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RELIGIOUS STUDIES/THEOLOGICAL STUDIES:
THE ST. LOUIS PROJECT

WALTER H. CAPPS

The essays included in this collection originated as presentations made during the course of a conference at St. Louis University in May 1983 sponsored by the University's Department of Theological Studies. The purpose of the conference was to explore the relationships between theological studies and religious studies in a manner that might enable the two fields to establish a close working partnership within a coherent undergraduate liberal arts curriculum.

For decades the faculty in theological studies had been engaged in academic pursuits that have traditionally belonged to a distinguished Jesuit institution. But as educational incentives have been modified, and cross-cultural consciousness has grown, and as the need to come to an effective understanding of the religious and cultural traditions of peoples of other places and times has increased, the faculty sought ways to translate these new (or revised) sensitivities into cogent and respectable curricular offerings.

Laurence O'Connell, then chairman of the department, was first to conceive of the undertaking, and received support for a planning phase from the Lewis Foundation in Chicago.¹ O'Connell invited me to become a consultant to the project early in its development. Recognizing that the venture would be regarded as a case study by other institutions with similar needs and aspirations, we applied to the National Endowment for the Humanities for additional assistance. The proposal was successful, and John Orr, Dean of the School of Education in the University of Southern California, was appointed by the Endowment as a consultant.

Together we designed a multi-dimensional approach. First, we desired clarification of the intellectual and conceptual issues involved. We wanted to cast new or rekindled light on relationships among the methods, scopes, and intentions of the two disciplines. Secondly, we sought a clear identification of some available categorical schemata by which the distinctiveness and possible interdependencies of religious studies and theological studies could be delineated in programmatic

¹ The Foundation has also underwritten part of the cost of publishing the essays.—Ed.

terms. Thus we found ourselves searching for curricular models that might support our basic intentions. And, third, we wanted to make certain that whatever new or revised curricular designs resulted would evoke the support and enthusiasm of the faculty in theological studies at St. Louis. Whatever innovations were to be recommended would need the support of incentives deeply set within the prevailing religious and theological tradition.

When it came time to organize the conference, our intentions were to insure that the issues we had identified would be approached through an interesting variety of intellectual stimulation. We recognized that there has always been a number of respectable positions on the propriety of linking religious studies and theological studies. Some have seen the two enterprises as being utterly compatible. Others have argued for strict separation with no mixing of procedural lines. And there are a range of mediating alternatives in between.

This aspect of our inquiry was influenced by a number of established givens. For example, St. Louis University is a church-related institution. In this regard it is free of some of the concerns that surface when the same questions are posed relative to the orientation of religious studies programs in state universities. In the church-school situation, obviously, there need be no great worry about maintaining separation of church and state. This left us free to approach the primary relationship in theoretical terms. We could concentrate—at least for a time—on the intrinsic natures of the two disciplines. Then we could proceed to tackle the matter of curricular reconstruction in light of such theoretical considerations. And yet, to place this issue in the church-school environment, and to free it from the sensitivities that prevail within state universities, is not at all to approach it in a manner that is value free or neutral. Church-related institutions have their own incentives, compulsions, and convictions, and these carry strong formative influences upon the curricular designs that spell the institutions' identities.

As participants in the conference, we sought persons who had had large experience with these issues—both in theoretical and practical terms—and who could draw upon the experience in providing appropriate counsel. Jill Raitt had just come from fresh experience in establishing (by revising) a program at the University of Missouri, after working in a similar capacity at the Riverside campus of the University of California. William May would speak from experience about the program at Indiana University. Joseph Cahill, of the University of Alberta in Edmonton, is well qualified to describe the ways in which religion became accessible in curricular terms in Canada. Jacob Neusner of Brown University is in a remarkable position to portray the academic study of religion that occurs in private universities, particularly as such ventures have been encouraged within modern Western intellectual history. Wilfred Cantwell

Smith, of Harvard, would describe ways in which the study of religions can be integrated within superlative undergraduate liberal arts programs of study. And I was able to describe the process that resulted in the establishment of a department of religious studies within the University of California. Our intention was to showcase selected curricular models and academic programs to stimulate discussion among St. Louis University faculty. We recognized that no one of the models carries explicit tailor fittings to the situation in St. Louis. And yet we expected them to be provocative in their ability to make religion (if not theology) intelligible and articulate.

We also sought to obtain a clear understanding of why an educational venture of this kind would be deemed to be important right now, that is, in the 1980s. We sought to identify larger socio-cultural developments and educational trends, striving throughout to place the current aspirations of St. Louis University within a larger intellectual context. We were interested in the extent to which religion (as well as the study thereof) has become a matter of keen contemporary theological interest. We were equally intrigued by the fact that theology—seen now as a crucial component of religion—has become of significant interest to scholars in religious studies. Clearly, one need not be a theologian to have interest in theology; one would acknowledge its importance simply in compiling an inventory of the ingredients of religion. We pondered the reasons for the openness to these intellectual possibilities today whereas earlier periods of inquiry were marked by a tendency to catalog other phenomena of religion (myth, ritual, divine kingship, etc.) usually to the exclusion of a theological component. We wanted to come to terms with the shift in intellectual interest and attention that is implicit here.

No set of excerpts from such a conference—no matter how expertly presented—can do full justice to the excitement that comes from responses to compelling suggestions and the sharp exchanges that can occur between persons who have considered judgments on such issues. But the papers included in this collection go a great distance in pursuing this objective. The larger consequences of the project, of course, will be seen in whatever curricular revisions are contemplated and instituted.

My own involvement in the project has served to stimulate several reactions, each of them an acknowledgment that the situation that obtains today is very different from the one that prevailed in the mid-1960s, when many of the religious studies programs came into existence. Twenty years ago everyone wanted religious studies to be guided by something other than the curriculum that prevails in seminaries; even a kind of theology of the world's religions would not have sufficed. It was then that the state universities were emerging as a fresh and challenging working environment for an enterprise that was being reconceived and

reconstructed. Thus, all efforts were directed toward providing assurances that whatever was done in the name of the study of religion would honor all constitutional principles regarding separation of church and state. And, in many situations, the constitutional distinctions were translated into disciplinary distinctions, which, though they may have made good legal sense, left religious studies and theological studies standing as if “never the twain shall meet.” There are manifest signs today that the fundamental disciplinary distinctions are being reconsidered. Persons involved in religious studies recognize that they are uncovering matters of paramount theological significance, and persons involved in theological studies are aware of having gained access to some of the dynamics of religion.

If it approaches the challenge resourcefully—avoiding the sectarianisms on all sides—a faculty able to run on both tracks can break fresh ground. The essays that follow provide illustration that these matters had not been laid to rest, but beg to be rethought.