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News *from* the University of Chicago Divinity School

UNTIL VERY RECENTLY SCHOLARS OF RELIGION CHARTED THEIR LOCATIONS AND THE FIELD generally on an axis of east and west. The east/west distinction denominated what one studied. Scholars of Christianity and Judaism and Islam studied “the western religious traditions”—usually specializing in one of the three—and scholars of Buddhism and Hinduism, or of indigenous traditions of Asia, studied “eastern religions.”

Today that distinction is no longer tenable. It is commonly acknowledged that the religions themselves, in their conceptions and their histories, have not observed them. To take one particularly formative example, the Orthodox Christian tradition, centered in Constantinople/Istanbul, actually stands at a geographical crossroad of east and west. Yet it was often referred to—in ways of which Orthodox practitioners would disapprove—as ‘eastern Christianity’. The unprecedented movements of peoples and the new and vaunted communication technologies have also helped to break down such distinctions. Our world today is both logistically smaller, and comparatively much more accessible in much greater detail, than ever in history. One consequence is that the religions are less subject to the vagaries of geography, and both more and less subject to cultural stereotype, than ever before.

Beyond acknowledging the facts of the case, there is one further reason why this recognition is important. It is at least arguable that the distinction of east and west reflected an orientation toward Christianity as the normative tradition for understanding the human phenomenon of religion; indeed, further, that this *de jure* approach had the further *de facto* limitation that the tradition was not all of Christianity but the Christianity first of Rome, and then of wider European and, later, North American history.

Equally salient and valuable, and crucial to retain in the process, is the fact that the values that produce, inform, and sustain this critique are in fact spawned by the traditions whose hegemony has been displaced. The heritage of the Enlightenment—the capacity to bring one’s most cherished assumption under scrutiny, the commitment to disinterested reason, the willingness to

## Letter from the Dean



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change one’s mind—are precisely the values that undergird this adjustment in the study of religion.

The challenge for the work of the Divinity School in the twenty-first century is to honor this revision of our topic of study without discarding the methods that have served it so well. We must continue to recognize and understand our heritage, but without allowing it to distort what “counts” as religion. Put prosaically, the revision I describe above should not require tossing out the scholarly baby with the bath water. The study of religion as we practice it today is decidedly a product of a tradition of intellectual thought (with vigorous representation in both “west” and “east”). The empirical realities that mandate adjustments in no way alter this fact. As we proceed to reorient our academic North Star, we must not discard the sextant—we simply and crucially must adjust its lens to permit a broader view.

Such work is already well under way in Swift Hall. I would mention three examples from among many of my colleagues. Philosopher of religion Dan Arnold studies Buddhist thought from the fifth to the twelfth centuries, and locates there sustained and sophisticated discussions of such formerly “western” topics as what counts as evidence for truth and what it means to have a mind, collating this work with discussions among Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophers in Europe and America. Historian Jim Robinson studies traditions of textual interpretation and the relation of science to religion in the medieval world. His scholarship is oriented chiefly toward Jewish traditions of exegesis and thought, but continually references Islamic and, on occasion, Christian thought and practice. To study medieval religion in Europe is to study not one tradition but three. Political scientist Malika Zeghal studies Islam as

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a global phenomenon, utilizing case studies from North Africa, Western Europe, and North America to understand how Muslim thought and practice have engaged modernity and its aftermath. Her work forces a rethink-

ing of our fundamental assumptions about the politics of religion in the last century.

This is not solely a function of individual colleagues. It is also reflected in broader intellectual understandings: in, for examples, the incorporation of the history of interpretation into the study of sacred scriptural traditions like the Bible and the Qur'an, which emphasize the reception of the text within communities as a crucial window into our understanding of the text; the transformation of the study of theology into the study of modern religious thought, locating commonalities in the Jewish and Christian, and potentially the Islamic traditions; in the rethinking of the terms and reliability of

categories of comparison in the history of religions; and in the interesting fact that the student who studies the medieval period in the Divinity School today could be studying Christianity or Judaism or Islam — but is more likely to be studying at least two of those three.

We no longer demarcate our work by “east” and “west,” but we do still reflect the fundamental values of enlightened rationality that make what we do a part of the broader enterprise of humane discourse — and continue to make religion the most fascinating object of inquiry in today's world. □

Richard A. Rosengarten, *Dean*

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In one sense, however, whatever success Deuteronomy achieved was short-lived, for Priestly authors soon afterward exploited and revised Deuteronomy toward their own end. Still, the impact of Deuteronomic thought is clearly visible across much of Hebrew Bible. Deuteronomy is also one of the most well-attested biblical books among the Dead Sea Scrolls and one of the most cited biblical books in the New Testament. It is really a starting point for understanding the Hebrew Bible.

**CIRCA:** In your work you situate the bible in its historical context. Why did you choose this approach to the bible?

**JS:** The historical context of the Hebrew Bible is indispensable for its interpretation. At a most basic level, because the meanings of words are historically conditioned, we can only know what the Bible says by appealing to history. What's more, because we have a relatively small corpus of ancient Hebrew texts, we must look to cognate languages from



contemporary and adjacent time periods to illuminate some basic issues of biblical Hebrew language. These philological concerns then lead to larger inquiries concerning the literary genre of texts, their historical periodization, the ideas that they espouse, and their authorship and intended audience(s). For some readers, historical questions beyond lexical and grammatical issues are not primary.

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“... I find myself returning to Deuteronomy time and again.”

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They may be more interested, for example, in grounding modern religious doctrines in biblical texts or the history of these texts' interpretation. My interests, however, are primarily historical: I am fascinated by the ideas of these ancient authors and their relation to the intellectual life of the wider ancient Near East. I am also intrigued by the socio-political dimensions of biblical texts for their authors and audiences. My personal interests thus drive both my selection of texts for study and the particular methods I employ in my analysis.



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