

8/24/79

Deborah and Mike:

This one will get me into a whole lot of trouble. Harold wants it for the Bulletin; we owe something like that to Lilly. I am a bit dissatisfied with the conclusion. But I'd like your opinions before I send it away.

Note that this is the only copy I have; the xerox machine was turned off by the time I typed it out.

Before we send it to the 15,000 readers of the Bulletin, I want Harold and Len Biallas to read it, and, for sure, the members of the faculty at UCSB. But that will only bring about a ruckus; and there's no need to start off this year that way.

Let me know what you think....

Walt

STUDENTS DISCERN RELIGION

IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Students learn and appreciate the difference between religious studies as an educational undertaking and religion as a matter of personal interest and devotion. And, at the same time, they find both religious value and content in the religious studies courses they take. Such is the principal finding of an inquiry conducted by the Institute of Religious Studies of the University of California, Santa Barbara, into "The Influence of Religious Studies upon Religion." The project was funded by the Lilly Endowment. Professor Walter H. Capps was principal investigator, assisted by doctoral candidates Edward T. Linenthal (now of the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh), Louise A. Greene, and Deborah R. Sills.

Responses to a questionnaire submitted to some two hundred recent graduates of UCSB, former majors in religious studies, confirm that students do indeed enroll in courses in this area for a number of reasons, prominent among which is "personal religious interest". However, this does not impede them from recognizing that the primary purpose of such courses is intellectual and educational, not religious. They attest that courses in religious studies increase their respect for "the importance of religion" socially, culturally, and historically. Nevertheless, appreciating

the place of objective analytical inquiry into the phenomenon of religion, they also draw personal religious content from the courses they take. A majority reported that their exposure to religion through religious studies carried positive religious and personal effects.

The inquiry was also designed to help identify prevailing religious orientations, stances, or points of view to which students may have come as a result or by-product of their work in religious studies. Do they prefer one religious tradition to another? Do those who enter the program as committed Christians find ways to remain that way? Does critical analysis of religious phenomena diminish or enhance the students' feeling of belonging to a tradition, faith, or community?

The responses indicate that "the religion" with which such students feel most comfortable is markedly similar to consensus religious positions that prevailed on the campus during the periods of time the students were enrolled. Not surprisingly, those enrolled in the 1960s exhibit personal religious stances that are more active in tone and temper than the orientations of students enrolled in the 1970s. Similarly, "new age" religion seems to have peaked at about the time "new age consciousness" was most prominent. The "cross cultural" component appears increasingly in students' religious points of view. In these respects, it appears that the influence of religious studies is more corroborative

and symbiotic than leading and catalytic. The students so affected can well have been expected to come to similar positions and sensitivities apart from religious studies, though perhaps not in such tutored fashion.

When religious studies lends formation to the complicated process by which personal attitudes to life are shaped, it is neither the particular course, the syllabus, nor the textbook, but the instructor who plays the most significant role. Yet, self-styled religious teachers seem to have no greater religious influence than instructors who present themselves primarily as analysts of religious data. The most influential instructors seem to be ones who preside over courses wherein personal religious transactions can be expected to occur. At UCSB, such transactions are frequent in association with courses on the Bible and on early Christianity.

When faculty members (both within and beyond the religious studies department at UCSB) are queried, the consensus is more difficult to identify. There is strong and demonstrable unanimity that religious studies should make every effort to be and remain a legitimate academic undertaking in the fullest and most rigorous sense of the terms. On this principle everyone agrees. But there are marked differences of opinion regarding the extent to which the question of the plausibility of religion should be allowed to become a conscious or explicit component of religious studies. Those who find it necessary intellectually that the question be faced directly also tend to

believe that the professor should "take a stand". It should be added that faculty members seem to feel differently about the prospect of discrediting religion than they do about efforts to lend advocacy. The former can be interpreted as the proper exercising of the critical temper. The latter threatens to undo the methodological basis on which religious studies is conducted.

From faculty perspectives, the primary working distinction between (1) objective analysis, and (2) personal advocacy seems to invoke some rather conventional conceptions of the nature of religion and the nature of religious studies. It is a truism to contend, for example, that there are clear inviolable differences between describing a religious tradition in analytical categories and portraying a religion in a manner that is deliberately designed to motivate the hearers or participants into a receptive response. But the distinction works best when religious traditions are the object of focus, and then fundamentally when they are approached historically. When religion is perceived as a factor in psychological development, a component with a more extensive social network or cultural system, as "attitude to life", or as a distinguishable mode of experience or behavior, the conventional distinction becomes elusive. The same happens when there is a shift from the historical to the present tense.

The study concludes that operational differentiations between religious studies and religion are more subtle and complicated than the formuli indicate. And yet, given this fact, there is no evidence to suggest that religious studies programs work in violation of constitutional constraints regarding separation of the interests of church and state. The personal uses to which students put religious studies can be likened to the personal uses to which all other subject areas can be put -- philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology, to name but the more obvious. The difference is that personal use is called "religious" in the religious studies instance, and there are necessary precautions against making the process explicit.

But this is precisely the subject that invites more attention. What students do religiously with religious studies is conceived both by students and faculty to be an extra-curricular matter. And faculty members may like to pretend that the same is true for them as well. But this seems inaccurate in each instance. There is religion in religious studies for both students and instructors, in a form that is highly unperceived and incredibly underrated. And its occurrence has a larger educational significance than prevailing methodological sensitivities appear willing to admit.