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Responses

Author(s): Walter H. Capps, Randy Huntsberry and Benjamin Ladner

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consequences for how we deal with ideas, especially ideas of religion and, I need hardly add, of divinity. The study of religion is a mode of inquiry into ideas, phenomena, events, to be sure. But seeing what these mean involves primarily a different way of seeing — different, I am claiming, from the accredited modes of academic expression, but not different from the actual grounds of those expressions. It attests, in other words, to the human condition — that condition of our incarnated, worldly being out of which emerge our ways of configuring what in some sense we already know, else we could not speak and take up the rhythm of our existence or indwell the cadence of our thinking by which we are related to our transcendence of ourselves.

## RESPONSES

MR. CAPPS: When I wrote “On Religious Studies” my intention was methodological mapwork. I wanted to clarify the place of religious studies within the framework of the humanities and social sciences. My goal was to enunciate some principles that might inform undergraduate and graduate curricula in religious studies. The content of my paper consisted of a series of suggestions for subsequent group discussion. Following the first reading of the paper, I was told that I had struck one or two significant chords. Given that encouragement, I continued working on the topic. I was not aware that Ladner and Huntsberry were working on definitional issues too. Indeed, I was hardly aware of Ladner and Huntsberry. We were introduced to each other by Ray L. Hart, by means of the U.S. Postal Services. Huntsberry put it well when he wrote to me “like two strangers seeking shelter from a storm, we seem to find ourselves thrown together.” As strangers, we could not have known that our papers addressed similar issues, or even that our approaches were compatible. And yet, in certain respects, it seems that compatibility is present. Though our papers treat different issues, they are formed by related diagnoses. Each of us understands religious studies to be an embryonic, fluid, and malleable undertaking which gives support to multiple statements of purpose, including some that are conflicting and some that are ironical.

My paper was regulated by an interest in identifying the conceptual models that are appropriate to the study of religion. It was an effort at methodological self-consciousness. It could be made to fit an intriguing chapter in Western intellectual history. Its footnotes would contain references to the work of Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper, Leonard Meyer, Margaret Masterman, Pierre Francastel, E. H. Gombrich, Richard McKeon, Robert Brumbaugh, and, particularly recently, Stephen Toulmin. I approach self-consciousness in religious studies via mapwork plottings, which plottings have been informed by analyses of models, paradigms, and formal conceptual systems.

Benjamin Ladner could discuss “my topic” at length, I am sure, for our respective interests overlap. But at some point, following an exchange of preliminary niceties, I suspect he would question whether my interest is either fundamental or crucial to religious studies. Given his fondness for Polanyi, he would be obliged to relegate analyses of conceptual paradigms to a secondary range of intellectual importance. By contrast, he would accord priority to the personal quotient in knowledge, that is, to self-knowledge. Then, with particular

reference to religious studies, Ladner would insist that self-knowledge play a more prominent and self-conscious formative role. His charge is that religious studies too often gets lost in concerns for hypothetical brilliance and conceptual exactness, all of which pertain to second-order reflective matters. This preoccupation is deflating, in his view, because it lends stress to reflective rather than to the more proper and elemental prereflective matters. He calls attention to the need to place “our deepest commitments,” “our most profound affirmations,” “our personal struggle, our professional growth, and our cultural and intellectual future,” “our personal intention,” or, in short, “our prereflective yet personal experience” directly in the center of the learning process, and particularly in religious studies.

Randy Huntsberry, on the other hand, takes a familiar distinction, and turns it the other way around and inside out. His purpose is not to enunciate a full, effective epistemology, or even to make grand recommendations for religious studies. Instead, concentrating on the distinction between “teaching about religion” and “teaching religion,” he points to its working deceptions. In his view, studies about religion contain implicit ways of conceiving and conveying religion. Analyses of religion, on closer examination, turn out to be presentations of religion. Huntsberry thinks practitioners of religious studies ought to be candid: we should admit that our inquiries about religion actually teach religion. Even the desire to be “objective” about religion carries its own first-order religious overtones.

Viewed temperamentally, the three of us are different spirits. When we are left by ourselves to do what we most want to do, I suspect one might find Ladner probing for supports of Polanyi in contemporary continental hermeneutical writings, perhaps in the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Huntsberry, I wager, would be open to an invitation to contribute to a discussion of “civil religion,” especially if he were allowed to choose his examples from the tacit “scholars’ religion” which gains sanction in halls of learning in America wherein the distinction between church and state is kept intact. And I could be found persistently trying to understand Toulmin’s *Human Understanding* better.

Yet, despite these temperamental differences, the three of us read the present situation in strikingly similar ways. All of us take as a starting point the fact that there are large slips between what we intend and what we do in religious studies. Huntsberry would say that what we say we are doing in the profession and what we really do do not agree with one another. In his view, we are actually doing what we profess not to be doing. Ladner is saying that what we do is in fact an accommodation to something less than our proper goals. Because what we really ought to be doing has not been conceived very profoundly, we have not yet done what we should be doing. In my view, we have done so much, and so much has been so different, that we have difficulty classifying what we are doing and discerning its interrelationships.

Such corporate testimony makes for an interesting future. For example, Huntsberry’s analysis could be employed to further Ladner’s recommendation. If the study about religion is really study of religion, it ought to be advanced — Ladner could say — on primary religious grounds. Or, Huntsberry could cite Ladner’s recommendation as expressed acknowledgment that the distinction between “about” and “of” does not actually pertain in religious studies. Given this example, Huntsberry could decide later whether he approves of this

fusing of prepositions. I myself could let both of them go their respective ways, for mapwork does not require one to stipulate relationships between primary and secondary modes of reflection. But mine is but a temporary security. Ladner could startle me by charging that no matter which of the traceable methodologies is selected, it may not make the true dynamics of religion accessible: perhaps none of the methods the map may isolate is sufficiently responsive to the presence of self-knowledge.

The accumulated evidence adds up to a significant point: the familiar distinctions we employ within the profession must be rethought and redressed. For example, the distinction between (a) the study of religion and (b) the study about religion may have no exact working curricular equivalents. The “language of” and the “language about” religion relate to one another via a variety of connectors in addition to “versus.” The distinction between “objective description” and whatever may be its counterpart possesses only provisional methodological sustenance. Some of this language sounded correct to us ten years ago when we sought academic entree, sanction, and respectability. But that was ten years ago, and the jargon no longer resonates very profoundly. Our corporate experience has shown that we did not enforce what we had professed. We did not, perhaps, because we could not. Perhaps the stakes were larger than we had realized and the challenges more compelling than “of” and “about” categories would admit. These, it seems, are sufficient reasons for thinking the rationale through again.

**MR. HUNTSBERRY:** The question, “What is the nature of religious studies?” has brought these three papers together. Walter Capps is right in saying that religious studies is at best a “subject-field” and not a “subject” or a “discipline.” There is no “center.” According to Capps, “ ‘Religious Studies’ denotes a collectivity.” Capps leaves us, it seems, with religious studies as anything and everything its professors say it is.

Capps claims that “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.” He seems to be suggesting that the answer to the problem will come when the “collectivity” produces such a second-order tradition. I wonder, however, how a collectivity as centerless as ours could ever produce an agreed-upon second-order tradition. Capps, it seems to me, is asking simply that we all get together and come to some kind of consensus. But this brings us right back to our frustrating starting point. We have been trying to do this for years, and most of us have long since given up.

I believe we have to look elsewhere for the prime reason. Unlike any other discipline, subject, or even subject-field, religious studies is not something new in itself. It has been around for a very long time. What is new and troublesome is that religious studies is now being taught in public as well as religiously affiliated institutions. Our confusion about the nature of religious studies exists because of our more fundamental confusion about the relationship between religious studies and secular education. We are perplexed because we have been swallowed alive. We no longer seem able to control our own destiny.

For this reason I find myself in complete sympathy with Benjamin Ladner’s suggestion that we have to begin with epistemology. There has to be a general re-evaluation of what learning in general is all about. Learning, according to Ladner,

is a “self-reflexive enterprise.” Religious studies and genuine learning are concerned with “discovery and transformation.”

I am not sure at this point where Ladner wants us to go next. At best he seems to conclude with Capps that the answer to our confusion is the “collectivity,” whose task is the “self-reflexive enterprise” aiming to “perceive the hidden.” Ideas, Ladner argues, are always rooted “in the plurality of persons.” We always stand in context.

My own paper really begins at this point. As I suggested to Professor Capps, the reason for our confusion about religious studies at present is that we have not taken fully enough into account the fact that religious studies is now part of an alien epistemological context. We have not yet admitted, even if we are aware, that we are teaching according to the norms inherent within public education. I believe that the beginning of clarity about what we are doing will come when we finally admit that we are teaching a new kind of religion, a kind of “religion of humanity,” and that our students come to us primarily in quest of “discovery and transformation.”

MR. LADNER: Professor Capps has written a thoughtful essay in an effort to shape the possibilities of continued reflection on religious studies. What is most appealing about his own reflection is his purposefully cultivated sensitivity to the complexities inherent in any talk about religious studies. He perceives the multiplicity of levels of interests, contexts for inquiry, and reasons for asking about the meaning of the phenomenon of religion. Insofar as he is concerned to legitimize this diversity I find myself in substantial agreement with him. I concur, in other words, with his *motivation* for writing what he has written.

Since, according to his rendering of the current status of religious studies, the field has few, if any, of the traditional markings of a “discipline” or “subject,” Capps would *like* to escape the confines of this way of characterizing religious studies. And yet — so it seems to me — he is *in fact* bothered by the tinges of quasi-illegitimacy which he himself is able to identify when religious studies is set comparatively alongside other disciplines. Without saying so explicitly [indeed, his explicit statements beg to imply otherwise] the force of his argument is nonetheless that he would like for religious studies to become acknowledged as respectable vis-à-vis “the disciplines.” Despite his concluding paragraph he actually views religious studies not merely as a “subject-field” as distinct from a “discipline,” but as a discipline-in-embryo, *on the way* to discipline status. To be sure, as he says, “Religious studies is a subject-field *before it is anything more discrete than this*” [my italics], but the real though unacknowledged problem for him is how do we become more discrete. And by implication there is an even more profound question, namely, on what conceptual basis is religious studies founded such that it is legitimate to speak of it and defend its undertakings in the context of the modern academy?

This is, I submit, *the* problem which is threaded throughout the whole of Capps’ essay. It is, I hasten to add, a good problem, one which if solved (even partially) would take us further in the fruitful direction of professional self-apprehension. In one sense his essay is implicitly an effort to address this problem. At a deeper and more serious level, however, Capps makes no effort to pursue this central question. Why is this? And why, even as one is reading and nodding

approvingly to his surface observations, do subtle pangs of disquietude intrude the underside of one's otherwise unaffected complicity?

There are, I think, at least two reasons. In the first place, Capps does not perceive the extent to which he himself has fallen victim to the disease he is diagnosing. In a word, nothing is clearer than that what he has in fact given us in this essay is another overview. That he has done this, albeit unwittingly, is not only understandable but also partially instructive when set against the background of his primary concern, namely, to avoid a substantive definition while at the same time to formulate a legitimate conceptual pattern for understanding the enterprise of religious studies. It can be instructive at the point of our seeing (as Capps does not see) that such a task unavoidably carries with it what Robert Pirsig calls a "platform problem," i.e., in trying to come to terms with understanding, one has no available platform from which to discuss it apart from that mode itself. Hence it is important for one to acknowledge that in trying to say something about the nature of religious studies he is in fact already "studying" this particular form of "studies," and that one cannot get very far without asking on what grounds one does *this*, knowing that in asking such a question the study is already under way. Capps seems not to know this. Thus his whole essay becomes a search for the right descriptive term ("subject-field," "collectivity," "we-feeling"), which is really a search for a term of overview.

A brief afterthought leaves the reader with the suspicion that no real distinctions have been made between "collectivity" and "discipline" and "subject field," or rather that the putative distinctive characteristics of each apply with equal plausibility to the others. Surely, for example, traditional disciplines may also be said to possess a "we-feeling." But Capps has failed to distinguish between what is the historico-cultural intellectual setting in which disciplines have come to make sense, and what a more profound criticism of that setting and of the nature of disciplines which religious studies, so long as it remains idiosyncratic, would call into question. Otherwise, the traditional disciplines remain (as I think they do, though tacitly, for him) the measure of our "coming of age." In the final analysis Capps has failed to propose any real alternative for how we might imagine ourselves legitimately doing what we do in religious studies under any other model than what other "fully developed" disciplines can provide.

It is this failure which lies behind a second and more important reason for his misapprehension of the problem of formulating an adequate conceptual image for religious studies. Briefly stated, he does not really perceive the problem at all. He simultaneously bemoans the fact that in religious studies there is *no* single second order tradition, chides us for not *being aware of* a second order tradition, and admonishes us to recover and/or to create one. And, while lauding the idiosyncratic nature of religious studies as a subject-field (as compared to traditional disciplines), he urges the necessity of being related to a second order tradition (as are traditional disciplines). "*At some point*," he says [my italics], "the two must come together." The central point, however, is *how* this point is to be *uniquely* arrived at. It is just this that he unself-consciously avoids telling us. But how are we to arrive at this juncture without the loss of that idiosyncratic status which he himself professes to prize? Could it be that the uniqueness of religious studies is not in its idiosyncratic collectivity (though admittedly this may be one of its characteristics) but in the fact that it stands in a peculiar (though not privileged) relation to truth; that, in other words, it perceives the meaning of things in a



particular way, and that this perception issues in a form of inquiry which in the context of the modern academy is rightly acknowledged to be eccentric? If so, it is not that eccentricity itself, sustained by some amorphous “we-feeling,” that is the point of departure for talk about religious studies. Such talk is only possible insofar as it is grounded in the *source* of our mutually acknowledged form of reflection which is the *precondition* of that eccentricity and which is at the heart (“center”) of our enterprise, however varied and unsystematic may be our apprehensions of it. In other words, it is important — even necessary — to recognize that there is *something* that we are doing, and not simply create labels and describe characteristics that attest to the fact of *our* doing it (e.g., “we-feeling,” “collectivity”). It is not only “we” who are involved but “it” as well. In saying something about religious studies we are saying something about the nature of reality, truth and meaning, and *vice versa*. And it is not simply of one or the other (“we” or “it”) that we speak when reflecting on religious studies, but of their reciprocity . . . and this reciprocity is not reducible to any sort of collective consciousness, however nobly conceived.

Every area of inquiry that has achieved recognition as a discipline or subject was or may even now be regarded as a “subject-field.” The real question is, how do we prevent the seemingly inevitable “development” of what we know and want to know in religious studies into the rigid forms characteristic of modern disciplines. We must first recognize the implications of their locus in the institution of knowledge that is the modern university, which by its very existence embodies and manifests a host of presupposing claims about the structure of inquiry, any one of which if left unexamined invariably tempts us to surreptitious and misleading overviews.

Professor Huntsberry has found Mr. Justice Clark’s sanction of the study of religion too simplistic and unmindful. I find Professor Huntsberry’s analysis of this sanction and its import for religious studies equally so. While this failing may be forgivable in a justice of the court, it is decidedly less so in a professor of religion. For what is at stake (as in Capps’ article) is the possibility of misleading ourselves about the modes of our own reflection in religious studies.

For the most part Huntsberry’s essay strikes me as ill-conceived and (perhaps *therefore*) unnecessarily obscure. There is a serious confusion about “the power of secularity to alter the nature of religion” — which is one problem — “the impact of secularity on religious attitudes” — which is another — and a misunderstanding of understanding in religion (or is it in the *study* of religion?) — which is yet another problem. While these are obviously not unrelated issues, they are hardly the *same* issue and cannot be simply collapsed into each other as Huntsberry supposes.

Furthermore, the abrupt changes in the development of his discussion reflect not merely stylistic indecision but intellectual diffuseness. He moves from a concern with public schools to an examination of the situation in universities, from religious trends in education to a “conservative”/“liberal” dispute; and finally he implicitly condones “accurate fairness” as a way of including conservative theology in religious studies on the same grounds that he condemns secular education for employing “objectivity” as a way of legitimizing the study of religion, only to qualify this by returning to his original claim about the real battle between “secularity” and “traditional religion.”

While one could, I think, succeed in disassembling Huntsberry’s too neat characterization of the relation of “secular education” to human experience as

somehow distinct from religious awareness such that divine truths and human questions must be categorically differentiated, the crucial point is the extent to which he would mislead us with respect to the epistemological function of norms. That so much of his argument hinges on a comparison of norms suggests that options have been posed in the essay which are themselves products of the critical posture which permeates our reflective tendencies and are evidence of Huntsberry's complicity in that which he criticizes. In sum, these are false options which can only make sense inside a universe of discourse which a-critically assumes the validity of an Enlightenment-influenced description of critical thought itself, and of the inherent dependence of the understanding on norms, whether of "experimentalism" or of "world-rejecting transcendence." It is his understanding of these concepts, which are themselves truncated forms of understanding, which he does not understand, and hence, it seems to me, adds all too little to our own.