ibid. p. 212.

\(^{56}\) Thurfjell 2011: 213.

\(^{57}\) Ibid. p. 213.
the Study of Religions. Two important questions immediately arise: Is the Study of Religions free from all forms positions, meaning that it is neutral? Has the Study of Religions as a field ever put itself into question by self-reflection over its own genesis? All these rules imply that there is a sphere free from all kinds of human presuppositions and subjectivities, which in my humble opinion is a somewhat naïve approach. Additionally, the secular-religious binary comes across vividly in these rules. Thurfjell seems to believe that there is a secular sphere which one cannot enter with religious subjectivities. It is as if there are distinct spheres in the society where we are different depending on what sphere we are in. This becomes very challenging to me as he seems to believe that everybody lives their lives according to this point of view, that we actually separate our religious identities from the identities shown in the public sphere, meaning that religion is essentially turned into a private affair. We must not forget that not only is the concept of religion a Western invention, so is also the secular-religious binary. In the third rule, Thurfjell notes:

“This while the students’ own personal beliefs and values are left outside the seminar discussions, they are encouraged to try to think within different frameworks of thought as if they accepted the premises upon which these frameworks are based.”

The challenging idea behind this is Thurfjell’s conviction that people from different religions can actually leave their personal beliefs outside some distinct places, which in this case are the seminar discussions. It is as if he is asking me to leave my beliefs as a Muslim outside the seminars, and be prepared to be think as a Christian or Buddhist for that matter in the following one or two hours. The most disturbing part is that he seems to take for granted that all religions actually share this feature, which deliberately or inadvertently leads to the treatment of religions as if they are all the same in essence. Metaphorically speaking, religion is here portrayed as clothes one can simply get on and off at will. What if there are religions that do not share this secular-religious binary, and what if there are religions that permeate all spheres of the believer and not only a distinct sphere called the private, which most of the times is limited to one’s home. Another point I find problematic is the implicit idea that one’s own religion would be a hindrance to listen, think and understand other perspectives from their own point of views. It is to say that I would not be intellectually capable of understanding a Hindu unless I distance myself from my own beliefs. Unfortunately, many of these rules or methods are loose assumptions, and highly generalizing. Thurfjell writes further in the first rule that: “All students have to make an intellectual attempt to distance themselves from their own position, to reflect upon the presuppositions that they bring into their study of religion and to articulate these presuppositions as

Thurfjell 2011: 213.
clearly as possible.”\textsuperscript{59} There is yet again the assumption that people from various religions actually can distance themselves from their own positions. These examples illustrates the premises which the study of religion was built on; it is a field in which one can only thrive if you are able to abandon your religious beliefs in the meantime you are a student of religion, and this is because the study of religion rests on notion of religion as a universal category, consequently leading to the same treatment of different religions. Thus becomes the differences invisible. It is also this point Asad has articulated; that it becomes problematic when we are trying to understand other religions and peoples who do not share these features.\textsuperscript{60} In terms of self-contextualization, Thurfjell and the department for the Study of Religions must firstly practice these rules before asking their students to do so and more importantly, to let the multi-religious student groups challenge their own presuppositions they seem to have taken for granted as universal truths. If there is a genuine wish to turn these groups of different backgrounds into resources, it is important that the department for the Study of Religions allows these groups to actually influence them with their diversities.

In the beginning of his essay, Thurfjell poses a couple of interesting, though rhetorical questions:

“Are the theoretical discussions that we, as scholars of religion, engage in, and expect our students to engage in, only relevant if the post-Judeo-Christian, secular life-world, that most of us seem to take for granted, is recognized and accepted? And, if so, what happens to Religionswissenschaft when it is taught to students who are rooted in other worldviews or religious traditions?”\textsuperscript{61}

If one examines the questions listed in the quotation above, it becomes perfectly vivid that the answers are actually within the questions – hence rhetorical questions. The questions actually give away more then they ask for. What are then to be found in them? First and foremost Religionswissenschaft is obviously conducted in a secular post-Judeo-Christian context. In other words, Religionswissenschaft does not belong to a natural sphere free from human presuppositions but is in fact based on one. Secondly, the answer the answer to question one is yes because the theoretical discussions that scholars of religion engage in are only relevant if the post-Judeo-Christian worldview is recognized. Thirdly and related to the former point is that Religionswissenschaft is already rooted in a particular worldview and religious tradition. Now, for the last three semesters I have been told several times that I must adapt myself to the objective approach and distance myself from my own beliefs. There is no doubt that

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid. p. 212.
\textsuperscript{60} Asad 1993.
\textsuperscript{61} Thurfjell 2011:209.
objectivity is important, but only when practiced properly. The Study of Religions or, *Religionswissenschaft* as it is in German, embraced the secular post-Judeo-Christian worldview and the religious traditions within it, and consequently excluded “the others”. This makes the field look like any biased theology out there. More importantly, the Study of Religions did not only embrace the secular post-Judeo-Christian worldview, but it was constructed upon it. We must at this instance question the worldview which the department has embraced at Södertörn University College. The very concept of religion has been given meaning in order to fit the secular post-Judeo-Christian society. To return to the theoretical framework, there is a belief that religion has its own autonomous essence, distanced and understood separate from other spheres. The following result of this is a universal definition of the phenomenon we call religion. The notion of separate spheres is recognizable in Thurfjell’s essay as he describes the Study of Religions separated from the individual’s personal beliefs. Supposedly, the secular domain contributes to religious plurality by actually restricting religiosity which can be observed in Thurfjell’s three rules set for *Religionswissenschaft*. The problem here is that if the Study of Religions takes one worldview for granted, it automatically takes for granted that there is a universal definition of religion, since religions are studied from the point of view of the secular post-Judeo-Christian worldview. This leads not only to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of other religions, but it does also lead to feelings of exclusion among students who do not share this particular worldview. Therefore we must ask ourselves whether secular automatically translate as neutral, and if the Study of Religions has been exposed to the very rules set by it.

Let us now turn our attention to two anecdotes shared by Thurfjell that exemplifies the challenges of multi-religious student groups:

“On one occasion I had prepared a seminar about Islamic folk beliefs in north-western Africa. The students, who were almost exclusively Muslim, had been asked to read some ethnographic texts about this field and to reflect upon a number of questions concerning the meaning and social functions of the different beliefs and practices described. One question concerned popular narratives about jinns and the way these narratives reflected gender roles and notions of sexuality in the given cultural context. I still remember the complete lack of comprehension in the students’ faces as I asked them to share their reflections on that particular question. It is of course important to mention that these were first-semester students with little or no prior academic experience. Still, I believe it is safe to say that their inability to comprehend this question reflected the fact that they did not share the secular

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63 Jinns are spiritual creatures mentioned in the Islamic scriptures and beliefs.
life-world framework within which the question was put…it became obvious to me that a majority of the seminar thought of jinns as something as real as say, rabbits or foxes.\textsuperscript{64}

This anecdote is interesting for two reasons: (1) it was not obvious to Thurfjell that Muslims believe in jinns although there is a whole chapter devoted to the subject of jinns\textsuperscript{65} in what Muslims believe to be the words of Allah: namely the Quran. (2) An interesting contradiction becomes obvious here. As the three rules mentioned above implies, students must be able to think distance themselves and think from the point of view of other perspectives. This is specifically mentioned in rule number three titled as the ‘as if’-approach. What is interesting here is that Thurfjell fails to do the exact same thing, and experiences challenges in understanding that these Muslim students actually believe that jinns are real just as Thurfjell believes that rabbits and foxes are real. Consequently, Thurfjell fails to apply the very methodology presented by him. This is something which I will return to for a second time in anecdote number two, and it follows like this:

“…a group of young Somali women became furious and indignant when their instructor, my colleague, urged them to move away from their confessional insider understanding of Islam and to try to discuss it on a more distanced and analytical level.”\textsuperscript{66}

The problem of this anecdote is Thurfjell’s attempts in explaining as to why this group of young Somali women reacted the way they did. He writes:

“Now, in order to understand their anger it is important to know something of their background. The Somali community is heavily marginalized in Swedish society. Largely excluded from the labour market, they are one of the least-integrated immigrant groups in the Country (Somalier i Sverige 1998). It is reasonable to assume that these young women have had to struggle hard for their place in the Swedish educational system. Compared to most of their ethnically Swedish classmates, they have presumably had to battle not only language problems, but also the problem of not automatically sharing the reference world which is the implicit default in the Swedish school system. Along with this is included the humiliation of realizing that one’s knowledge of a non-European language (or possibly languages) and one’s own acquaintedness with a different set of cultural references, including knowledge about Islamic traditions, are not valued at all. It is reasonable to assume that these young women, when the seminar of Islam appeared on their schedule, expected a chance to, for once, be more knowledgeable and confident than their Swedish classmates. Seen in this circumstance, it is possible to

\textsuperscript{64} Thurfjell 2011:210–211.

\textsuperscript{65} Chapter 72 (Surah Jinn)

\textsuperscript{66} Thurfjell 2011: 211.
understand how the teacher’s correction of their confessional approach could cause such offence. Even in a discussion about their own religion, the Somalis were placed at a disadvantage relative to the Swedes and, even though they were in a sense now playing on their home ground, their competence and knowledge was considered less useful and valuable.  

This is when the Study of Religions becomes Sociology at its best. Because what Thurfjell goes on to do here is some kind of social psychological analysis as to why the group of Somali women got upset. The matter has been reduced and explained only in terms of natural explanations fitting to the secular perspective. What is more disturbing is that Thurfjell’s explanations are, as he mentions himself, only a set of assumptions. This, in my opinion, is unfair to the group of Somali women. Reducing this problem to only a matter of pedagogical challenge will be misleading and miss out on asking the important questions, such as: Why if there is no secular in other religious traditions? This question is important to ask, since Thurfjell’s colleague asked the group of women to distance themselves from their personal point of view which yet again reveals the tendencies towards a universal concept of religion where the religious and the secular are two different and therefore two separate spheres. Why is it considered that the group of Muslim women failed to distance themselves and therefore think within different frameworks of thought, and not Thurfjell’s colleague who obviously failed to do the same thing? It is because his colleague has taken for granted that there is a distinctive sphere named religion and a distinctive sphere named secular that people, no matter religious affiliation, operate in between as they wish to. This example shows how the Study of Religions actually fails its own methodology which is very worrying. I remember my study counselor telling me once that I should leave my religious beliefs outside the school with no understanding or whatsoever that my religion permeates my life on a twenty-four/seven basis. My beliefs are not simply something I only do for practical reasons, but they are related to the existential questions greater then my own level of comprehension. Religion cannot be studied or defined as a backpack which you can get on and off at will. We must first give it the respect it deserves before we even attempt to study it.

Furthermore, Thurfjell describes the department within which he teaches and within which I study with the following words: “Department for the Study of Religions at Södertörn University teaches Religionswissenschaft, which we understand as the non-confessional, historical, comparative and social study of religion.” The first thing coming to my mind from the previous chapter is the fact that there is no non-Western term equivalent to that of Western religion. If we do not have terms corresponding to

67 Ibid. p. 211.
each other, it would be normal to assume that our conceptions of religions are therefore different and not the same. So, with the risk of using the term religion in different senses depending on which religion it is, how do we then conduct comparative studies? More importantly, what is the basis for the comparative studies, and what is our starting-point? Given what this study has shown, it looks like the only way for us to conduct comparative studies on religions is by projecting a concept of religion which we take for granted for being universal on non-Western religions. In other words, once we have labeled it religion, we can then begin to study it. Time will tell whether the field of the Study of Religions will develop new and adequate concepts and methodologies more fruitful than those clearly outdated of today. Thus, it becomes extremely important for us, or my elderly scholars to be correct, to go back and critically examine the premises which the Study of Religions was based on in the first place.

To summarize and answer the questions that were in focus of this study, the challenges for the methodologies applied in the department for the Study of Religions at Södertörn University College are evident, and in need of improvement based on my analysis of Thurfjell’s essay. Although the methodologies offered by Thurfjell are primarily for turning multi-religious student groups into assets, we can conclude that the department has failed its own principles or pragmatic rules as they were. The department for the Study of Religions must first distance itself from its own viewpoint, and let the multi-religious student groups challenge its presuppositions. The department must first show the same self-reflexivity it requires from its students. To put it differently, the department is in need of these challenges, and what Thurfjell’s essay is suggesting would simply erase those challenges and prevent further developments within the department. The remaining task will then be to go beyond these Eurocentric narratives and universal projections on other religions and traditions. The Study of Religions is practiced in allegiance to the specific framework of thought of the secular post-Judeo-Christian tradition. We can hereby also draw the conclusion that nothing happens to Religionswissenschaft when taught to multi-religious student groups, since the field does not allow anything to happen. This is simply because nothing can happen because they have to abandon, even if it is for a while, their own personal beliefs. Therefore, the Study of Religion remains unchallenged. The question is, of course, tempting: What would happen if the Study of Religions and Thurfjell allowed themselves to be challenged by other perspectives? If there is a wish to turn diverse student groups into assets, one must simply let their differences flourish. They can only be turned into assets and therefore question and challenge already existing presuppositions by letting them express themselves in ways that are unique to them.
Conclusion and personal reflections and suggestions

First of all I would like to make clear that although my critics of the Study of Religions at Södertörn University College, it should not be understood as a total waste. It was because of the Study of Religions that I was able to learn and gain knowledge regarding these questions. It is also because of my studies that I have been able to critically and fairly reflect over my own personal situation and presuppositions. I feel much more confident in my individual thinking due to the studies, and although the field may not be perfect, I am very much indebted to it and my teachers I have been fortunate to have.

The purpose of this study was to (1) give a historical background of the concept of religion; (2) critically examine the challenges in the Study of Religions based on David Thurfjell and his essay *Religionswissenschaft and the challenge of multi-religious student groups*; and (3) to offer a solution that might improve and turn the study of religion into a more fruitful field.

We can draw the conclusion that, as far as etymological concerns, the very term religion is native to Europe. There is no non-Western term corresponding to what is known as religion. The developments in constructing the concept of religion have solely been the theological and intellectual endeavor of the Christian West. Given that the Study of Religions has failed to show the same self-reflexivity as it requires from its students, it has also failed its own methodologies; a set of methodologies which Thurfjell seem to believe are free from all kinds of human presuppositions, which does not reflect the reality. The field of the Study of Religions must let multi-religious student groups with different presuppositions challenge the existing presuppositions of the field which seems to be taken for granted as some kind of universal truths. The field must confront not only its own history but also the concepts that it has inherited from the time in which it was formed. It is easy to be critical and point out the flaws of others. But what is difficult is to be able to do it in a constructive manner, and actually offer something that could improve what one feels is not good enough. I will try to give some personal suggestions on how the Study of Religious should operate in the future. This is, of course, based on my limited knowledge and I would therefore like to ask for the indulgence of the readers. My suggesting is that the curriculum needs to be remade. Instead of filling the first year with a number of different traditions (such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and etc.), the curriculum should include the challenges for the Study of Religions. The challenges and problems should be made visible as soon as possible. There should be theoretical and philosophical discussion allowed where students can express themselves starting from their own presuppositions. This is for the reason that the differences among students, teachers and the field should be mapped out as quickly as possible. Instead of asking them to
talk about the crucifixion of Jesus according to different views among Christian traditions, they should be asked about religion. A space for an open and free dialogue should be made available. The problems the young group of Somali women experienced would maybe not happen if the differences were made visible in the beginning.
References


