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# TEMPLE UNIVERSITY AND THE BIRTH OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES: A BOOK REVIEW

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**Abstract**: This is a review of the book *Breakthrough to Dialogue: The Story of and Reflections on Temple University's Department of Religion* (Mesa, AZ: iPub Global Connection, 2019), edited by Dr. Leonard Swider, who is a long-time professor of religion at Temple University. The history of Temple's Department of Religion is of interest because the department pioneered objective, non-sectarian religious studies at a public university. This approach to religious higher education has now spread throughout the US and beyond.

**Key Words:** Leonard Swidler, Temple University, Department of Religion, TUDOR, Religious Studies, Interreligious Dialogue

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## 1. Introduction

This book is not what it seems: it is much more. The subtitle, *The Story of and Reflections on Temple University's Department of Religion*, could be interpreted as suggesting that the book is merely some sort of commemoration of the Department of Religion at Temple University (henceforth TUDOR). As a result, one could assume that the book would primarily be of interest to those who have some connection to Temple University, and perhaps secondarily to people who are interested in interreligious dialogue. On the contrary, though, the book is an insightful historical account of the development of what several of the contributors argue was the first modern "religious studies" program in the United States (and perhaps in the world). Furthermore, it claims that TUDOR's religious studies program became the paradigm for similar programs at many other universities, both within and outside of the US. Therefore this book should be of interest to anyone interested in the academic study of religion.

The book is a collection of essays by TUDOR faculty, administrators, and past students. Some of the contributors were at Temple University when TUDOR was founded; most of them joined TUDOR within its first decade. Thus it is comprised of eyewitness accounts, though some of the contributions bear the evidence of also being carefully researched. It is edited by Leonard Swidler, who joined TUDOR very early on as a professor of Roman Catholic thought and interreligious dialogue and is the only professor from the early days who is still active in the department.

## 2. Background

There have probably been postsecondary schools offering religious studies as long as there has been postsecondary education. Typically, such education has occurred at institutions that were founded and run by religious organizations. In the US, postsecondary theological education typically took place in church-related colleges, universities, and seminaries. Perhaps as a result of the First Amendment's requirement of a separation of church and state, and perhaps also because religiously affiliated schools were deemed to be meeting the need, state-related schools eschewed such programs.

Such programs were usually professional rather than academic: their primary purpose was to train clergy, so their curricula were generally along confessional lines, focusing on the teachings of their respective traditions. When courses were offered that covered other religious traditions, they were generally taught by faculty who were aligned with the

religious tradition of the institution rather than the religions studied in the courses.

There are some noteworthy exceptions to this. Most significantly, the University of Iowa established a "school of religion" in 1927. This school was affiliated with the university but did not grant degrees. Instead, if offered courses in Jewish, Protestant, and Roman Catholic theology, and the credits that students earned for taking these courses could be used toward their degrees, presumably as general education electives. These courses were not intended to train clergy but rather to respond to the religious interests of the students, although the faculty were local clergy. Their salaries were paid by their denominations rather than the university. Hence while this is notable in that it was non-sectarian and because it took place at a state university, it was a rather modest step toward religious studies as we know it today (Ortale 2019, 28-30). In 1929 a similar program was instituted at the University of Michigan (Ortale 2019, 30-32).

In 1946 the University of Florida established a Department of Religion that offered courses on religious topics and also coordinated the activities of various religious organizations that met on campus. It was chaired by an academic whose salary was paid by the university (Ortale 2019, 32-35). This appears to be a step closer to a modern department of religious studies, but it is lacking at least one crucial element: a diverse faculty teaching the very religions to which they belong.

## 3. Temple University

This is where Temple University enters the story. However, this part of the story is a bit complicated. Temple's roots can be traced back to the Baptist Temple, a very large Philadelphia church pastored by Russell Conwell. Conwell's biography is itself a very colorful story, but the aspect that is most relevant here is the largely blue-collar nature of his congregation and his desire to enable such people to acquire a collegiate education at an affordable price. In the late 19th century, there was no affordable higher education in Philadelphia. Conwell saw in the working class "acres of diamonds" (which was the title of a sermon that he preached many times during his academic career) that could bring immense value to America if they would be given access to higher education.

Motivated by this vision, Conwell and the leadership of the Baptist Temple founded The Temple College of Philadelphia in 1884. Conwell actually had two desires for this institution: he wanted both to provide ministerial training for working-class people who wanted to transition into ministerial vocations, and he wanted to provide a general education for other working-class people, believing that general trades and vocations

also bring glory to God. Although founded by Baptists, The Temple College was from the outset nondenominationally protestant (Ortale 2019, 13ff).

Temple College was a success, and along with its secular programs of study, enrollment in the theological and ministerial programs flourished on the undergraduate and graduate levels. This eventually led to the formation of the Temple School of Theology as a division of Temple College. This was essentially a protestant seminary, with courses of study that were both academic and professional, but with a somewhat greater emphasis on the latter than the former.

Temple College was initially funded by using the facilities of the Baptist Temple, employing adjunct instructors, and charging minimal tuition. However, as the student body grew, these measures became inadequate. Tuition increased, and in 1911 Temple began receiving limited financial assistance from governmental sources. This increased over time, eventually becoming a significant part of Temple's budget (Ortale 2019, 25, 41). As Temple's dependence on state funding increased, the problem of a state-related educational institution offering theological instruction and granting ministerial degrees increased in significance.

Eventually Temple College became Temple University, and the school of theology became the Temple University School of Theology. It was accredited by the AATS (American Association of Theological Schools). In the mid-1950s the AATS conducted a review of Temple's school of theology, found it to be irregular in various ways, and required significant revisions in order for the school to retain its accreditation. Very little time was given to implement these changes, and in 1957 accreditation was lost. This threw the theological programs into a crisis.

Resolution of this crisis involved reorganizing the Temple University School of Theology into the Conwell School of Theology and establishing a separate entity within the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences for the academic study of religion. This is the birth of TUDOR. Undergraduate classes started in the Department of Religion in 1961 and graduate classes began a year later (Ortale 2019, 21). The timing of this creation of two different entities within the university, one of which was more professional in its orientation and the other more academic, could not have been better, for various factors resulted in Temple University becoming a state university in 1966 (Swidler, "Global Paradigm Shift," 92). This led to the separation of the Conwell School of Theology from the university, and in 1969 the Conwell School merged with Gorden Divinity School to form Gorden-Conwell Theological Seminary, with the new entity residing in Hamilton, Massachusetts on a campus that was formerly a Roman Catholic seminary (Swidler 2019, "Preface," 1).

TUDOR remained in Temple University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The free exercise clause of the First Amendment and the 1963

Supreme Court decision Abington School District v. Schempp supported the view that the study of religion in state schools is a permissible academic exercise when it is conducted as a study of human history and culture (Ray, 388). Concordantly, the university sought to approach religious studies from a historical and cultural perspective and hired a faculty with the appropriate qualifications for this kind of work. Swidler writes that this made Temple the first state-funded university in the US to have a full-fledged department of religion (Swidler 2019, "Global Paradigm Shift," 101).

Although Temple's founders were Baptists and its history was largely protestant, the first chair of TUDOR was Dr. Bernard Phillips, who was a Jewish philosopher with a secular education, expertise in world religions, and a Fulbright scholar in India and Japan (Ortale, 25-26). Phillips' vision for TUDOR corresponded admirably with the need to construct a multicreedal religious studies department. In his proposal to establish a graduate program within TUDOR he states that, "Religion will be studied as one of the humanities, centered around courses in the History of Religions and Religious Thought. The Department expects to observe the highest standards of integrity and impartiality in its teaching. It will make every effort to present the total picture of man's religious life, both in its variety and its common features, and will not undertake to uphold any single point of view or to propagandize for any single faith. It is intended that the faculty shall represent as broad a variety of religious faiths and standpoints as is possible, so that the exposure of students may be a comprehensive one" (Ortale 2019, 26).

The influx of funding that resulted from the state alignment of the university enabled Phillips to hire an outstanding slate of professors for the new department. Littell and Libowitz claim that "Phillips assembled a faculty for the Temple University Department of Religion (TUDOR) that, in breadth of experience and depth of scholarship, rivelled any in the world" (Littell and Libowitz 2019, 149). The details of who was hired and what their excellent qualifications were are discussed by several of the contributors to the book, the most detailed accounts being those given by Swidler (2-6) and Ortale (2019, 27).

What emerged from this hiring process was a religious studies program where the world's major religions were taught by faculty who were extremely qualified and wherein each faculty member taught courses on the religion in which he or she grew up or to which he or she had converted (Esposito 2019, 353). This is a very different model than what was to be found in any other university. Sloyan claims that "Temple was the first public university in the country, and perhaps the first university of any sort, to teach the full spread of the world's major religions from an academic perspective" (131).

Some were critical of this new approach. Some students and alumni of the theological faculty were opposed to the idea of a Department of Religion that would approach religious studies in an almost secular, scientific way (Stoeffler 2019, 48-50). This is understandable, given the historical antecedents. This opposition was asswaged by the continuation of traditional theological studies in the Conwell School of Theology. Critics from outside the university questioned whether one could get an objective knowledge of a religion by studying under someone who adheres to it, since that person would be biased in its favor. Esposto points out that this attitude wasn't applied to the study of Christianity or Judaism, but it was to Islam (Esposito 2019, 355). Temple's faculty affirmed that you can obtain an excellent knowledge of a religion by studying under scholars who reside within that religion. The chair of a department of religion at a prestigious neighboring institution described TUDOR as a "religious zoo" due to its menagerie of professors and students from many different faiths (Sloyan 2019, 141). Name calling, of course, is not a logical critique but rather an illogical *ad hominem*.

In addition to the benefits of learning about a religion from an instructor who has experienced it "from the inside," the program at TUDOR yielded other benefits. Students learned about religions not just from books and lectures but also from having classmates from various religions and parts of the world, such that the educational experience was an immersive one (Esposito 2019, 354). This enabled learning to go beyond a religion's creeds and texts: students could see and experience how religions are practiced by ordinary people who were their classmates (Esposito 2019, 360). Consequently, TUDOR graduates were a new breed of religion scholar, one that had a reasonable ability to explain religions "from within" even though they themselves were not devotees of that religion (Esposito 2019, 359; Ray 2019, 389).

Esposito highlights two distinctive strengths of TUDOR's approach to religious studies: 1. It offers degrees at all levels in all major world religions in a secular rather than sectarian context. 2. Originally, all students were required to major in one religion and minor in two others, and thus they graduated with a pluralistic knowledge of world religions that increased their ability to be objective and scholarly while also improving their job potential (Esposito 2019, 360-1). As a result of this new approach, TUDOR attracted students from around the world. TUDOR graduates went on to be university professors, published authors, Fulbright scholars, leaders in their own religious traditions, and in some cases held prominent public offices in their home countries (Esposito 2019, 359-60, Swidler 2019, "Looking Forward," 386).

Eventually, academic currents like postmodernism and postcolonialism rendered some aspects of TUDORs world religions

curriculum obsolete, and changes were made to keep the programs current and strong (Ray 2019, 391-2). However, the core value of having students study multiple religions under instructors who know the religions from inside has remained a key aspect of the TUDOR experience.

The title of this book, *Breakthrough to Dialogue*, surely relates to the fact that the religious diversity within TUDOR, which included both the outstanding faculty and the very international student body, could have resulted in considerable discord and debate, but instead resulted in rich interreligious dialogue. Much credit for this goes to Bernard Philips, the first chair of TUDOR, who was trained in philosophy and religion from both the Eastern and Western traditions and who appreciated the strengths and weaknesses of both. The faculty that he brought together shared his interest in diversity within a collaborative academic community.

Also contributing to this ecumenical spirit was Philips' recruitment of Leonard Swidler and Elwyn A. Smith to TUDOR. Swidler and Smith, together with Arlene Swidler, had founded the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* while teaching at Duquesne University. The journal came to TUDOR with Smith and the Swidlers, where Arlene served as its general editor. It remains there to this day.

## 4. Conclusion

*Breakthrough to Dialogue: The Story of and Reflections on Temple University's Department of Religion* tells the tale of the birth of the religious studies movement as we know it today. TUDOR has influenced the way that religion is studied and taught at religious and secular universities in the United States and around the world. The book is an easy read, full of personal experiences and anecdotes in addition to researched historical accounts. Some chapters deviate a little from the big picture; these could be viewed as interludes that add personal color to the overall narrative. In general, the book is insightful and should be of great interest to anyone working in the area of religious studies.

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