

## AN ENCROACHING SPIRITUALITY: WHAT HOPE REMAINS FOR A SCIENCE OF RELIGION?

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

When we bear in mind the original *religionswissenschaftliche* aims of the enterprise of Religious Studies as it emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century, there are disturbing signs that, intellectually and scientifically, the field is in decline. And that decline, I will argue here, is in large measure the direct and indirect effect of a gradually encroaching spirituality in the institutional structures that are essential to the field.

It is a quarter century since I delivered my paper, “The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion” (1984), to the American Academy of Religion. Back then I argued that although the study of religion had gained a place for itself within the academic community by claiming to distinguish itself from the religio-theological community, by the middle of the twentieth century it had given control of the scientific and educational agenda of the field to the scholar-devotee. By the time that essay was published, the line of demarcation between religion and the study of religion had become so blurred that it was often difficult to distinguish the objectives of Religious Studies departments from the religious interests of liberal Protestant seminaries. This “blurring” of objectives not only continues, but is getting worse. Although I am in some respects as pessimistic about the field today as I was in 1984 I nevertheless acknowledge that there have been some significant positive developments since then, and I shall first focus attention on them before airing my concerns.

The first thing that must be recognized here is the incredible growth in the institutional and structural strength of the field. There are, for example, many more departments engaged in the study of religion and many more scholars engaged in research and teaching now than twenty-five years ago. There has

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