

The Ideology of Religious Studies: The Birth of a Breakthrough or an Unnecessary Blow to a Discipline Fighting for its Place in the Academic Canon?

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Abstract

Studies in Religion Departments continue to be undervalued within Australia's tertiary education sector. As universities move funding and attention towards vocational degrees rather than humanities, it is important to revisit and build upon existing debates surrounding the efficacy and importance of critical examinations of religious phenomena. Timothy Fitzgerald's *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (1999) provides a vessel for conversation and debate regarding whether a discipline built upon Euro-centric constructs, which fails to agree upon its own definitions, can add value as an academic category. This article will provide an overview of Fitzgerald's arguments, followed by an exploration of rebuttals made by Kevin Schilbrack and Alexander Henley. Fitzgerald singles out Studies in Religion, failing to extend his analysis to the other academic disciplines (including, for instance, Art History) that also squabble about the meaning of their category and the influence of dubious colonial origins. *The Ideology of Religious Studies* continues to impact the discipline as it contributes to a narrative that undermines the credibility of the subject. I stress the irony that Fitzgerald's arguments for the need to dissolve Religious Studies as a discipline. The way to improve Euro-centric academic categories and ensure they account for cross-cultural phenomena is not to dissolve them completely, but to change them. Instead of 'giving up' we must continue to focus on platforming a diverse array of voices and embrace academic 'self-awareness'.

Keywords: Studies in Religion, Judaeo-Christian, Euro-centric, secular, critical religion, theology, academic.

Introduction

As funding is decreased and withdrawn from the few remaining university Studies in Religion departments across Australia, it is necessary to reflect on the place of the discipline in the academic canon. At the University of Sydney, where I work and intend to complete my PhD, the discipline has recently been downgraded from a Major to a Minor. Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm states in *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory*, "'Religion' has been under attack as a concept since before 'postmodernism' is supposed to have appeared."¹ In a world where religious conflict is widespread and interfaith dialogue often flounders, how will one be able to understand their fellow humans without an understanding of their ultimate, existential concerns? I am teaching a first-year unit this semester and have been delighted to witness the

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¹ Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm, *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), p. 61.

magic that takes place when students put on their “critical” scholarly hats and debate the definition of religion, the Judeo-Christian-centric roots of the discipline, and whether we can *ever* discuss religion critically. The Studies in Religion classroom is a safe place where bias is unpacked and we try our hardest to leave our emotional attachments at the door. At this time, I wish to re-examine a work that ignited much debate upon its release, as it questioned whether the Studies in Religion discipline should continue to stand alone as an independent school of thought. Yet, Timothy Fitzgerald argued that “... there is no coherent non-theological basis for the study of religion as a separate academic discipline,” and called for the closure of independent Studies in Religion departments.² While I disagree with Fitzgerald’s ultimate call to action, I appreciate the debate that was sparked by the release of this work, and argue that the retorts offered by scholars in response can be built upon to reaffirm the relevance of the discipline today.

Fitzgerald posited that the concept of ‘religion’ as the categorical opposite of ‘secular’ “operates rhetorically to make capitalism and liberal Individualism seem ‘natural’, with a mask of scientific objectivity, normality and respectability.”³ In other words, Fitzgerald claims that religion is a Euro-centric category that fails to account for any unique ‘cross-cultural’ phenomena.⁴ This concept was introduced by Jonathan Z. Smith in 1988. Smith stated, “it is the study of religion that created the category, it is the study of religion that invented ‘religion’.”⁵ *The Ideology of Religious Studies* provides arguments for why religion should instead be studied as an “ideological category” under the umbrella of other disciplinary departments such as cultural studies or anthropology.⁶ Fitzgerald’s work led to vigorous academic debate with many scholars providing rebuttals or support, including Kevin Schilbrack and Alexander Henley. These scholars will be discussed as they are indicative of the discourse produced in response to Fitzgerald’s work. This breakthrough had a profound impact on the discipline as it jeopardised the livelihoods of Studies in Religion scholars, who understood their positions could be made redundant if Fitzgerald’s assertions were taken to be true by university leadership. Moreover, the concept of ‘critical religion’ was developed by Fitzgerald to reference the goals of his work and the work of scholars with similar perspectives.⁷ *The Ideology of Religious Studies* and its associated discourse continues to impact the discipline today, as made clear through the continued questioning of the importance and function of Religious Studies departments. I argue that if Religious Studies were to be dissolved or merged into other Humanities disciplines, Fitzgerald would be proving his own point: that the school of thought cannot escape its Euro-centric foundations or resolve its issues with definition. Merging with other Humanities disciplines would defeat the idea that academic schools of thought cannot evolve or find flexibility in the face of critique. Instead, self-criticism

² Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 3.

³ Timothy Fitzgerald, “*The Ideology of Religious Studies* Then and Now: The Author’s View,” *Implicit Religion*, vol. 22, nos 3–4 (2019), p. 268.

⁴ Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, p. 4.

⁵ Jonathan Z. Smith, “‘RELIGION’ AND ‘RELIGIOUS STUDIES’: No Difference at All”, *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 71, nos 2-3 (1988), p. 234.

⁶ Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, p. 4.

⁷ Mitsutoshi Horii, “Historicizing the Category of ‘Religion’ in Sociological Theories: Max Weber and Emile Durkheim”, *Critical Research on Religion* 7, no. 1 (2019), p. 25.

will provide a framework from which Studies in Religion scholars can continue work with the discipline's problematic foundations laid bare.

Context

There is some conjecture as to when Studies in Religion first developed as a school of thought; however, it can be assumed that the academic discipline as we recognise it today was established in earnest in the twentieth century. This is when academics began to refer to themselves as scholars of Religious Studies.⁸ However, this followed a period of deep exploration that took place in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a period which laid the foundations of the discipline and shall be discussed in more depth here. As outlined by Akram,

It was in the second half of the nineteenth century that the study of religion acquired its institutional character and chairs and professorships for this field started to appear one by one in many important seats of learning across the Western Europe.⁹

In the wider context of the history of academia, this was long after L'università di Bologna (widely considered the first university in Europe) began teaching in the eleventh century.¹⁰ Studies in Religion also differed to the many well-established university Theology departments that were already in operation. Whilst these Theology departments focused on knowledge production from a religious standpoint, the new Studies in Religion departments were instead concerned with a critical and non-biased approach to religious analysis.¹¹ The distinction between Theology and Religious Studies is stark and important. Generally, theologians do not attempt to distance their own beliefs from their research and the discipline is openly underpinned by faith-based bias. Studies in Religion scholars attempt to do the opposite, distancing themselves from issues of personal belief to produce analysis that is useful to a broader audience. The establishment of a discipline that could produce non-biased approaches to religious material is indicated by the early name of the discipline *Religionswissenschaft*, which means 'science of religion' in German.¹² However, despite these intentions, nineteenth century Religious Studies departments produced analysis influenced by European and Christian biases. Muhammad Akram notes that "it is striking to note that emergence of the academic study of religion coincided with major developments of European powers' colonial project."¹³ The most obvious example of this colonial foundation are the racist terms such as "savage" and "primitive," which were often used to describe non-European peoples and

⁸ Donald Wiebe, *The Learned Practice of Religion in the Modern University* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), p. 11.

⁹ Muhammad Akram, "Emergence of the Modern Academic Study of Religion: An Analytical Survey of Various Interpretations", *Islamic Studies* 55, nos 1-2 (2016), p. 12.

¹⁰ Bryan E. Peterson, "Founding of the University of Bologna (ca. late 11th Century)", in, *Great Events in Religion: An Encyclopedia of Pivotal Events in Religious History: AD 600 to 1450*, eds. Florin Curta and Andrew Holt (London: Bloomsbury Publishing 2016), p. 497.

¹¹ Adam Kotsko, *What Is Theology? Christian Thought and Contemporary Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), p. 1.

¹² Akram, "Emergence of the Modern Academic Study of Religion", p. 10.

¹³ Akram, "Emergence of the Modern Academic Study of Religion", p. 13.

traditions.¹⁴ The belief systems of non-Europeans were compared to Christian ideas and value judgements were assigned in response to similarities and difference.¹⁵

Influential early Studies in Religion scholars including Max Weber and Emile Durkheim approached the issue of defining religion in different ways.¹⁶ Whilst Weber was reluctant to provide a direct definition of 'religion' his writing indicated that he viewed religion as a set of regulatory systems found in every culture.¹⁷ Weber was concerned with comparing religions; however, this endeavour reflected his Protestant bias.¹⁸ Horii outlines Durkheim's definition of religion: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things ...".¹⁹ The colonial tone of the Religious Studies discipline is clearly visible in these influential early approaches to definition, separating religion and culture in a way not applicable to most non-Christian examples. As religion is no longer definitionally considered in terms of 'regulatory systems' of guidance, Studies of Religion today lacks a broadly accepted definition of the concept. Carole M. Cusack notes:

the definition of 'religion' itself is often left vague and indefinite. Until recently this openness was viewed as a strength, and certain scholars rejected outright suggestions that any particular theoretical orthodoxy or definition of religion be mandated, even if they were sympathetic to critics of the discipline.²⁰

There is no definitive definition of 'religion'. This is cause for concern among some humanities scholars: if there is no definition of religion, how does a Religious Studies department know what to study? Some scholars argue that stepping away from a preoccupation with "unnecessary" definitions of religion will help the discipline.²¹ However, according to Fitzgerald, the lack of concrete understanding of what constitutes a religion, in combination with the discipline's colonial foundations and loaded language, means the school of thought does not "pick out any distinctive cross-cultural aspect of human life" and therefore "Religion cannot reasonably be taken to be a valid analytical category."²² This argument had a profound impact on the Studies in Religion discipline, as it threatens its very existence.

Timothy Fitzgerald

Fitzgerald is an English scholar who completed his PhD in the Faculty of Theology at King's College London.²³ Fitzgerald's *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (1999) was a breakthrough text when it was released and continues to prove impactful today (more widely expanded in

¹⁴ Robert Launay, "Defining Religion: Durkheim and Weber Compared", *Religions*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2022), p. 9.

¹⁵ Launay, "Defining Religion: Durkheim and Weber Compared", p. 8.

¹⁶ Horii, "Historicizing the Category of 'Religion' in Sociological Theories", p. 26.

¹⁷ Horii, "Historicizing the Category of 'Religion' in Sociological Theories", p. 28.

¹⁸ Launay, "Defining Religion: Durkheim and Weber Compared", pp. 7-8.

¹⁹ Horii, "Historicizing the Category of 'Religion' in Sociological Theories", p. 30.

²⁰ Carole M. Cusack, "Discontinuous Meditations on the Phenomenology of Religion", *Mentalities/ Mentalités* vol. 25, nos 1-2 (2011), p. 1.

²¹ Josephson Storm, *Metamodernism*, p. 62.

²² Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, p. 4.

²³ The Center for Critical Research on Religion, "Timothy Fitzgerald", accessed 26 May 2024. At <https://criticaltheoryofreligion.org/timothy-fitzgerald/>.

Discourse on Barbarity and Civility, 2009). Fitzgerald was a trailblazer of ‘critical religion’ and his work triggered significant scholarly debate. There was one main question central to the discussion Fitzgerald fostered: Should Studies in Religion remain an independent academic discipline? *The Ideology of Religious Studies* addresses issues of colonial influence, the problematic religious/secular divide, and ideologically loaded language as the three core reasons that Religious Studies should not continue as an independent academic discipline.²⁴

In 1999, claiming that Religious Studies had a colonial, Euro-centric influence was hardly a niche viewpoint.²⁵ However, arguing that this Euro-centric perspective was so pervasive that it rendered Religious Studies frameworks unable to account for any particular cross-cultural phenomenon was new. While acknowledging that many writers have attempted it, Fitzgerald suggested that “reducing its specifically Christian elements” and trying to mould the Western concept of religion to fit neatly on to non-European cultures was an impossible task.²⁶ Fitzgerald used his observational experience in both India and Japan as examples of the inability to separate the religious from the secular in some societies, therefore arguing that this strict religious/secular divide did not exist everywhere. He states that “the customary practices in India and Japan... are both ‘religious’ and ‘secular’, and therefore neither.”²⁷ When reflecting on his work twenty years after its initial release, Fitzgerald stated that “A core part of the argument was and is that the invention of generic religion and its binary opposite the non-religious secular operates rhetorically to make capitalism and liberal Individualism seem ‘natural’, with a mask of scientific objectivity, normality and respectability.”²⁸ Fitzgerald argued that as a result of this inability to account for a concept that surpasses the boundaries of societal context, religion cannot be used to analyse non-European cultures, stating that “Religion cannot reasonably be taken to be a valid analytical category since it does not pick out any distinctive cross-cultural aspect of human life.”²⁹ Fitzgerald stressed that instead of being viewed as an “objective category,” religion should be recognised as a Western “ideological category.”³⁰ Fitzgerald outlined that Studies in Religion should therefore merge with other academic departments, such as Cultural Studies or Anthropology.³¹ Fitzgerald argues that,

Instead of studying religion as though it were some objective feature of societies, it should instead be studied as an ideological category, an aspect of modern western ideology, with a specific location in history, including the nineteenth-century period of European colonization.³²

However, Fitzgerald himself later changed his perspective on this merging of disciplines, concluding that many other Humanities departments, including Cultural Studies and

²⁴ Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, p. 4.

²⁵ Myrna P. Sheldon, Terence Keel and Ahmed Ragab, “Introduction,” in *Approaches to Science and Religion*, eds Myrna P. Sheldon, Terence Keel and Ahmed Ragab (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), p. 1.

²⁶ Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, p. 5.

²⁷ Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, p. 282.

²⁸ Fitzgerald, “The Ideology of Religious Studies Then and Now”, p. 268.

²⁹ Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, p. 4.

³⁰ Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, p. 4.

³¹ Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, p. 4.

³² Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, p. 4.

Anthropology, also “rest on wobbly foundations.”³³ Fitzgerald’s work was a breakthrough in the true sense of the word, challenging the validity of the very discipline it discussed, calling scholars to either defend it or accept its potential irrelevance. Again reflecting on his work two decades later, Fitzgerald highlighted,

I wanted to show why the discourse on religion, religions, and world religions, while appearing to give us a useful and objective descriptive and analytical tool, imposed a conceptual grid on colonised sites that reorganised the indigenous customary practices along a fictional axis of progress and development.³⁴

The Ideology of Religious Studies did successfully communicate that the discipline is colonial and Euro-centric, which continues to prove problematic. However, over twenty-five years after its release I argue that whilst Fitzgerald’s work was breakthrough due to its divergent perspective, the debate and discourse that it inspired that is of more significant value.

Response

Fitzgerald’s breakthrough work led to new and innovative academic debates across Studies in Religion departments internationally, further developing a new category of ‘critical religion’, building upon the “critical realism” of Roy Bhaskar.³⁵ Retorts and support were offered by a range of scholars including Kevin Schilbrack and Alexander Henley. Firstly, I will discuss Schilbrack’s “The Social Construction of ‘Religion’ and Its Limits: A Critical Reading of Timothy Fitzgerald” (2012) as it represents the tone of many reviews that challenge the conclusions of *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. In the years since the work’s release, a popular perspective has developed, that Fitzgerald’s arguments are compelling but do not necessitate the termination of Studies in Religion. Schilbrack disagreed with Fitzgerald’s arguments, stating,

I agree that “religion” is a social construction. I will argue nevertheless that “religion” is descriptively and analytically useful, and it is useful because there really are religions that exist “out there” in the world.³⁶

Schilbrack challenges Fitzgerald’s view that “the concept of religion has no descriptive or analytical value” with two core rebuttals.³⁷

Firstly, Schilbrack addresses “The first and central aspect of Fitzgerald’s position is his claim that the concept of “religion” is a social construction.”³⁸ Schilbrack compares this to other “social facts” widely accepted by many societies, that are also “rhetorically invented by

³³ Fitzgerald, “*The Ideology of Religious Studies* Then and Now”, p. 283.

³⁴ Fitzgerald, “*The Ideology of Religious Studies* Then and Now”, p. 287.

³⁵ Roy Bhaskar, “Critical Realism and the Ontology of Persons,” *Journal of Critical Realism*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2020), p. 113.

³⁶ Kevin Schilbrack, “The Social Construction of ‘Religion’ and Its Limits: A Critical Reading of Timothy Fitzgerald”, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2012), p. 98.

³⁷ Schilbrack, “The Social Construction of ‘Religion’ and Its Limits”, p. 99.

³⁸ Schilbrack, “The Social Construction of ‘Religion’ and Its Limits”, p. 98.

definition.”³⁹ These “social facts” include the ultimately arbitrary nature of borders between states and marriage. As outlined by Schilbrack,

To deny that religions exist for those reasons would be analogous to saying that “there are no wives out there” because marriage is rhetorically invented, a wedding is an ideologically loaded event, and wives come into existence only in tandem with husbands.⁴⁰

This example highlights that, although religion is a “social fact” that may exist without concrete evidence of its “existence”, “their existence is sustained by convention, performance, and language and often by the power necessary to secure that rhetoric.”⁴¹ Secondly, Schilbrack communicates that, contrary to Fitzgerald’s argument, Western constructs can be used to analyse non-Western phenomena. Schilbrack states,

In the first place, the idea that if a culture lacks the concept of “religion,” then it is inappropriate to use that concept when describing or analysing it insulates cultures not only from external critique but also from external interpretation.⁴²

This point was also discussed by Brent Nongbri in *Before Religion* (2013), another influential work, which I will now briefly discuss as an alternative to Fitzgerald’s radical conclusions. In *Before Religion*, Nongbri argues that the concept of religion evolved in the seventeenth century and consists of “anything that sufficiently resembles modern Protestant Christianity.”⁴³ Nongbri disagrees with Weber’s perspective that religion is found in every culture and instead stresses that religion (as it is recognised today in popular discourse) did not exist in ancient cultures or at any point before the seventeenth century.⁴⁴ However, Nongbri acknowledges that while the concept of ‘religion’ is limited by its Euro-centric nature and “efforts to de-Christianize it are to some extent futile,” it remains a valid analytical category.⁴⁵ Nongbri stresses that ongoing use of the category of religion should be marked by categorical self-criticism; that is to say, Religious Studies scholars who wish to continue producing working within the discipline should “generate creative ways of using the category while acknowledging its roots as a relic of Christian polemic.”⁴⁶ Schilbrack also highlights that moving toward substantive definitions of religion, as opposed to functional definitions, can help to remedy what Fitzgerald sees as a ‘catch-all’ issue with the term and its current usage.⁴⁷ Fitzgerald maintains that the broad overuse of the term religion has erased its meaning. Schilbrack maintains that while functional definitions of religion often lack boundaries, substantive definitions allow scholars to ask, “according to what definition of religion would

³⁹ Schilbrack, “The Social Construction of ‘Religion’ and Its Limits”, p. 100.

⁴⁰ Schilbrack, “The Social Construction of ‘Religion’ and Its Limits”, p. 101.

⁴¹ Schilbrack, “The Social Construction of ‘Religion’ and Its Limits”, p. 100.

⁴² Schilbrack, “The Social Construction of ‘Religion’ and Its Limits”, p. 102.

⁴³ Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 15-18.

⁴⁴ Horii, “Historicizing the Category of ‘Religion’ in Sociological Theories”, p. 28.

⁴⁵ Nongbri, *Before Religion*, p. 12.

⁴⁶ Nongbri, *Before Religion*, p. 12.

⁴⁷ Schilbrack, “The Social Construction of ‘Religion’ and Its Limits”, p. 106.

this count as a religion?,” instead of, “is this a religion?”⁴⁸ In *Before Religion*, Nongbri takes this argument further, stating that moving away from efforts to find a conclusive definition of religion will help give scholars more freedom within the discipline.⁴⁹

Moreover, Religious Studies scholars have looked to the question of “What is art?” to aid in the exploration of definitional importance. As outlined by Storm, Morris Weitz sought to answer the question in his 1956 work “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics.” Weitz referred to art as an “open concept”: “that art is a family-resemblance concept... It is based in unevenly shared similarities rather than in a definition.”⁵⁰ These rebuttals in Schilbrack and Nongbri, illustrate the influence of *The Ideology of Religious Studies* in inspiring further critical deconstructions. To further the point, political and religious (as the terms are taken to mean in popularist perspectives) concepts often intersect, so much so that it is sometimes difficult to identify where politics ends and religion start. This further encourages a move away from a strict functional definition of religion.

In comparison, there are scholars who agreed with Fitzgerald’s call to cull the Religious Studies category. Arguments on this side of the debate include those of Alexander Henley “Islam as a Challenge to The Ideology of Religious Studies: Failures of Religious Studies in the Middle East” (2019). Henley argues that,

By taking seriously a certain Islamic perspective on the terms of Western scholarship, this article highlights ways in which it supports Timothy Fitzgerald’s critique in *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000). It poses a challenge to the idea of value-free study of religion, religions and the religious as conducted through any discipline.⁵¹

Henley acknowledges the way that Western organisational structures have impacted non-European cultures. He stresses that the reasons Religious Studies has not readily been adopted as a discipline in Middle Eastern academia support Fitzgerald’s assertions.⁵² The Christian bias in Studies in Religion centres this particular cultural history, preventing other cultural perspectives from being represented. According to Rushain Abbasi, placing “modern European history at the very centre of their analysis... obstructs the ability of premodern Muslims to speak for themselves.”⁵³ Moreover, as previously discussed, when Studies in Religion was founded as an academic discipline, it “coincided with major developments of European powers’ colonial project.”⁵⁴ With reference to Fitzgerald, Henley highlights that many Middle Eastern scholars continue to recognise the discipline as “inherently “connected to cultural imperialism and orientalism.”⁵⁵ Essentially, Henley communicates that the lack of active Religious Studies departments based in the Middle East illustrates that the concept of a “value-neutral study of religion has lost credibility among Muslims,” and essentially provides proof that Fitzgerald is

⁴⁸ Schilbrack, “The Social Construction of ‘Religion’ and Its Limits”, p. 106.

⁴⁹ Nongbri, *Before Religion*, p. 155.

⁵⁰ Storm, *Metamodernism*, p. 63.

⁵¹ Alexander Henley, “Islam as a Challenge to The Ideology of Religious Studies: Failures of Religious Studies in the Middle East,” *Implicit Religion*, vol. 22, nos 3-4 (2019), p. 373.

⁵² Henley, “Islam as a Challenge to The Ideology of Religious Studies”, p. 386.

⁵³ Henley, “Islam as a Challenge to *The Ideology of Religious Studies*”, p. 382.

⁵⁴ Akram, “Emergence of the Modern Academic Study of Religion”, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Henley, “Islam as a Challenge to *The Ideology of Religious Studies*”, p. 382.

justified in calling for the cessation of the discipline, as it cannot account for cross-cultural phenomena.⁵⁶

Impact

The Ideology of Religious Studies was impactful as the arguments it presented jeopardised the livelihoods of scholars working in Studies in Religion departments. As highlighted by Fitzgerald when reflecting on his influential work twenty years later,

My purpose was to show the contradictions and the mostly unconscious rhetorical techniques for disguising the relation between the study of religion and the reproduction of the wider ideological formation.... This would threaten not only the survival of religious studies departments, but the entire system of classification that supports secular social and natural science.⁵⁷

As alluded to in this quote, there were in fact many livelihoods at stake. This kind of ‘real world’ impact is not as common when working in the realm of theoretical scholarly pursuits. This statement by Fitzgerald also indicates his potential realisation that calling for the extinction of Religious Studies departments was an over-reach. Fitzgerald has since asserted that “Our collective and personal consciousness is heavily dominated by empty abstractions that appear concrete, and that unconsciously operate and organise our knowledge. There are many other problematic inventions such as ‘history’, ‘nature’, and ‘The Enlightenment’.”⁵⁸ I agree with Fitzgerald in the sense that the academic world operates in a maze of constructs; however, if we were to remove all disciplines founded upon ‘empty abstractions,’ there would be few disciplines left. For example, if Religious Studies was eliminated as an independent discipline due its lack of definition, colonial roots and Euro-centric qualities, then Art History should also be disassembled. Art History has historically excluded and ‘othered’ non-European cultures and this is reflected in the discipline’s methodological approaches.⁵⁹ Moreover, the definition of ‘art’ is just as contested within its own discipline as ‘religion’.⁶⁰ As Smith detailed,

the concept “religion” functions as a category formation for religious studies as its close analogue “culture” functions for anthropology or “language” functions for general linguistics. Like them, it is to be judged solely by its theoretical utility.⁶¹

Religion and politics scholars like Naomi Goldenberg have offered support for Fitzgerald’s arguments. Goldenberg highlights that “‘religion’ as both term and concept must be deconstructed.”⁶² I agree with this sentiment, as re-evaluating and examining the development

⁵⁶ Henley, “Islam as a Challenge to *The Ideology of Religious Studies*”, p. 383.

⁵⁷ Fitzgerald, “*The Ideology of Religious Studies* Then and Now”, p. 273.

⁵⁸ Fitzgerald, “*The Ideology of Religious Studies* Then and Now”, p. 282.

⁵⁹ Joshua I. Cohen, Foad Torshizi an Vazira Zamindar, “Art History, Postcolonialism, and the Global Turn”, *ARTMargins*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2023), p. 3.

⁶⁰ Tiziana Andina, “What is Art?,” *Brill Research Perspectives in Art and Law*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2017): p. 1.

⁶¹ Smith “‘RELIGION’ AND ‘RELIGIOUS STUDIES’”, p. 235.

⁶² Naomi Goldenberg, “The Religious Is Political,” in *The End of Religion*, eds Naomi Goldenberg and Kathleen McPhillips (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 14.

of academic terms and concepts is a helpful way to reflect on Western biases. However, I disagree with Goldenberg's assertion that, by acknowledging the category of religion (and therefore the discipline of Religious Studies), feminists fall short of their analytical and critical potential:

Although feminist academics and activists have energetically opposed the blatant sexism and misogyny that characterises many religious beliefs and practices, feminist theory, to its detriment, has stalled at the threshold of "religion" by continuing to reify the category.⁶³

This argument is reductive. Instead of disassembling an academic category because it is a Western construct, one should encourage a diverse range of academic voices. Returning to the example of Art History, the discipline was constructed by Western men for Western men. Today, feminists do not call for the deconstruction of the discipline as a whole. Instead, female, queer, Indigenous, and other minority voices are encouraged to contribute to the canon, unpacking and re-assessing the impact of the discipline's past without calling into question its existential future. In 2025, Religious Studies has been impacted by Fitzgerald's critique, as departments in several major universities (including the University of Sydney) have experienced budget cuts or been closed completely.⁶⁴ This does not mirror the increase in religiously motivated events occurring in wider society that call for our consideration. Cusack stresses that,

never before have we been quite so much in need of religious literacy, which is a basic knowledge of all the religions of the world... We are in multi-faith, multi-ethnic contexts. There's a lot of aggressive religion but also a lot of anti-religious secularism going on today as well.⁶⁵

Fitzgerald developed the term 'critical religion' to label his work and the work of other scholars who sought to discard the Religious Studies discipline altogether.⁶⁶ 'Critical religion' focuses on the binary religious/secular divide as a problematic Western, colonial classification that renders the entire Religious Studies discipline unnecessary and unhelpful.⁶⁷ While 'critical theories' of religion consider the limitations of the category of religion yet still accept it as a valid analytical device, critical religion does not accept that religion can be used to examine cross-cultural phenomena and instead focuses on "the genealogy of the concept of religion."⁶⁸ Horii notes that scholars who are considered proponents of 'critical religion' include Russell McCutcheon and Talal Asad, whose work "often takes the combination of postcolonial and poststructuralist perspectives to analyse the ideological function of the religious–secular

⁶³ Goldenberg, "The Religious Is Political", p. 13.

⁶⁴ Jordan Baker, "Sydney unis consider more cuts, including religion and theatre," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 May 2021. At: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/sydney-unis-consider-more-cuts-including-religionand-theatre-20210505-p57p3n.html>.

⁶⁵ Baker, "Sydney unis consider more cuts, including religion and theatre."

⁶⁶ Warren S. Goldstein, Rebekka King and Jonathn Boyarin, "Critical theory of religion vs. critical religion", *Critical Research on Religion*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2016), p. 3.

⁶⁷ Horii, "Historicizing the Category of 'Religion' in Sociological Theories", p. 26.

⁶⁸ Goldstein, King and Boyarin, "Critical theory of religion vs. critical religion", p. 4.

distinction.”⁶⁹ Moreover, concepts such as “methodological atheism” seeks to “bracket” out the supernatural experience in academic study.⁷⁰ Douglas V. Porpora argues that “[m]ethodological atheism is the practice of bracketing – or refusing to consider – for the purpose of sociological study the ultimate reality of such religious objects as God, angels, or cosmic unity.”⁷¹ In contrast, Nongbri argues that religion is indeed a Euro-centric, Christian construct, but does not extend his critique to the divide between the religious and the secular. Therefore, Nongbri employs critical theories in his religious analysis but does not take a ‘critical religion’ stance.⁷² The development of ‘critical religion’ further demonstrates the impact of the arguments made by Fitzgerald in *The Ideology of Religious Studies*.

Conclusion

Fitzgerald’s *The Ideology of Religious Studies* continues to influence academics working in Religious Studies departments some twenty-five years after its release. Fitzgerald stated twenty years after the release of *The Ideology of Religious Studies* that “Our collective and personal consciousness is heavily dominated by empty abstractions that appear concrete, and that unconsciously operate and organise our knowledge.”⁷³ I agree with Fitzgerald that the academic world operates in a system of constructs. However, as demonstrated with reference to the discipline of Art History, if all ‘empty abstractions’, colonial-influences and/or Euro-centric qualities were removed from all academic disciplines that developed in a Western context then there may not be any departments left. As Josephson Storm stresses,

To completely delete the term religion – the ostensible goal of a bare secularisation – is self-defeating because to do so would undermine the concept of the secular itself. We need rather simultaneously to recognize the contingency of religion and to track the causal processes that anchor its properties. This will permit us to see how not just “religion,” but all the disciplinary master categories have been produced.⁷⁴

In an attempt to avoid the further unravelling of any Religious Studies departments, as suggested by Nongbri, self-criticism and an emphasis on the importance of location in knowledge production will help to ensure the discipline remains relevant long into the future.⁷⁵ Studies in Religion has the opportunity to potentially become the most ‘self-critical discipline’ in the Humanities; this will continue to improve the discipline’s epistemological outputs. Overall, Fitzgerald’s work allowed Studies in Religion scholars to offer their views on why the discipline should remain independent. These arguments are still relied upon today to support the value of Religious Studies departments.

⁶⁹ Horii, “Historicizing the Category of ‘Religion’ in Sociological Theories”, p. 25.

⁷⁰ Douglas V. Porpora, “Methodological Atheism, Methodological Agnosticism and Religious Experience”, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2006), p. 57.

⁷¹ Porpora, “Methodological Atheism, Methodological Agnosticism and Religious Experience”, p. 57.

⁷² Horii, “Historicizing the Category of ‘Religion’ in Sociological Theories”, p. 25.

⁷³ Fitzgerald, “The Ideology of Religious Studies Then and Now”, p. 282.

⁷⁴ Storm, *Metamodernism*, p. 62.

⁷⁵ Nongbri, *Before Religion*, p. 12.