The processes through which the study of religion was gradually accepted as an academic discipline (or area of study) at undergraduate and graduate levels in the University of Toronto was marked by co-operation and goodwill but also by disagreements, misunderstandings and tangled histories. During the past four decades I have participated in those processes from a number of vantage points. I was an Emmanuel College doctoral student in the late sixties and early seventies when the seven U of T-related theological schools created the Toronto School of Theology (TST). For a decade and a half I taught in the emerging undergraduate University of Toronto religious studies program, and I was later appointed to the University of Toronto’s graduate Centre for Religious Studies. (These programs are now called the Department and Centre for the Study of Religion). In 1986 I switched from religious studies in Victoria College of Victoria University to the theological faculty of Emmanuel College of Victoria University and the Toronto School of Theology in the University of Toronto. As an Emmanuel College and TST faculty member I was cross-appointed to the graduate Centre for Religious Studies.

This movement across boundaries gave me a heightened interest in the complex - and contested - relationships between theology and religious studies, on the one hand, and the public university and church-related institutions, on the other.

1. The changing role of religion

One of my first courses in religious studies was called “The changing role of religion in Canadian society.” It seemed like a straightforward task to describe the (forced or willing) migration of the formerly mainline denominations, such as the United Church to which I belong, from the centre to the margins of Canadian society. According to the secularization theory that was dominant at the time, the public realm became increasingly “secular” and religion was reduced to a purely “private” matter. This was a relatively harmless picture of the changing role of religion as long as it was recognized that “secular” meant no longer under the control of a single dominant religious tradition rather than no continuing role for religious teachings or commitments in the public realm. In other words, secularization and secular should not be confused with the “hegemonic ideology” (i.e., one supreme source of authority) of “secularism.”

An alternative way of looking at the changing role of religion in modern - or post-modern - society pictures a shift in emphasis from secularization and secularism to religious and cultural diversity. Rather than being banished to the margins of society, different religions and cultures - including the basic values and cultures of persons with no formal religious identity - participate
in a shared and contested public realm. Controversies over particular policies - and over the role and responsibilities of a public university - will continue, but they will usually be debated in the context of respect for one another’s traditional affiliations and basic identities.

I became sensitized to the importance of paying attention to diversity both among and within religious and cultural traditions in my contemporary issues courses and in my research projects. I pointed out in Prophets, Pastors and Public Choices: Canadian Churches and the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Debate that:

As I became more attentive to the diversity of the students in my classes, I found it relatively easy to adapt my approach to a religious studies setting in which not all students shared my Christian, and particularly my United Church, identity. It was more difficult, however, to do justice to the perspectives of students whose assumptions about individual freedom, religious authority and so forth differed from the “situation ethics” approach that was in vogue among liberal Protestants when I started teaching. From the standpoint of Roman Catholic, conservative Protestant and Orthodox Jewish students, situation ethics reflected my liberal Protestant outlook rather than a theologically neutral stance. The desire to be non-confessional, that is to avoid providing instruction in a particular faith, was a necessary but insufficient response to the religious diversity I discovered both among different religious groups and within each tradition. It was necessary to become more self-consciously comparative, both at the levels of factual claims and ethical arguments and at the level of interpretative frameworks (p. 2).

It also became clear to me that it was necessary to acknowledge deep-seated differences within particular traditions as well as among different religions and cultures. In addition to paying attention to religious diversity in the classroom,

I also became more interested in the way conflicting positions on issues ranging from abortion and homosexuality to northern pipelines were being handled in particular churches or in ecumenical settings such as the recently created inter-church social action coalitions. Just as in nineteenth-century Canada Lord Durham found two nations warring in the bosom of a single state, in relation to the pipeline debate I observed different Christian factions warring within the bosom of each church. It struck me that it seemed easier to achieve open and undistorted communication among representatives of different religious traditions, or different Christian denominations, than it was among members of a particular church. I became intrigued by the possibility that the protocols and categories developed for cross-cultural studies and interfaith and ecumenical dialogue could be applied to debates within a particular religious group (PPPC, p. 2).

In other words, in discussions within as well as among religious communities, and between members of particular religions and followers of no particular religion, it was important to acknowledge that the general orientation, norms and substantive judgments of one group should not be presumed to be normative for all groups or for factions within particular groups. This conversion from secularization to diversity as the background framework for the study of theology and religion in public and church-related contexts prompted me to rethink my
understanding of the transition from Religious Knowledge to Religious Studies at the undergraduate level and the relationship between the graduate Centre for Religious Studies and the Toronto School of Theology.

2. Religious Knowledge and Religious Studies

Undergraduate teaching about religion at the University of Toronto emerged against the background of Religious Knowledge courses offered by the church-related federated institutions - St. Michael’s, Trinity and Victoria - and in the program of studies in University College that became the Department of Near Eastern Studies. The first step in the transition from Religious Knowledge to Religious Studies involved the creation of a Combined Department (or Departments) of Religious Studies. I recall animated debates about whether the new collaborative effort should be called “department of” (to stress its unity) or “departments of” (to emphasize the continuing distinctiveness of each partner). There were also discussions about what the shift from religious knowledge to religious studies entailed. For example, during an early curriculum committee meeting there was a somewhat heated debate over a course proposal “to teach the mysteries.” Those of us who suggested that a religious studies course would be more appropriately described as “teaching about” the mysteries, or as a comparative study of rituals and sacraments, were viewed by some of our colleagues as secularizers.

Within the University there was resistance to the idea of religious studies as an academic discipline. As Gordon Watson pointed out in his 1997 publication, Religious Studies in the University of Toronto, there were members of the Faculty of Arts and Science who did not believe that religious studies “could ever free itself from confessional contamination, or that it was a worthy subject for a University curriculum, even if it could.” There were others “who held to the view that religion should not be desecrated by the cold, analytical prying of scientists and academics.” A third group believed that teaching religion in a public university would be illegal (Watson, p. 31).

By the mid-seventies the energetic promotion of religious studies as a discipline or area of study suitable for a public university, combined with other changes in the University such as the ending of the highly restrictive honours program, led to the creation of the Department of Religious Studies. Lingering anxieties about the confusing if not contaminating effect of the attribution of “religious” to an academic method produced a further change in name to the Department for the Study of Religion. In such a department, scholars with and without a personal religious affiliation can work together on the basis of a shared commitment to the academic, non-confessional study of religion. According to the Department’s program description:

Religious Studies is distinguished by the uniqueness of its subject matter and the diversity
of its methods. Its subject matter is global: the scriptures, institutions, teachings, rituals, devotions, iconography, and moral injunctions of all the world's religious traditions. And it addresses this subject matter with the full range of investigative tools made available by the various disciplines, especially modern historical and scientific human studies and modern philosophy. As such, Religious Studies is inherently cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary.

The question begged by this description is whether or not individual scholars can both share the commitments of a particular religious tradition and meet the criteria for teaching about religion in a public university. My own view is that as the background framework continues to shift from a homogenizing secularist ideology to a self-consciously affirmed acceptance of a religiously and culturally diverse public realm this concern will seem less relevant. As one Jewish colleague has said, as a philosopher he can speak “as a” Jew without having it assumed that he is speaking normatively “for” Jews. This may eventually be an acceptable stance for members of formerly dominant traditions as well.

While undergraduate religious studies was evolving from religious knowledge to religious studies to the study of religion, parallel conversations and developments were taking place regarding the graduate study of religion in the University.

3. The Centre for Religious Studies and the Toronto School of Theology

Discussions leading to the creation of a graduate program in religious studies were characterized by a number of concerns. One set of outside appraisers concluded that structurally the University of Toronto was so complex that the proposal for a Centre involving the federated universities and a number of departments would be completely unmanageable. Key University administrators were so offended by the suggestion that the University of Toronto was unable to manage its affairs that they became strong defenders of the Centre!

Another concern was that the participation of the Toronto School of Theology would threaten the academic quality of the proposed M.A.-Ph.D. programs. Regarding the academic competence of the proposed faculty, as Watson pointed out, the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies assured sceptics “that proper provision would be made for screening all proposed faculty, and that the criteria would be those of the School of Graduate Studies, rigidly enforced” (p. 54).

A more challenging concern was that TST participation would give the Centre an overwhelmingly Christian character. This fear was addressed through collaboration among related departments and centres and by appointing new faculty members who were specialists in one or another non-Christian tradition. The concern about Christian dominance was also counteracted by the realization that scholars with a Christian commitment were also capable of
engaging in cross-cultural, multi-disciplinary teaching and research characterized by respect for all religions.

4. Co-existing Paradigms and Contested Categories

I have given the impression that the “old” secularization paradigm was gradually replaced by a post-modern emphasis on a public realm characterized by religious and cultural diversity. However, it is more accurate to acknowledge the co-existence of alternative frameworks. On the one hand, the continuing influence of the secularization framework can be discerned at Victoria University when the view is expressed that Victoria College is an integral part of the “public” University while Emmanuel College, as a church-related theological college, is like a “private” “faith-based” institution. And, although the theological degrees granted by the federated universities are now conjointly awarded with the University of Toronto, the Toronto School of Theology is not even mentioned in a recent major history of the U of T.

On the other hand, appropriately qualified TST colleagues continue to be cross-appointed to the Centre for the Study of Religion. There also appears to be a growing acceptance of the fact that newer religious minorities and formerly dominant groups all feel included in an increasingly diverse “commons.” For example, the new director of the University’s Multi-faith Centre reports that he received a warm welcome not in spite of but because of his United Church connection. Perhaps those who see the common good by banishing religion from the public realm and those of us who celebrate the religious diversity of our shared public space can work together to resist the reduction of wisdom to training and the growing influence of “private sector” interests which are now the main threats to the role and responsibilities of a public university.

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