

## Reviews

*Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline.* By WALTER H. CAPPS. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995. xxiii + 368 pages. \$29.00 (paper).

After a long drought, scholars of religion now find themselves with a number of resources for teaching students the theoretical and methodological history of the field. Besides the new theories of religion by such authors as Pascal Boyer, Walter Burkert, and Stewart Guthrie, we now have a number of classroom resources on theorizing in the study of religion: Robert Segal's six-volume reference set, *Theories of Myth* (Hamden, Conn.: Garland, 1996), Ronald Grimes's *Readings in Ritual Studies* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1996), and Daniel Pals's *Seven Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996). Now comes Walter Capps's thematic history on the field. Capps's name is undoubtedly well known from his work on the Council on the Study of Religion and his writings on the history of the Vietnam War era and on the Christian right as well as from his career as a teacher at the University of California at Santa Barbara. In light of such a distinguished career as a scholar and educator, readers will come to this volume with high expectations.

*Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* is organized into six main chapters, which are framed by an introduction and a brief closing essay on the future of the field. The six main chapters are organized thematically, each covering, in chronological order, those scholars representing certain paradigmatic aspects of the field. In his introduction Capps outlines the history of the field in terms of an overall intellectual and methodological paradigm comprising several "large, controlling questions" (p. xxii) that developed directly from the Enlightenment category "natural religion." Capps maintains that with this new way of conceiving religion, scholars were able to understand it as a fundamental human activity, thereby opening the way to studying religious phenomena throughout history. Capps then devotes his main chapters to a study of the six paradigmatic questions that can be traced back to the Enlightenment: (1) What is the essence of religion? (2) What is its historic origin? (3) What is entailed in describing its components? (4) What function does religion serve? (5) How should one study discursive (that is, formal propositional statements) and nondiscursive (that is, symbols) religious expressions? (6) How does one compare religions? Because of the centrality of these questions throughout the history of the study of religion, Capps's book is less a mere chronological history and more a steadily unfolding story.

Each chapter sketches the contributions of a number of thinkers to each of the six questions. For instance, when discussing the effort to determine the function of religion (and by this he specifically means the sociological function), Capps

takes the reader through the contributions of Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, Ferdinand Tönnies, Franklin Giddings, Karl Mannheim, Joachim Wach, Talcott Parsons, Clifford Geertz, Thomas Luckmann and Peter Berger, Robert Bellah, Thomas O'Dea, Melford Spiro, Milton Yinger, Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, and Erik Erikson. The sections on each author understandably vary in detail and length, from several pages on such writers as Durkheim, Weber, and Wach to only a few paragraphs on Tönnies and Bellah.

Some of Capps's choices of figures and of emphases are surprising. For example, why are such theologians as Karl Rahner, John Hick, and Paul Tillich included in the chapter on comparison? Why does Freud's inquiry into the essence of religion warrant only two pages whereas Rudolf Otto's quest entails five? It becomes clear that Capps finds the theological origins of the field to be the most important. Despite his apparent praise for the Enlightenment, he does not really consider its contribution to the study of religion in a nonreligious or naturalistic fashion (a paradigm already traced so nicely by Samuel Preus in his *Explaining Religion* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1987]). Rather, Capps sees its prime contribution as providing scholars with the ability to study religion not just as revealed by a deity but also as intuited from our sensory experiences of the natural world. According to Capps, the Enlightenment enabled scholars (1) to see more phenomena *as* religious and (2) to identify an aspect of human consciousness as the seat of natural religiosity. For example, such terms as *consciousness*, *awareness*, and *experience* occur throughout the text, suggesting that Capps's decision to begin with Schleiermacher's efforts to identify a specifically religious form of human consciousness signifies, for Capps, the key to the modern study of religion.

Capps claims that, armed with the category of natural religion, scholars have "approached [religion] as belonging to the range of natural human abilities and interests. Religion is explained on the basis of human nature. In this sense it is natural to be religious—just as natural as being reflective, being ethical, and being sensitive to the compulsions of beauty" (p. 10). But by "natural" Capps means something entirely different from a naturalistic approach to the study of religion—an approach that roots religion in something nonreligious rather than in an irreducibly religious faculty or experience. Capps's confusing use of the term is most evident when he describes how "naturalist" scholars contended that "the human capacity or faculty in question lacks completion unless the religious factor is functionally present. In other words, the religious factor is treated as a complement to the faculty or habit with which it is associated. It is understood that the religious element adds something to the human activity with which it is associated and in reference to which it is explained" (p. 10).

Capps's focus on a mysterious religious factor, element, or reference that adds "something" to human nature and experience is in fact anything but characteristic of naturalistic research as social scientists characterize it. In the social sciences naturalism means the attempt to reduce and thereby explain religion in terms of such things as politics, biology, history, and economics. For Capps, by contrast, naturalism refers to vaguely defined theological and aesthetic conjectures on such things as Otto's "overplus of meaning." What Capps characterizes as the Enlightenment shift of religion "from revelation to natural grounds" (p. 11), then, is hardly a shift at all. It is but another theological approach.

Although one should not obscure the theological origins of our field, the kinds of questions that have developed in the study of religion differ significantly from those that Capps finds to be paradigmatic. Instead of taking for granted the presence of a religious factor, element, consciousness, or impulse, many scholars of religion ask a prior question: Just why does it make sense even to talk in this manner? What are the psychological, social, political, and economic conditions that make such expressions possible? Although I realize that one might see Capps as simply attempting to describe accurately what writers such as Schleiermacher and Otto argued, I think that Capps himself endorses this so-called shift as foundational to the modern field. For it is only by portraying this theological shift from revealed to natural religion as a significant methodological and theoretical move that many of the figures in his book can be included.

However, this shift is responsible not so much for the development of the academic study of religion as for developing theologies of religious pluralism, a movement associated most in the mid- to late-twentieth century with the work of such writers as Mircea Eliade, Huston Smith, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and John Hick, some of whom figure prominently in Capps's chapter on comparative religion. In fact, this entire chapter is actually a survey of the development of religious pluralism rather than a study of those scholars credited with developing nonevaluative methods of comparative analysis. As a survey of one aspect of mostly, but not exclusively, Christian theology, Capps's final chapter is indeed useful; but as the final chapter to a study concerned with the "making of a discipline," it is not only misnamed (it should be retitled "The Evaluation of Religion's Truth") but also entirely misleading.

Furthermore, Capps's use of the "great man" heuristic is itself problematic, for he presents the history of the study of religion as essentially an intellectual adventure, a virtual Hegelian narrative unfolding in history, thereby failing to take into account the material and social origins of the field. Indeed, the Enlightenment played a considerable role in our history, but today it is rather difficult to talk of the Enlightenment simply as a purely intellectual event, the way Capps does. As important as the beliefs and conscious intentions of our field's founders may have been, such things as European colonialism and the more recent advent of American imperialism have played considerable roles as well. Sadly, the approach used in Capps's book—much like the approach used by most scholars who study religion—is not capable of considering the social and political factors that made it necessary to characterize "them" as having religions like "us" in the first place. We need to inquire into the relations between the rise of our field in the mid-nineteenth century and the state-sponsored colonialism that was at that time taking over from the private-enterprise colonialism of the previous age. Is it a coincidence that scholars working in Britain (Müller) and the Netherlands (Tiele) are so prominent in our histories, or has it something to do with the growing need those countries had for developing more efficient ways to describe, categorize, contain, control, and profit from diverse customs and populations? We need to investigate the intellectual *as well as* the cultural and material capital that the field accrues. We might learn that the origin of the field lies more in the realm of global politics than in the insights of the disengaged mind.

Clearly, there is a place for Capps's sweeping picture of the field's major players and for his attempt to delineate a coherent set of intellectual issues into which we

can all map ourselves. His book complements Eric Sharpe's more historically based *Comparative Religion: A History* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986) by providing a narrative overview of the field that might be used in the classroom. However, Capps's work, like Sharpe's, will likely be used by many instructors as a convenient resource for retelling "the old, old story" concerning the field's founding and its future. But if one views Capps's story as simply the latest attempt to redescribe the dominant cosmogony of the field—for it is indeed a story of origins—it provides us with the ideal site to begin deploying critical tools for studying how the authority to define, describe, and understand—in a word, construct—"religion" has been generated and legitimized by a class of priestly specialists involved in obscuring the links between ideas and practices. This latest contribution to writing the history of the field might prove to be an important piece of data in reconceptualizing the academic study of religion.

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*Editor's note:* Because Capps died in October 1997, this book becomes his last long contribution to the discussion he did so much to advance.

*Intersections: Science, Theology, and Ethics.* By JAMES M. GUSTAFSON. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1996. xxi + 174 pages. \$16.95 (paper).

This book is a compilation of seven previously published essays and adaptations of unpublished lectures delivered between 1990 and 1994. The title is descriptive of the theme: it is about intersections or points of common interest between theology, ethics, medicine, and biology. The general focus of this compilation is to examine how these separate disciplines can and should be used to develop a more complete understanding of ethics and moral life, and to assist in thoughtful formulation of policy proposals. In this, Professor Gustafson's stated hope is not only that our methods of intellectual inquiry should be improved but also that our actions might thereby be more prudent.

Taken as a whole, the chapters work together to convincingly advance the point that theology and ethical theory have a justifiable claim "to participate and be taken into account, with the open possibility that [they] will be informed and even altered by concepts, information, and theories that they meet at particular intersections" (p. 4). Gustafson goes on to clearly emphasize what is a major point in the book, that "how we think about these matters [at the intersections of science, theology, and ethics] when dealing with particular studies that make fine-grained connections is not satisfactorily resolved by general hermeneutical theories, general epistemological theories, or general theories of facts to values" (p. 146). It is more helpful to consider particular intersections in the context of specific issues at stake. In doing so, it is possible to uncover the true extent or limitations of disagreement and to find possibilities for complementarity and mutual corrections

between disciplines. This suggests what the text bears out: that a critical analysis of a particular subject by participants from different disciplines and ideological perspectives will yield a more comprehensive explanation of moral life and provide a sounder basis for developing ethical norms.

Each of the seven chapters in this book is capable of standing alone as an analysis of particular intellectual and practical issues that arise at points of common interest between disciplines. And while there is a common focus on intersections between disciplines, each chapter makes a distinct contribution. Thus it is appropriate to comment, though necessarily too briefly, on the individual chapters.

The first chapter, "Explaining and Valuing the Human: An Inevitable Theological and Scientific Encounter," demonstrates how two very different descriptions of human existence can lead to quite similar outlooks on life. This is done by comparing Reinhold Niebuhr's understanding in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* with that of bioanthropologist Melvin Konner in *The Tangled Wing*. In Niebuhr's view, humans are a "curious compound of nature and spirit," in which our essential freedom is in tension with our inherent finiteness, thus causing anxiety, which he regards as the internal precondition of our sinfulness. Niebuhr retains a cautious optimism about humanity, based upon his belief in a merciful God and the possibility of a more correct human understanding of our relationship to God. Konner, on the other hand, gives an essentially biological explanation of humans and our propensity to do evil and places his hope for the future in a human sense of wonder and creativity. Niebuhr and Konner give very different descriptions of what is essentially human, one biological and the other transcendent. But they both have a cautiously optimistic outlook and arrive at ethical positions that are, for practical purposes, very similar. To Gustafson these similarities suggest that the sciences and humanities can move beyond confrontation to more collaborative interactions, each shedding its distinctive light on a subject.

In chapter 2, "Moral Discourse about Medicine: A Variety of Forms," Gustafson continues with the theme of complementarity by asking who (if anyone) should control the parameters and hence the content of discourse in medical ethics. In addressing this question he sets out four modes of moral discourse in the medical context. Discussed in order, they are ethical, prophetic, narrative, and policy—each with its own potential insights and contributions. Though the book provides a more adequate description of these modes than space here permits, the central argument of the chapter can be apprehended by the statement that "if too exclusive attention is given to any one of the types, significant issues of concern . . . are left unattended" (p. 37). In the final point of the chapter, complementarity emerges as a subtheme with the statement, "there are different 'moments' in medical morality when different forms [of discourse] are more appropriate" (p. 55).

Chapter 3, "Styles of Religious Reflection in Medical Ethics," delineates three alternative methods of religious belief and practice. First, there is a model of religious autonomy, in which religion is understood to have its own sources of authority, independent of and often superseding other sources of knowledge. Second, there is a model that emphasizes continuity between religious beliefs and other sources of information such that religious ethics may be intelligible both inside and outside the religious community. Third, religious justifications of ethics can be understood as existing in an interactive dialectic with other nonreligious sources of information and explanations of morals. On this understanding, religious

justifications are open to change as new information becomes known, just as discussions involving typically nonreligious explanations can be broadened and deepened by religious contributions.

Gustafson presents these alternatives as a typology to assist in understanding or formulating positions in medical ethics and not as a rigid taxonomy. Indeed, he suggests that a person doing medical ethics will often choose between these alternatives, depending upon the context or question.

Chapter 4 analyzes and commends to us the writings of genetic therapist W. French Anderson. This chapter, “Genetic Therapy: An Intersection of Science, Ethics, and Theology,” uses Anderson’s writing to formally describe a process for evaluating the permissibility of genetic interventions. While the resulting framework provides a method of analysis, it raises more questions than it actually answers. Perhaps this is appropriate in the rapidly evolving field of genetics, where questions are a greater constant than answers. For example, given our present and likely future knowledge, which genetic interventions are morally defensible and which are not? In the event of ambiguity, how does a clinical investigator, physician, patient, or the general public choose what to do? What criteria should be used to determine whether intervention is appropriate? And what about access to treatment? These and other questions are presented in the chapter. And though no clear answers are provided, the questions point to persistent issues that warrant continued attention.

Chapter 5, “Theology, Biology, and Ethics: Further Explorations,” begins by looking at ways in which theological beliefs and understandings of humanity can predispose a person toward specific moral judgments. In demonstrating this point, Gustafson shows that Paul Ramsey’s understanding of human finitude supports his consequent caution about genetic interventions. Ramsey’s view is then contrasted with Karl Rahner’s emphasis on human freedom and his greater willingness to explore how genetic knowledge might affect the context within which human freedom exists. Gustafson then examines how different theologians have responded to scientific knowledge in their respective interpretations of God and humanity. The theological alternatives he shows us cover a spectrum ranging from a serious consideration of the sciences to bracketing science out of theology. These alternative theological positions relate to the questions developed in chapter 6, “Human Viability: To What End?”

In whom or what can we have confidence? For what can we hope? And, perhaps alternatively, to what we can reasonably aspire? Answers to these questions depend upon how one describes humanity in relation to other realities. While orthodox Christian theology holds that we can trust in God to ultimately redeem humanity, secularists and some nontraditional Christians may focus on understanding and developing reasonable aspirations in light of our finitude. These descriptive differences notwithstanding, both groups may make similar observations, taking serious note of moral limitations that blind us to what we ought to see and harden our hearts to the suffering of others. This moral condition leads to calls for repentance in religious and secular terms and can serve as a warrant for an ethic of humility, tolerance, caution, and restraint. Given the possible similarity in ethical norms, one might return to a question that was posed in chapter 1: What is at stake between a scientific and a theological view of humanity? In terms of a



practical ethic, on some issues there may be very little at stake. On other issues, alternative descriptive premises give rise to significant ethical differences. But on any issue truthfulness is at stake where a truth claim implies an accurate description.

In the concluding chapter, "The Relations of Other Disciplines to Theological Ethics," Gustafson names eight ways in which theological ethics can be understood in relation to other disciplines. The possibilities range from an understanding of theological ethics as closed to the contributions of other disciplines to a mutual openness between disciplines in the formulation of ethics. In discussing the alternatives, Gustafson makes a good argument that an adequate theological ethic depends upon the descriptive contributions of other disciplines, but he does not make a strong case for the converse. It is true that theological understandings can provide useful critiques and add unique dimensions to ethical discourse. But unless one presumes the existence of God, it is unreasonable to rely upon theological contributions as such. Descriptions and valuations must be otherwise accessible in order to be persuasive to the nontheist. And if they are, theology may become superfluous. So while a complete dialogue should include all relevant information, the claims for theological participation are not unassailable. Gustafson recognizes the persuasive limitations of theological claims in the first chapter of his *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*. With characteristic objectivity, he admits: "Any theological response to a perception of the issues of life in the world invites the charge of circularity" (p. 2).

These admitted limitations notwithstanding, Gustafson's compilation is a coherent contribution to an understanding of the possibilities for interdisciplinary dialogues that, in the long run, may improve both our knowledge and our actions.

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*Rationality in Science, Religion, and Everyday Life: A Critical Evaluation of Four Models of Rationality.* By MIKAEL STENMARK. Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1995. ix + 392 pages. \$32.95 (hardcover).

Mikael Stenmark does philosophers, theologians, scientists, and all others interested in the relationships among science, religion, and rationality an enormous amount of good in this book. As its title indicates, it presents four models of rationality and evaluates them from the scientific, religious, and everyday points of view. The chapters include an "Introduction," "The Nature of Rationality," "Science and Formal Evidentialism," "The Scientific and the Evidentialist Challenge to Religious Belief," "The Practice-Oriented View of Science," "Social Evidentialism," "Social Evidentialism and Religious Belief," "Presumptionism," "The Nature and Function of Religious Belief," "Religious Rationality, Contextualism and Human Practices," and "Some Concluding Remarks." As Stenmark, Lecturer in Philosophy of Religion at Uppsala University, wends his way through the various models of rationality and how they fare in the three contexts of science,

religion, and everyday life, he deftly manages to argue that three of the four fall prey to serious challenges.

The first two, formal evidentialism (which holds that a belief is rationally acceptable only if it is obtained by following the appropriate rules) and social evidentialism (which rejects the rule principle and claims that rationality is guided by informed judgments rather than rules), fall prey to the charge that rationality is not independent of the agents and their circumstances. Contextualism (which holds that rationality is context dependent) fails since there is, in fact, a universal standard of rationality that is not evidentialist. The fourth approach to rationality, presumptionism, purports to take into account that no more can be expected of a rational agent than he or she is capable of and that we should presume that someone's beliefs are rational until shown otherwise. There is, Stenmark argues, a universal account of rationality, and presumptionism is it. He concludes with the very strong claim that "the debate on whether religious beliefs are rationally acceptable is over" (p. 359).

Stenmark sets out four theses in his introduction. First, he proposes to argue "against a too narrow conception of what 'rationality' is all about" (p. 5). Second, he claims that "most conceptions of rationality proposed by philosophers have been far too idealized or utopian to apply in an interesting way to actual human agents like you and me" (p. 7). Third, he argues that "much of the discussion of the rationality of religious belief has been irrelevant for whether people are rational in being religious believers, and it cannot consequently function as a basis for a recommendation of the appropriate standards for religious rationality" (p. 14). Finally, he defends the idea that "the demand of rationality is for everyone and everywhere the same, that we ought to do what can reasonably be demanded of us with the limited means at our disposal in the particular situation in which we find ourselves" (p. 15).

Does Stenmark successfully defend his four theses? The first claim needs, I believe, little defense these days, especially in the field of philosophy of religion. The work of the so-called Reformed epistemologist more or less broke the back of the overly rigid views of rationality a number of years ago. Nevertheless, Stenmark clearly lays out an overall argument for a broadly construed notion of rationality and does an excellent job of clearly presenting where work on rationality has been this last eighty or so years. Particularly helpful is his discussion of various philosophical research programs—the formal, the contextual, and the practice-oriented. Stenmark has a good command of these approaches and presents them in such a way that even those on the outside of professional philosophical circles should develop a sense of what is involved in the various commitments theorists of rationality make.

His second thesis also does not seem to need as much defense as it might have twenty years ago. Philosophers of rationality who were influenced by the logical positivism of the 1920s and 1930s held to idealized views of rationality. That this was too high a standard has been argued by any number of theorists in the last twenty years. Nonetheless, Stenmark presents his case well and clearly and in a way that outsiders to the conversation of the last twenty years or more can easily access.

The third and fourth theses are more needful of defense, and Stenmark's approaches are more novel. His claim that discussions of rationality have been largely



irrelevant to religious believers seems to me to be right on target. Stenmark's main approach here is to give an analysis of what kinds of beliefs religious beliefs are and to note that more traditional accounts of rationality simply miss the mark. Religious beliefs (or more broadly, life-view beliefs, of which there are secular and religious versions) are existential beliefs—beliefs that should not be thought of merely in terms of truth and falsity but in terms of how we should live our lives. Choosing such beliefs is not simply a matter of making up one's mind but rather choosing how to live one's life. Since one must have a "life-view," the issue is not whether to have such a view but which one to have. Also, if it turns out that religious views are irrational in general, then secular life-views are as well. Stenmark's defense of this thesis is the most original aspect of his book.

The fourth thesis, in this day of contextual approaches, sounds the most radical and most difficult to defend. Stenmark does a good job of laying out his ground, and I believe on that ground he is successful. However, given our human, finite means of attending to rationality, the account Stenmark is forced to give will not satisfy many of the more traditional theorists of rationality. I once heard a comment about Reformed epistemology that ran more or less like this: "You want me to believe in God for that reason?" I suspect Stenmark's position on rationality will receive a similar response. From the fact that human agents are not capable of reasoning from an ideal point of view, does it follow that we should set the standards so low? Realism is acceptable in these discussions, but shouldn't we hold up somewhat more of a challenge to ourselves?

Be that as it may, *Rationality in Science, Religion, and Everyday Life* is an excellent overview of the issues in the grand conversation among religious believers, scientists, and philosophers. Its attempt to spell out terms in which rationality can be understood but not undercut is excellent. One strength of this work is its clarity of style and excellent English prose. Although the book does introduce a number of technical terms and descriptions, it does not do so beyond what is necessary for comprehensiveness. For those outside the fields of philosophy of religion and philosophy of science, the book is accessible with some work. Compared to other books in the field, Stenmark's is relatively free of arcane, technical discussion. A useful—but missing—feature is a good index to the work.

In addition, the book contributes to our understanding of rationality and the role that human agents play in it. When it comes to religious belief, the book is at its strongest and most original. I'm sure that Stenmark's suggestions for new directions will generate much discussion, and so I doubt that the last sentence of the book, in which Stenmark claims that "the debate on whether religious beliefs are rationally acceptable is over," is true.

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