

The Study of Religion at McMaster University, 1966-1984
Its history and achievement
E. P. Sanders, Arts and Sciences Professor of Religion Emeritus, Duke University

I believe that there are a lot of people who could give a better talk on this occasion than I, but I think that no one could have been more pleased to receive the invitation. I love the Department of Religious Studies, I love McMaster, I love Hamilton, I love Ontario, and I love Canada; it follows that I am delighted to be back. I owe my career to McMaster, and so I owe a deep debt of gratitude. But my affection for McMaster and Canada goes far beyond gratitude for past support. I offer my deepest thanks to Travis Kroeker and the members of the department for the invitation to share in this celebration, which I do with great pleasure.

Travis asked me to “provide a combination of personal reminiscence and academic-scholarly reflection on the contributions of the McMaster program.” I want to start with a short reminiscence.

The time was the 1960s. I started work towards a doctoral degree in 1963 and completed it in 1966. I planned to go to Israel to work on rabbinic and modern Hebrew, and so I was turning down job offers. Yes, job *offers*, plural. The 60s were a time of rapid expansion in higher education in both Canada and the U.S. The baby boomers—the progeny of the second world war—were entering universities in large numbers, prosperity was the rule, the Canadian dollar was worth about 1.05 to 1.10 American, and jobs were plentiful. The minister of education in Ontario had the ambition of turning universities here into world-class institutions.

Sometimes the hand-over-fist hiring was too quick for academic health, but we didn't know that at the time.

Eugene Combs got my name from one of my teachers—I think Lou Martyn—and called to ask me to come for an interview. I explained my plan to go to Israel, but he thought that if I came to McMaster I could take an early leave of absence and go abroad. Going abroad with a position was obviously an advantage over going abroad and hunting for one from there, so I came for an interview. I don't remember a lot about it. Well, I do recall the personal warmth of Eugene, Louis Greenspan, Paul Younger, Kathleen Going, J.G. Arapura, and Anthony Stephenson, and the courtesy of George Grant, though I saw some of them very briefly. The most memorable interview was with Mel Preston, the Dean of the Graduate School. He was brief and to the point: we want you to come here and help prepare young Canadians for teaching positions in your field. Are you interested?

I replied enthusiastically that I was.

Everything went as predicted. I taught for two years, applied for leave, won a Canada Council post-Doctoral Fellowship, and spent a year in Israel.

The situation that Mel Preston was worried about was that Canadian universities produced very few doctoral students, not nearly enough for the hiring boom. Thus most new appointees were either British or American. He and doubtless others conceived the aim of making Canada both world-class and largely self-sufficient. In biblical studies we did our best to respond to Mel's vision. I am proud of all our doctoral students, but perhaps especially of

those who took positions in Newfoundland, PEI, and the far reaches of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Some have major positions at leading research universities in Canada, and of course I am proud of them. But I mostly want to note that we very successfully bore fruit and multiplied and filled the corners of the Canadian world with Canadian scholars who were competent in at least two areas in the study of religion.

This brief account of the 1960s leads me in two directions: the character of the senior administration, typified by Mel Preston, and the issue of too many Americans.

First, the senior administration: I think that during the years I was here—fulltime from 1966 to 1984, part-time until 1988—McMaster was blessed with the best senior administration in the history of higher education. Have I sampled all the competition? Well, no, but I'm sure that my evaluation is entirely correct. This is my personal view, but it is not merely my view. Ben Meyer, John Robertson, Adele Reinhartz, Al Baumgarten, Wayne McCready, and many others, have said the very same thing to me that I am now saying to you.

One of the ways of explaining what the senior administrative officers here did is to say that the scientists decided to bring the Arts—the humanities and the social sciences—up more or less to their level. George Grant never ceased to wonder at the fact that the scientists, such as the President, Harry Thode, and the Dean of the Graduate School, Mel Preston, wanted to support research in the Arts, and in particular in religious studies. In retrospect, I wonder at

this far less, since I realize that scientists and mathematicians can appreciate the Arts in a way that we cannot fully reciprocate, since they can understand what we do much better than we can understand what they do. We can admire the results, but it is difficult to understand the process.

I hope that in the following roll call of the great and good I don't leave anyone out. The Presidents during this eighteen-year period—Harry Thode, Art Bourns, Alvin Lee—all firmly backed the efforts of the Department of Religious Studies. The Academic Vice-Presidents—Bill Helmuth, Alvin Lee, Les King—did the same, and did so somewhat more directly than the Presidents. The Graduate Deans—Mel Preston, Alvin Lee, Les King—were enthusiastic supporters. And the Faculty Deans—Saul Frankel, Peter George—did much to further our efforts. This largely home-grown set of administrators always—**always** in my experience, **every single time**—fixed on academic values when discussing any issue that came before them. They almost never mentioned money or financial problems—though of course they had some problems. They always strove to enhance the research of their faculty members, to provide good academic programmes, and to make adequate financial support for doctoral students available.

All of these men had *drive*, and we must assume that they had ambition. But concern for personal fame and glory were submerged beneath care for the academic success of the whole. This is the highest praise that I know how to offer.

Would you please stand and join me in thanking them? There has never been a better bunch of people.

[Sustained and hearty applause.]

One of the downsides to the rapid build-up of several doctoral programs was that Canadians sometimes felt overwhelmed by foreigners. I was always personally unrepentant about coming here when I did, since I had received an offer and accepted it in good faith, and the goal was to help create a Canadian programme. On the other hand, I appreciated and still appreciate the problems that hoards of foreigners—perhaps especially loud, self-assertive Americans—can create. I remembered cultural imperialism from my childhood. Once when I was in the 4th grade, the teacher was reading to us from a geography textbook about the migration of robins. The book explained that we do not see robins in the winter, since they migrate south. It was then January, and as I looked out the window I saw robins bounding all over the lawn. I thought that this was rather odd, but I didn't sort it out until the next year. We *were* south, and the book had been written by some unspeakable damned Yankee and published by some ignorant New York Press. Sheer cultural imperialism, to make us poor southerners think that we shouldn't be seeing robins in winter!

In Canada, of course, I ran into the same cultural imperialism: textbooks written by damned Yankees and published in New York. I think that American instructors would not have been *quite* so irritating if they had been able to use

Canadian materials. I never minded Canadian complaints about cultural imperialism. I in fact developed a self-protective joke. When criticized for being an American, I would explain that I was in fact a Texan, with whom Canadians had a lot in common, including especially the fact that they were superior to the people who lived south of the border.

Net, however, the dominance of Americans did become an uncomfortable issue, and various students and faculty members grumbled about the American take-over—as it sometimes appeared to be. By far the principal grumbler around the McMaster Department of Religious Studies was the man to whom we owed our existence as a department, George Grant. Many of us Yanks had been hired when he chaired the department. And even when he was not chairman, he could have stopped the appointment of any given individual. But at some point we began to seem too numerous. This was one of the factors that led to the first substantial conflict in the department.

I believe that Professor Grant's discomfort with some of us Americans was exacerbated by an opposition in his mind between philosophy and history. There are people present who can explain George Grant more authoritatively than I, but I want to hazard a guess. This is a fairly short lecture, and there will be time for discussion when it is over, when you can correct or modify my guess.

Grant had a rather Platonic view of the world and regarded religious study as being part of the quest for the good, the beautiful, and the true, which were unchanging. When I first met him, it was clear that he had no interest in

the historical-critical approach that typified biblical study at the time, and that he regarded teaching about dates, authors, context, etc., as an inferior task, but one that must go on. He explained his support for my appointment by saying that a department of religious studies had to have biblical studies despite the excessively technical nature of the enterprise. I think that over the years, enhanced by discomfort with Americans, historical study began to seem worse to him than merely being a lower sort of investigation than philosophy. This can easily happen. If what is inferior *detracts* attention from the search for what is superior, then is not the inferior *evil*? Paul, one of my favorite ancient Jews, thought in precisely that way, and I can hardly blame anyone else for it.

Whether following the path I have suggested or another, Professor Grant came to disapprove of the historians in the department, some of whom were American, and labeled them “historicists,” a word with a negative connotation. This probably would have passed with not much difficulty, except for the fact that the historians in early Christianity and ancient Judaism—Ben Meyer, Gérard Vallée, Al Baumgarten, and myself—applied for a new sort of grant: a “programme grant” from the Canada Council.¹ (This was before the Council was divided into the Canada Council and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada). If we won the grant, we would be able to build up further the area that we called “Judaism and Christianity in the Greco-Roman World.” There would be tons of money, new positions, famous visiting

¹ Meyer and Vallée, despite being historians, had very substantial interests in philosophy, theology, and theory.

scholars, conferences, publications, in short the whole brouhaha of entrepreneurial academia.

My guess is that “entrepreneurial academia” itself was objectionable to Professor Grant. When this was added to the facts that all four of the applicants were historians and that three of the four were Americans, the project must have seemed highly inappropriate. For whatever reasons, Professor Grant attempted to secure a negative vote from the external evaluators and from within the Canada Council itself. We won the award anyway. He then helped organize a counter application, which failed.

Not too long after that, Grant left for Dalhousie. Continuing my guesswork, I am inclined to see the programme grant as a development that contributed to his decision to leave.

In any case, the department lost its most influential founding father, a man of considerable intelligence and high reputation. In some ways his departure was as epochal as his arrival, which is why I mention it. His vision for the department was either lost or declined, and I regret this. I failed to rise above the fray, which I might have done by suggesting, perhaps, a mini-conference on the role of historical study in the ongoing search for the good, the true, and the beautiful. He and I never sat down to talk things over, and surely I am as much to blame as he for this failure.

This concludes my personal reminiscence. There are lots of stories that I could tell, but I wanted to give you my own perspective on what we were

attempting to do in the early years of the graduate programme and on the most substantial conflict in the department during those years.

It is now time for my “academic-scholarly reflection on the contributions of the McMaster program” (quoting again from Travis’s charge). Actually, I want to talk about the contribution of departments of religious studies. McMaster has a very strong department, and I have always regarded it as one of the best in the world, though of course it is less well known on the benighted side of the border than it is here. But my present interest is in the academic study of religion *per se*, rather than the superiority or inferiority of McMaster vis à vis other departments.

It is a necessary characteristic of a department of religious studies that it include more than one religious tradition. When I came to McMaster to be interviewed in 1966, I already intended to learn enough about a second religion, Judaism, that I could have a career as a comparativist. I regarded comparison of two religions to be an extremely difficult task. One must be knowledgeable enough about both to avoid simply interpreting aspects of one within a framework that is basically derived from the other. A department as such will find it difficult to be a department of *comparative* religion. It can teach diverse religions side-by-side, allowing students to make comparisons, and so it fosters comparative study, but a side-by-side presentation does not require comparison. I was personally interested in comparison, but the

department here, quite correctly, did not focus on that, but rather on side-by-side presentation of three areas of religious studies.

George Grant, Eugene Combs, and Paul Younger had decided which aspects of religion could be taught side-by-side at McMaster: modern western religious thought, Indian religion, and biblical studies: the three areas of these three men. I thought that this was wonderful. A three-way split seemed ideal: it allowed enough concentration in each third to promote research, yet the three were scattered enough to prevent students from killing too many birds with one stone. A doctoral student who majored in biblical studies or MWRT had to minor in some aspect of Indian religion, and a student who majored in Indian religion had to minor in some aspect of MWRT or biblical studies.

Within the Canadian context, these choices avoided competition with McGill's Islamic Institute and Toronto's Medieval Institute. The McMaster solution to the question of what religions to teach was in part determined by the decision not to engage in wasteful duplication.

My only contribution to this question of areas, with which I was in general very pleased, was to request that Judaism be worked into the mix, more-or-less under the rubric of biblical studies. This was done with no dispute, as far as I remember. Soon we had added Al Baumgarten. Sometime after the arrival of Gérard Vallée, we became "Judaism and Christianity in the Greco-Roman World."

Now let me explain one of the benefits of requiring students to study more than one religion: it avoids and in fact destroys a certain kind of

dogmatism, one that is very injurious to society. This is going to take me a few minutes, or five pages, whichever comes last.

There is one kind of dogma that is intrinsic to many religions and that separates one from the other. There is no objection to acknowledging the framework established by such dogmas—well, there are some objections, but I shan't go into them.² Back to the intrinsic dogmas: Judaism stood out in the ancient world by being monotheistic and exclusivist: the only God in the whole world is the God of the Jews, who is defined in Jewish scripture and in particular in the books of Moses and the great prophets.

Christians stood out because of their insistence that Jesus was in some sense the Son of the God of Israel and that the only true path to God was through him (Jesus).

Muslims, when they came along, insisted that whatever the virtues of Moses and Jesus, Mohammed was the last and greatest prophet, who expressed the will of Allah in the Quran.

I of course wish that Christians, Jews, and Muslims had never persecuted or killed one another over these dogmatic differences, and I wish that they had always found common ground—which does exist if one will look for it. But I cannot say that holding these dogmas is being untrue to the religion itself, since these few dogmas are in fact definitive.

But in the modern world, another kind of dogma arose, the dogma that only *our* little group produces good human beings. That's the kind of dogma

² “Heresies” and the Pseudepigrapha should be included in the study of Christianity, for example.

that we can get rid of by study—if only enough people would study more than one religion.

One of the things I would like to live long enough to write is a historical account of the humanistic evaluation of religion: judging religions by how well they do as producers of people who are good, honest, kind to others, etc. Humanistic evaluation of course goes back to the Greeks, the first humanists. It is perfectly clear in Philo (another of my favorite ancient Jews), who assured his readers that the religion of Gentiles was inferior to Judaism because it produced bad humans, people who were hypocritical and who practiced trivial adherence to certain rituals while harboring sin and wickedness in their hearts. For example, pagans “cleanse their bodies with lustrations and purifications, but they neither wish nor practise to wash off from their souls the passions by which life is defiled” (*On the Cherubim* 95).

The Middle Ages were, as far as I know, relatively free of humanistic religious dogma: the dogma that only our religion produces good human beings. We owe its modern upsurge to the forces that make us modern, and to which we owe our ideals of freedom and democracy: Greek and Latin humanism, which started an invasion of European thought in the medieval period, but which came in full flood during the Italian Renaissance and the Enlightenment. I shall skip the Renaissance and move to the Enlightenment (c. 1689-1789). One of its seminal figures, John Locke, wrote a long pamphlet called *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), which followed hard on the heels of his letters concerning toleration and his treatises on government.

These works had among other virtues the goal of getting dogmatic religion of the old sort—creedal definition—out of political life. The greatest continental philosopher of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, published *Religion within the Bounds of mere Reason*³ in 1793, about a hundred years after Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity*.

The revolutionary force of the Enlightenment's appeal to Reason was phenomenal. Many educated Scottish Presbyterians gave up the idea of divine predestination because it conflicted with the new commitment to Reason.⁴ Soon religious scholars were on board. William Paley rejected all claims of miracles except those attributed to Jesus himself. Politicians joined in: Thomas Jefferson restricted the valuable parts of the New Testament to not much more than Jesus' ethical teaching.

Among those eager to join the conversion of religion to Reason were German professors of theology and biblical studies. In the nineteenth century, the attempt to use study of the Bible to support traditional dogma was shunned. It would no longer do to try to find biblical support for the idea that three persons are united in one Godhead or that two essences exist in one of the persons (Jesus being both 100% human and 100% divine). Indeed, Isaac Newton, on whose broad shoulders the Enlightenment rested, refused to take holy orders because he regarded the doctrine of the Trinity as unbiblical and heretical. Throughout the Enlightenment, the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation were downplayed or ignored. Instead of these traditional

³ *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*.

⁴ Such as the famous American jurist James Wilson.

creedal definitions, Christianity was defined by its commitment to humanistic values such as grace, love, mercy, generosity, sincerity, and the like.

What could be better from my own point of view, since in my deepest recesses I suspect that I am a humanistic deist? The trouble is that even this conversion of Christianity to humane values was carried out by all-too-human scholars. Christians, even though they accepted the principles of the Enlightenment, still for the most part studied only one religion. This made it easy for them to think that their religion was the best. So now they claimed that **only** *their* version of Christianity produced humans who possessed good attributes. This is the new kind of dogma: our religion, if you follow it, will make you a good human being; other forms of religion will make you a terrible person. It's a short step to "let's get rid of them."

This way of thinking—that humanistic evaluation proved that Christianity, specifically Protestant Christianity, was the only good religion—started, as far as I know, in Germany. But it spread to other European nations and was accepted, to a slightly lesser extent, in North America.

For examples of bad religions, Protestant scholars, who dominated the academic study of religion, turned to Roman Catholicism and Judaism. Luther's polemic against the church of Rome was converted into polemic against Jews, even dragging over the terminology, such as the accusation of belief in a treasury of merits. What is so horrible about Catholicism and Judaism in the view of these liberal Protestant German scholars are the following two characteristics: (1) they are ritualistic and therefore focus on

external trivialities—just like pagans in Philo’s polemic; (2) they are legalistic and therefore deny the grace of God by maintaining that people must earn salvation by obeying the law. Ritualism and legalism produce bad effects: either arrogant self-righteousness (I have done enough trivial good deeds to force God to save me even though my God is not merciful) or anxiety (I don’t know if I have done enough good deeds and so await the judgment in fear, full of Heilsunsicherheit, lack of confidence in God). Such people—that is, *all* Catholics and *all* Jews—are necessarily hypocritical (trying merely to chalk up enough deeds to offset demerits without any sincere desire to do good).

Thus the humanistic evaluation of religion, when conducted in faculties of Protestant Theology, led to the very un-humanistic conclusion that only Protestantism produced good human beings.

This new dogma—which has by no means disappeared—is absolutely fantastic. I think my way back through all those invented descriptions of ancient and modern Jews and Judaism with a sense of incredulity. Did the generations of scholars who produced tons of books think that they were actually describing Jews or the Jewish sources? All you have to do is (1) know some Jews; (2) sit down and read the literature through. Then you will disbelieve these horrible dogmas. And to think that they arose from such sources as the humanism of Erasmus and the enlightened philosophy of Locke! They are among the most inhumane works of scholarly imagination.

As Christian productions, such books are no closer to the spirit of Jesus than are the murderous intentions of the gang of fundamentalists now in charge of the Government of the United States.

I still believe that all you actually have to do is study the sources, and study the sources of more than one religion. If you do that, humanistic evaluation will not lead you astray. And studying sources is what departments of religious studies are for. A faculty member in a department of religious studies will find it very difficult to present *as true* the fevered imaginations of people who were cut off from other religions in their faculties of so-called Christian theology. I suppose that I am terribly naïve, but the study of religion, in a good department of religious studies, still seems to me one of the best ways to learn about the virtues of diverse cultures.

I regret that I am unable to extend this discussion to the religions of India, China, Japan, and other nations of the Far East. This inability shows that I did not study religion at McMaster, or even in the (inferior!) department at Duke. Maybe in my next incarnation, or sooner, perhaps when I finish the history of the humanistic evaluation of religion, I'll be back to take some courses.