

The birth of religious studies

by [Leigh E. Schmidt](#) in the [August 2, 2000](#) issue

*The University Gets Religion: Religious Studies in American Higher Education*, by D.G. Hart

It is hard by now not to be a little jaded about laments over the university's loss of religious perspectives and Christian groundings. That D. G. Hart takes the opposite tack is bracing: The modern American university, he argues, has had altogether too much religion, especially of the muddled liberal Protestant kind. His case in point is the way liberal Protestants helped build over the course of the past century the lackluster enterprise of religious studies.

Hart, who teaches church history at Westminster Theological Seminary and who cut his scholarly teeth working on the antimodernist tough J. Gresham Machen, has little patience with modern liberal projects of any kind. The attempt to make the study of religion palatable to the wider research university--to its scientific, pluralistic, progressive and civic-minded ethos--strikes Hart as an inescapably Faustian bargain for Christianity. The consistent failure of liberal Protestants to foreground the tension between Christian particularity and post-Enlightenment ways of objectifying religion is to Hart, as it would have been to Machen, a mind-boggling mistake. The end result inevitably seems to be, in historian George Marsden's biting phrase, "liberal Protestantism without Protestantism."

Hart's historical brief against religious studies begins with an unmasking of its ancestry. Far from having a pure "intellectual pedigree" reaching back to the philosophes, the discipline has a much more immediately progressive Protestant lineage, Hart contends. He tries to demystify the field's myth of origins by cutting it off from skeptical Enlightenment forbears and revealing its tenaciously Protestant underpinnings. That Protestant past, Hart rightly points out, has become an embarrassment to many in current religious studies circles, who are moving as rapidly as possible away from a seminary-bound past and who desire more credible intellectual bloodlines. Hart rather enjoys watching the spectacle of their embarrassment and does all he can to add to it. He leaves those who want to run away from the discipline's Protestant past no place to hide.

One problem with this demystification is that Hart construes the production of the study of religion in American culture in relatively narrow, institutional terms. He deftly shows how a number of Protestant ministers and educators laid the groundwork for the emergence of the American Academy of Religion (1964), now the largest and most prominent professional society for scholars of religion. Those Protestant foundations consisted of various campus ministries, Bible chairs, schools of religion and organizations such as the Religious Education Association (1903) and the National Association of Biblical Instructors (1909). Yet these ecumenical Protestant efforts, as Hart well knows, were thoroughly imbued with Enlightenment assumptions about freedom, progress, universality and republicanism. Pointing to them hardly breaks the Enlightenment genealogy for the modern study of religion.

The close, institutional focus on these American Protestant versions of studying religion also underestimates the importance of more suspicious, freethinking variants--a vital lineage stretching from Jefferson, Adams and Paine through Fanny Wright and Robert Owen to H. L. Mencken to Van Harvey. Whether in learned correspondence, public lectures, barbed exposes or scholarly tomes, that line of inquiry was important for the development of the critical study of religion in the U.S. It is certainly far more than a convenient myth of origins for status-conscious academics who prefer now to venerate Hume and Feuerbach as ancestors rather than, say, Schleiermacher. That said, Hart nonetheless does an excellent job of showing the formidable role of establishment-minded Protestantism in the making of religious studies in the first half of the 20th century.

At one point Hart actually calls 20th-century liberal Protestant theology a "mirage" (again the shade of Machen rises up). In taking this stern Reformed measure of religious studies and its American Protestant past, Hart closes off much of the complexity of this history. While he patiently reconstructs the ambitions of such educators as William Rainey Harper, Charles Foster Kent and George F. Thomas, he does so to show the shortsightedness of their assumptions: namely, the largely unexamined equation of studying religion with the advancement of scientific knowledge, the flourishing of a democratic nation, and the emancipation of the churches from sectarian dogmatism.

These liberal Protestant lives, in Hart's hands, seem flat and unreflective. There is none of the spiritual anguish of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, none of the self-critical questioning of Reinhold Niebuhr's *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, none of the visionary thrust of Rufus Jones's sundry studies of

mysticism.

Certainly, Hart has unearthed a wealth of vapid pronouncements (of the sort one would expect from committees) about the public consequence of including the study of religion in the modern university. But these ministers and scholars deserve to have their institutional contributions studied against the wider backdrop of their memoirs, letters, diaries, sermons, prayers and family lives. How many of them, like James, were driven to the study of religion through the melancholy of the sick soul? How many of them joined in the work of comparative religions out of longings for the transcendent or the esoteric that belied their academic dispassion? It is only fair to surmise that turn-of-the-century liberal Protestants had inner lives, perhaps even of some complexity, and that their desires to build up the study of religion are not fully contained within the benignity of their public discourse.

In Hart's view, it is precisely because Protestants had so much at stake in the emergent study of religion--moral uplift, spiritual nurture, biblical literacy and nonsectarian civility--that their enterprise always had such questionable scholarly credentials. Their chief fault, by this account, was an inability to see the basic conflict between academic standards of excellence and their prior commitment to a liberal Protestant conception of public objectives. That contradictory inheritance, according to Hart, is what has doomed religious studies to its second-rate status in the modern university, giving it a moralistic taint that no amount of humanistic maneuvering has ever succeeded in removing completely.

A more nuanced rendering would acknowledge the importance of the questions that these Protestant makers of the discipline posed and engaged. A willingness to imagine scholarship as having not only professional but also practical public consequences--for churches, governments and civic associations--is hardly a liberal disposition to abandon in a strained quest for respectability and supposed objectivity. Even the recurrent essentialist mistake in liberal Protestant circles of misconstruing their own irenic religion as a universal religion is not without its resonance: At what point, in the vast multiplication of religious and cultural differences, are larger patterns, commonalities and comparisons to be sought? Hart would give up on religious studies and return to studying Christianity within the crisp particularities of a specific faith community. But the older liberal engagement with pluralism, however naïve, is more realistic than a call for retreat to an ecclesial bunker.

That these liberal Protestant crafters were often puzzled, torn or even confused about why they were building what they were building is hardly surprising. Sometimes they were hoping to retard the secular drift of American culture and to offer learned resources for filling modern "spiritual hungers." At other times, they were intent on establishing religion as an object of scientific study and were proud advance agents of the secular city and modernist spiritual crises. It does not require much historical empathy to appreciate such quandaries over the divided, ambivalent implications of knowledge. It is an empathy that one would think even a "vinegary" Calvinist, as Hart describes himself, would be able to muster.

Forbearance, though, is not a tone that Hart chooses to strike. "Protestants delivered very little that counted as both good scholarship and serious Christian reflection," he remarks in scrutinizing *The Christian Scholar*, a largely Protestant academic journal founded in 1953. Of those contributing essays to one of the publication's series, he makes the acid remark, "The academic caliber of the author was disproportional to his Protestant convictions."

It is not a fashionable conclusion these days, but perhaps these liberal Protestants really were on the right track. The capacity of the Protestant establishment to generate its own critics, to engineer the dismantling of its own seminary model in the pursuit of a more expansive understanding of religion, is as much a narrative of profound intellectual achievement as of theological trimming. Usually it was Protestants themselves, such as the Methodist Edmund Perry at Northwestern University, who fomented the revolution against "the Protestant tyranny" in religious studies. That reorientation certainly does not have to be plotted as a tale of ruin and betrayal, but in Hart's hands it is one sad story, however instructive and vigorous its telling.