

Claude Welch
October 3, 1978

AN INFORMAL POSTSCRIPT TO CAPPS ON WINGSPREAD

I regret deeply that I was not able to attend the conference at Wingspread. Because I could not be there, to perceive first-hand the dynamics and the mood of the discussion, especially the discussion that does not appear in the transcripts, it was only with considerable hesitation that I agreed to interrupt the study of late nineteenth century theology to offer some comments on the affair (a hesitation not decreased by doubts whether my own research area would have been given high priority by anyone at the conference). Nonetheless, my arm having been twisted, I have tried to digest the transcripts of the presentations and of Walter Capps's draft report and I offer some comments that relate indiscriminately to the conference and Walter's draft. (At least, these will be no less relevant than the strange Chronicle of Higher Education story of March 20, 1978, which seems to me to have emphasized most of the wrong questions and missed most of the substantive points.)

Preliminary Expectoration

For openers, let me offer some summary and possibly provoking judgments about what I believe to be confusions and irrelevancies that appear here and there. One is the confusion between the "professional development" needs of scholars and teachers in religion and the "research needs in religious studies." These are not the same question, though of course research, and the support of it, is a need for professional development. But I doubt seriously that the professional development needs of persons in religious studies are much different from the needs of faculty in other areas and fields. A somewhat more severely disciplined attention to research areas and needs would have helped the focus and the results.

A second "red herring" was the recurrent question about the "identity" or "integrity" of the field, or the question of firmly establishing the "border relationships" to other fields, or the cry for "coherence", or how to integrate religious studies in the humanities or the university generally. As one who had something to do in 1970 and 1972 with popularizing the phrase "identity crisis in religious studies," I want now to suggest that the notion has become trite and worn out. It was bemusing, as I began to work on the conference materials, to read in the Chronicle of Higher Education for Sept. 11 that the morale among political scientists is terrible and that a major contributing factor is "that political science is not so much a field as a 'category of sub-groups'; Consequently, there is little 'sense of discipline' among its practitioners." And then in the next issue of the Chronicle I read a historian's judgment that in science the present "is a period of 'normal science' in which many ordinary researchers essentially spend their time trying to solve the problems posed by

the extraordinary scientists who went before them." I happen to believe that in the past decade a great deal has been done in both teaching and scholarship to develop the interconnections among the "sub-fields" of religious studies and with cognate "disciplines." The actual presentations at Wingspread seem to bear this out. But even apart from that, for us to suppose that religious studies is singularly bedeviled by a problem of coherence or integrity is either lack of confidence in our particular pursuits or hubris (or both), and both we can do without. Let us give up this habit of talking.

Closely related, perhaps, is the illusory quest for the introductory course in religion, which comes in for a mention or two. That quest I believe to rest on some false judgments about the "success" of other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences and some quite specious comparisons with biology or chemistry or whatnot.

It is relevant, or at least convenient, at this point to note my uneasiness with any bemoaning of the lack of a dominant, over-arching theory of religion. Is not this, in part, another version of the attempt precisely to define religion and its boundaries, rather than recognizing that answers to such questions will always (and should) be in flux? Again, comparison with other fields is instructive. In many fields there are rare events, "discoveries," new theories that give impetus to new work and reshape configurations of understanding. But we need not suppose that we must have a grand, unified theory. To say this, however, is not at all to deny the legitimacy of the calls, made by several at Wingspread for more attention to theoretical constructs.

Further, in the present vein, we did not need to be reminded that we can't do everything and can't have everything. We are all painfully aware of the constriction of resources. That does call for making some hard choices, for selectivity and for priorities. And it is true that Wingspread did not get far in this respect. But in partial defense, it must be said that working scholars are (unhappily?) often not those who have the power to make the crucial choices -- though we may be able to take some steps in that direction -- and the mood of Wingspread, in reference to research needs, seems to have been inclusive rather than restrictive.

Finally, I don't quite understand the concern of some to decide whether religious studies is in its infancy, its adolescence, or its maturity. Away with such questions! They don't lead us anywhere.

Substantive Outcomes of Wingspread

Having got those comments off my mind, we can come to the question whether Wingspread has in fact helped us significantly in the problem of identifying research needs and priorities. The answer is Yes. Despite the casual, sometimes rambling and off-hand character of some presentations, the papers as a whole do two important things relative to the areas covered.

First, in several of the papers, we have interesting and important assessments of what is now going on and of the directions in which research is moving. Even apart from the unfortunate occasional attempt to assure colleagues that "things are alive and well in X field," there are significant statements here which ought to be considered seriously by others in the various sub-fields to see

if they reflect any consensus. (I do not enumerate the particular areas in which I think this happened, but leave that for the Committee on Scholarly Development.)

Second, from the papers one can compile a fairly lengthy series of problems identified as priorities for future research. Without attempting to be complete, and with apologies to the authors for the inadequacy of efforts to reduce their prose to a phrase or two, I note the following priorities or special areas for which arguments are made:

- Biblical studies: the social and cultural contexts in which Judaism and Christianity emerged; biblical ethics; biblical theology and process philosophy; comparative exegesis (i.e., biblical and non-biblical materials); ritual studies.
- History of religions: comparative ethics; theoretical constructs, including non-Western categories for interpretation; the "dull" as well as the creative epochs; the processes of change now going on.
- Historical and anthropological studies: American religious movements as transformations of American culture as a whole; comparative studies, e.g. in "civil religion" a study of the "political religions" of Canada, the U.S., and Mexico; "regional" religious studies; roots of "new" religions in American transcendentalism, romanticism and the occult; the creed of the Whole Earth Catalogue.
- Philosophy of religion: analysis of symbolic usage; the function of the imagination.
- Ethics: comparative ethics in new kinds of cross-cultural and cross-historical materials; ethics and the vocations, social roles; ethics and the natural sciences.
- Religion and literature: retrieving the notion of the imagination and its products; historical studies of religion and literature; comparative studies (Eastern-Western); socio-political effects of the models used in religion and literature.
- Psychology of religion: clarification of the belief dimension; theoretical constructs; depth history of the psychology of religion.
- Sociology of religion: involvement of scholars from non-Western religions; changing sex roles and sexuality; cross-cultural and "content free" measuring of sub-structures of religion; changing roles in religion of family and church organization.
- Native American religions: reconstructing the utterances and discovering the principles and the grammar in the fabric of the culture; the special character of pre-literate networks of data; religion and healing; process and change in native traditions; acculturation processes and effects.
- Women's studies in religion: (in addition to research in three so-far developed areas) the question of the implicit value judgments in the study of so-called pagan, heretical and minor traditions; the religious lives and experience of "ordinary women."
- Afro-American studies and religion: everything needed.

New Religions: "marginal" religions as important social indicators; taking new religious movements seriously as philosophical data; hermeneutic of the ideas.

Next Steps?

The preceding list looks indeed like a whole earth catalogue, and may be quite unintelligible apart from the contexts of the proposals, though the regularity with which "comparative study" appears is striking. (But then, some of the proposals were carefully stated and argued for, many others, including quite a few not noted here, merely stated.) The warnings that not everything can or should be done are to the point. Very few of the participants at Wingspread presented any internal priorities: A must be done first, then B and C. Most of the proposals were of general areas rather than specific projects. And sometimes there was more talk about the need to clarify issues than an actual clarification of issues. But I think the proposals do in fact form the beginning of what can be an important process, which might lead to some clarification of priorities and even to collaborative efforts.

I would suggest therefore that the Committee on Scholarly Development take these statements of need in hand (along with other areas not covered at Wingspread), (1) have them reviewed by others in the same "subfields," asking whether the judgments of the authors concerning directions and needs are valid, or at least reasonable, and (2) ask for (insist upon) some statements of priorities (i.e., "given the likelihood that only a half or a third of the research, which you think indispensable, can actually be done -- which half, or which third?"). Then, it might be possible to have some interesting discussions about priorities across the subfields and about research tools and other means of support.

CW:dp