

THE ARCHITECTURE OF RELIGION

A Theoretical Essay

PAUL WIEBE

Foreword by Walter H. Capps

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To Elly –
necessary angel

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Foreword

I have the privilege of writing the Foreword to this book because Paul Wiebe, its author, and I discussed its subject at great length during the course of a 1981 Summer Seminar for College Teachers, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, that took place, under my direction, at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The entire eight weeks of the seminar were devoted to analyzing theories of religion in relation to the primary currents of western intellectual history since the Enlightenment period. Paul Wiebe came to the seminar with extensive background and cultivated training in the subject. He had kept the subject high on his list of intellectual interests since his days of doctoral work at the University of Chicago. Many of the courses he had been teaching since that time had focused on the subject. His colleagues in the seminar were impressed with the day-to-day and week-to-week progress that we witnessed as Wiebe gave us sketches of the scope of his endeavor. He called it "an outline of a theory." By the end of the eight weeks, he had it under control. Indeed, he had more in mind than he could tell us. We recognized that he had come to some kind of satisfying intellectual closure. To be sure, the project had not yet been completed. But one could tell from the twinkle in Wiebe's eye, and the confidence with which he spoke, that he was now sure he could do it. And those of us who were close witnesses to this creative and analytical process will also be among his most captivated readers. It was inspiring to be with him when he transformed an idea into an intention for a project, and an intention into the project itself, and the project, subsequently, into a book. We all feel that we had a hand in the work that was performed. As a result, we take individual and collective personal pride in Paul Wiebe's achievement.

He has undertaken a gigantic task—nothing less than to offer a revised and updated statement concerning the nature of religion. He intends his "outline of a theory" to be fully informed by the discussion of the subject that has taken place from the time of Immanuel Kant to the present. He is committed to the thesis that religion can indeed be made intelligible, and that scholarly communication regarding it can occur according to many of the same rules that apply when intelligibility is sought scientifically within the university. He is also fully aware that religion is made intelligible through a variety of interpretive modes; single-minded methods just will not do. And he recognizes that scholarly approaches to the subject

carry their own vested intellectual interests, all of which are translated into the definitions themselves. The prologue to his book makes this explicit. Wiebe asks: "What are we to make of religion? What is religion? Where is it to be placed within the apparatus of human faculties? Is it a way of knowing? Is it akin to, or part of, the aesthetic sense? Is it moral through and through? Does it occupy a sphere of its own?" The answer, of course, is that religion is made intelligible through all of these pathways and approaches: the philosophical, the aesthetic, and the moral. And, as the writings of Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade, among others, make apparent, religion can also be approached as if it had enjoyed some independent grounding. The interpreter needs to be sensitive to the interdependent workings of all of these methods or avenues of approach to make religion satisfactorily intelligible. And, if all of them are to be included, the interpreter must also come to terms with the theoretical supports they give to each other. This requires that intellectual approaches to religion be plural rather than singular. Wiebe's study is aware of this methodological factor from the very beginning. The initial sentence in its Preface, where it is recorded that "a book represents a community of four parties," is indicative of this posture. And the citations of distinguishable "interests" and "modes" that follow in subsequent chapters is representative of the same sensitivity to the fact that religious studies is an academic discipline that has been established on a multiplicity of methodological grounds. Entry to its world can be effected via philosophy, aesthetics, or ethics, through a combination of these, and through avenues of greater refinement. Religious studies is grounded this way (as an interdisciplinary undertaking) because there is no single prescribed pathway toward its source, cause, or intentions. The interpreter needs to know how to work from within a variety of subject fields, utilizing a variety of methods of inquiry, and then must propose how such necessary variety can be orchestrated.

Why should it be this way?

Because religion carries a remarkable ability to show a plurality of aspects, sides and faces. One might wish for a single definition that would apply in all cases, whenever religion is encountered, wherever it is found. Such a desire has been persistent through the centuries. "Religion is nothing but wish fulfillment," one theory holds, and others have tested the possibility that the roots of religion lie in "fear" or in the dynamics of "projection." Most of these hypotheses are correct to a point, but without being exhaustive or able to stand, as it were, on their own feet. Wiebe is fully cognizant of the variety of definitions that have been offered, and he understands—given the nature of the subject—why such variety is appropriate.

But to admit that religion contains numerous vital components, and to acknowledge that religious studies involves numerous approaches to the subject, is not to concede that virtually any definition will do since hardly any possible component of religion can be excluded. The truth is that it is just as difficult, intellectually speaking, to know what to omit and exclude as it is to know what ought to be retained. While it would be a mistake to include everything, it would be a grave error to reduce religion to a single factor or component. Neither miscellany nor reductionism is in order. The interpreter needs to know what ought to be included without destroying methodological rigor, and what can be omitted without emaciating the subject. From both sets of considerations, the resulting portrayal of religion must be thoroughly compelling.

Paul Wiebe has kept such considerations in mind, and they have played a powerful role in directing him toward appropriate definitions of the nature of religion and descriptions of the functions it performs. But his primary task is neither to define the subject nor to outline the workings of a particular academic field. His fundamental intention is to write a book whose chapters and paragraphs are reflective of a distinctive approach to the subject. That is, he has utilized the book as the instrument to outline his theory. And the book itself carries its own intellectual requirements. For example, what is written for a book must be clear, engaging and intellectually supportable. It must be useful in the intellectual situations toward which it is directed. It must make a contribution to the subject-field in which it registers. It must be thoroughly readable. And, if it is to be a good book, it must present a memorable thesis, or illuminate a subject in a striking or even dramatic way. It is not enough that a book's theory is intellectually satisfying, or that the definition of the subject that is offered strikes the right balance between what is being included and what is being excluded. Beyond this, it is necessary to design a book that will serve the author's purposes and the readers' interest. The author's theory becomes transposed into a notable book if the theorist can find a way to share his primary discovery with others, and particularly with those who may have embarked upon this intellectual pathway from other and even distant points of interest and orientation.

I think Paul Wiebe has achieved all of this. His theory, in my judgment, will attract the curiosity and respect of other specialists in the field. The portrayal of religion that he offers is properly balanced. In addition, and most importantly, he has produced a readable book that will become a close companion to students, teachers, and researchers who are working to make the subject of religion more intelligible.

Having perceived it in embryo, having read it in galley form, after having traced some of the lines of its outline during that wonderfully produc-

tive summer of 1981, I am pleased with its appearance, and wish, most heartily, to congratulate its author.

Santa Barbara, California

WALTER H. CAPPS