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## WHY DO IDEAS ILLUMINATE?: BENJAMIN LADNER

AS teachers of religion in colleges, universities, and seminaries we are set precariously, even painfully, at an important juncture not only within the field of higher education but within what must finally be recognized as an increasingly alien culture that is nonetheless presently all we have to call our own. This culture and its structure of higher education are in one sense undeniably of our own making, and we possess them. Yet it is equally certain that this culture and the structures of learning in which we live and think have befallen us, and they anticipate our best efforts for coming to terms with them.

The juncture I am speaking of is not of course between education and culture. It is rather at the point at which our efforts to teach in the field of religion intersect problematically with these structures. For example, to mention only one pervasive form of the problematic, there are few of us as religious studies teachers who have not known the self-inflicted agony of attempting to speak of our deepest commitments non-committally, and of our most profound affirmations ironically. There are fewer still who, on pain of utter disorientation if severed from the tyranny of expediency, have not found modes of intellectual accommodation in our cultural and intellectual setting despite the sliding and tilting of formations we hoped would form the bedrock of a discipline. It is not surprising then that the study and teaching of religion has come increasingly to mean laboring under a panoply of models, all of which if not slightly disfigured have certainly become disconcerting, to the extent, in fact, that we can hardly bear asking again this year just what is the discipline of religious studies, what is its role alongside other disciplines, and what is the distinctive method of inquiry that sets it apart from other intellectual enterprises. It is clear that as a profession we now have more organized settings for raising these questions. Yet it is also clear that we are becoming less inclined to press for continued self-assessment—and for good reasons, not the least being boredom with finely shredded, redundant questions; the attainment of intellectual legitimacy with its consequent non-apologetic posture; and, inescapably, the demands of making sense not of the discipline but of the world. And yet the legitimacy of our *ways* of making sense of the world, of our world and that of our students, still seems elusively at stake, demanding to be claimed and reclaimed.

Without naively supposing that only teachers of religion discern or attempt to respond to this demand, it is nonetheless uniquely instructive for us to recognize the setting of religious studies at the intersection of our personal struggle, our professional growth, and our cultural and intellectual future. For however bewildering the prospect, it is likely that we may not be able firmly to establish religion as a neatly demarcated subject in our intellectual milieu. Or, insofar as we do succeed in establishing it in this manner, we may be misconceiving that which cannot be reduced to the negotiable currency of the academic market place, namely, the self-reflexive *method* which always escapes our best efforts of ideational structuring yet which is the precondition of our inquiry. This is why, it

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seems to me, we are condemned—to the extent that we acknowledge the authority of our own self-integrity—to concerning ourselves with what may at first seem to be “extra-religious” or even “non-religious” intellectual enterprises in order not simply to illuminate the subject “religion” but to fashion viable modes of reflection for our increasingly exteriorized, fragmented existence. Instead of merely compiling and conveying the undeniably useful information about religion, there is, I am claiming, the prior task of understanding understanding, rethinking thinking, and making sense of meaning.

This is not, of course, a task necessarily to be undertaken apart from the subject of religion, the information that surrounds it, or the traditions from which it emerges. Indeed, this has been the now centuries-long erroneous diversion of philosophy: to attempt to establish a method *before* embracing what can be known. Such an enterprise cannot take place in a vacuum logically or chronologically prior to our concern with this or that subject matter. It is rather a matter of *how* we take up our inquiry that forms the precarious juncture at which we are presently set, of our possibly undertaking a viable reflective enterprise at the intersection of our discipline, our culture, and our institution of education.

If the exploitation of your attention has not already depleted the finite resources of patience extended by even the most accommodating of readers, it may be helpful at this point to own up to the title of this essay, “Why Do Ideas Illuminate?” This, it seems to me, is not simply *one* of the prior questions of which I spoke and which demand our attention, but is a pivotal if not paradigmatic issue for our consideration. I would like to suggest that an inquiry into this problem not only etches the lines of our commonly assumed but little acknowledged presuppositions about cognition, but may, if we can both bear the pangs of and steady our attention upon giving birth to ideas, issue in a foreshaping of yet-to-be embodied intellectual configurations. That such an inquiry into ideas would have significant implications for, among other things, ideas about religion is obvious.

## II

Tortuous  
 Incessant  
 Pounding in the brain;  
 Real  
 Yet elusive  
 Life-pulse.

Inaccurate probably—  
 “Impotent hierophant!”—  
 All-at-once systole-diastole  
 Leaving the body stunned.

Mind,  
 Belatedly  
 Delves into where it might have been,  
 Patching up broken word-pieces  
     that do not remember  
     what they were.

Any well-intentioned effort to establish a point of beginning for an inquiry into why ideas illuminate places one precariously near the edge of a vast chasm of

perplexity. Peering beyond the brink (by what illumination?) one begins to perceive the edge as being one of many rungs in a downward spiral that the perceiver is not merely viewing but constructing. The spiral looks like this: can I, after all, catch myself in the act of thinking about myself thinking about myself catching myself? This question and the strange dilemma it evokes are not simply the product of intellectual high-jinx but pose a real and fruitful problem, namely, to what extent one can objectivize his own subjectivity. Where does the spiral stop? Can one formally undertake to reflect at all on this quite ordinary but opaque phenomenon? In confronting these questions one must deal not only with the problem itself — why do ideas illuminate? — but at the same time with the further problem of *how one deals* with such a problem *as part of* what is implied by the problem itself. This is so because taking up such a problem unavoidably implicates one as already possessing sufficient illumination, however meager, to be able to pose the problem. In other words, in order to deal with this idea I have in some sense already assumed what I intend to discover, for I am using ideas to think about ideas. Hence, the formidable yet elusive fact confronting anyone intending to begin such an inquiry is that he finds it to be already under way, somehow strangely ahead of him. My hope is that we shall come to regard this situation, as disillusioning as it is undeniable, as being itself a clue to understanding why ideas illuminate. What we shall see emerging, in fact, is the inescapably self-referential character of all human reflection.

Having said this much we may at least have in view the actual status of the question: that it is *in medias res*, that there can be no clear point of beginning; which is not to say, however, that we cannot begin to understand.

In attempting to account for the illumination of ideas it is worth remarking that some traditional ideas about this phenomenon have not been very illuminating. However commonly acknowledged, even belabored, are the misapprehensions spawned by the separation of mind and body in Western thought, the fact is that our presuppositions and our analyses of ideas remain thoroughly cerebral as distinct from somatic. We invariably conceive of them simply as products of the mind rather than of the body. This way of viewing ideas leaves us with an image of discrete conceptual units that exist somehow in themselves. They may then be talked about as illuminating in much the same fashion that a mechanical device such as the light bulb is. As ordinarily depicted, a luminous bulb throws light upon that which in a separate act we perceive. Its luminosity is its clarity. According to this analogy, talk about ideas would refer to clear, manageable products of the mind.

We are no doubt often misled at this point by the metaphor of illumination which tends to evoke an image of static clarity. In one quite ordinary respect, of course, ideas do illuminate to the extent that they become for us configurations of focal awareness. But in a more profound sense ideas do not illuminate so much as we bring to convergence through them hidden intimations of reality enmeshed in the fabric of an already existing pattern of interwoven threads which comprise our being and our being situated in the world. The traditional metaphors of light and clarity which we have relied upon for our ideas of ideas may actually distort our recognition of their true character as nodes of reciprocity for our personal intention and vulnerability on the one hand and our world on the other.

What is invariably omitted under the metaphor of illumination is the person who has ideas. However simple and obvious this omission may seem, it is

nonetheless crucial. For in dealing with ideas we are concerned so not merely — indeed, finally not at all — with ideas “in themselves” (whatever that might mean) but with man in thought, to borrow a congenial phrase from Michael Polanyi.

An inquiry into ideas under the rubric of man in thought means that we are on a wholly different terrain than that posited by either empiricism or idealism in their search for the wholly explicit as a means by which to account for the operation of ideas. In view of this fact, at the very least we must relinquish any illusory notions of developing ideas about ideas as if they were dissociated from our being, as if we might examine *them* apart from looking, however obliquely, at ourselves. To speak of man in thought is to eliminate the possibility of a thoroughly explicit objectivation. What we find is that ideas turn back upon us in the very act of approaching them since we, so far as we are able to speak of approaching them, are already using them to understand them. Likewise,

With his unique figure of conscious mind-body, man is part of the total situation in which he thinks. That is, thought is never, despite appearances, a detached activity or product of the brain nor even a sole and pure relation between intellect and phenomena. It is always also involved with man's living self as a whole, and in its turn is a constituent element in man's continuous self-construction, be it individual or communal, at any given time and place.<sup>1</sup>

Hence, ideas extend the figure of our own being in the world. They do not merely stand for something else. We are always a part of what we think.

Strictly speaking, there are no second-order activities in the usual sense in which we employ this phrase with reference to mental abstraction. This is admittedly a delicate but, I think, a significant point. The phenomenologists have taught us of the primordial embodiment of our worldly existence, and that this incarnate orientation grounds us irrevocably and prereflectively in our habitat. “The world is not what I think,” says Merleau-Ponty, “but what I live through.”<sup>2</sup> Far from denying this situation as the condition by virtue of which our ideas can mean what they do, I want only to observe what must be implicit in Merleau-Ponty's statement, namely, that it is this very body with its essential relation to the world that gives birth to ideas, and that this movement into meaning is of a piece with what we prereflectively know and count on . . . our movement in the world. Indeed, our ideas can move this same primally rooted body.<sup>3</sup>

We can now observe another fundamental aspect of ideas as meaning what they do not because we look *at* them but because we see *from* or *through* them.

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Sewell, *The Human Metaphor* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), pp. 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. xvi-xvii.

<sup>3</sup> In the midst of a discussion on consciousness in which he is exposing the contradictions inherent in theories of evolution by natural selection, Michael Polanyi recounts the following episode: “When I urged a meeting of the American Association of the Advancement of Science (held in New York at Christmas, 1956) to recognize the absurdity of regarding human beings as insentient automata, the distinguished neurologist, R. W. Gerard, answered me passionately: ‘One thing we know, ideas don't move muscles!’ I could not believe my ears.” Michael Polanyi, *Knowing and Being* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 46.

They enable us to attend from them to something else. Polanyi's view of personal knowledge as moving from the subsidiary to the focal certainly bears on an understanding of this phenomenon. Moreover, if ideas cannot be simply regarded as objects-in-themselves, neither can we rush to the simple presumption that what we see through them is merely another idea-in-itself. For the moment we pause to bask in *it*, we find its virtue to have been its power to release us to the shape of an already emerging idea on the verge of replacing or reshaping the original idea. We are speaking again of the spiral. What we in fact discern is the prereflective, unspoken, yet-to-be-shaped. *But* this discernment is rooted in the ambiguous. It is here that traditional notions of ideas most radically mislead us. For within that framework we should have to recognize that we are now speaking of the function of ideas to attract us and move us not into illumination, and what that implies under the metaphor of light, but into what cannot be clearly seen at all. This of course would not be conceivable so long as we plodded along from one clear idea to the next, always within the bounds of the already visible. Instead, ideas negotiate that about which we have no idea. This idea of ideas changes the locus of knowledge from the clarity of ideas in themselves or in the totally explicit to the silent and prereflective into which and out of which a person moves by virtue of his own judgment. We must speak then of the *person* who himself takes responsibility for integrating clues, the performance of which can never be made fully explicit. This does not mean that we cannot say things, and rather definite things, about ideas. It does mean that our capacity to do this can never be fully subsumed under ideas. Therefore, our ideas are both what we produce and what we find.

Ideas are engendered by persons and hence are rooted in the ambiguous. And, in the final analysis, they are what they are by virtue of enabling us to move further into the ambiguous. The simultaneity of having ideas and of using ideas to move beyond them to what gave rise to them, however fundamentally obscure, is not susceptible to further disassembling. Indeed, moving beyond ideas in the act of having them is what having ideas *is*.

The situation I am describing exists because of our prereflective rooting in a world we are not merely *in* but, as Merleau-Ponty says, to which we *belong*. And this situation can never be reduced merely to the idea we may have about it. It is rather the self-reflexive enterprise that is the precondition of our having ideas about it — and to speak of it is already to be having an idea of it. Hence, as Polanyi has noted, we always know more than we can tell. This could not be so if what we knew were the sum total of clearly conceived and clearly expressed notions.

Having established a perspective on ideas that views them as more than clear objects of the mind, we may conclude with respect to our original problem at least this: ideas illuminate because of the tacit background of both the prereflective yet personal experience and the given world on which they bear. We have also discovered the impossibility of arriving at an ideational outline of ideas doing their work of illumination. It can now be added that having an idea is never merely a privatized, insulated experience, since an idea is always on the verge of being expressed. It has the possibility of entering human community.

For the other to be more than an empty word, it is necessary that my existence should never be reduced to my bare awareness of existing, but that it should take in also the awareness that *one* may have of it, and thus include my incarnation in some nature and the possibility, at least, of a historical situation.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. xii-xiii.

The legacy of the Cartesian *Cogito* provides a model of ideas hermetically ensconced in clear but isolated abstraction. In fact, as we have seen, I am not the idea which I have of myself; I am the precondition of the idea which I have of myself. Because they arise and are sought at the intersection of myself and my world — which always includes the world of human plurality as the context for our possibility of meaning — ideas are always on the verge of being spoken, of finding expression. They are rooted, therefore, not only in the self but in the plurality of persons who interact within a commonly acknowledged space.

Furthermore, ideas cannot be conceived merely as products of individual minds since, as we have also seen, they bear on reality, which itself is always on the verge of being disclosed to us. That is to say, it is accessible. For this reason ideas bespeak themselves to us even as we think or speak them. Also for this reason we are aware of the power of an idea that does not reside solely in the individual who may, even for the first time, have thought it.

We may conclude, then, that ideas arise and are received in the matrix of personal intentionality and mean what they do not least of all because persons mean with them within a commonly acknowledged convivial order.

### III

In this essay I have attempted to alter our awareness of the grounds of our reflection—and I shall now add, reflection in religious studies. The justification for thinking about religion within our contemporary intellectual setting cannot finally be based on the assumptions of that setting. The fact is that religion claims to perceive the hidden. That very way of putting it goes against the grain of our reflective tendencies which suppose that we perceive only what is manifest.

It was Vico who characterized the power of speculative thought as divination and noted the derivation of “the term ‘divinity’ from *divinari*, to divine, which,” he says “is to understand what is hidden *from* men — the future — or what is hidden in them — their consciousness.”<sup>5</sup> And later he adds “as rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them (*homo intelligendo fit omnia*), this imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by *not* understanding them (*homo non intelligendo fit omnia*); and perhaps the latter proposition is truer than the former, for when man understands he extends his mind and takes in the things, but when he does not understand he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them.”<sup>6</sup> As we have discovered, the perceiver, as one who can never be fully transparent to himself, is always a part of the perception even as he takes responsibility for doing the perceiving. He is himself in process of being reconfigured in the process of integrating the patterns which emerge at the nexus of his embodied existence.

If a consideration of ideas within the framework I have explored here is homologous to the enterprise of religious studies, at least insofar as both involve the dynamics of discovery and transformation, we would perhaps do well to reflect upon such ordinary phenomena. Such reflection could possibly have

<sup>5</sup> *The New Science*, trans. Thomas G. Bergin and Max H. Fisch (New York, 1961), section 342. Quoted by Elizabeth Sewall, “Bacon, Vico, Coleridge, and the Poetic Method,” *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), p. 134.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, section 405.

consequences for how we deal with ideas, especially ideas of religion and, I need hardly add, of divinity. The study of religion is a mode of inquiry into ideas, phenomena, events, to be sure. But seeing what these mean involves primarily a different way of seeing — different, I am claiming, from the accredited modes of academic expression, but not different from the actual grounds of those expressions. It attests, in other words, to the human condition — that condition of our incarnated, worldly being out of which emerge our ways of configuring what in some sense we already know, else we could not speak and take up the rhythm of our existence or indwell the cadence of our thinking by which we are related to our transcendence of ourselves.

## RESPONSES

MR. CAPPS: When I wrote “On Religious Studies” my intention was methodological mapwork. I wanted to clarify the place of religious studies within the framework of the humanities and social sciences. My goal was to enunciate some principles that might inform undergraduate and graduate curricula in religious studies. The content of my paper consisted of a series of suggestions for subsequent group discussion. Following the first reading of the paper, I was told that I had struck one or two significant chords. Given that encouragement, I continued working on the topic. I was not aware that Ladner and Huntsberry were working on definitional issues too. Indeed, I was hardly aware of Ladner and Huntsberry. We were introduced to each other by Ray L. Hart, by means of the U.S. Postal Services. Huntsberry put it well when he wrote to me “like two strangers seeking shelter from a storm, we seem to find ourselves thrown together.” As strangers, we could not have known that our papers addressed similar issues, or even that our approaches were compatible. And yet, in certain respects, it seems that compatibility is present. Though our papers treat different issues, they are formed by related diagnoses. Each of us understands religious studies to be an embryonic, fluid, and malleable undertaking which gives support to multiple statements of purpose, including some that are conflicting and some that are ironical.

My paper was regulated by an interest in identifying the conceptual models that are appropriate to the study of religion. It was an effort at methodological self-consciousness. It could be made to fit an intriguing chapter in Western intellectual history. Its footnotes would contain references to the work of Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper, Leonard Meyer, Margaret Masterman, Pierre Francastel, E. H. Gombrich, Richard McKeon, Robert Brumbaugh, and, particularly recently, Stephen Toulmin. I approach self-consciousness in religious studies via mapwork plottings, which plottings have been informed by analyses of models, paradigms, and formal conceptual systems.

Benjamin Ladner could discuss “my topic” at length, I am sure, for our respective interests overlap. But at some point, following an exchange of preliminary niceties, I suspect he would question whether my interest is either fundamental or crucial to religious studies. Given his fondness for Polanyi, he would be obliged to relegate analyses of conceptual paradigms to a secondary range of intellectual importance. By contrast, he would accord priority to the personal quotient in knowledge, that is, to self-knowledge. Then, with particular