Re-envisioning the sites and sights of the late twentieth century study of religion

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Abstract

In this paper the author shares some of the findings, observations, and stimulating insights from colleagues and students gathered during visits to various parts of the world. The academic study of religion must now encompass more than it has done until now the effects of modern media and communications technologies, global consumption patterns, cultural mobility, and changing geo-political configurations. Scholars of religion are being outpaced by these developments, whether because of the limitations of vision, or the shortsightedness of theoretical lenses. The argument is that sites such as art, the media, Internet, outer space, diasporas, global culture, nature, and the public space deserve critical attention - not just for reasons of content, but because these new or neglected sites offer a potential challenge to our categories and concepts. Focus has to be shifted increasingly from bounded local cultures to transnational cultural flows and the significance of place has to be reexamined. This paper has suggests a number of pathways that are deserving of more exploration by scholars of religion. What we choose to include or exclude from our gaze affects the nature of our discourse(s) through and through. The whole business of "seeing" is integral to both the academic enterprise as well as the political economy of the academic study of religion. This paper highlights some of the exciting new areas that face us as students of religious ideas and phenomena, and point to their methodological implications.

Keywords: Methodology, Globalization, Religion -- Study, Religious change, Transnationalism, Media and religion, New Age movement, Internet, Diaspora
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The twentieth century German-born American theologian Paul Tillich gave a simple and basic definition of the word. “Religion is ultimate concern”. This means that religion encompasses that to which people are most devoted or that from which they expect to get the most fundamental satisfaction in life. Sociological studies of religion were undertaken by Auguste Comte who is considered the founder of modern sociology. His general theory hinged substantially on a particular view of religion, and this view has