

Religion before Religion:
a sketch of the early years of Religion at Reed drawn chiefly from the College Catalog¹

If education has caused its sons and daughters ever to dissipate creative function, it has so far failed of an angelic mission. If its commandment has ever seemed so exceedingly broad that no alluring single vision of creative work to be personally fulfilled has risen up, lover like, to entrance the heart, then indeed has its work as educator become void, with "only a name to live." Thomas Lamb Eliot, 1907.



Thomas Lamb Eliot

The claim that Reed was founded according to nonsectarian principles has long been prominent among Reed's markers of institutional identity. The College has publicly maintained, from the very beginning, that it was and would remain unaffiliated with "any religious denomination whatever. No sectarian considerations enter into the election of Trustees or Faculty or the admission of students. The will creating The Reed Institute expressly provides that 'it forever be and remain free from sectarian influence, regulation or control, permitting those who may seek its benefits to affiliate with such religious societies as their consciences may dictate.'"²

Reed's early nonsectarian character, however, is perhaps better understood as an expression of the Unitarian sensibilities of its founders. Typical of early 20th century religious liberalism, Reed's early notion of "nonsectarian" is perhaps better characterized as omni-sectarianism. In the early years, the college assembled at Chapel to hear a wide variety of speakers. In fact, Chapel services were held on a daily basis (Saturday

excepted) and speakers, representative of a number of sects and social institutions, were listed in the catalog's "College Chapel" section prior to 1924. In 1920, for example, Chapel speakers included Faculty members, representatives of government agencies, and religious leaders such as Dr. Thomas Lamb Eliot, President of the Board of Trustees; Rev. W.G. Eliot, Church of Our Father, Unitarian; Rev. Christopher Eliot, Bulfinch Place Church, Boston; Rev. M.A. Christianson, Our Saviour's Lutheran Church; Miss Florenc [sic]³ Buck, Directory of Religious Education in the American Unitarian Association; Dr. H.H. Bell, Interchurch World Movement; and Dr. C.L. Carlisle, Captain in U.S. Public Health Service and Director of the State Survey on Delinquency, Defectiveness and Feeble-mindedness for the University of Oregon.⁴ The centrality of religion in the communal life of the college was mirrored in its curriculum. Religion has been taught at Reed since the founding of the college, even though the department of religion appeared only in 1969. Prior to the formation of the department, the study of religion was spread across a number of departments, including Philosophy, History, English Literature, and Humanities.

From 1911 through 1920 three courses treated religion at Reed: *History of Religions*, *Philosophy of Religion*, and the *English Bible*. *History of Religion* and *Philosophy of Religion* were offered every year in the early days of Reed's philosophy program. At first these courses were taught by Bertrand Capen Ewer. Ewer received his undergraduate and master's degrees from Brown in 1899 and 1900 respectively. He completed his Ph.D. at Harvard University in 1904. Ewer held various teaching positions before coming to Reed, including a short stint as a Mathematics professor at Mount Hermon Seminary (1904-1905) and Wesleyan (1905), and as a Professor of Philosophy at Northwestern University.⁵

Initially, *The History of Religion* was open only to seniors and covered "the nature of Religion, including early Religion and the great Religions of the world."⁶ Offered as a full course for one semester, it culminated in the study of Christianity. It was followed in sequence by *The Philosophy of Religion*. This course addressed the "religious consciousness in terms of modern psychology." The course description promised "a point of view" that would harmonize with "contemporary scientific and philosophical thought."⁷ Briefly in this period, 1914-1916, the Reed faculty was joined by a recent Yale

Ph.D. who would become one of the most noteworthy historians of Christianity in the 20th century and President of the American Historical Association, Oregon City native and history professor Kenneth Scott Latourette.⁸

These religion courses were offered until the 1916-17 academic year. At this point they disappear until 1919, when *Philosophy of Religions* was again offered, now addressing

The Problems of human life and experience in the light of contemporary thinking, especially as affected by the War; the existence and reality of "values"; the significance of the teachings of science with reference to "human destiny"; the "religious consciousness" of the race, and of the present age; the integration of a consistent, positiv [*sic*] and purposeful life, fitted to a democratic world order.⁹

Philosophy of Religions was removed from the offerings for 1920-1921.

The English Bible was offered as a year- long course from the inception of the College. Reed's first course catalog lists *The English Bible* as a year-long elective with the prerequisite of Sophomore [*sic*] standing. Norman Frank Coleman was the first to teach this annual offering at the College. Like Ewer, Coleman was a graduate of Harvard. Before his arrival at Reed, Coleman taught both high school English and college English and Rhetoric at Whitman College (where he chaired the English department). After Coleman, *The English Bible* was taught by Edward Octavius Sisson, who later presented a Reed Extension lecture "the English Bible" with presumably similar content. Sisson was originally a Lecturer of Education at Reed; later he became both the Advisor to Men in the college and a professor of Philosophy. Sisson held undergraduate degrees from both Kansas State Agricultural College and the University of Chicago. Sisson received a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1905. He taught in secondary schools and served as an Extension Reader for the department of Psychology at the University of Chicago. He lectured and taught education at several universities before moving to Reed in 1912. He came to be numbered among the presidents of the American Philosophical Association (1939-40); *The English Bible* presented the King James Version of the Bible "with reference to its sources and composition to show the function of the Bible in developing the Religion and national consciousness of the Jewish people." Of particular interest to the class was the role of the Bible in "the development of the state and of Religion." Similarly, the catalog states, "although the course is not primarily religious

instruction, it aims to adjust a scientific knowledge of the Bible to a profound appreciation of its mission in the religious experience of a race.”¹⁰

After the mid-20's, during the presidency of Norman F. Coleman (1924-1934) and following the retirement of Thomas Lamb Eliot from the college's Board of Trustees, there is considerably less evidence for religion in the College's formal representations of its communal life. Apart from 1929-30, the Chapel receives scant or no mention in the catalog, The library, dormitories, the Senior House for men and "Men's and women's social rooms for the entertainment of guests and for informal teas" play a more central role in the College's official self-representation.¹¹

There is evidence, however, that students continued to pursue their own critical inquiries into the subject of religion. In 1927, H. Griffin, a Reed senior, wrote his thesis on the religious values of thirty other seniors at the College. “The instrument included questions about God, prayer, immortality, and miracles.” It appears from the study that those surveyed found that their experiences at Reed “undermined former religious values.” In 1936, another thesis treated the life of reason and spiritual life in the philosophy of Santayana.¹²

The Eliot bequest

The process that would culminate in the formation of the department of religion was formally initiated in 1953 as the result of a bequest from the family of Thomas Lamb Eliot. A portion of the department's budget continues to be derived from funds and bequests established by the Eliot family.¹³

It was with the development of the Humanities program that the study of Religion at Reed achieved a certain degree of autonomy. In 1955, under the auspices of the Humanities department, two new fields of knowledge were represented in the catalog for the first time: Linguistics and Religion. The first course in Religion to be taught at Reed was the comparative course, *Religious Experience*.

The approach to Religion is comparative -- the first semester being devoted to the study of Hinduism and Buddhism, the second semester to Christianity. The reading is drawn largely from religious scripture or "classics;" Upanishads, *Bhagava-Gita*, Sankara, *Dhammapada*, *the Diamond Sutra*, and *the Sutra of Wei Lang* in the first semester; The New Testament, Paschal Services from Roman Missal, the *Imitation of Christ*, Ekhart's *Sermons*, Law's *Serious Call*, Kierkegaard's *For Self-Examination* and *Training in Christianity* in the Second. It is recommended that students taking the course shall have successfully completed Humanities 11.

In 1957 the department of philosophy undertook a commitment to address those philosophical problems raised by religious thinking with the appointment of Daniel Deegan as an instructor in philosophy and religion. In 1961, religion was added as a sub-category of the department of philosophy's course offerings. The two philosophy of religion courses were: Phil 210, *Problems in Religious Thought*, and Phil 310, *The Development of Christian Thought*, an "examination of major interpretations concerning the nature of God, the nature of man, and the function of religious community in selected thinkers of the early church, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and the modern period..." In 1965-6, the College began to offer a Philosophy-Religion major which modified the upper division requirements of the Philosophy major by requiring Phil 210, *Problems in Religious Thought*, Phil 301, *The Philosophy of Religion*, Phil 302, *Introduction to Modern Theologians*, and Philosophy-Religion 480, the thesis.

The Founding of the Department

Following two years of discussion, led by Prof. Deegan, the Faculty voted to establish a department of Religion on 10 March 1969.

The reasons for establishing the religion department were: 1) that Reed College possessed sufficient academic resources for a major in religion, 2) that the study of religion had sufficient internal coherence to warrant an independent department and major, and 3) that the existing reliance on the philosophy-religion major left "no room for emphasis on other areas relevant to religion, such as history, social science, or literature" (PERP Division minutes, 8 April 1968). There were dissenting opinions within the faculty, but a majority agreed to the creation of the department¹⁴

Sadly, Prof. Deegan died unexpectedly in 1969; his duties devolved upon John C. Staten and Simon B. Parker, who had been hired in 1967 as an Assistant Professor of Religion and Humanities. The newly formed department announced that its pedagogical mission was "to provide the student with the opportunity to study Religion in its literary, historical and theological manifestations..."

The department's mission was clarified in 1971 with the division of the curriculum into three areas, theological studies, biblical studies, and history of religions. In 1975, Prof. Parker was replaced by Robert A. Segal, who had an announced interest in theories of religion, myth, symbolism, and Greco-Roman religion; biblical studies was dropped in favor of the broader, "literary studies." In 1976, Dennis McCann took over the position previously held by Prof. Staten.

Judaic studies were formally added to the departmental curriculum in 1980 with the appointment of Steven E. Aschheim, whose area of specialization was modern Jewish History. In the same year, the division of the curriculum into theological, literary, and historical approaches was dropped. The department now proposed the two-fold mission to which it still subscribes, to introduce students to major religious traditions (originally "of the West"), and to familiarize students with the various methods used in the academic study of religion.

The Kenney Years¹⁵

Despite students' enthusiasm for the department in its early years, and the many contributions of early Religion faculty members and students to the formation of the department's structure and sense of mission, perhaps no event was more central to the department's continuing success than the appointment of John Peter Kenney¹⁶ as assistant professor of Religion and Humanities in 1981. One year later, with the departure of Prof. Segal, the department comprised only two members, Prof. Kenney, and the newly appointed Dr. Rev. William R. Long, a historian of early Christianity. The two had been graduate students together at Brown University. For fifteen years Prof. Kenney worked to solidify institutional support for the young department, to strengthen the department of

Religion's ties to the departments of philosophy and history, and to integrate the discipline's perspectives into the Humanities program. In the early 1980's, a number of the faculty, perhaps unfamiliar with critical approaches to the study of religion, continued to harbor serious reservations about a "department of religion" at "non-sectarian" Reed.

Under Prof. Kenney's oversight, the department's mission continued to be expressed in terms of discrete traditions and the variety of methods of critical inquiry, but the curriculum, perhaps more accurately to reflect the interests of the Religion faculty, was divided between the philosophy of religion and history of religions. 1986 witnessed the arrival of the distinguished scholar of Sanskrit and Indian religious culture, Edwin Gerow (now emeritus Professor of Religion) and, with him, the introduction of Asian religions to the curriculum. Steven Wasserstrom, who would, in 1991 be awarded the Moe and Izetta Tonkon Chair in Judaic Studies and Humanities, was also hired in 1986 as a visiting assistant professor of Judaic Studies (religion & history). His position in 1987 became a tenure-track position, and it was the first and only permanent position in Judaic studies in Oregon through 2000. The department's mission statement was formally broadened in 1989 to reflect what had in fact been the case since the arrival of Prof. Gerow. No longer limited to the major religious traditions of the West, the department formally purposed to introduce students to major "world" traditions. With Prof. Kenney's acceptance of an appointment as dean of St. Michael's College, the John Peter Kenney era concluded in 1996.

The Department of Religion Now

In 1996, Professor Steven Wasserstrom, who had served as chair of the department since 1994, became the senior member of the department of religion and oversaw the hiring of Michael Foat '86, a Brown graduate and department alumnus from the Kenney years, specializing in ancient Christianity. In 1998, Kenneth Brashier, a specialist in Chinese religions who trained at the University of Cambridge, was also hired. In 2001, the College's faculty approved the creation of a fourth permanent Religion position in Islamic studies. In 2002, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, a graduate of Harvard University, became the first appointee to the new position. Throughout these

years, the department benefited from the invaluable service a number of visiting professors, who left an important impression on the development of the department.

The years 2002-03 also marked the department's move from the Vollum College Center to new quarters in the Educational Technology Center. In addition to state of the art, technologically enhanced classrooms, the Religion Department's new home boasts a student lounge, which its students share with members of its neighbor department, the department of classics. This proximity has had the unintended, but happy, consequence of strengthening the longstanding interdisciplinary Classics-Religion major.



The ETC, under construction

As has been the case, with increasing breadth, for nearly twenty years, The aims of the Religion curriculum at Reed are two: to introduce students to the various religious traditions of the world--Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Taoism, for example--and to acquaint students with the variety of methods employed in the academic study of religion--philosophical, social scientific, and historical. Because the study of Religion is concerned both to describe and to explain religious thought and practice, the department offers introductions to major religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Chinese religions, a core course on the theories and methods developed to explain religion, a core course on history of religion as an academic discipline, and advanced seminars for junior majors on a variety of topics that have both descriptive and explanatory components.

The curriculum reflects this commitment to a diversity of approaches in religious studies. The historical introductions offered by the department are designed to familiarize the student with the historical development of the Jewish, Christian, Islamic and Chinese traditions through the reading of a variety of primary sources and selected secondary historical works. "Theories and Methods" is intended to provide students who have taken at least one historical introduction with the opportunity to engage critically participants in the interdisciplinary conversation about religion that is the hallmark of the study of religion, including writers who are representative of sociological, anthropological, psychological, historical, philosophical, and feminist approaches to Religion. "History of Religions" invites students to explore significant cases in the contemporary study of the world's religious traditions. Advanced courses in the department focus upon the application of a variety of methods to specific sub-disciplines, such as Christian asceticism, early Chinese cosmology, modern Islamic thought, and Jewish mysticism. In the senior year, majors in Religion are expected to be familiar with the variety of methods, and to concentrate upon particular approaches in their own research.

Although Religion is an independent academic field, the study of Religion is linked closely to other academic disciplines. The department encourages the pursuit of interdisciplinary work in Classics, Literature, History, Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, and other fields.

In addition to providing a foundation for a liberal education, a Reed Religion major prepares students for advanced study in Religion and related fields. Graduates have entered both graduate and divinity school, and have pursued careers in the ministry, counseling, social work, medicine, law, business, and in the academy.

¹ assembled by Gretchen Pfeil '00 with some assistance from Michael Foat '86

² Reed College catalog, 1920-21: 84.

³ In its early years, the college advocated and practiced phonetic spelling.

⁴ Reed College catalog, 1920-21: 84.

⁵ Reed College Catalog 1911-12: 33.

⁶ Reed College Catalog, 1911-12: 96.

⁷ Reed College Catalog 1911-12: 97.

⁸ *Christian History* 72 (Summer 2001) vol. XX: 44;
<http://webtext.library.yale.edu/xml2html/divinity.003.con.html>
http://www.theaha.org/info/AHA_History/kslatourette.htm

⁹ Reed College Catalog 1920-21: 60.

¹⁰ Reed College Catalog 1911-12: 72.

¹¹ Reed College Catalog 1940-41: 22.

¹² The document from which this is taken is untitled and is held in the department chair folder. It appears to be a report issued in response to the department's report to the Commission on Colleges of the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, p. 17.

¹³ Robert Segal, Dennis McCann, "Self-Study; Department of Religion; Reed College; Northwest Area Foundation Grant," 1.

¹⁴ ¹⁴ Robert Segal, Dennis McCann, "Self-Study; Department of Religion; Reed College; Northwest Area Foundation Grant," 1.

¹⁵ Information obtained from the catalog of the relevant year

¹⁶ Although when faced with the man himself, students invariably addressed him as "John," religion majors in conversations with one another soon reduced his name to the initials JPK, which tended to be pronounced in an indefinably different tone, intimately and reverently, like some one of the *nomina sacra*.