

A Response to Dr. Strenski

Author(s): Walter H. Capps

Source: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Spring, 1987), pp. 125-126

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1464339>

Accessed: 14-10-2023 19:52 +00:00

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Oxford University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*

## □ Discussion

---

### A RESPONSE TO DR. STRENSKI

WALTER H. CAPPS

There is something extravagantly but wastefully chivalrous about Ivan Strenski's uncommonly vitriolic commentary on the report concerning the St. Louis Project (see his "Our Very Own 'Contras,'" *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, Summer, 1986, pp. 323-335). Strenski takes a number of us to task—primarily Laurence O'Connell, William May and me—because we make lots of mistakes when thinking about relationships between theology and religious studies. He believes that all of us intend a kind of "re-theologizing" of the academic study of religion. He even suspects that we hope someday to be able "to do theology" and not only to study about it. He offers that we "were never really convinced of the value of secular religious studies in the first place." Our objective, he asserts, is similar to that of "the contras." We are combative in wanting to overturn the emancipatory work of the real and trustworthy revolutionaries who, now about twenty years ago, "emancipated" religious studies from theology.

My initial reaction—goodness, gracious—was to suspect that some parcels had gotten mixed in the mail, that Strenski had been reading about some program other than the one that was being discussed at St. Louis University. For, contrary to what he wants to believe, it can be argued forcefully that the fundamental achievement of the St. Louis Project was a kind of "emancipation" of religious studies. But the language of oppressors, colonizers, revolutionaries, contras, and the like is hardly appropriate.

Somehow Strenski missed the story; and because he did, he inserted some other story's plot. A revivification of theological studies, under a religious studies banner, was not what was intended at St. Louis University. On the contrary, this Jesuit institution, with a long and distinguished record in theology, was reaching for the instrumentation to add a religious studies component to its undergraduate curriculum, and in ways that are congruent with the school's institutional identity.

Walter H. Capps is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, California 93101.

There never was a question of replacing the one enterprise with the other, and certainly not religious studies with theology. Instead, the objective was to establish some educational and intellectual independence for religious studies within an academic program that was already providing for theological studies. The challenge, from the first, was to differentiate the two ventures. After all, both theology and religious studies are about religion. It might make matters easier—as Professor Strenski seems to wish—to understand the two endeavors to be mutually-exclusive, to enable an educational institution to offer either one or the other. It might make it simpler too to view them as being ingredients in some developmental process, to encourage the judgment that, now that true enlightenment has come, theology has been superseded. It might have made matters tidier to view the situation in this way, but it would not have been accurate, and it would not have fit the character of the institution through whose sponsorship the project was undertaken.

How would Strenski have called it? Would he have said that St. Louis University, since it already has a program in theological studies, is therefore barred from offering one in religious studies? Or, would he resort to a series of warnings, all to the effect that continued institutional involvement in theological studies will adversely affect whatever aspirations the school might have now that it is also involved in religious studies? And, if he is saying any of this about St. Louis University, is he saying it about all institutions of higher education—that is, if they do theological studies, they should not also be engaged in religious studies? There are institutions within the land whose programs follow Strenski's outline, but, certainly, they are not the only ones to qualify for undertaking responsible work in religious studies.

During the St. Louis University deliberations, we thought it important, if we could, to find ways in which the two enterprises could co-exist within a vital academic program. We recognized that co-existence always depends upon sure and protected identifications of individual characteristics and capacities. We knew it to be absolutely essential that these distinctive characteristics be underscored and safeguarded. But we didn't believe that any of this should prevent us from exploring possibilities of mutual support, and, if possible, of mutual enrichment. After all, we are referring to distinctive components of an intended *integrated* educational program. We are talking about substantive and schematic interrelationships between fields and disciplines that belong to the intellectual and programmatic dynamics of a university that is committed to the unity of human knowledge. From this vantage point, the stance Strenski seems to be advocating—which gives him license to release rather ill-mannered volleys of rhetorical venom—would hardly have been of much benefit to us.