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# A Forum on the Study of Religion in the University

ON RELIGIOUS STUDIES,  
IN LIEU OF AN OVERVIEW:\* WALTER H. CAPPS

I heard a sermon one time which was introduced in the following way. It was Ascension Day, and the homilist acknowledged it. But because he did not understand Ascension Day, he confessed, he had chosen to speak about something else. He comforted himself by noting that this is what homilists often do.

My reflections on religious studies are prompted by an invitation to sketch an overview of religion. I understood the invitation, but I found it difficult to comply. So, like the homilist, I have shifted to another topic. In the process I have learned something about both subjects, and, particularly, why the initial subject was difficult to reach. My report is set in the form of a preamble, diagnosis, and, I trust, a responsible proposal.

The *preamble* begins this way: First, religious studies is not a discipline, and it is not a subject. Rather it is a *subject field* within which a variety of disciplines are employed and an enormous range of subjects are treated. *Religious studies is a subject-field before it is anything more discrete than this*. It follows that what one does within the field depends upon where he is standing, and where one stands influences what he discovers. Thus, when one looks about for analogs to religious studies, he should not be content with anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and the like. For religious studies is less like philosophy, psychology, and anthropology than like “environmental studies” or even “ethnic studies,” for in both cases the name of the subject field indicates that it is a collectivity in which a variety of useful endeavors occur which draw upon a large number of disciplines, methodologies, and sensitivities.

\* In original form, this paper was prepared to be read to the meeting of the Council on Graduate Studies in Religion, at the Center for Continuing Education, University of Chicago, October 7, 1972. Following discussion, the paper was revised, then read to a group of faculty members and graduate students in colloquy at the University of California, Santa Barbara. It has been revised twice since. The writer records his thanks to the many persons who have offered suggestions or encouragement along the way, particularly to Professor James Spalding, University of Iowa, who designed the original occasion.

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Within the subject field of religious studies there are indeed a variety of specific subjects, each of which lends a regulative definition to the word *religion*. Some see religion as religions, for example, and spend their time trying to bound and describe one or more religious traditions. In such cases, religion is treated as an *organism*. It has its component parts, and the analyst proceeds to demonstrate that the components belong to one another. Ordinarily, religion-as-religions is approached historically, geographically, culturally and, sometimes, comparatively. Thus, emphasis quickly falls on “religions-of,” that is, religions of *India*, religions of *the Ancient Near East*, and so forth.

But other scholars and teachers, when looking at religion, are not thinking first of religious traditions, just as philosophers do not always think in terms of philosophical-isms, philosophical ideologies (Platonism, Aristotelianism, existentialism, positivism, and the like), or ideational sets. Instead such scholars find themselves talking about religious *quotients* or even religious *factors*. They argue, for example, that there are religious factors that influence the development of the personality. There are religious dimensions which inform cultures. There are religious quotients to social, ethical, and political life. Thus, instead of depicting religion in terms of *religions of*, this approach uses the language of *religion* (singular) *in*, or, with less precision, *religion and*. (University catalogs often include courses in the Religious Studies curriculum, for instance, with such titles as “*Religion and Society*” and/or “*Religious Themes in Literature*.”)

In addition to the two large postures already cited, there is an orientation to the field which is motivated neither by religion as tradition or organism nor by religious factors and quotients, but, as it is said, by religion itself, or “the nature or essence of religion” if you will. For this temperament, it is not enough to concentrate on the prominent patterns of religious institutionalization or upon religious qualities that register elsewhere; rather it wants to identify the core of the matter. Consequently the approach is regulated by an interest in what religion is, what its fundamental components are, how it is to be defined. The Kantian concern about whether or not there is in fact a religious a priori is a fundamental case in point. One can list under the same rubric the apparently perpetual, ongoing quest to locate the *range* of human experience to which religion properly refers. Similarly based are the efforts to locate or isolate religion’s *origin* and religion’s *essence*. Here religion is construed as being something other than an adjective modifying a noun or a noun that can be pluralized.

Still another approach starts from within the range of interests of a particular field or discipline within the humanities or the social sciences, then treats “religion” according to methods and principles which are sanctioned by the same field or discipline. Thus there develops a sociological perspective on religion, a psychology of religion, a philosophy of religion, and, more recently, an anthropology of religion. In each of these examples, a distinctive working definition is given to the crucial term.

The range is compounded further because the *multiple subject* is approached from multiple interests and sometimes from multiple vested interests. Some are content to *describe* religious phenomena, whether such phenomena be organisms, quotients, distinguishing elements, structures, and so forth. Comparison and contrast can be used to treat the unity and diversity of a single organism, tradition, or phenomenon; or it can be directed toward cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary interests. Some scholars not only compare and contrast, or describe and decipher,

but, more ambitiously, engage in systematic or synthesizing work. That is, they construct systems of unification or patterns of similarity.

This is multiplicity enough. Additional complications occur when the various *methodological* intentions give expression to deep-seated convictional goals. Descriptive, comparative, isolative, and synthesizing work is engaged to *defend* religion, *demonstrate* its utility, *verify* it, or *explain* it away. Admittedly, these examples of convictional intent are too simplistic; they hardly ever manifest themselves in such unambiguous manner. The point is worth making, however, that the elements of evaluation and sanction are inserted into methodological dispositions. There is hardly a scholar in the field who is not doing what he is doing in order to show the significance, relevance, meaningfulness, connectiveness, coherence, or utility of religion, in either positive or negative terms.

Until now reference has been made to the subject of religious studies, and the contention is that religious studies is a large subject-field within which a variety of selected subjects are approached by means of numerous disciplines under the inspiration of multiple methodological and attitudinal sets of interests. But we must also turn to the matter of the curriculum, for it is in curricular terms that the multiple subject achieves form.

Almost everyone teaching religious studies knows what it is to be involved in curricular construction and development. The massive, widespread attention devoted to this subject in recent years is added testimony that religious studies is a new enterprise which is still in its initial phase of development. There is as yet no handbook on the subject. There are no operational manuals. The predecessor versions of the enterprise are not always trustworthy. The models currently being employed are chiefly experimental; they are frequently revised as quickly as they are instituted. In fact they are presented ordinarily under the full recognition that they are flexible, tentative, and incomplete. Usually they specify no clear way of moving architectonically from the first course of instruction to subsequent courses. Ordinarily the relationship between courses follows no explicable criteria, and passage from one to the next is not sequential.

Nor have we thought very impressively about how the content of the subject is affected by the relationships to the subject that are created by diverse levels of education. Instead, we tend to replicate the same curricular pattern at all levels. The prime difference between undergraduate and graduate instruction tends to be more lecture and survey courses at the "lower level" and more in-depth seminars at the "higher level." The curricular categories remain the same. The subject tends to be conceived and presented in the same way. Only the mode of attack is altered. The entire undertaking is uni-directional and self-orientational. Accordingly, graduate education is treated as a several-stage initiation rite through which the penitent must pass if he/she is to be given access to the rights and privileges of the guild. In other words, religious studies is a process of socialization. It sometimes appears as if the whole venture is regulated to perpetuate a hierarchically-ordered, pyramid-formed educational structure which, as William F. May has pointed out, allows a handful of precious provincial governors to keep their subjects in servile submission. May writes:

The . . . system is pervasively hierarchical, with non-professional groundlings at the bottom, pre-professionals at the middle levels, and Ph.D. professionals at the top.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> May, "The Recovery of the Humanist's Vocation: A Proposal for Graduate Study in the Humanities," *Religion and the Humanizing of Man*, ed. James M. Robinson, (Council on the Study of Religion, 1972), p. 145.

But through it all the curricular fields have remained pretty much the same. The innovations that have occurred are to be likened to the shifting perspectives available to one who is riding a train forwards, who suspects that he can get a different view by riding backwards for awhile, or by moving to the club car, the observation car, the dome car, or by whiling away some time in the diner (especially if the menu contains several intriguing possibilities): there have been perspectival adjustments from within the train, yet most tend to be riding the same train, almost without regard for diversity of destination.

#### DIAGNOSIS

The prime reason for lack of certainty and identity is that religious studies has not yet learned to operate with effective awareness of what might be called a second-order scholarly tradition. For example, when one studies philosophy, he is introduced not only to long-standing philosophical issues, but to philosophers and to philosophical schools. To study philosophy is to engage in philosophical reflection *and* to learn to find one's way into the reflections of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Russell, Wittgenstein, and the others. The same is true too in psychology. In studying psychology, one is introduced to problems and issues that belong to the field, *and* he is also forced to become acquainted with the history and theory of psychology. And this implies knowing one's way into Freud, Jung, Adler, Rank, Erikson, Sullivan, Maslow, and the others. But it is difficult to do the same in religious studies. The prime difficulty is due to the fact that a subject-field has no *single* clear, direct, self-sustaining second-order tradition. Religious studies is a subject-field and neither a subject nor a discipline. Its various subjects have histories, and its disciplines own traditions. But the multiple histories of such multiple subjects and disciplines do not lead into religious studies in any simple, predictable way. When we draw upon James Frazer, E. B. Tylor, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, Rudolf Otto, and the others, under the presumption that all of them lend constitution to the subject-field, we must also recognize that these ancestors come from a variety of fields, represent a variety of disciplines, and hardly ever enter the field of religious studies from the same standpoint, in the same terms, on the same grounds. Indeed, when we look at this matter, we discover that the principal contributions and the prime discoveries within the field have ordinarily been made by persons who are self-conscious practitioners of methods and disciplines of other fields: anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, historians, psychologists, and sometimes historians of art. Much of the time, the formative contributions have come from outside "the field of religious studies," strictly defined. Thus, if we are to recover a sense of a second-order tradition, we cannot expect to look for a single chain of continuous communication. The subject-field has nothing functionally equivalent to apostolic succession. Instead, the background context is disparate, disjointed, flexible, and accumulated or even created rather than discovered. Its sources lie here and there, and its ingredients are always arbitrarily assembled. But no matter how difficult it is to recover, the field cannot get along without a sense of second-order tradition. It cannot hope to be instrumentally self-conscious without knowing how to arrange its second-order literature. It cannot pretend to find its way until it can place its past in narrative sequences. When we do not have these perspectival capacities, we lack depth, understanding, and the assurance of what, where, and

who we are. Or, to be more precise, while we live with these absences and vacancies, we give the impression of having to make up the subject anew each time we approach it, as if there were no protocol at all, as though we are creating *ex nihilo*. Or we cater to our anxieties and yield to premature closure. Called upon to say something, we ascribe authority to formulations only preliminarily conceived. Or, we take action without the benefit of counsel from our actual corporate mind. Without conscious ties to the past, we lack confidence in the present and wisdom for the future. For, the second-order tradition, or some surrogate thereof, is necessary for entree into the subjects of the field as well as insight into meaningful curricular design.

#### CLARIFICATION

I began with certain confessions about the way I see religious studies. I called it a subject-field instead of a subject or a discipline, and I enumerated some of the more prominent exercises — both methodological and substantive — which are supported within the subject field. Then I turned to the matter of the curriculum specifically, and I contended that it is difficult to find our way about within the field because we have no clear sense of a second-order tradition to inform our contemporary self-consciousness. The labeling of religious studies as a subject-field was the prime feature in the preamble; the contention regarding our inability to employ a second-order tradition resourcefully formed the major thrust in the diagnosis.

To summarize the point more dramatically: religious studies has no center. There is no single, identifiable core element. There is no common subject which is treated by all who are associated with departments or programs in religious studies, regardless of the backgrounds out of which they come or the disciplines they represent. There is no subject which is common to all religious studies endeavors.

. . . Religious studies is a large and conglomerate field, and a very real prospect exists that there is, in fact, no common subject around which its interests turn. . . . Indeed, it is entirely conceivable that none of the subjects under discussion when men seek to explain, describe, isolate, synthesize, and verify "religion" are the same as any of the others.<sup>2</sup>

None of the specific subjects within the field "share a common likeness." Thus, the only definitions one can give religion are operational.

But that puts the matter in contentious terms. It can also be presented positively. Like "Environmental Studies" and "Ethnic Studies," "Religious Studies" denotes a *collectivity*. It is a subject field within which a variety of enterprises are sponsored, most of which have some kind of direct and indirect association with each other. But the association is not organic. That is, the enterprises are usually not organically interrelated. Just as "Environmental Studies" and "Ethnic Studies" do not require the definition of a noun, so too can "Religious Studies" exist without having its noun defined, or the adjective "religious" transformed into a noun. The lack of a definitional noun does not prevent one from talking about the environment, or ethnicity, or even about religion. But one must do so in the awareness that he is not pointing to the

<sup>2</sup> Walter H. Capps, *Ways of Understanding Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 7.

substantive center of a field. The fields really have no substantive centers. The words environment in Environmental Studies, ethnicity in Ethnic Studies, and religion in Religious Studies are sponsored by their respective collectivities. Should the collectivity collapse, the synthesizing word would also dissolve. It would dissolve because it would no longer have reference. Religious studies is a subject-field before it is anything more discrete than this. When it becomes more discrete it lends exactness to subjects, methods, and disciplines that are operative in a host of other fields.

But there is a dimension to our discussion that I can approach only by offering an example. In Sweden several summers ago, at an international congress on aesthetics, the rector of the host institution, Torgny Segerstedt, of Uppsala University, presented an opening lecture on “the social function of art.” In the paper Segerstedt described the role of the artist in terms of the articulation of “we-feeling.” He observed that the artist functions to make present “we-feeling” conscious; and, in addition, the artist has privileged access to future “we-feeling.” The sensitivities of the artist are directed toward disclosing corporate consciousness often before this has been sensed or articulated by anyone else. The artist’s talents are regulated by a disposition, sensitivity to which prompted Immanuel Kant, for example, to correlate aesthetics, the future tense, and a commentary on hope in working out the grammar for his third *Critique*.

The suggestion here is not a corollary to Segerstedt’s observation, but an analog or a parallel example. It is not about art, but it may be about design. The constitution of religious studies is also the articulation of cherished corporate awareness, or what might be called “we-feeling.” Scholars and teachers in the subject-field must be viewed not only as tutored practitioners of certain disciplines, or even as persons who have invested large energies or devoted expensive intensities to “religious” subjects. Both facts are true no doubt much of the time. But, in addition, they function as custodians of legacies, bearers of scholarly traditions, and stewards of cultural, intellectual, and religious experience. That legacy includes a group of studies with manifest family likenesses which, under fitting circumstances, gives formation to reflection, imagination, and sensibility, and leads sometimes to the accession of wisdom. Thus, if forced to admit that religious studies is a disparate subject-field without a common substantive center, the custodians and practitioners should recall how collectivities come about. One description is never violated: collectivities are idiosyncratic. A collectivity is comprised of peculiarities, not of logical steps. The function of a collectivity is odd-job rather than regular and forensic. It is given to parameter monitoring and not to definitional exactness. Unlike organic unities, collectivities need not be systematically or hierarchically arranged. And, while the components of the collectivity are always formative, they are never causal. A collectivity is formed, not caused. It is composed, not deduced. It has a certain spontaneity, but is never forced. It is a Gestalt-like composition, a picture, a puzzle — and not the end product of a sequential discursive series.

Collectivities and second-order traditions — at some point the two fuse together. The first is necessary to discern the second. The second is necessary to form and support the first. Collectivities without second-order traditions are empty; second-order traditions without collectivities are idle and inert. As far as anyone knows, the collectivity called “religious studies” was prompted in part by developments within theological reflection, shifts of emphasis in American higher

higher education, and stirrings in what, for lack of a better phrase, we call contemporary religious self-consciousness. It was formed by events, experiences, traditions, and legacies which reach far back into history — perhaps farther back than we recognize. But it came about because some sort of “we feeling,” or corporate awareness, was able to perceive, compose, guide, support, articulate, and formulate it. This must be the reason we have come to the stage in our corporate life cycle where, in Erik Erikson’s words, after knowing that we can make things and make them well, it is necessary for us to align these fundamental capabilities with our sense of endowment, opportunity, and heritage. We seek to move past the embryonic stage; we are coming of age. At earlier moments we sought purpose and competence; now, as the cycle tells us, it is a matter of fidelity.

Stated again: in lieu of a substantive definition of religion there is only an endowment of disciplined corporate awareness, and this endowment has been resourceful enough to inspire an enormous range of scholarly interest and creative activity. From the same endowment issues a sense of place, belonging, and connectedness, but always delicately, never mechanically, genealogically, never genetically. Furthermore, the resourcefulness appears to promise to not run out quickly. Some may be worried that this is not enough. To my mind, this is the way it must be.

## SECULAR EDUCATION AND ITS RELIGION: RANDY HUNTSBERRY

**T**HE separation of church and state has always been an embattled position in the American ethos. Because of its constitutional shield, however, the principle is rarely confronted head-on. Frequent skirmishes are fought over such things as school prayers, while questions about the “religious” presuppositions of the public school system itself are left unasked. Too many of these skirmishes have left a smoke screen over the real battle, the rapidly accelerating number of actual “religion” courses now being taught in the public schools.<sup>1</sup> I would predict that “religion,” though of a very different stamp, will soon be as pervasive in the public schools as it now is in the parochial.

The constitutionality of these courses has never been tested, though the Supreme Court has implied that the “objective” study of religion is constitutional.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> By 1967 over 90% of the state universities were teaching courses in religion and approximately 30% had departments of religion (statistics cited by Robert A. Spivey, “Modest Messiahs: The Study of Religion in State Universities,” in *Religious Education* 63 [January-February 1968], p. 6).

<sup>2</sup> In the 1948 *McCullum vs. Board of Education* (333 U.C. 203) and the 1963 *Abington School District vs. Schempp* (374 U.S. 203, 225).

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