

Institute of Religious Studies  
July 9, 1975

THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES UPON RELIGION

Background

The academic program in religious studies at UCSB was established in July 1964, more than a decade ago. It was the first curricular program of its kind within the University of California, and one of a few such programs within state universities in America. For years persons inside and outside the state university had been contending that religion was a fit subject for objective, scientific, scholarly study. Thus, the successful introduction of the program at Santa Barbara was regarded as something of a breakthrough development and achievement.

During the course of the decade, the program has grown, matured, and expanded. It currently offers a wide range of courses in Asian religions to complement its early emphasis upon religious factors in western culture. At present, there are eight full-time and several part-time faculty in religious studies, an average of over seven hundred undergraduate students enrolled in religious studies courses each quarter, approximately one hundred twenty five undergraduate majors, and over forty M.A. and Ph.D. candidates. In addition, an institute of religious studies has been established to foster various interdisciplinary and cross-cultural programs and projects on an interdepartmental and inter-campus basis.

Though distinctive with respect to setting, history, personnel, and emphases, the program in religious studies at UCSB is based upon convictions and intentions which are shared with religious studies programs on other state-university campuses. Initially, all such programs were initiated with a clear conception of large and significant differences between teaching religion and being engaged in religious studies. This important, indeed, crucial distinction is implicit in the doctrine of the separation of church and state as prescribed in the Constitution of the United States. Thus, in keeping with operational choices compelled by

legal distinctions, such programs have been directed toward the objective and descriptive study of religion as opposed to a devotional or indoctrinational promoting or advocating of particular religious positions, attitudes, or orientations. Being engaged in religious studies, an objective and analytical undertaking, was understood to be both methodologically and temperamentally distinct from teaching religion. Furthermore, though many of the original faculty members in religious studies came to their specialties after having been prepared in theological disciplines, primarily in seminaries and divinity schools, they also discerned the differences between religious studies and theology. They were also conscious that theology, if transportable at all, had to enter the academic scene on religious studies' rather than its own intrinsic grounds. Often this required a transformation of vocational skills as well as a redressing of priorities. But such adjustments were regarded as being necessary to the task of studying religion according to the most rigorous and scientifically respectable methods and standards. This intention has been fortified by changes of direction of professional societies in the field too as well as by large shifts in the content and structure of professional training. Nowadays, the professional schools have programs for training in religious studies, whereas, before the scholar was obliged to cultivate religious studies within established divinity school or theological seminary curricular contexts.

### The Issue

Given these very clear intentions, it is somewhat ironical, though not altogether surprising, that religious studies may have created a phenomenon against which it has been judiciously trying to distinguish itself. Religious studies, in effect, has stimulated religion. By subscribing to the most scrupulous standards of scholarship and objective appraisal, religious studies has functioned as agent and catalyst in discovering, manifesting, and, perhaps, even in creating religion. Though the stated curricular

purpose was to engage in scholarly undertakings in the most circumspect and impartial manner possible, the successful realization of that purpose has been utilized to make religious options available. The goal was to treat religion as one fundamental factor apart from which the history and morphology of human culture, east and west, could not be understood. But, frequently, the announced goal has been given a subordinate role.

A variety of examples can be cited. For instance, in exposing students to mystical traditions, religious studies has assisted some students to become mystics. Similarly, in doing careful textual analyses of the literature of religious traditions which are minorities in the western world, religious studies has provided reliable access to resources which can be personally appropriated and subscribed. Furthermore, because this exposure to other religious traditions has occurred at the precise time that searching questions have been raised about the legitimacy of western culture, religious studies has functioned as one of the chief academic carriers of a much larger network of social, political, and cultural interests. And, in providing impressive literary and philosophical documentation that the present world is illusion --or, at least, highly deceptive--religious studies has become a haven for students sensitive to the vision of the counter culture and disenchanted with the world's range of established opportunities.

But this is just the beginning, for once the subject is opened the lines of interest fall in a variety of directions. To identify but a few:

- (1) Given the distinction between religious studies and religion, how, precisely, does religious studies function to enhance sensitivity to human values? In any marked or traceable sense, does religion enhance the moral or ethical sensitivity of religious studies students? Has it had influence within a larger moral context? How, if at all, has it affected the quality of life in America? Has it assisted in enriching and expanding ethical and moral alternatives? How has

religious studies functioned to assist in the transmission of cultural heritages?

- (2) What happens to the student whose exposure to religion is effected through the simultaneous study of several religious traditions? How does the same exposure affect one's capacity to maintain firm personal convictions? Does the simultaneous study of several religious traditions have the effect of stimulating a religious orientation which is unlike any one of the traditions?
- (3) If the need for religious studies was discerned through developments within theological reflection, what is the actual working relationship of religious studies to theology? Are there residual theological convictions in religious studies? And, if the relationship between the two has been altered through developments in religious studies and in theology, can the present theological sanctioning of religious studies utilize the same arguments as it did a decade ago? How has religious studies influenced theology?
- (4) What contributions has religious studies made to university life in America? In addition to offering courses, expanding the curricular range, and stimulating the study of new or neglected subjects, how has religious studies served the (state) university?

### The Project

In association with faculty on other state-university campuses which have academic programs in this field, the faculty in religious studies at UCSB desires to bring concentrated attention to the subject of "the influence of religious studies upon religion." We propose that the subject be approached as a joint research project with accompanying conference and publication. To initiate the process, we request a planning grant of ~~58,000~~ which will enable us to schedule a three or four day planning conference, to which

we will invite selected experts in the field, articulate and knowledgeable representatives of the several academic programs whose career has been similar to ours, and a variety of research personnell from other fields and disciplines. The planning conference will consist of reading and discussion of working preliminary papers on subjects associated with the major theme. It is anticipated that one of the major functions of the planning conference will be to identify crucial interest areas, and to specify methodological procedures. (It is conceivable, for example, that a questionnaire can be designed through the assistance of the Survey Research Center at University of California, Berkeley, to submit to instructors, administrators, and students across the country.) At the initial planning conference specific research projects on the subject will be conceived and commissioned, involving the perspectives of scholars from within a variety of fields and disciplines. The planning conference will also project a larger conference on the theme, at a later date, at which those commissioned to do research on the subject will be asked to provide the results and products of their endeavors. Results of the project will be disseminated through a publication and through the medium of professional societies in religious studies, from whom agenda time at meetings will be requested for reporting and discussion purposes.

The project will be sponsored by the Institute of Religious Studies at UCSB. M. Gerald Bradford will serve a professional staff person, and, at least until the time of the planning conference, Walter H. Capps, director of the Institute, will serve as coordinator and principal investigator.