

Theology and Religious Studies Reconsidered

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There are several reasons for reassessing the relationship of religious studies to theology. Each of these acknowledges that both sides of the relationship are products of dynamic and ongoing intellectual development. Thus, both are in constant process of formation. Changes on one side of the relationship evoke corresponding changes and adjustments on the other. As religious studies develops, so too is theology perceived differently. Similarly, sensitivity to religious studies is affected by shifts and alterations in theological self-consciousness.

At one time, it seemed possible to be fairly clear, precise and definite about the distinction between theology and religious studies. But this was when both religious studies and theology were conceived in fundamentally static terms, and when their long-range mutual influences were not discerned. It was customary then to utilize the words "about" and "of" to specify the distinction. Religious studies was understood to be an "about" discipline, while theology was formed by "of". Religious studies was conceived as "a language or a science about": about religion, about culture, about society, about texts, about the history of the human race in all of its cultural and

ideologically variety. Theology was conceived as "a language or a science of": of a religion, of a particular religion, of a faith, indeed, of faith.

So too was intellectual intensity understood to be defined differently in the two enterprises. By analogy: recently anthropologists and sociologists have come to employ the distinction between "thick" and "thin" to contrast two ways of analyzing and interpreting data. In being multi-valenced, the former seeks a greater measure of analytical and interpretive depth. The latter, by contrast, wants, at all costs, to be empirically circumspect. But, with respect to the comparison of theology to religious studies, the key word is not "thick" vs. "thin" but between "hot" and "cold". Certainly, both religious studies and theology are reflective and analytical undertakings. Both involve concept formation. Both intend to achieve intelligible orientation. But the former was understood to much "cooler" than the latter. Correspondingly the latter was understood to be "hotter" than the former, because theology exhibits an element of advocacy that enhances intensity, because theology tends to assume promotional tendencies. It takes sides. In doing so, simply by its selection of interests and materials, it moves toward being intolerant. It issues from a presumed context, from a given and prescribed set of circumstances. Religious studies, by contrast, appears to be much easier to conduct in a more public manner. Party and/or ideological affiliations seem much less important. Presumably, anyone with requisite intelligence and training, command of appropriate methodological procedures,

and adequate textual knowledge can engage in religious studies. Banners are not required. Religious orientations are not supposed to count in the portrayals being rendered. The mode of religious studies is detachment. And detachment implies distance, and distance fortifies dispassion, and detachment, distance, and dispassion diminish ideological intensity. Religious studies' stated intention is deliberate and calculated scholarly objectivity. It wants to qualify as an acknowledged impartial and circumspect field of inquiry. It approaches its subject as being simply one of the crucial elements necessary to comprehensive cultural understanding. Religious studies argues, "omit the religious dimension, and the study of society and culture is diminished, incomplete, and partial." That is all. Theology, by contrast, in an internal language. It belongs to a specific tradition, a particular community, and is thus resistant to evaluation by public criteria. In religious studies, the chips fall where they may. In theology, some of the key chips fall according to pre-ordained plan.

This is something of the temper that used to be invoked when religious studies was in its infancy. The distinctions which were made were both sensible and useful. In certain respects, they are sensible and useful still. They caused the new intellectual undertaking to occur. They enabled it to blossom. They gave both sanction and respectability to a burgeoning enterprise. It wasn't simply a speculative issue.

However, more recent awarenesses conspire to make us wonder if the earlier distinction can be sustained with such clarity and

simplicity. In the first place, a quick survey of the history of religious studies reveals that the new discipline was an embellishment of the older one. Religious studies, at least in large part, it seems, was conceived through extended theological self-consciousness. We base this impression on an analysis of the process by which religious studies came into being. We refer specifically to the personalities which were most influential in the process. We recognize that the modern origin of religious studies, strictly speaking, dates back to the time of Edward Burnett Tylor, Sir James Frazer, Max Müller, and other nineteenth century theorists. Yet religious studies doesn't really come into its own until its formative theorists can also supply the new discipline with adequate theological sanctions. Religious studies came into its fuller being when its content was recognized as making demonstrable theological sense.

We cite, specifically, the role played in this century by the two large conceptual visionaries, first, Paul Tillich, and second, Mircea Eliade. Both gave formation to the field. Both moved it significantly forward. Indeed, it is arguable that the influences of Tillich and Eliade virtually brought the field of religious studies into being, at least in North America. By "being brought into being" we mean giving ideational reality, curricular definition, and academic respectability to the subject. These creative intellectual craftsmen did this by providing attractive and compelling systems of conceptual coherence which blended several important components.

Tillich was first, of course, and Eliade followed thereafter. And the transition from Tillich to Eliade was so natural that it seemed only to be a matter of logical expansion: scholarly interest, it seems, was simply progressing from one stage of development to the next. Furthermore, there was striking compatibility between the two theoretical accounts. Where the theologian sensitive to the history of religions left off, the historian sensitive to theological considerations continued on. The sequence was so compelling that many scholars could easily identify their own personal intellectual development with its progression. It helped, too, that the two prime theorists taught a graduate seminar together at the University of Chicago the year prior to Tillich's death. This gave some shared cues regarding the orchestration of the transition. It also provided an element of generic sanction. All of this was germinated at the very moment when programs and departments of religious studies were being established.

Tillich's and Eliade's orientations were transposed immediately into orientations of the field. Instructors who had been trained in theology prior to the flourishing of programs and departments of religious studies found it congenial to shift to religious studies. For many of them, it wasn't a shift at all. Or, if it was a shift, it was a theological shift, too. A compelling conceptual or ideational pattern was there to facilitate the transition, and to keep newer religious aspirations alive.

Consequently, a veritable explosion of Tillich-based courses

--the "religion and" courses ("Religion and Literature," "Religion and Science," "Religion and the Arts," "Religion and Contemporary Culture," etc.)--was followed by a set of courses on the phenomenology of religion. Following Eliade's lead, the study of religion was introduced via "phenomenology of religion." Ever since, students everywhere have been introduced to religion through Eliade's The Sacred and the Profane, a book which has become required reading in many introductory or first courses. The Sacred and the Profane assumed the function formerly reserved for Tillich's book, Dynamics of Faith.

It is important to recognize that Tillich's perspective was Christian theology before it was history or phenomenology of religions. Similarly, Eliade's perspective, though it belongs more properly to the history of religions, enunciates and honors important theological contentions. And these are not isolated examples. One need only refer to the presence of the same combination of history-of-religion and theology in the writings of other prominent figures, Rudolf Otto, Nathan Soderblom, Wilhelm Schmidt, Geraardus van der Leeuw, Joachim Wach, to name but a few. Such examples support the view that religious and theological dimensions have been present side-by-side for a long time.

From this vantage point, Eliade's work enabled theologians to take an additional step in their own intrinsic development. It had been possible before to do theology in a theological vein. But the explosive attractiveness of phenomenology of religion was due in part

to an acquired insight that the deepest roots of theology lie in religion. While this "raising of consciousness" may not have been Eliade's first intention, his work possessed this power. It enabled theologians to expand their visions. It became a sustaining theological influence. And the expansions it evoked in the main were compatible with previous religious convictions.

Via Tillich, theologians found access to a wider religious context. In Eliade, that access reached further and deeper, and was made more precise. Through Eliade's works, theologians came into contact with theology's elemental religious roots. Tillich, like Moses, perceived the new land from afar, but was unable to pass over into it. Eliade, like Joshua, was accorded the mantle of leadership within the new land. Eliade, following Tillich, offered ample assurances that the exodus--the transition--was congenial.

Consistent with this point of view is the recognition that religious studies faculties throughout the continent have been staffed largely by persons trained in one branch of Christian theology. Many of these even aspired toward a vocation in theology before the new academic possibility--with all of its capacity for individual freedom and intellectual innovation--became a possibility. In simple truth, faculty members in department after department across the land reflect Christian theological backgrounds. Furthermore, for many of them, the initial interest in religious studies was cultivated via early exposure to theological forms of reflection. The fact that many faculty persons have moved from theology to religious studies also

suggests that the new enterprise provides a more suitable form of academic vocation for persons with updated religious sensitivities. It has created a profession through which new ideas and insights can be brought into line with ongoing, longer-term patterns of personal religious conviction. We refer primarily to matters of faculty interest and motivation.

But the same combination of convictional and analytical components was also present in student interest in the subject. When the subject was first introduced, students seemed to have been intrigued by the prospect that the study of religion might elicit new insights, truths, and self-knowledge regarding human life and meaning. In retrospect, it appears that some other academic fields and disciplines which had been treating these subjects abdicated functions which religious studies thereupon took up. We refer to the narrowing of the scope within philosophy departments, psychology's full-scale turn to matters behavioristic, empirical, and experimental, sociology's increasing involvement in statistical inquiry, survey research, and anti-Verstehen endeavors, etc. The suggestion is that had "meaning questions" been fully treated in other fields, religious studies' entree into the academic market place would have found it much harder going.

Ironically, because religious studies held out the prospect of conveying significant human truths, student interests sometimes ran counter to the rationale announced by the professors. While



students seemed intent upon searching for meaning, the professors declared themselves devoted to objective, academic study. Consequently, these latter worked diligently to demonstrate that the new academic subject-field was being conducted under rigorous standards. Because religious studies was a new undertaking, its first sponsors were acutely aware of potential criticisms. To meet such challenges, or threats, very few of which ever gathered momentum, the original sponsors did their very best to preach (by not preaching) that the subject-field was thoroughly circumspect, academic, objective, scholarly, disciplined, and legitimate. This objective was understood to be consistent with the legal distinction between church and state. The same distinction was enforced through a separation of the study of religion and the promotion of religion. This was the effective way of studying religion in a non-sectarian way. And while the method was always tailored to the subject, it was understood that disciplined reflection on religion requires a certain objective distance. The inquirer worked to establish an objective, detached point of view.

But the personal dimension could not be omitted. Nor could it simply be bracketed. Even the primary distinction between religion and religious studies did not work against it. Indeed, the most rigorous scholarly approach to the subject has seemed to be the most effective means of supporting personal (but still non-sectarian) religious interests. Religious significance was to be found even in those subjects which were offered under strict scholarly terms. To be

sure, academic respectability and methodological objectivity were rightfully claimed. One could demonstrate that the study of religion employs approaches and methods which are as rigorous and objective as those used within any other field in the humanities and social sciences. Thus, teachers worked diligently to inculcate correct methods of analysis and interpretation. They labored long and hard to instill rigorous hermeneutical sensitivities. They claimed their research and analytical standards were as demanding as for any other field and discipline. And frequently they could be heard to say that religious studies evokes a transposition of intrinsic personal religious interests into actual scholarly competence.

But scholarly competence also allowed the capacity to deal with the personal religious dimension. It could do so because the paramount conceptual schemes, formed in part out of theological interests, sustained that dimension.

One wonders, too, about the preoccupation with methodology. It was and remains appropriate to be concerned about methods of procedure -- this, simply because of the novelty of the undertaking. Self-subsistent, extratheological models for doing religious studies had to be constructed. They didn't come ready made. But it appears that the interest in methodology was not altogether simple-minded. At least in part, it responded to a need to facilitate the intellectual transitions of the practitioners of the discipline. It became a profesorial occupation. By contrast, student interests seemed more instinctual. And yet, both professors and students blended their first- and second-order interests often enough to soften the force of

the distinctions they drew. Religious studies, at least from time to time, was about religion, and not only about religious studies. Its formation was not restricted altogether by being an "about" field and discipline.

But now we are discussing not only the relation of religious studies to theology, but also the interdependencies between these two enterprises and religion. We arrived at this point by wondering if the distinction between "of" and "about" can be maintained. It appears that the relation between "of" and "about" is very complex, and that the two partake of some common elements. We could be surer of the distinction when religious studies was conceived from within a fundamentally Christian outlook, when there was some clear counterpart to religious studies in the theological enterprise, when both were conceived primarily in passive schematic terms.

What happens in the fluid, active, and dynamic state? What happens when -- or if -- Tillich and Eliade are no longer the chief conceptual fashioners? What, then, when the context changes markedly? This question prompts a series of others. Can Christian theology, even in its Protestant capacities for malleability, give sanction to religious studies? Is the Christian religion conceptually elastic enough to abide an ongoing association with religious studies? Won't any religion be extended and inevitably reformulated because of religious studies, simply because it is placed within a new context and made party to a new formulation?

Furthermore, does religious studies now know so much about

the makeup of religion that it is able to simulate it? And if able to simulate it, can it also stimulate it, indeed, even create it?

We are not talking about sectarian religion in this regard, but about the dynamics of conceptual creativity, the process of ideological innovation. We presume the propriety of the separation of church and state; all that is being said here simply reaffirms that principle. We are not talking about the claims one religion might make against another religion. We categorically reject a taking of sides in religious disputes on the part of faculty members and departments of religious studies. We reaffirm the freedom of religious studies to follow its independent inclinations, and to resist being formed by distinctions between religions, religious traditions, even theological contentions. Reaffirming all of this, we want to inquire into the process by which something new is formed via a bringing together of already established things in fresh constellations. In this sense, we ask if something is being constructed that the parent discipline will be able to control.

But this is the long way about.

While it may not have been obvious from the first, the intention of this inquiry has been to refer a topic of ongoing discussion among persons dedicated to religious studies to the interesting current discussion of the role of paradigms, models, and conceptual systems in giving shape to the process of intellectual discovery. We refer primarily to the work of Thomas Kuhn (The Structure of Scientific

Revolutions, 1962) and Stephen Toulmin (Human Understanding. The Collective Use of Concepts, 1972), and then also to the works of Imre Lakatos, Alan Musgrave, Margaret Masterman, and others of "the logic of discovery" (Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge, 1970), Karl R. Popper (Conjectures and Refutations. The Growth of Scientific Knowledge, 1963), Ihab Hassan's stimulating edited volume on "revolution in the humanities" (Liberations. New Essays on the Humanities in Revolution, 1971), Ernest Gellner (Thought and Change, 1964), Bryan Wilson and others on "rationality" (Rationality, 1970), William M. Irvin's sparkling study (On the Rationalization of Sight, 1975), E.H. Gombrich (In Search of Cultural History, 1969), Peter Brown (Laws of Form, 1972), and other studies of this sort. We are particularly intrigued by their comments and suggestions regarding the evolution of fields and disciplines within the humanities and the sciences. For, it is apparent that the development of religious studies provides a very prominent current example, a veritable case study, and an intriguing test which illustrates how a new subject-field comes into being.

We are compelled by the prospect that religious studies was created through a paradigm shift. We can sketch some of the contours of the transposition. The recent origins of religious studies involved a refashioning of an earlier conceptual orientation within which religion had been treated in dominantly theological terms. The refashioning was effected in terms of both form and content. Religious studies adapted something of the form of theology, particularly in its capacity for conceptual cohesiveness, integration, and compre-

hensiveness. It did not come into full being until the possibility of such formal conceptual coherence was created. But religious studies also took something of the content of theology -- by extension, by perpetuating and reaffirming some of the principles which religious aspirations found compelling.

Within the transition, the process of intellectual discovery was obliged to play a dual role. In the first place, it had to make the new subject (religion) accessible. To do this, it developed the instrumentation both to discern and examine this phenomenon in a free and responsible, scholarly and objective manner. Similarly, it was called upon to effect a transition from theology. This transition was being called upon for various reasons, all of which pointed to the inability of the accepted paradigm to continue carrying a subject that had become larger than the paradigm. Measured against the substance of the new subject, the former paradigm lacked both fertility and resonancy. Thus, the transition was, in fact, a real transition: definite movement occurred. At the same time, the transition didn't imply a radical break with the past. Instead, it provided a form of culmination. The process of transition was regarded as being entirely in order. To be sure, it was recognized as being something less than inevitable. But there are good reasons for viewing it as being appropriate. Some things were lost in the process. Some things were created in the process. Something new was formed. Some things were transposed and reformulated. Traditional things were organized

into fresh combinations via the instrumentation of catalysis and the logic of conceptual coherence.

This is religious studies. It consists of some definite new elements, catalyzed into shape by the placing of old things in fresh combinations. But the old things were not obliterated in the process. Instead, they were transposed. We refer first to the religious component which not only survived but was rejuvenated by the transition. We refer secondly to the theological dimension which re-emerges as the compulsion that religious studies be coherent and also mean something significant.

In summary, our contention is that religious studies constitutes very fertile ground for testing Stephen Toulmin's thesis that "persons demonstrate their rationality by their preparedness to respond to novel situations with open minds." Religious studies seems to be a product of this response. As such, it involves a fresh formulation and transposition of some rather traditional intellectual components. In that transposition is its link with the past. In the same transposition lies the instrumentation of its novelty. We have every reason to believe that the transition is still in process, that it is not yet complete. What is still to come, perhaps no one knows for sure. But the current reconstruction may well carry religious studies beyond current intellectualisms, and even beyond itself, perhaps all the way to an alternative but consistent way of perceiving and safeguarding what is fundamentally human.