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CONTEMPORARY SOCIO-POLITICAL CHANGE AND THE WORK OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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When he was teaching in Union Theological Seminary in New York, Reinhold Niebuhr enjoyed admonishing his students that the two source materials which were absolutely indispensable to their work were the Holy Bible and *The New York Times*. He urged them to cultivate the art of reading both of these documents together, at regular intervals, and in light of each other. For, in his view, *The New York Times* lends access to the subjects most fundamental to the Bible, on which it also provides explicit daily commentary. And the Holy Bible brings a greater depth and richer perspective to the issues documented within the daily newspaper. The interaction between these two source materials, in Niebuhr's view, brings substance and creativity to theological work.

In citing Niebuhr's admonition, I am fully cognizant that I am borrowing an example from theology to talk about the composition of religious studies. And I am acutely aware of the fact that the two enterprises are not the same. They do not carry the same intentions. They are not conceived according to the same conceptual or intentional models.

And yet the example does enable me to raise, I think, some important questions. How might the composition of religious studies be affected if the contents of, say, *The New York Times*, *60 Minutes*, *Issues and Answers*, or *The Los Angeles Times* were brought more closely to its fundamental ranges of concern? Put more directly, how would religious studies be con-

ducted if such matters were understood to be its proper subject?

In putting the questions this way, I wish to make clear, from the outset, that relevancy is not my cause. I am not seeking more for us to do by courting topics that have not traditionally been ours. Nor is my primary intention to revise the curriculum to attract more students or to establish new vocational alternatives for persons with graduate training in the field—as worthy as all of these objectives might be.

No, the impetus comes from another quarter. I simply recognize that the items of most current human interest in the world about us are religious in nature, substance, or implication. And my great anxiety is that we are missing them because we are not trained to perceive them as such. Or, when we do recognize them to be important, or even religious, we tend to treat them as being extra-curricular to religious studies.

The list of topics is not difficult to compile. One could cite the extent to which religion was an issue in the recent U.S. presidential election, or the situation in Iran (with the recent rise of an Islamic theocracy), or the situation in the Middle East (with the clash between distinctive modes of life and alternative eschatologies), or the reascendency of the political right in the U.S. (with battle lines drawn between good and evil, light and darkness, and supported by a mythology which places all events within a framework which sees godly forces contending against the godless, with the resolution to come in some final conflagration both international and cosmic in scope). The same can be said about global issues, about the ways in which these are affected by clashes between world views, all dependent upon the influence of religious attitudes, religious traditions, and a religious mode of engaging reality. Or one could talk about intolerance—the growing and sometimes violent suspicion of persons of different religious creeds, experiences, and sensitivities. And I haven't begun to mention the various kinds of salvation being offered today, whether through economic, political, psychological or more specifically religious programs.

One need not look very far for items of current religious interest. They are there before our eyes in the headlines of the newspapers. And it takes no hermeneutical sleights-of-hand to be able to call them religious. The larger world knows they are religious, recognizes them as such, and even turns to the religious leaders of our time (persons like Billy Graham and Oral Roberts) to provide interpretation and commentary.

My fear is that the religious studies profession does not regard the same issues as being religious, at least not religious in the way religious studies deems things religious. This, I believe, has led to the impoverishment of our enterprise. I think it also reflects an inaccurate and shortsighted view of what religious studies is. Further, it demonstrates that we have a very short memory regarding the reasons religious studies came into

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prominence both within the university and beyond not much more than a decade and a half ago.

I recognize these to be large claims, and I wish not to offer them recklessly. I am simply suggesting that religious studies came into being, at least in part, because it held the promise of being able to reach subjects other fields and disciplines were unable to reach, had neglected, or had abandoned.

It has been suggested by astute observers of the academic scene, for example, that religious studies may not have come on with such force in the mid-1960s, say, if philosophy had not vacated some of its existentialist concerns, or if psychology had not become behaviorist. (I offer this report without comment.) This implies that religious studies engaged subjects left behind by others, or assumed certain functions which some other fields and disciplines, whether adequately or not, were perceived to have been serving. It also says that those who invested in religious studies, whether teachers, researchers, or students, understood religious studies to be dealing with fundamental human questions. The implication is that religious studies gained institutional support when it had also earned moral support. It had moral support because it had a larger collective respect. It was understood to make sense given the intellectual questions—yes, the human agenda—of the time. It caught on, as it were, because it could demonstrate that fundamental

human questions could be resourcefully addressed via religious studies.

Thus the work of Mircea Eliade, to select one significant example, was demonstrated to be a useful way of pursuing religious studies as well as an effective way of addressing fundamental human questions. Students found his writings not only to be resourceful ways of gaining access to religion, but also able to teach them something significant, as we say, about the meaning of life. And religious studies functioned in this way too. It provided the materials and supported the motivation to think consciously and creatively about what we frequently refer to as one's "world-view." Courses in religious studies helped students make some "world-view" their own. It gave them perspective to compare and contrast their own sense of life with others that have prevailed, say, in other geographical settings or in other times in history. Indeed, religious studies courses became effective instruments in cultivating a more resilient self-consciousness, and I mean the word "self-consciousness" to apply in both individual and collective senses. Such courses could do all of this and still be sophisticated history and/or phenomenology of religion.

The late Thomas F. O'Dea liked to remind his students that religious studies is "a second-time through discipline," meaning, of course, that to make sense of it one needs to know something else as well, like history, philosophy, art, sociology, and so forth. But it is equally true that religious studies must always carry a double focus: first, on what counts as "hard data," or on that to which the specific inquiry is directed; and, second, a kind of sophisticated self-consciousness about the larger frameworks of interest and attention under whose auspices the inquiry is being carried out. In short, religious studies deals not simply with the data, but also with the process by which the data are translated into human knowledge.

Perhaps it is because the data have been uncovered at too rapid a pace, and it is nearly impossible to keep up with all of it. But it seems to me that we have given too little attention to the comprehensive grasp, that is, to the ways in which what has been uncovered affects our general theories about religion. Instead, we are opting for preoccupation with matters much more regional, specific, and parochial. And the sign that something is lacking is our propensity to look outside our own field for theories of comprehensive generalization. Currently we are looking primarily to anthropology, and there, most specifically, to the work of the speculative anthropologists, like Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, and Clifford Geertz. The moral must be that when such general theories about religion are not forthcoming from within our own proper work we import them from the outside, for it is the nature of our subject to be dependent upon them.

But this says too little. For I also think we've come to the stage in our development where we ought to be able to offer

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more than we offered in the beginning. I'm talking about the cumulative impact of our research. For example, there is no academic field with better information and clearer sensitivity to global phenomena. After all, we teach the major religious traditions of the world. We engage in cross-cultural analyses. We decipher comprehensive world-views. Why then, when so many are compelled to cultivate a global perspective—say, for purposes of husbanding energy resources, or dealing with the crisis in world hunger, or even preventing ecological collapse—why do we, with our disciplined global awareness, seem so impotent in offering some useful forms of assistance?

Or to ask another series of embarrassing questions: Why did it take those of us who teach in religious studies so long to respond to the Jonestown incident? Why were we so shocked when it occurred? Why were we so lacking in categories of interpretation, as if to suggest that nothing of this sort really belongs to our areas of expertise?

Similarly, why were we in the United States so inadequate in assisting our nation's understanding of the actions of the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iranian government in the situation with the fifty-two U.S. citizens held captive? Our performance record in such instances is so poor that hardly anyone ever thinks to ask us for our interpretation of what is going on. Indeed, the first national piece on the subject offered by a religious studies scholar was Harvey Cox's article, "Understanding Islam," in *The Atlantic*, an interpretation offered by a non-specialist in the field.

Or, to take another example: The rationale we frequently offer to justify the academic study of religion is that it is impossible to understand a particular culture without coming to terms with its religion. I believe this is so. But, if we mean this, why don't we scholars of religion know more about culture? Why have we not developed a mode of critical cultural consciousness which, say, utilizes religion as its primary means of access? And when we have learned to do this, why do we restrict our focus of inquiry to the world of the past tense? Why are we not able to say more about the dynamics of contemporary cultural change?

And, if we in our science believe, as Clifford Geertz proposes, that the study of religion unlocks some of the mysteries

within the process of symbolic interaction, why were we unable to anticipate that social conditions were conducive to give impetus to the rise of a movement like the Moral Majority?

Or, to ask all of these questions in summary fashion: Why has it not yet caught on that these are issues with which religious studies deals, or at least ought to, or at least could?

My feeling is—and I'm being self-critical—that we are still writing term papers to each other rather than thinking through the strategy by which religious studies might more regularly and substantially contribute to the welfare of our larger collective life.

The corollary follows, namely, that what I am proposing I do not regard as being either novel or radical. I believe it can be demonstrated that the persons we all regard as being the fundamental theorists of our field—from the mid-nineteenth century forward—came onto the fact of religion in their quest for something else. They would not have been content simply to know what religion is. More fundamentally, they wanted to know more about the dynamics of society, or about distinctions between psychic functions, or about the nature of language, or about the basis of human aspiration and devotion, or about ways in which human knowledge is formed in patterns of comprehensive self-consistency, or about the reciprocal interdependencies of Subject and Object. In pursuing such topics, they encountered religion. Hence, their portrayals of religion are always also descriptions of other realities and phenomena—whether of human consciousness, human society, historical change, ideological differences, the compositions of thought, ideas, and so forth. This, it seems, confirms the observation that it is nearly impossible to approach religion directly. Religion will always be studied through the avenue of something else.

My plea is that we become more disciplined in approaching religions through the avenue of contemporary sociopolitical change. For I believe this innovation holds the prospect of teaching even one with Reinhold Niebuhr's sensitivities something that is inaccessible otherwise. And it may even give newspaper and magazine editors more to work with when composing the religious pieces in the daily news.

FOURTEEN CASES: THE STUDY OF RELIGION IN CHURCH-RELATED HIGHER EDUCATION

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Background

A decade ago, *Religion in the Undergraduate Curriculum: An Analysis and Interpretation* was published. One of Claude Welch's conclusions in that important analysis was that the options and dilemmas of the undergraduate study of religion are determined more by broader educational and institutional issues (the nature of liberal education, the parameters of academic responsibility, and the role of church-related institutions) than by disciplinary ones. Welch linked the development of the study of religion to undergraduate education. He said: "The questions for religious studies thus are increasingly the questions of liberal education generally, and if the goals and patterns of the former are unclear it is largely because the aims

and norms of undergraduate education as a whole are uncertain."¹

The linkage of undergraduate education, church-related institutions, and the study of religion through common choices and questions is more apparent now, in a problematic educational decade, than when Welch identified it a decade ago. The recent report of the Commission on the Humanities about the undervalued and misunderstood humanities in American education is an indication that the nature and quality of undergraduate programs has returned to center stage as an issue in the national education debate.² Three years ago, a major study entitled *Church-Related Higher Education* was published in which the character of college-church relationships was analyzed.³ And in the past two years, disciplinary issues in the