March 1989 Volume 2, Number 1

Excursus:
A Review of Religious Studies

Colloquium Edition: Religious Studies and the Academy

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Colloquium Keynote:
Where is Religious Studies Going?

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TO THE QUESTION THAT FORMS both the basis and the introduction to this colloquium, I would like to cultivate both macro and micro approaches. That is, I would like first to describe some of the characteristics of the educational situation within which the academic study of religion is cast at the present time, and then to describe some of the challenges our subject-field faces. My proposal will be that religious studies seems ideally suited to respond resourcefully to present educational opportunities. It is ideally suited by virtue of its acknowledged scope and the methods of analysis and interpretation by which it is characterized.

It is apparent that education has captured the attention of the American people. The new wave of interest was prompted, it seems, by a series of national reports on the strengths and weaknesses of American education that was initiated by the *A Nation At Risk* report that was issued by the presidentially-appointed Commission for Excellence in Education in 1983. *A Nation At Risk* pointed to the fact that the United States had lost its competitive edge in mathematics and the sciences because of educational deficiencies and lassitudes. The report also charged that insufficient attention had been directed to the teaching of moral values. Thus the society that could no longer boast of possessing the most effective educational system in the world was also showing signs of impoverished collective moral and spiritual resoluteness. The writers of the report provided evidence and illustration of the fact that a weakened educational system had left the nation itself vulnerable. Other nations were doing better than the United States in preparing their offspring to meet the serious challenges of the present and the future. Other nations were also showing more determination and greater character in pursuing those objectives that bring distinctiveness to a people.

A Nation At Risk was followed by a series of some twenty national reports, the sum total of which has subjected American education to thorough scrutiny. And, while the reports do not always agree on diagnosis or prescription, they share the view that the educational enterprise needs to be strengthened throughout. No longer can it be assumed that American education is always a success story. No longer can it be presumed that the prevailing educational systems are the best that can be. Instead, it has become apparent that the American system has considerable ground to make up if it is to serve the most compelling needs of both the nation and the society resourcefully and successfully.

Of course, none of the innovations that are contemplated for higher education in the current era can be considered without implicating the appraisal and recommendations of Allan Bloom (author of *The Closing of the American Mind*), E. D. Hirsch (author of *Cultural Literacy*), and William J. Bennett, the former secretary of education. And when we consider these commentators and analysts, we must include the recommendations of the current chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Lynne Cheney, from whose hand we have been given two reports, *American Memory: A Report on the Humanities in the Nation's Public Schools*, and, most recently, *Humanities in America*. Bloom, Hirsch, Bennett, and Cheney have been resolute in calling for a revival of the humanities and the liberal arts, and a resuscitated interest in the great literature of the western world.

Colleges and universities throughout the country have acknowledged that there are fundamental problems in contemporary American higher education, or, if not this, that specific improvements are in order. Most campuses now have faculty committees to deal with the reports.

Such committees, characteristically, have been drafting responses to the reports, which responses most easily assume the form of additional reports. The institution with which I am most familiar, the University of California, has responded to the reports through the work of a systemwide committee appointed by President David P. Gardner. This committee has issued a report popularly referred to as "The Smelser Report," since Professor Neil Smelser of the Berkeley campus chaired the committee – which, we believe, carries important ramifications for the academic study of religion. While acknowledging that students today know far too little about the history and literature of the western world, the report calls for vigorous and effective initiatives to assist "the internationalization and diversification of education." And, while acknowledging that general education requirements should be strengthened at the lower-division levels of higher education, the report proposes that effective general education courses be inserted at the upper-division levels, to provide opportunities to enable and encourage students to bring some coordination to their knowledge. This argues, no doubt, for the creation of interdisciplinary approaches to knowledge. And when "interdisciplinary" is mixed with "internationalization and diversification," such upper-level general education courses can easily attain a multi-cultural complexion. The latter is fast becoming a requirement in California, where high percentages of children in the public schools approach English as a second language, and where high percentages of children were born outside the United States. The city of Los Angeles has the second largest percentage of Korean people outside Seoul, the second largest percentage of Jewish people outside Tel Aviv, the second largest percentage of Nicaraguan people outside of Managua, etc. The recommendations in "The Smelser Report" are designed to reflect the dictates of these demographics as approached from the vantage point of intended effective educational reform.

There are additional elements in the current national educational picture that bear on the subject of this colloquium. It has become apparent, when one looks about, that academia is giving increased attention to effective teaching. Lynne Cheney makes the point in *Humanities in America* that faculty members tend to speak of "teaching loads" and "research opportunities," and hardly ever the other way around. Nevertheless, there is new interest in pedagogy today. A number of colleges and universities are offering prizes for good teaching. A number of professional organizations and institutions are making awards in this area. I think specifically of the National Professor of the Year Award which is awarded by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, as well as "Teacher of the Year Awards" that are now being given by many school districts and by numerous States. On the college campuses themselves, remedial and reconstructive efforts are underway to train teaching assistants before they enter the classroom, and to make more effective use of learning resource laboratories, including word processors and micro-computers. While the results are not yet well documented, it is significant that the subject of teaching is being addressed in contemporary higher education.

The employment situation for prospective faculty members in the humanities is also improving. Again, within the institution that I know best, the projections tell us that 40 percent of the current faculty will retire by the year 2000, and, given current population increases, additional faculty members, estimated to be approximately 40 percent of the current total, will be needed by the year 2000. This means that during the next eleven or twelve years, at least at one prominent institution of higher education, there will be employment opportunities for as many as 80 percent of the current number of faculty between now and the year 2000. This is a situation that is also reflected outside California.

Though the evidence for this is not overwhelming, there are signs, indeed, encouraging signs, that there is increasing interest in what Robert Maynard Hutchins called "the learning society," that is, learning that continues throughout one's lifetime, and is not restricted to the period of one's life between the ages of 18 and 22. Hutchins pioneered the "great books tradition," but he always insisted that "great books" have to be matched with "great issues." The two entities always belong together. The success of state humanities councils throughout the country is eloquent testimony to the worth of Hutchins' insight, and to the acknowledgment of the truths it contains by persons, organizations, and educational institutions across the length and breadth of the land. With this has come a new interest in what Studs Terkel refers to as "the wisdom of ordinary Americans," coupled, of course, with intellectual fascination with persons and authors who can speak for under-represented groups and peoples. The struggle occurring at Stanford University, regarding the appropriate intellectual content for the required course in western intellectual history, stands as an example of these shifts.

Thus, from even a cursory examination, it has become apparent that American higher education is the object of intense scrutiny at the present time, from which analysis has come some intriguing proposals about intellectual reformation and institutional reallocation of resources. As I shall hope to emphasize in the conclusion of these remarks, I think most of this bodes very well for the future of religious studies.

There isn't time or space in a quick survey of this kind to begin to identify all (or even most) of the most significant trends in the nation's current collective religious life. So, still following the macro-instinct, let me suggest one such development that I regard as being very

important, which development I also understand to have significant bearing upon the professional self-consciousness of the academic study of religion. I refer, of course, to the rise of neo-conservatism in American religion, or, more specifically, to the influence that has been exerted by the movement we commonly refer to as the New Religious (or New Christian) Right. It is apparent that neo-conservative influences in American education run parallel to neo-conservative influences in American religion.

Mary Douglas was speaking for the majority of scholars in religious studies when, in her essay "The Effects of Modernization on Religious Change" (which first appeared in the Winter 1982 issue of *Daedalus*), she observed that "events have taken religious studies by surprise." Douglas thought it interesting that academic programs in religion in colleges and universities have "generally included religious change" in their focus, and yet "no one foresaw the recent revivals of traditional religious forms." The rise of the New Religious Right was unexpected because it happened in a manner that didn't initially register within prevailing monitors.

Since 1981 a number of religious studies scholars have turned their attention to this matter. For instance, Professor Martin Marty of the University of Chicago is directing a large, long-term study of the rise of fundamentalism throughout the world. Professor Marty was among the first to recognize that the American variety of neo-conservative religion was both religiously and ideologically similar to the fundamentalist religion throughout the world. Thus, he is approaching the subject in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary terms. And there are other projects and studies that deserve to be cited.

Of course, there isn't time here to analyze this very important subject in detail, or even to list some of the prominent issues that this subject places on a scholar's agenda. But there is time enough to suggest that it may well turn out that the New Religious Right represents an alternative "civil religion," as Robert Bellah described the phenomenon. If not an alternative civil religion, the religion of the New Religious Right may indeed embody American civil religion in a conservative mode or key. And, if this is true, the implications for the academic study of religion are both deep and extensive.

The reason is that the academic study of religion was conceived on thoroughly compatible intellectual terms with the principles and convictions of the Enlightenment. The religion of the New Religious Right is antithetical to those same Enlightenment convictions. Indeed, New Religious Right religion stands in opposition to the Enlightenment, understands itself to be a post-Enlightenment phenomenon, and has made its intellectual case in the form of a critique of the Enlightenment. The accusation that most liberal college or university professors are "secular humanists" is a vivid example of the antagonism New Religious Right spokespersons feel toward Enlightenment philosophy. New Right accusations that prevailing current American education has no ability to teach compelling moral values, to instill faith on the part of today's students, or to encourage patriotism, is an attack on Enlightenment assumptions. In New Religious Right sensitivities, it is not enough that students are encouraged to ask critical questions. After the critical questions have been asked, someone somewhere needs to posit some truths, make some assertions, or offer some compelling avowals.But New Religious Right theoreticians find the Enlightenment-intellectual community unable to do any of this. In their view, contemporary American education is thoroughly impoverished because its guiding principles are neither intellectually true nor personally resourceful. One need not accept every ingredient in Richard John Neuhaus' analysis to accept the diagnostic value of his observations about "the naked public square." The New Right has tried to fill that avowalless vacuum with proposals of its own. To grasp the larger significance of this development for our purposes, we must consider some of our subject-field's foundational circumstances.

In retrospect, it becomes apparent that religious studies experienced a big academic lift in the early to middle 1960s on numerous campuses across the country, in part, by virtue of the enormous influence of Paul Tillich. Tillich's philosophy of culture enabled previous students of Christian theology to move beyond the world of Christian experience narrowly conceived, and into a larger and wider cultural experience. Under Tillich's counsel, such a transition was undergirded by deep and compelling incentives and sanctions, all of which also made good Christian theological sense. Having been ushered into this new world, previous students of Christian theology found tremendous assistance in the writings of Mircea Eliade, which stood, for many scholars of that era, as the point of entry into the world of phenomenology of religion. It is important to observe that both Paul Tillich and Mircea Eliade were general theorists. They were able, of course, to do detailed investigative work, but they were appreciated most of all for marking out new intellectual territories and ascribing compelling intellectual sense to such areas of reflection and investigation.

Following Tillich and Eliade, the field of religious studies has not been able to develop its own general theorists. Indeed, when the new world opened, there was no immediate need for general theorists. There was so much specialized work to be done, so much particular investigation of the various religious traditions of the world, that equivalents to theological systematicians were hardly called for.

On the contrary, once the new worlds opened, the new arrivals called for religious studies' emancipation

from Christian theology, which emancipation has become more or less successful. And when general theorists were called for, following Tillich and Eliade, a sufficient number were found in the field of anthropology – Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz, and Victor Turner being among them – to enable practitioners to take the next important steps. When the guiding theories from anthropology had influenced about as deeply and extensively as possible, religious studies scholars turned to literary and cultural critics, hermeneuticians, constructionists, deconstructionists, and post-constructionists. In doing so, religious studies was simply following the prominent lines of traffic on most college and university campuses, from anthropology to literary theory. Sociology, psychology, philosophy, and history contributed too, each of these enabling the emancipation from theology to be firmly sustained. And, all the while, scholars in the field were busy with details, probing the wide range of subject areas that had been unlocked, all of which required specific forms of mastery. But somewhere along the way, the sense of the unity of the undertaking vanished, and at a time when it was most important that the collective nature of the enterprise be affirmed.

The foregoing paragraphs are designed to illustrate that the multiple challenges facing religious studies are due in part to the fact that American higher education itself is under intense and persistent scrutiny today, as well as to the fact that American religion is both fluid and volatile today. On the constructive side, there are a variety of elements in the current cultural and intellectual mix of things that should encourage religious studies. Indeed, from this vantage point, religious studies seems ideally suited to the needs of the new era. By definition, it is globally-oriented, and not narrowly or parochially focused on the western world. Even before higher education recommended the global grasp, religious studies was both "internationalized" and "diversified." It deals with the religious traditions of humankind, and is thus an intrinsically cross-cultural intellectual undertaking. In addition, at a time when reading is being emphasized, when literacy is identified as a primary educational aspiration, religious studies remains remarkably well-suited. Much of its basic work is the reading and interpreting of texts. Yes, without texts or sacred scriptures the major religious traditions of the world would not have been able to attain this stature. Moreover, religious studies has been a leader in the history of textual criticism and hermeneutical theory. Therefore, the subject-field need make no urgent or abrupt on-course corrections to be able to claim the support of significant intellectual trends in contemporary American education. Rather, it is one subject-field that could not have come into prominence had such trends not already taken root. In numerous respects, the current educational objectives have been religious studies objectives before it became apparent that they also belonged to the more comprehensive enterprise.

But this is not to suggest that I am satisfied with religious studies' achievement to date, or that no remedial or reconstructive steps need be taken. On the contrary, I believe this is the time for religious studies to take advantage of current educational and intellectual opportunities, and that this will require some sustained and concentrated efforts in a number of areas.

To begin with, isn't it time to declare that the emancipation of religious studies from theology has been successfully effected, and, therefore, need not remain a high-priority agenda item? I recognize that I have ventured into dangerous political territory here, and that I must tread cautiously. I recognize, too, that differentiations between religious studies and theology are a matter of continuing diligence and vigilance. But I am also proposing that the time has come to look at the matter from another standpoint. That is, when religious studies scholars were fearful of being and acting like theologians, they took deliberate steps to demonstrate that this was not the case, to prove that their work was neither derived from theology nor similar to it in intention or purpose. However, after making such distinctions forcefully, religious studies tended to illustrate its point by assigning all convictional work to theologians. They were the ones who could legitimately make proposals and affirmations. By contrast, the safe way for religious studies to conduct itself was to delegate all avowal-making tasks to theologians, and to engage in no intellectual undertakings that would transcend (and, therefore, transgress) pure description, analysis and criticism. Thus, while theologians retained the right to make truth-claims on behalf of religion, religious studies scholars reserved the right only to criticize such truth-claims, or probe their meaning, or describe their significance. Under this arrangement, no effort was expended to identify the truth-claims that religious studies scholars might make *qua* religious studies scholars, and not as theologians. Wanting not to be guilty of entering forbidden territory, religious studies did not develop the collective strategy by which it might make positive, constructive avowal-filled affirmations of its own.

My suggestion, in this regard, is that the time has come for religious studies to begin to profess what it knows. I say this, of course, while recognizing that there are marked differences between how we talk with each other and what we transmit to the larger world of inquiry and discourse. What needs to be communicated is not the content of that which we exchange when we talk with each other. Instead, we need to cultivate the methods and procedures by which we take our places responsibly and resourcefully in the larger – or, perhaps it is *the common* – discussion. After years of concentrated and diligent inquiry, we have acquired knowledge and attained insight

that is very much worth communicating. For instance, by virtue of our sustained efforts in exegesis and hermeneutics, we have learned both how to read and how to identify some classic texts. By virtue of our sustained efforts in examining and interpreting the roles and functions of religion, we have learned something significant about the workings of societies. By virtue of our sustained preoccupation with numerous systems of symbolic forms, we have learned something significant about the composition of cultures. By virtue of our sustained inquiry into the ways of assent and the disposition of the temperaments (as in "the habits of the heart"), we have learned something significant about human behavior. And by virtue of the fact that we are dealing with a subject whose prime examples lend configuration to the peoples and cultures of the world, we have learned something significant about global interaction. To cite but one confirming example: the prize-winning author, Frances Fitzgerald observes in her book, *Fire In The Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*, that early American foreign policy concerning Southeast Asia would have been more astute and compelling if there had been surer and deeper U.S. State Department appreciation for the influence of Buddhism among the people of the region. Examples in kind are numerous.

My proposal is that the most promising future for religious studies lies in raising the level of religious literacy throughout the land. The corollary is that the present fascination with the subject, coupled with the current interest in the strengths and weaknesses of American education, has created an unusual opportunity through which this objective might be pursued. There are evident signs that we are living in a time when it is possible to create situations for this kind of education, of course, in the schools, but also beyond. And in this regard I think specifically of the fine work that was done on this campus some years ago when Professor John Schutz developed a program to train journalists to be more knowledgeable when writing stories about religion.

Robert Maynard Hutchins, former president of the University of Chicago and author of *The Learning Society* (1964), liked to say that the enduring conversation in every culture, at every time, is about the fundamental virtues, that is, about justice, truth, goodness, and the requirements of the pursuit of the common good. He observed that in resilient societies, this is a conversation in which the citizenry is equipped to participate knowledgeably and wisely. He added that in every society, whether it is always recognized or not, this is what the enduring conversation is actually about. The telling question is about who is participating in it and who is not.

There are two fundamental sets of indispensable tasks within religious studies, and, correspondingly, two distinctive dispositions. From the one side, there will always be the necessity of taking care of our internal affairs as astutely and judiciously as possible. We must be diligent in protecting our rights to engage in this essential endeavor. But there is another side to our collective work, and this involves developing the strategy to listen and talk with others, and to seize appropriate opportunities, within this more comprehensive intellectual setting, to contribute what we know. These two modes of engaging our subject are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they are complementary and mutually supportive. In the intellectual vitality that can be brought to both of them, and to both of them together, lies the positive future of religious studies.