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RELIGION

**GLOBAL AND ARCTIC
PERSPECTIVES**

**Edited by
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**INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE
UNIVERSITY OF TROMSØ**

FONDS POLAIRE
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THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE WORLD TODAY

The questions to be replied in this paper are: what do we know about the world because we understand the role and function of religion; or put in another form, what role and function is religion playing in the world today?

The comprehensive answer to be detailed below is that religion is playing a variety of roles. The basic statement is that religion both continues to be a stabilizing force and exercises a destabilizing force. Special attention is directed to the rise of fundamentalism. Christian fundamentalism in the U.S. strengthens American nationalism. The same concerns Marxism and such post-Marxist movements as that led by Vaclav Havel in the Czech Republic.

The statement of the author is that a "lived experience" is fast becoming a potential contributor both as the category as well as the criteria in terms of which the fundamental tenets of the religions of the world are being tested.

I'm very pleased to be invited to participate in this symposium here in Tromsø, and I wish to bring greetings from the University of California, Santa Barbara, to everyone who is gathered here, and particularly to those who have exercised leadership in the establishment of an academic program in religious studies here in the northernmost university in the world.

I have had a productive time thinking about the topic.

While preparing my remarks for this occasion, I was quickly taken back to the first years at Santa Barbara, when we were in process of establishing a department of religious studies. To make the academic case for including religious studies within the regular curriculum of undergraduate and graduate studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, we employed a rationale that included the language of description as well as the language of meaning. We asked the skeptics, critics, would-be detractors, and those who might have been simply suspicious, (Friedrich Schleiermacher would have termed some of them "cultured despisers") to consider the composition of current social, cultural, and political events. Against this background, we advanced the proposition: *it is impossible to understand the history of the world, or to understand contemporary events in the world without really knowing something about the nature and function of religion*. Then, when it was time to offer examples in point, we would remind our defenders, detractors, and supporters that it would be impossible to understand developments in China, India, Japan, the Middle East, northern Ireland, or even within the United States, without understanding the influence and role of religion within each of these frameworks.

So today, here in Tromsø, we turn the proposition in the other direction: *what do we know about the world because we understand the role and function of religion; or, put in another form, what role and*

function is religion playing in the world today?

The comprehensive answer is that religion is playing a variety of roles. In much of the world, religion continues to be a **stabilizing force**. It grounds beliefs, attitudes, behavior, ideals, and aspirations in both individual and collective senses. As Clifford Geertz said now nearly thirty years ago (in that well-cited definitional study, included in Michael Banton's **Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion**, 1966)¹ religion functions to provide an authentic perspective on reality, and lends appropriate legitimacy to this perspective so that adherents take it to be a trustworthy basis of action. Religion was doing this centuries ago; religion is doing this now; religion will always function in this capacity.

It is important to add that religion is also exercising a **destabilizing force**. There was a late 1960s' book, published in the United States, by Charles Glock, Benjamin Ringer, and Earl Babbie, entitled **To Comfort and to Challenge**² which explored the two-sidedness of religion. From the one side, religion aspires to uphold the status quo, that is, the determinative lineaments of the social or cultural order. And, from the other side, it challenges the social and cultural status quo. The authors noted that individual religious institutions can function in each of these two ways, and individuals are drawn to such institutions on the basis of the function that is being exercised.

We have employed the comfort/ challenge study to illustrate the twofold role of religion. Their examples are both American and Christian. But similar examples can be found in other locales. Using Jewish biblical sources, for example, one need only cite the contrast between *priestly* and *prophetic* traditions, the former dedicated toward maintaining stability and the second dedicated to calling stability (sometimes false or presumed stability) into question.

Of course, one finds the stabilizing and de-stabilizing functions being exercised throughout the world today. Almost

wherever one looks, one can find opposition and conflict between those who are seeking, as it is said, to strengthen or reestablish the eternal values (sometimes also called "permanent verities") and those who are motivated, as it is said, to establish something new, for example, a new world order, a more progressive orientation, or an understanding of the faith (whatever the specifics of this faith might be) that is more inclusive, or more resilient, or with a wider range of application than in previous formulations or expressions. If the comfort/challenge paradigm fits, one should be able to detect the conflict between the stabilizing and de-stabilizing strands within every religious tradition, probably at all times, though it must certainly also be true that there are moments and periods when, over all, one of the two forces is stronger than the other.

I'd like at this point to attach this rather general analysis to some rather astute commentary on what is happening with religion in the world today. Recall Mary Douglas' observation, made in her provocative analysis of "modernization and religious change" (*Daedalus*, 1982)³ that the reassertion of conservative religion took the religious studies profession "by surprise." Scholars dispositionally motivated to look for new or novel items of interest were blindsided by the reassertion of conservative and/or neo-orthodox tradition. And, of course, Professor Douglas was calling attention to the rise of **fundamentalism** on a global scale — a series of events that did indeed catch most religious studies scholars unaware. But even after the surprise occurred, there was considerable reluctance to take the phenomenon seriously, and there was a certain amount of scrambling before appropriate methodological procedures could be identified, cultivated, and employed. Little by little, of course, scholarship offered recognition, and, in the end, the development was met by the very fine multi-volume and multi-authored study, **The Fundamentalism**

Project, organized and subsequently edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby of the University of Chicago⁴, and by numerous individual portrayals and analyses.

I'd like to supplement Professor Douglas' observation with one registered by the late Ernest Gellner, noted British philosopher, who, until his death this year, was also director of the Centre for the Study of Nationalism in Central European University in Prague, in the Czech Republic. Gellner was also busy referencing intellectual surprises, but, for him, the first surprise is one that didn't occur, and the second is the one that occurred in its place. The expected event that did not materialize was the extension of a strong Marxist orientation throughout the world. In fact, what happened in this connection, as we all know, was the apparent failure of Marxism in the very Soviet Union with whose expressed aspirations, form of government, and way of life it was most closely identified. In noting this fact, Gellner has directed his attention toward assessing the future of socialism, and, in my judgment, has offered very provocative analysis and interpretation, particularly in his most recent book, **The Conditions of Liberty**⁵, which, without question, take into account the changing social, cultural, and political situation within the eastern bloc countries that, until recently, were under Soviet domination. Gellner does not expect that American style democracy will be extended to every nation of the world, and given prevailing circumstances, would not even wish for this. Rather, as the title of his book illustrates, the author is intent upon identifying the "conditions of liberty."

Numerous questions are raised by these analyses, not least one concerning the relationship between the role of religion and that of ideology. It is apparent that when religion functions as a stabilizing force it also lends authenticating support to the prevailing ideology. On the other hand, when religion functions to destabilize, ideology is one of its primary targets. This,

by the way, is why it is difficult to differentiate religious and ideological components within fundamentalism. It also helps explain why fundamentalism bears such close resemblances to nationalism, and why fundamentalism is often assigned the role of carrying neo-nationalistic causes forward. For example, Islamic fundamentalism is always linked integrally with Islamic nationalism. Christian fundamentalism in the United States strengthens American nationalism. And so it goes: fundamentalist movements are frequently and appropriately identified as neo-nationalist movements. This is also why it becomes appropriate to treat Marxism, which qualifies first as an ideology, as a religion (or quasi-religion) as well. Regarding this equation, Gellner has this to say:

[Marxism] was the first formally secular belief system to have become a world religion and a state ideology in a considerable number of polities, some of them—of great importance, and one of them a superpower.⁶

And, then, wishing to interpret the significance of the fall of Marxism in these terms, Gellner adds:

[Marxism's] fate is of enormous interest from the viewpoint of determining what can or cannot be done with nominally non-transcendent, this-worldly belief systems. Of course, the fate of Marxism on its own is not strictly conclusive. The failure of one secular religion cannot absolutely establish, for instance, that secular faiths in general cannot ever be socially effective. Others may yet succeed in the future where Marxism failed.⁷

In approaching the question as to whether a this-worldly, secular faith can satisfy humankind's religious needs and spiritual desires, Gellner offers some tantalizing equations: the Society of Jesus, established by Ignatius Loyola, he suggests, was both a religious order and a political party. Moreover, Marxism, a secular faith, was suited to the Russian soul because it enabled the Russians to catch up with western scientific development while sustaining the messianic utopian "longing for a wholly uncorrupted world, a harmonious society, of man at one with himself."⁸ Gellner's

analysis, as I have indicated, stands as fascinating commentary on the dual stabilizing-destabilizing social and political functions of religion. If Marxism offered itself as a more effective faith than the supernaturalistic faith the Russians had had before, it could claim to be the basis of social, cultural and political stability in the midst of pervasive and profound destabilization.

But, to bring the narrative up to date, how shall the fall of Marxism be interpreted, that is, in these terms? In social or cultural terms, why did the event happen?

On this point, Gellner draws one lesson that exhibits full clarity: "Human society does not...lend itself to the simple application of blueprints worked out in advance by pure thought."⁹ Gellner adds that Marxism suffered both from eliminating the *transcendent* from religion, and by "oversacralizing the *immanent*." In his judgment, the second of these failures was more serious than the first. He explains:

It has been said that society cannot make do without the sacred; perhaps it needs the profane as much. By sacralizing all aspects of social life, notably work and the economic sphere, Marxism deprived men of a profane bolthole into which to escape during periods of lukewarmness and diminished zeal.¹⁰

Put in other words:

...the world's first secular religion failed not because it deprived man of the transcendent, but because it deprived him of the profane. Marxism claimed to liberate man from religion, from seeing his life through the distorting prism of fantastic notions. By forcing him to endow concrete reality with its full importance and weight, it also made it intolerable.... By sacralizing this world, and above all the most mundane aspects of the world, it deprived men of that necessary contrast between the elevated and the earthy, and of the possibility of an escape into the earthy when the elevated is temporarily in suspended animation."¹¹

Gellner's conclusion: "the world cannot bear the burden of so much sacredness."¹²

Now, I have followed Gellner's argument with some care in order to make some sense of the role of religion in the world today. It is very interesting that some of the most significant developments in both religion and philosophy are occurring in those places in the world that have witnessed and experienced the loosening of the domination of the Marxist orientation. Again, following Gellner's lead, I wish to concentrate on recent occurrences in Prague, following the "velvet revolution" of 1989, and the great success of the Vaclav Havel movement to bring about significant social, cultural and political change by what is properly referred to as a "revolt of the human spirit."

I cannot go into sufficient detail in this paper. But, in brief scope, Havel and his associates gave normative status to conviction that worldviews cannot function top down. They do not work well deductively. In this regard, Havel would agree with Gellner's observation that "human society does not lend itself to the simple application of blueprints worked out in advance by pure thought." Understandably, therefore, Havel repeatedly criticizes the dogma that "operating from theory is essentially smarter than operating from a knowledge of life."¹³ In another place, he comments, "social life is not a machine built to any set of plans known to us."¹⁴ In fact, when one looks for the theoretical foundation of assertions of this kind, one can find them in the writings of Edmund Husserl (who, as we recall was a Moravian) and his concept of *Lebenswelt*. Havel takes some poetic liberties in identifying *Lebenswelt* with "the flow of life which is always taking us by surprise," but he insists that he learned this concept from Husserl, as rephrased by the Czech philosopher Jan Patocka.¹⁵

Once again, I have an obligation to keep track of the lines of argumentation I am putting forward. I recognize that I have taken my hearers/readers down a number of paths, without fully reaching final desti-

nations in any of them. I ask for your patience.

We began, you will recall, with some rather general observations about the traditional roles of religion in the world. Then, in wishing to offer examples, we got ourselves involved in a discussion concerning the resurgence of conservative religion in our time, primarily in the form of fundamentalism. We extended this point to include the provocative observation of Ernest Gellner regarding relationships between the resurgence of fundamentalism and the downfall of Marxism, both of which entities, he proposed, can be approached, analyzed, and interpreted as religion. Next, in extending Gellner's analysis of why Marxism fell — and we noted that he was approaching this question in structural terms — we gave some limited consideration to a response to Marxism's fall by certain thinkers, writers, and (now) governmental officials in the Czech Republic who have developed impressive post-ideological intellectual reconstruction. We noted that this response is directed by the insight that life does not flow from thought, that engagement of the world does not occur top-down from some preconstructed theoretical orientation, and that the task of life is not to discover what Havel calls "a universal theory of the world, and thus a universal key to unlock its prosperity." The alternative, Havel says, is an orientation to life that has its roots in the world of lived-experience, or that fundamental human environment within which "the flow of life" is most fundamentally honored. In his view, in sum:

Communism was not defeated by military force, but by life, by the human spirit, by conscience, by the resistance of Being and man to manipulation. It was defeated by a revolt of color, authenticity, history in all its variety, and human individuality / against imprisonment within a uniform ideology.¹⁶

Now, where does all of this leave us with respect to the subject that is being addressed in this paper, *The Role of Religion in the*

World Today? The answer is that the religion of the future, like the religion of the past, will continue to play both stabilizing and destabilizing roles. With respect to context and content, we can be more specific: there will be no more great religions of the world. The ones there are are the ones that will be. They are all already here, and were already on the scene more than one thousand years ago when Christianity was brought to Norway. What we can expect to change — and we can treat this as a constant — are attitudes toward them. Here I am venturing the expectation that the religions will be approached less and less in top-down theoretical fashion, or, thus, as candidates vulnerable to the criticism against dogmatic, ideological systems. Rather, the religions of the world will function more to inform “lived experience,” which experience, in my judgment, will come more and more to be regarded as normative. This means that insights from the major religions of the world will be utilized in a highly eclectic and even syncretistic fashion. Adherents will be less interested in testing isms for legitimacy than in living lives of intention and purpose. As Havel put it:

In a world of global civilization, only those who are looking for a technical trick to save that civilization need feel despair. But those who believe, in all modesty, in the mysterious power of their own human Being, which mediates between them and the mysterious power of the world's Being, have no reason to despair at all.¹⁷

And the corollary would be that within the world of collective “lived experience” all of the religions of the world are potential contributors. I site, in this regard, the request recently issued under UNESCO auspices to request leaders and representatives of the major religions of the world to offer assistance toward building an era of world peace. I had the privilege of participating in a similarly-motivated undertaking a few years ago, when His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, addressed a public audience, and participated in a panel discussion, on the subject of “Human Happiness.” The

organizer of the conference explained that all of the religions of the world have something to say about “happiness.” He thought the time had come to bring representatives and spokespersons for some of them into the same room to enable “the public” to hear their views. If they had something valuable to offer, the audience, he was certain, would recognize it.¹⁸

Such requests and events, given the ideals and aspirations of the religions, seem entirely appropriate. And this, clearly, is a call to religion to draw upon its most fundamental qualities to function, if possible and where appropriate, as an instrument of stabilization. After having participated in such an event, I have come to the firm conviction that the religions do indeed share common ideals and convictions. That is, there is compelling shared religious understanding across the traditions. No, I am not proposing (as some have suggested) that a Hindu, qua Hindu, is worshipping a Christ he doesn't yet fully know. And I'm not very fond of the elephant analog, the one that proposes that we are all people without sight, who, by touch and other sensibilities, encounter an elephant, and, of course, disagree about the likenesses the various parts (the arm, the leg, the trunk, the ear) of the elephant evoke, because each part reminds us of something with which we are more familiar. But I do believe that all of the great religious teachers of the world have discovered agreement on some matters, such as the indispensability of human integrity, the supremacy of life over dogma, the “higher responsibility” we carry toward one another, that there is no substitute for honesty, that the only vice, sin, or misdeed that is unqualifiedly condemned or denounced is self-righteousness, and that human beings are such that our attitudes and actions should be motivated by compassion.

In a somewhat roundabout way, I am making the case that “lived experience” is fast becoming both the category as well as the criteria in terms of which the fundamen-

tal tenets of the religions of the world are being tested. If this be true, I suggest that the founders would be pleased, for all of them affirmed the truth to which assent is given is less significant than truth by which lives are guided. Again, we quote Havel: There exists deep and fundamental experience shared by the entire human race, and traces of such experience can be found in all cultures, regardless of how distant or how different they are from one another.¹⁶

As we look ahead, we can be sure that religion will continue to perform both stabilizing and de-stabilizing roles in the world of the future. It has been this way for centuries. It will be this way for as long as time shall last. And the stabilizing/ de-stabilizing syndrome will express itself in rather complex ways. All of this is rather easy to predict.

What is not so easy to identify is the role religious studies (the academic study of religion) will play in shaping the future course of religion. Some will look to religious studies to play a prescriptive role — to guide religion in a certain direction. In my judgment, this would be a gigantic mistake. Religious studies should not be assigned prescriptive religious functions. It should be encouraged to develop on its own according to the most rigorous research methods, and the highest standards of objective scholarship. But this does not mean that it has no role at all, or that religion will develop entirely independently of religious studies. For example, in the United States today there is great clamor for prayer in the schools. Citizens concerned about the absence of moral values, or about what is called "the vast naked public square," wish to fill the vacuum with voluntary school prayer. Some progressives have countered that it is more important to provide school lunches than to institute school prayer. But the response that I would prefer is one that recommends the study of religion. There is no reason why the study of the teachings of the religious traditions of the world cannot be undertaken in the schools. To date,

this educational practice is not very widespread within the United States, though I am pleased to learn that it is a relatively common practice within the schools of Norway.

In short, what the positive future of the world requires is increased understanding of our social, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity and higher regard for what we as human beings have in common. Yes, we are all members of the same human family. In the long run, we will sink or swim in the future together. To gain the kind of understanding we need, we should encourage the study of religion. For one of the inevitable and predictable consequences of the study of religion is increased and heightened religious understanding. We will attain such heightened understanding not when we transform religious studies into prescriptive programs, but when we do religious studies properly. Those of us who teach also bear responsibility for recognizing that the subject we study belonged to others before it became ours. It is still theirs before, after, and while we are studying it.

By now, the intentions that drove the content of this paper should be apparent. I was asked to speak to a gathering of scholars on "the future of religion," as part of the inauguration of a new program of studies at Tromsø University. I said what I could, in brief scope, about the general tendency of religion in the world, namely, that it has played and will continue to play both stabilizing and de-stabilizing social, cultural, and political roles. I offered the opinion that, given recent social, cultural and political developments, religion will find itself attached more to life-views than to ideology, and the former conceived and constructed in highly inventive, syncretistic ways, which ways will encourage the participation of virtually all of the religious traditions, to the extent that they feel qualified, and, more crucially, to the extent that their advocates and exponents are willing to submit their cherished viewpoints, attitudes, and moral precepts to this kind of

assessment and evaluation. I also indicated that the monitoring of these developments belongs to the proper work of religious studies. Indeed, religious studies is there to make certain that religion will be acknowledged when attempts are made to make sense of significant cultural and social events and developments, whether in historical or contemporary form. In so doing, religious studies contributes the kind of understanding that allows such events and developments to be understood in greater depth. And with the increase in understanding of religion comes an increase in religious understanding. And, thus, in a roundabout way, the study of religion is in something of a position to influence, at least in part, the future direction of religion in the world today. Religious studies does this worst when it attempts to do it deliberately.

Religious studies does this best when it simply strives to do its own work well.

My remarks, of course, are offered in tribute to the transforming power of education. Of course, I believe that religious studies belongs intrinsically to the work of the humanities and social sciences. Regretably, not every institution acknowledges this, but the University of Tromsø does.

Therefore, I congratulate you on your perceptiveness. My colleagues and I in Santa Barbara will watch with keen interest as you cultivate an understanding of a universal subject in a highly distinctive manner — a manner shaped by the magnificence of this place, and by the compelling collective character of those who have lived their lives here.

NOTES

- 1 Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in Michael Banton, ed., *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Tavistock 1966), pp. 1-45.
- 2 Charles Y. Glock, Benjamin B. Ringer, and Earl R. Babbie, *To Comfort and To Challenge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).
- 3 Mary Douglas, "The Effects of Modernization on Religious Change," in *Daedalus*. Winter, 1982, pp. 1-19.
- 4 Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, editors, *The Fundamentalism Project* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991-1995).
- 5 Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Vaclav Havel, "Politics and Conscience," in his *Open Letter: Selected Writings 1965-1990*, Selected and edited by Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), pp. 249-271.
- 14 Vaclav Havel, "What I Believe," in *Summer Meditations*, translated by Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), pp. 60-79.
- 15 I have explored this matter in much greater detail in a paper entitled "Discerning Husserl's Philosophy in Havel's Proposals," prepared for the meeting of the Congress of the World Institute for Advanced Phenomenological Research and Learning, Guadalajara, Mexico, September, 1995, which paper will subsequently be published in the proceedings of the Conference, under the editorial direction of Prof. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka.
- 16 Vaclav Havel, "Politics and the World Itself," in *Kettering Review*. Summer, 1992, p. 10.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 18 I have analyzed the viewpoint of the Dalai Lama on this subject in an essay, "Religious and Political Perspectives," to be included in a forthcoming book of essays, *The Principle of Universal Responsibility*, edited by S. S. Bahulkar.

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THE WORK OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

The thesis of this paper is that there are three distinctive knowledge frames, or cultures of knowledge, invoked by the scholarly study of religion. The three foci are mutually supportive and are to be included within one and the same religious studies program: academic culture, global culture, local culture.

As the founding professor and chair of religious studies at the University of California, the author deals with the problematics in a programmatic way summarizing his most recent publication: *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (1995).

The thesis of this essay is that the work of religious studies occurs within three distinct frameworks, which are most appropriately referred to as spheres or, even more preferably, as cultures of knowledge. The first is primarily an academic framework, and derives from the particular way in which a discipline is both formed and composed. For identification purposes, we refer to this first frame as *academic culture*. The second gives the academic frame significant expansion, combining the particularized interests and issues of disciplines and fields with broader, more generalized discussion or conversation of issues and interests to which religious studies can contribute, and in which it also has a stake. For identification purposes we shall refer to this second frame as *global culture*. The third frame is more particularized, and is supplied in its details by the location, specific setting, or circumstances under whose institutional sponsorship the program in religious studies has been established. In this respect the rule is that every commendable program in religious studies exercises responsibility for and takes advantage of some local or circumstantial feature, element, characteristic, or opportunity, and acknowledges this factor in its program. In other words, each comprehensive religious studies program should do one thing better than any other program or department does because of the nourishment and direction it draws from the setting under whose auspices it is sponsored. We refer to this third frame as *local culture*. As indicated, our thesis is that religious studies belongs to each of these three frames, and, we must add, to each of them in reciprocal relationship to each other. It follows, therefore, that the programs in religious studies that are most resilient are those in which there is strong testimony from each of the three cultures in a mutually-supportive and edifying manner.

Academic Culture

I have explored the first of these three frames, academic culture, at significant length in my recently published book, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (1995). In an attempt to create a single narrative account of the intellectual development of religious studies, from its roots Enlightenment philosophy to prevailing current developments, I have identified the principal points of methodological departure in accordance with the dominant questions that have been asked. The four prominent questions are: (1) what is religion? (2) what is the origin of religion? (3) how is religion to be described? and (4) what is the function of religion? For shorthand purposes, I referred to theoreticians who tackled the first question as being primarily concerned about religion's *essence*. Those who ask the question about roots are identified as being primarily motivated to identify religion's *origin*. Those who engage in phenomenological portrayals are segmented as being interested in coherent *description*. And the theorists who concern themselves with purpose, and/or with the role religion plays in society, culture, or, indeed, within human life, are identified as being oriented toward *function*.

To this collection of responses to four questions, I appended a chapter on language, expression, and communication, since myth, symbol, symbolisation, truth claims, and other questions and issues relating directly to *language* have formed major foci of interest within the history of the discipline. Then, I chose to round out this analytical account of the formation of religious studies by including a chapter with the title: "Are All Religions True?" It is within this chapter that I place the long-term and continuing interest in what is usually referred to as "comparative religion," or which might more appropriately be called "comparative studies in religion." There is an epilogue

which goes under the title, "The Future of Religious Studies."

The intention of *Religious Studies: The Making of an Academic Discipline* was to write a single narrative, which narrative was composed out of a deliberate sequential methodological development that is not difficult to trace. At the outset, scholarly interest in religion was motivated by a desire to identify the essence of religion, which question was posed as "what is that without which religion would not be what it is?" Both Descartes and Kant set the stage, as it were, by trying to isolate a single core component apart from which nothing of significant substance could be defined. Thus responses to the definitional question range all the way from Kant's treatment of religion as embellishment of ethics to Rudolf Otto's *das heilige* and even more recent or current attempts to explain religion as fear, illusion, or even as a particular mode of human consciousness. Thus, when the question about origin was posed, the expectation was that the isolative interest of religion could be sustained. That is, in trying to account for the origin of religion, the inquirers expected to identify a single source. And, whether that inquirer be Durkheim, Tylor, Frazer, or the others, all approached religion as belonging to the first or primordial state of human development. Therefore, religion became associated with mythology, or the particular state of consciousness that preceded the subsequent development of metaphysical then scientific modes of engaging reality. But when it became difficult to identify a single core element, either as essence or as origin, the inquirers shifted to descriptive accounts which were also multiple in focus. We tend to refer to this chapter in the making of the discipline by the term *phenomenology*, for it was the phenomenologists who did the intended-objective descriptive work that stood as comprehensive inventories. Then, once the focus shifted away from singles to plurals, and from explanation to description, it was an

easy transition to think of function and purpose. The functional accounts of religion were constructed on a phenomenological base.

In this way, as we have illustrated in *Religious Studies*, the discipline attained intellectual coherence as well as curricular design and academic legitimacy. Via the painstaking way in which it was composed, religious studies demonstrated that it belongs to both humanities and social sciences. We can add that wherever it has been given strong institutional encouragement, it has exercised responsibility for the overall, comprehensive educational program. We believe it has functioned this by virtue of its inherent multi-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary character. Indeed, it is arguable that religious studies, alongside anthropology, is the most cosmopolitan multi-cultural discipline within the university. Thus, it has frequently been called upon to service multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural tasks.

And while the intellectual, educational and institutional achievements of religious studies are already considerable, there are a number of key issues that have not yet been adequately addressed. I have space enough here to list but four of them, leaving further development of these ideas to another time. In the first place, religious studies has not yet given sufficient attention to the relationships between *religion and ideology*, both of which terms refer to identifiable belief systems, the differences between which are not yet very well understood. It has not yet given sufficient attention to the role and influence of *the founders*, by which I refer to the individuals — the Buddha, Jesus of Nazareth, Mohammed, Confucius, and numerous others — whose teachings, personalities and temperaments have had formative influence on the traditions which frequently bear their names. Furthermore, religious studies has not adequately reckoned with the theme of *contact*. In this regard, the major point is that no religion can be defined except in

relation to the religions with which it stands in contact, communication, and contrast; thus all religions are, at all times, being redefined. And descriptive accounts of religion are obligated to reckon with the power of *secularisation*, that is, with strong anti-religious forces and sentiments. These, of course, are not the only neglected areas, but they are significant ones, and deserve further scholarly attention. (I explored this subject in greater detail in a paper, "Religious Studies: Unresolved Methodological Issues," presented to the meeting of the International Association for the History of Religions, in Mexico City, in August, 1995.)

Global Culture

The second large framework within which the work of religious studies registers is the wider or the *global culture*. By this we refer to a more comprehensive and less specifically academically focused set of intellectual questions and interests, but certainly questions and interests in which religious studies owns a stake and to which it is in position to contribute something. For example, when an attempt was made to establish the religious studies program in the University of California, Santa Barbara [I cite this history because it is the one with which I am keenly familiar], the rationale that was offered was simple and straightforward. The sponsors of the program simply declared: "if you wish to understand either India or China, in either historical or contemporary dress, you must know something about the religions that informed these countries and cultures." It is a proposition against which there is no valid argument. And the same is true, of course, with respect to other parts of the world. How can anyone understand Europe without acknowledging the influence of religion? How can anyone understand Norway, or, for that matter, the region of Finnmark, without acknowledging the role that religion has played? How can anyone under-

stand what is happening in the world today — in the Middle East, in the clashes in Bosnia — without acknowledging the role that religious cultures and forces play? This, we said, is what academic programs in religious studies contribute to the larger, more comprehensive intellectual enterprise. The corollary is that when this dimension of knowledge and understanding is omitted or neglected, knowledge and understanding of the subject, to that extent, is weakened or impoverished. That is, if one fails to include religion in the explanation of historical or contemporary world events, that failure will result in a very partial picture, description and intended explanation.

Under this global or wider perspective also belongs all interest in promoting or defending the significance of religion within human culture. Permit me to recall a memory I have from 1968 when I was studying art history at the Warburg Institute at the University of London, and the distinguished director of the Institute, Ernst H. Gombrich, offered commentary on the social and cultural upheaval that was occurring in London and throughout the western world at the time. Gombrich referenced the history of sound, from the earliest sounds of primordial people to the cultivated sophistication of a Beethoven Symphony, commenting that it took time and generation-upon-generation of teaching and education for this achievement to occur. But all could be lost in dramatically brief time if civilization was defeated by barbarism.

I utilize the Gombrich analog to call attention to the place of religion in human culture. To put the matter boldly: just think what we'd be missing if our knowledge didn't include acknowledgment of Jerusalem, for example. Or, to stretch the analogy even further, what would humanity be like if it had never experienced music? I ask this question because the impact of religion on humanity has similar significance to the impact of music. It is a key component of

culture. Indeed, it is an essential ingredient of human experience. As Ninian Smart has both skilfully and tirelessly pointed out, religion is ingredient in worldview. And worldview, as others have insisted, refers to the fundamental perspective, or the "horizon", through which life is experienced, or, to employ ontological language, reality is engaged. Religious studies is involved in the acknowledgment, appreciation, assessment, and analysis of religion in this larger, global sense too. Again my memory of just how it happened that an academic program in religious studies was established on the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California adds vigor to this point. In addition to asking questions that the academy found relevant, we also found support for our work in the prevailing *zeitgeist*. It is important to recall that religious studies made great strides in American institutions of higher education in the 1960s, when state universities gave evidence of interest in the subject, therefore, when it became necessary to distinguish sharply between theological studies and religious studies, and when, under influences of the expanding Counter Culture, interest in Asian modes of sensibility and modes of culture and expanded significantly. Had this soil not been receptive, the making of the discipline might still have occurred, but would not have grabbed hold institutionally anywhere.

The moral of the story is that religious studies must be sensitive to these larger sustaining factors. It is not enough that there be internal and intrinsic disciplinary development, or even that the discipline be equipped to participate in the conversations that are occurring on campuses. In addition, those responsible for the care and nurture of the discipline must also be aware of challenges and opportunities in the wider world of intelligibility, in keen recognition of the fact that academicians do not possess first or even most important rights to ownership. Religion occurs outside the academy and is studied and assessed in-

side. The relationship between inside and outside is always reciprocal.

Local Culture

When we refer to local culture, we are acknowledging that the primary intellectual transaction that occurs in religious studies involves "giving back to the people what was originally theirs." This means that every worthy religious studies program exercises a commitment to the integrity of the local culture. In most instances, the way to exercise this commitment is to draw special attention to one of the distinctive features of the culture. Often, for highly understandable reasons, this local attention is effected on a regional, geographical base. The religious studies program at the University of Sydney, Australia, for example, offers a program of studies on the religions of the nearby Pacific Islanders. The religious studies program at the University of Hawaii, located at the crossways between Asia and the western world, offers a highly sophisticated program in comparative studies. The University of Montana, located in a geographical region that was once inhabited by numerous tribes of indigenous peoples, was among the first institutions of higher education to develop coursework in Native American religion and culture. The graduate programs in religious studies in the United States that belong to institutions that also have seminaries or divinity schools have taken the lead in conceptualizing the relationships between the study of religion and the work of theology. And so it goes: each worthy program of study has taken advantage of a distinctive local circumstance, and has transposed this circumstance into a focus of disciplined inquiry.

When a program "gives back to the people what is theirs" in this specific way, the program is sufficiently indigenized culturally speaking to invite local support and sponsorship. That is, the people of the area "buy into it," as it were, taking pride and exercising ownership over what is

occurring. It helps, of course, if the program not only exercises local interest, but also develops a reputation for academic excellence. Doing something of local interest and doing it well is a sure way to gain the support and enthusiasm of the local people, who provide indispensable nurture and support.

I have pondered how this principle might be exercised in the new academic program in the study of religion that is being established at Tromsø University. My suggestion is that this "land of extremes," as I've heard it described frequently, invites inquiry into *the relationships between nature and society*. In fact, given the severity of the weather, the record of Sami culture and civilization, and the way in which nature influences and/or controls virtually everything that is established in this region, I believe that this foci carries particular theoretical significance and is thoroughly capable of generating intellectual curiosity and interest. [I offered this suggestion in my address to the founding conference in October, 1995. Even after having thought about it in subsequent weeks, I remain convinced that this is a topic worthy of sustained interest and study.] The point, however, is not to nominate a candidate for sustained methodological and substantive concentration, but, rather, to emphasize

that a local cultural component is an indispensable feature of an energetic academic program in religious studies.

Conclusion

As noted, our thesis is that there are three distinctive knowledge frames, or cultures of knowledge, that are invoked by the scholarly study of religion. We are suggesting that effective religious studies programs acknowledge each of the three frames, and make determined effort to come effectively to terms with each of them. Further, the three foci are to be included within one and the same religious studies program, for, in numerous respects, they are mutually supportive. But this is simply to recognize that the three cultures do indeed belong to one and the same world. Thus, in the holistic sense of life that I've discovered to be characteristically, temperamentally and convictionally Norwegian, the three planes or frames can and will be enunciated together. All of this bodes well for the work of a new program of studies that focuses on the attitudes, habits, behavior, and aspirations of the northern peoples, and recognizes that none of these can be defined, described, interpreted or explained except in reference to each other.

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He has performed field work among the Lapps or Saami (1944, 1946), the Shoshoni Indians of Wyoming and Idaho (1948-58, all together 1 1/2 years), and Northern Plains Indians (particularly the Arapaho) and Californian Indians.

He has published 20 books, in ethnology, comparative religion and folklore, including the following: *Conceptions of the Soul among North American Indians* (1953); *The North American Indian Orpheus Tradition* (1957); *General Ethnological Concepts* (a dictionary, 1960); *Studies in Lapp Shamanism* (1978, together with L. Bäckman); *The Religions of the American Indians* (University of California Press 1979); *The study of American Indian Religions* (Crossroad and Scholars Press 1983); *Saami Pre-Christian Religion* (1985, together with L. Bäckman); *Native Religions of North Ame-*

rica (Crossroad 1987); *Shamanic Healing and Ritual Drama* (Crossroad 1992).

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He led 31 expeditions to the Arctic during the course of which he made several films and researched his books. He is also the founding editor of the ethnography collection *Terre Humaine*.

His publications include:

- *The Last Kings of Thule* (1955), by 1989 in 22 languages
- *Thèmes de recherches géomorphologiques dans le Nord-Ouest du Groenland* (1968)
- *Ultima Thule* (1990)
- *Hummocks* (1996)

One book has been dedicated to him:

- *Pour Jean Malaurie*, Paris, Plon 1990, 970p.

He has published numerous scientific papers in French, English and Russian.

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