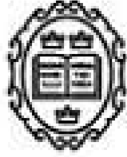

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline by Walter H. Capps

Review by: Gregory D. Alles

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AAR BOOK REVIEWS

Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline. By Walter H. Capps. Fortress Press, 1995. 368 pages. N.P.

Walter Capps has written an account of the making of religious studies that is amazing in its breadth. I learned a great deal from reading it. It is hard to imagine a reader who would not.

Ostensibly Capps is writing the story of the rise of religious studies as a discipline (cf. 348). But that way of stating Capps's intentions probably raises expectations that will be frustrated. *Religious Studies* is a story only in the loosest sense of the term. It might more accurately be called a cast of characters. The characters appear before the audience in carefully defined groups. The sequence of groups creates a loose sense of narrative—often non-linear narrative. But the characters in each group generally deliver soliloquies. They hardly ever interact, and very little links them together. As a result, the story is pretty minimal. Religious studies arises. It tries to conceive of religion as unitary and simple. Then it begins to conceive of religion as plural and complex. That is not much of a story. Furthermore, the subtitle bills the story as "the making of a discipline." But by the end of the book it is not at all clear that religious studies is a discipline. Capps writes, "Religious studies is a subject-field before it is anything more discrete" (337). So instead of taking Capps's framing devices too seriously, readers should look for the book's strengths elsewhere. To my mind those strengths lie in the characters that the book presents and in the way it presents them.

Capps organizes the book in terms of what he calls four basic questions and three questions "that have special and enduring relationships with religious studies" (xvii). These questions overlap the organization of Capps's earlier *Ways of Understanding Religion* (1971), but they do not simply repeat it. The four basic questions, which Capps sees as fundamental to studying any subject, concern the definition, origin, description, and function of the material under study, in this case, religion. The three "enduring" questions in religious studies concern religious language, the truth of the various religions, and the future of religious studies. Capps gives so little attention to the last question that one wonders why it counts as a separate question at all.

One decided strength of Capp's discussion is the insightful way he links work in the study of religions to movements within philosophy in general. The question of the definition of religion depends upon Descartes and Kant; of the origin of religion on Hegel; of the description of religion on Husserl and Merleau-

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Ponty; of the function of religion on—well, on Durkheim and Weber; of religious language on a noble assembly that includes not simply the Marburg neo-Kantians but also Ernst Cassirer, Susanne Langer, Paul Ricoeur, Wilhelm Dilthey, Hans-Georg Gadamer, G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and A. J. Ayer; and of the truth of religion on—perhaps John Hick, but Hick comes toward the end of the chapter. Actually, the chapter on religious truth lacks a philosopher whose stature matches that of any of the other philosophers I have named. It shows.

Within each topic Capps discusses an amazingly rich set of thinkers. Given this breadth, it is inevitable that depth would suffer. Sometimes when Capps takes up a thinker whom (I think) I know well, I find the discussion too brief and even superficial. For example, the account of the art historian Erwin Panofsky (232-235) does not even mention the word "iconology." But when Capps turns to thinkers whom I know—or knew—hardly at all, I find the discussion informative and interesting—in fact, just about right. One might say that Capps has written an analogue to a field survey in archaeology, in which one notes the kinds of remains that appear on the surface of a broad territory. Such a survey has very distinct benefits, for example, in guiding more intensive work.

Oddities occasionally creep into Capp's specific accounts. The discussion of Michel Foucault (243-244) makes it sound as if Foucault wrote his books in the order in which the English translations appeared rather than in the order of the French originals. But it would be very odd indeed if, in a book whose scope is so expansive, such oddities did not occasionally appear. In addition, someone—perhaps an editor rather than Capps himself?—decided to publish this book without annotations. That was a bad decision. To continue the archaeological metaphor: many times I found myself wanting to dig exploratory trenches, but I lacked the necessary coordinates. For example, Capps quotes Erwin Goodenough extensively (27-30). But he gives no titles in the text, no footnotes, and no endnotes. He does not even list Goodenough in the bibliography. I know, of course, how to go about locating the source(s) from which Capps quotes. At the same time, Capps could have spared me the effort.

The preceding points are quibbles. I also have broader reservations. One set of them concerns the organization. Capps seems to think that, with very few exceptions, each thinker he discusses should deal with only one of his four or six or seven questions. This provokes some strange deliberations. For example, Capps tries to determine where to place C.P. Tiele among his questions. He concludes: "if we must make a choice, we must view him first as a phenomenologist" (120). But why must we make a choice? Only a rather rigid adherence to Capps's scheme requires that. More broadly, Capps's scheme limits thinkers to a few blunt questions. Why not explore the multiplicity and subtlety of queries that various thinkers actually made?

In applying his scheme Capps conflates taxonomy and history. He identifies the basic questions scholars of religions may address; then he makes those questions stand for the various stages through which religious studies has progressed. This procedure has several disadvantages. It produces a past that is intelligible

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but somewhat artificial. It does not provide any impetus to consider the non-philosophical purposes and interests that generated work in religious studies—surely important questions about the making of any discipline. It also implies that the discipline—or the scheme—may be in trouble. Let us say that Capps is right to claim that "only a certain number of basic or fundamental questions can be asked about a subject" (xvii). Let us also say that he is right when he identifies the four basic questions. What does it say about the health of religious studies that the works surveyed on the first three of Capps's four questions are generally out of date and uninspiring? And what does it say for Capps's scheme that the chapter on religious language, which lies outside the four fundamental questions, examines scholars and ideas that I, at least, find much more interesting and exciting? These thinkers address two or even three very distinct sets of issues for which the chapter title is simply a convenient catch-all.

The preceding reservations should not blind us to one positive result of Capps's organization. Because Capps conceives of religious studies in terms of fundamental questions, he has little use for traditional distinctions between social scientific, humanistic, and theological approaches to religion. The inclusivity is refreshing, but Capps gives it a questionable spin. The book is heavy on summary, stitched together by analysis, and very short on critique. Its concluding remarks raise immense problems. "All of these models can be conceived" (334). Well, yes; otherwise they could never have appeared in the book. "All of them are methodologically possible. All of them make sense. All of them are workable. All of them can claim high academic respectability. All of them have adherents, representatives, devotees, spokespersons, and disciples" (339). In this transfiguration each and every method blazes brighter than the most brilliant white.

Then Capps takes another giant step. "Many of these insights would have been inaccessible to all or most of the other approaches. . . . Furthermore, the same viewpoint is unavailable to any of the other standpoints. . . . Thus, one model cannot comprehend another model within its own terms. For the same reason, the product of one disciplined viewpoint cannot easily be translated into the terms of another, nor are they easily blended or fused. Each model exhibits a specific logic of inquiry" (334-335). Which does Capps mean, "cannot" or "cannot easily"? If one model cannot comprehend another, we are condemned to talking past one another, to letting each person have her or his say and sitting down. That makes for an unsustainable image of a discipline. Against it stands Donald Davidson's simple, elegant, and very powerful thesis on translatability. Against it too stands the overwhelmingly shared logic underlying all of these models.

None of my reservations, however, should take away from Capps's very real and impressive achievement in writing this book. Capps promises to write another devoted not to the making of religious studies but to its current shape. One hopes that he does so very soon. He has a great deal to teach us all.

Gregory D. Alles
Western Maryland College

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