Appendices

The Fallacy of Teaching "About" Religion

by

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I believe that every young person arriving at college bears somewhere on his or her soul the questions Jacob Needleman brought to his first philosophy course at Harvard. For this reason, perhaps especially because of the features of the life-cycle, the experience of higher education will necessarily be, in some form, religious. The basic fallacy of which I speak in entitling this paper is, then, not whether we teach religion, but what kind of religion we teach.

The harder we try to teach about religion or teach religion, as part of "secular" education, the more clearly we will be teaching the reigning orthodoxy. I refer to that orthodoxy carried forward by what Peter Berger calls the cognitive elite. This elite represents a militant secularism present, for instance, particularly in the American Civil Liberties Union and its friends. To a considerable extent, the courts are, I am afraid, attempting to make this militant secularism the established religion in the United States.

Though our field has been criticized for being overly concerned with methodology, the need for ever-renewed methodological self-consciousness is constantly felt. Promulgation of a militant secularism still goes under the guise of objectivity among professionals of our field. For instance, just last week I unexpectedly received a paper from a member of my National Endowment for the Humanities Residential Seminar which I am giving this year. The seminar topic is tradition and interpretation, which is so on-target in this discussion that I would like to share a couple of paragraphs with you.

All the members of this seminar are professors, from various parts of the country. The man whose paper I am about to share is a professor of religion at a Mid-West public university. He calls his paper "A Second Fall," and I will read the first paragraph.

> Somewhere Mircea Eliade speaks of the change from the sacred mode of being to its profane successor, from tradition to modernity, as a second Fall. Unlike the Fall of the first parents, this Fall was historical, not mythical. One might also say that unlike that Fall, this one was the beginning, not of religion, but of religious studies.

It is important for us to deal with the problem existing in our field which this paper demonstrates. What I am reading to you here should be understood as data for our discussion, since this is an active teacher of religion in a fairly large and good

department of religion. I'd like now to turn to the last page of his paper to clearly show how he views religious studies in the context of this second Fall.

> Even though the hermeneutic of religion ameliorates the consequences of the second Fall, it is not entirely satisfactory as a solution, because what it rectifies can only be rectified in part. The second Fall is a Fall indeed. Certainly, the primeval Fall from the Garden was ambiguous. The good of the present paradise was replaced by the host of evils. But that great privation, innocence, was removed by the boon of consciousness.
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> The second Fall has also been an ambiguous mixture of good and ill. We have escaped from childhood into maturity, from illusion into knowledge. But this movement has exacted a price. Where the locus of things was once apparently grounded in a fundamental reality, human faith is now in human hands. Where there once seemed to be norms from beyond the human condition, we now face the terror of nihilism. Humans are responsible for the creation of their own standards. But it is not clear that we will devise these standards responsibly, in the light of some logical judgement.

That is, from my point of view, talking about religious studies; but it is also understood by the writer in religious language. This is especially seen in his saying we have escaped "from childhood into maturity," "from illusion into knowledge." I am not that messianic about religious studies.

But what is important here is that this paper represents a mood. We have heard it expressed in these meetings, perhaps not as a major note, but it is a very widespread note. It is part of the project in which we are involved.

I would like, then, to turn to some of the basic issues to look at what we do and how we teach. Under this, I would like to develop three rather tendentious rubrics: first, propagating religion, which is not what we are supposed to do, but I think we do it. Second, religious studies as the second Fall, and third, religious studies as redemption from the second Fall.

By propagating religion, I mean the teaching of religion in a way which is to be differentiated from teaching "about." Dogmatic teaching of religion, of the teaching "of" religion, that is, teaching which starts from the a priori assumption that the material being taught is true, was what we were supposed to be avoiding in establishing religious studies. Nonetheless, much dogmatic teaching goes on in religious studies as it perhaps inevitably and rightly should. Often the best person to teach a particular tradition is a devoted adherent to that tradition who cannot or will not conceal his or her adherence. Edward Conze, for instance, taught Buddhism dogmatically at Berkeley with marked success. If the case in point is an Asian religion, there will hardly be an eyebrow raised, particularly in the case of Edward Conze, who taught dogmatically without burning incense. He simply told you what the truth was, that's all.

One particular problem arose from this kind of teaching, particularly early in the history of our discipline, and to an

extent still exists. That is, there was the fear that the mere presence of the teaching of other religions would undermine faith. But what the Supreme Court and such people are worried about is not likely to happen in the university context in which many religions are taught. Experience has shown us that when religion is taught dogmatically, as when Edward Conze taught Buddhism, it was only one course of many; you could learn sixteen other religions right next door. The significance of one teacher teaching from the standpoint that what he is teaching is 'Truth' must here be differentiated from the institution wholly and single-mindedly devoted to the teaching of one and only one faith.

This can perhaps also be observed in the Jewish Studies program within the Department of Religious Studies at Berkeley. There is considerable ambivalence in the feelings of those teaching Jewish Studies toward religious studies. The heavy requirements, linguistic and otherwise, of majoring in the Jewish subsection of religious studies makes it very difficult for the students in that program, who are, by the way, almost all Jewish, to do much else. This situation creates the occasional refugee from Jewish Studies, who come to me as advisor for the general studies area. Some such undergraduates note that their program is getting too heavy, and note that they would like to learn something other than Jewish Studies alone.

But such intensity and immersion in a religious tradition doesn't bother me. There may be political and legal problems in

the long run, though they would probably be more likely to emerge if we taught Christianity in this way. Such an immersion method is most useful in teaching a tradition as an organic unit. Unfortunately, most of our students have only the vaguest sense of what a tradition is. For them to really begin to understand what a tradition is--how it is formed, how it operates, the enormous density on the tradition--requires that it be taught to them. What it means to take certain things as normative and apply them over the centuries, which is precisely what a tradition does, is something which would be of greatest value for our students to learn. Exposure to this sort of teaching might well be the only way in which they could learn it.

The necessity to teach a specific tradition reflects a basic assumption of religious studies: that man is an inveterately traditional animal. All efforts to undercut and deny tradition have resulted only in a formation of semi-surreptitious new traditions. Indeed, when each of us defines who he is, he does so by stating certain authorities, at least by implication. This happens in spite of our notion of individuality, of being free from authority and pursuing truth without presuppositions. For even in being free from authority, we indicate those authorities who have helped us become free of authority. In a certain sense, it is then as impossible to be wholly untraditional as it is to be wholly unreligious.

What we have currently in religious studies is an education which does not teach a tradition but an education which teaches a vast cacophany of traditions. Perhaps we have not yet adequately helped people understand what a tradition is, why it is inescapable, how one can live within one or more traditions. This should be one of our primary tasks of the future.

I want next to talk about religious studies as a part of the second Fall. The critical approach to religion is often understood as the forté of religious studies. This is the essence of teaching "about" religion. The assumption here is that if one is teaching religion "objectively" and "scientifically" then one is teaching religion from a non-religious, i.e., secular, perspective. But this "objectivity" turns out to be illusory. If one believes that the critical theories with which one explains religion are truer than the religious beliefs themselves, then one is opting for an ultimate stance which is at least quasi-religious. In this sense, what is really being taught in religious studies is often positivism, or relativism or historicism. These are powerful modern ideologies with spiritual, ethical, and political implications. They may accord so closely with the majority ethos, or, if not the majority ethos, the influential ethos of the cognitive elite, what I have called "enlightenment fundamentalism," that it seems to be simply true rather than only one possible position

among others. In the guise of teaching "about" religion, very powerful beliefs, even dogmas, are being conveyed.

I want to qualify that critical sounding paragraph by affirming how much I accept, utilize, and teach a great deal of what comes from the critical approach to religion. Without it, we are certainly not able to deal with the questions Ninian Smart was raising rather insistently yesterday. These are important questions about the role of religion in the historical process and its relation to power and politics.

To put it another way, what are the human factors which help us understand, and even to an extent, to explain, religious phenomena? The notion that there are pure spiritual expressions which exist wholly aside from questions of power, economics, class interest, etc., is absurd. If we haven't learned that from what Paul Ricoeur calls the "Masters of Suspicion," then we certainly are not educated adequately in our own field. While I would be tha last to deny the validity, power, and importance of the critical theories of religion, I cannot finally accept what I think is their reductionism, and their covert replacement of religion by other quasi-religious dogma. I nonetheless think that it is necessary to absorb their teaching very deeply.

This approach with its assumption that the critical understanding of religion is somehow higher, or more in accordance with

truth than the benighted views of religious people whom we are studying leads to a kind of "museumification" of religion. Religion, then, is understood as a series of exhibits, butterflies pinned to the wall, which we study, compare, analyze, and explain. If education is formation of a total human being, this process of museumification says something very significant. It suggests what religion is, which can in curious ways reinforce teaching religion under the first rubric, wherein you have a number of religions taught as true side-by-side. There are, in a certain sense, two ways of making specimens out of religion, contributing to possible tendencies toward spiritual confusion and chaos which have been described in our discussions today.

The extent to which this approach of museumification has even pervaded some of the seminaries is to be noted. I don't know how many of you have read George Lindbeck's report, but there is a deep anxiety on his part that the seminaries, or at least some of them, avoid this museumification process. Whether Lindbeck's particular solution will work or not, the problem he raises is certainly real. But whether confusion in the minds of the students is to be wholly pinned on the professors is dubious. Tha capacity of students to be confused in quite original ways is very great. Yet, I cannot also help but wonder if in more subtle, mediated, refracted ways, the confusion in the minds of the professors in an important part of the story. Perhaps even our unacknow-

ledged confusion concerning what we really think religion is and how we stand toward it should be of great concern in this regard. We can see, then, another way in which the study of religion can be the source of what my NEH Seminar member calls "the Second Fall," however valid many of the problems are.

I would, then, like to turn very tentatively to a consideration of whether, if at all, religious studies might contribute in some way out of the second fall, though, admittedly, this is not the only contribution to be made. Perhaps this contribution is to be found in a third possibility in religious studies, distinguishable from both dogmatic and positivistic points of views. This possibility accepts the critical enterprise but does not assume that its truths are ontologically superior to those of the religious materials being studied. Indeed, critical theories are seen only as ancilliary to interpreting what is there, letting the symbols speak. All that is taught about religion is seen as valuable only in so far as it helps us to teach religion. This is to be understood in the same sense as that in which a good teacher of literature teaches literature, not about literature. All analogies are dangerous, and I certainly think that that one is; but I also think that, if used cautiously, it is an illuminating one.

This third possibility I will call the symbolic. The symbolic approach holds that religious truth is ultimately symbolic and not

conceptual in form. In this, it differs from some dogmatic approaches in accepting critical approaches. and in being pluralistic instead of exclusivistic. I think it is not relativistic, though that is another problem about religious truth. It avoids the pitfall of those who remain devoted exclusively to the critical approach by stepping out of the exclusively conceptual framework.

I am aware that this third way of dealing with religion can, and most often does, simply compound the confusion which I see arising from the first and second ways. Nonetheless, it is a serious attempt to cope with the religious meaning of a world which in indelibly pluralistic, while denying neither religious nor critical truths. It is a step on acknowledging the legitimacy of different traditions' views of truth concerning human existence. It is also a ground for interaction between traditions. Any student of Asian religions knows how profoundly the major traditions there have been influenced by the fact that they live in a world with other traditions, and how difficult it is to find anybody who is traditionally religious, in a pre-nineteenth century sense. To significantly cope with religious pluralism, as an intellectual and religious fact, is something which I think some people in religious studies are trying to do.

Among other things which I think lie at the background of this kind of conference is the fact that over the last twenty years, a major shift has occurred among religious intellectuals, at least

in the United States. Twenty years ago, they would have been found overwhelmingly in the seminaries, and today they are much more likely to be found in departments of religious studies or in those seminaries which are really graduate departments of religious studies. I think this is a fact which is of great significance in the long run. It indicates that the religious intellectuals are, perhaps to a greater extent than ever before in American history, cut off from large religious bodies which, theoretically, represent the majority of the religious population. But that is another problem with its own set of sociological considerations.

I think Walter Capps' opening remarks to this conference are suggestive of this. He pointed to the great importance of two figures, Tillich and Eliade, who, to my mind, represent this tradition. I would today add Paul Ricoeur. Others of you would have others to add. These are thinkers who are clearly not traditional church theologians. The ambivalence of the community toward Paul Tillich has been pointed out. In reference to his situation in Germany, he was always making reference to the boundary situation. He was certainly always on the boundary, and was never a church theologian in the typical sense. This is obvious about Eliade and Ricoeur. Yet, it seems that much of the most important thinking about religion has been coming from these figures, and from those deeply influenced by them.[1]

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[1] This us, by the way, another form of that inveterate traditionality. What Walter was doing for us was canon formation, in a sense, telling

I will here simply point to the schema of Paul Ricoeur's which lies behind my own tripartite formulations, which I am using here. Ricoeur speaks of a primordial naiveté, when the religious symbols are simply taken as given, without critical reflection. This is followed by criticism, which is his word for that whole vast rise of modern scholarship which calls into question all assumptions, particularly in the area of religion. Marx, Nietsche and Freud are the main figures in this criticism of culture and particularly of religion. They are known as the great "Masters of Suspicion," and what they stand for is representative of this critical stance. Ricoeur then tentatively suggests the possibility of a second naiveté. This is not a denial of criticism, but, as Ricoeur says, in and through criticism: a return to the possibility that the symbols might speak again, that the inexhaustible depth of meaning in the symbols can, in a new way, help provide some form of direction for us. Here, to slightly extend a Ricoeurean formula, one might say that experience gives rise to the symbol, and the symbol gives rise to thought.

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us who some of the founders of our tradition are, who some of the authorities are whom we have to grapple with even if we reject them. This is part of what it means to be in a tradition.

But Ricoeur is a person who stands in more than one tradition. He is clearly a Christian, but with W.C. Smith, he is also a philosopher. He is a man deeply devoted to thought, reflection and reason, even while accepting certain symbols as formative for his own life experience, and to some extent community experience.

To see the relation between the symbolic, as a kind of primary form in which religion comes to us, and reason, I think I can turn to the last sentence in the passage from Whitehead which James Wiggins read to us. "It is the task of reason to understand and purge the symbols on which humanity depends." A very suggestive sentence, but also full of deep problems. What are the criteria for purging? Jonathan Z. Smith tempted us greatly last night with the notion that some kind of criteria are perhaps inevitably involved in our study. But here I want to emphasize the dialectic between the critical intellect. To me, the second naiveté is in no sense a simple basking in the light of the symbols, but it involves a critical dialogue, reflection in the deep philosophical sense of that word, on the symbols, which can be the sources of terror and destructiveness as often as of light and hope. The important point is the symbols themselves are not created by reason. It is that very thing with which I am unhappy in the last sentence of my student's paper. He takes the position that people now create the whole thing themselves. I think the primary symbols arise from the immediacy of experience, in very complicated

ways. They are discovered, perhaps revealed. They are NOT invented. Yet, not to use our reason, reflectm criticize, and even on occasion to purge, seems to me to miss the whole other side of the process.