Appendices

The Relationship Between Studying Religion and Being Religious: One Student's Perspective

by

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When I was invited to participate in this symposium, the understanding was that I, as a former undergraduate in Religious Studies and continuing (perennial) graduate student at UCSB, might be able to shed some light on the changes which have occurred in this department throughout the years. The idea being, presumably, that if there were a trend or pattern developing in the nature of the curriculum or in the general format of the program as a whole, I would be able to spot it.

However, this is not the case. Due to the fact that my own course of study progressed largely without reference to (and often in spite of) the major emphases of the department, my particular interests leading me to work around rather than through the offered curriculum, I am simply not in a position to propose any such overview. However, a brief perusal of the Religious Studies program and course descriptions in the annual UCSB catalogues from 1964 to the present would probably give

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a better indication than any first-hand account could as to any shifts in emphasis or structural changes which might have occurred over that period of time.

As an aside, I would like to mention that I have never been under the impression that either the graduate or the undergraduate program in Religious Studies was something that could be evaluated, or simply grasped as a cohesive whole. The directions that the department has followed seem to have taken their cues primarily from those individuals who have occupied positions on the faculty roster over the years. The graduate program, in particular, has invariably reflected the specialized, scholarly interests (not to mention, personal idiosyncracies) of the professors involved in teaching the seminars at various times, rather than reflecting any common goal or unified purpose in the instruction of its graduate students.

Half-facetiously, I would suggest to anyone interested in an in-depth understanding of how the department of Religious Studies at UCSB has altered over the past decade, that a questionnaire, similar to the one distributed among the graduates, be devised for the teaching personnel. For there really is no "program" here at all which exists independently from those men and women who have taught and/or continue to teach courses in it.

Getting back to the purpose of this symposium, which has to do with better understanding the relationship between studying religion and being religious, I do feel that I can make a contribution, of sorts, based upon my (too lengthy) experience as a student of religion and, more specifically, of the philosophy of religion. Not that my remarks will be, necessarily, of a philosophical nature. On the contrary, much of what I am going to say will probably sound somewhat naive, simple-minded, or confused. But that is due to the fact that my personal religious views (which would include any views I might have had <u>about</u> religion) were quite naive, simple-minded, and confused at the outset of my studies. And despite (or perhaps because of?) any philosophical sophistication and theoretical knowledge that may have been acquired in the meantime, my understanding of religion from the "insider's" point of view has changed very little. Why this is so could be said to constitute the theme of this essay.

Let me begin by saying that I always felt that the most striking feature of Religious Studies as an academic discipline <u>was</u> the fact that however "objective" a course of study might be offered and pursued, most people who came to this subject could not be entirely neutral about what they were studying. That this is the case is, of course, quite obvious; otherwise there would be no occasion for having

a symposium such as this.

But I am not referring so much to the fact that a person's own religious convictions or affinities might motivate, color, or determine the nature of his pursuits within the discipline (which is often the case) but to the simple fact that in thinking that religion is important enough to study in its own right, is itself to take an, albeit minimal, religious stand. For in so choosing Religious Studies, one is saying that religion is not something that could be better understood in a sociology, psychology, history, or philosophy department; it cannot be pigeonholed and tucked away in some other frame of reference, but has to be understood in its own terms on its own grounds.

As I said, this is a minimal religious stand; all that it really says is that the serious student of religion is almost by definition, going to be "for it" (at least as an autonomous area of interest) rather than against it. However, given the large scale rejection of religion as "nothing but" this or that, a decade ago even an academic commitment said quite a bit.

Now that there is, culturally, a kind of spiritual renaissance taking place today, marked by the proliferation of movements, cults, and sects within or diverging from traditional religions, as well as the consciousness-expansion emphasis of the drug culture, and given the personal commitment, and hence some degree of self-consciousness, already

present in the study of religion, the tendency of us all, students and teachers alike, is to wonder if we have stumbled on to something REALLY BIG. Well, this is precisely where my natural scepticism steps in and dictates words of caution. I am reminded of the fact that this is Santa Barbara, California, former summer residence of the counter-culture, and presently typified by the grab-bag approach to spirituality, the never-ending Quest for newer, better, faster, easier ways of achieving higher forms of consciousness, deeper levels of self-awareness, and (my cynical demon inserts), subtler and more insidious ways of becoming, ultimately, more self-centered and self-deceived.

Yet, before I reach the point of summoning a Staff of Experts from the more reductionistic branches of sociology and psychology, who might be willing to explain away everything religious in terms of the rootlessness, alienation, anxiety, boredom, insecurity, and lovelessness which characterizes present-day society, I would simply like to ask if it might not be the case that at least some of this so-called spiritual awakening is in fact merely another symptom of our cultural malaise. I simply want to point to the possibility that perhaps, in certain cases or in particular areas, whatis going on in the name of "personal enlightenment" is something that might be better described as "nothing but" something else.

It could be argued that it is practically, if not also theoretically, impossible to make such a distinction between that which is to be characterized as legitimately religious and that which may be seen as delusional, idolatrous, or fraudulent. For to do so would be to assume that there is available to us some kind of objective, universally agreed-upon norm by which to discern which, among the "Seekers-After-Truth" have "Found It" and which of them have not. For me to say that such an absolute and indisputable criterion exists would go against everything that my endeavors in Religious Studies have taught me; but just the same, such distinctions are made, some kinds of criteria are being applied, continually, by many of us in this field.

Naturally, many of those claiming to have the Truth by the tail would be only too happy to hand us a ready-made standard by which we would be lead to the Correct Path. And, although that is not the kind of guideline I am looking for, that is the only kind of norm which is available to us, in lieu of an external, universal, and objective one.

Though this problem may seem like a pseudo-problem to some, it was precisely my perplexity in this regard which partially prompted my interest in Religious Studies, and which, in a somewhat altered form, constitutes a source of uneasiness for me even today.

At this point, in order to gain more clarity on the matter, I must become even more autobiographical. And, hating to discredit my position as a sceptic, I have to admit my comraderie with fellow "Seekers-After-Truth" in the Quest which, at least initially, motivated some of my other-than-scholarly interests in Religious Studies.

Having long since become dissatisfied with my own religious upbringing, and finding myself constantly bombarded by the various religious and quasi-religious ideologies which flourished in the mid-sixties, I found myself believing that by studying the wisdom of some of the great religious traditions and their outstanding religious thinkers from antiquity to the present, I would somehow be able to discover that Absolute Standard by which to separate the wheat from the chaff.

At that time I half-heartedly subscribed to the popular view that "all religions are essentially the same," that, at root, they all shared a common experience of one and the same Truth; and though I was somewhat uncomfortable with this view, thinking it too easy, nevertheless, when I began my studies it was precisely that central core, that eternal Truth, (however distortedly it might be manifested in certain traditions) that I was looking for.

Once I became really caught up in the study of religion for its own sake, however, I found multiplicity, diversity, plurality. Rather than permanency, I discovered

change; instead of the universal, I saw the particular; rather than the eternal, what confronted me was history. The characteristics which I had previously taken to be the "mere external trappings" of religion now began to convey to me most meaningfully what religion was all about. The myths, ritual observances, rites of passage, liturgical practices, the communal sharing of the minutiae of daily life, made meaningful by reference to shared stories and exemplary figures within a particular community or society--all of this spoke to me of a dimension of religion that I had never before considered. In other words, the appreciation I was gaining of religion allowed me to perceive it as a human phenomenon rather than as an annotated volume of Divine Wit and Wisdom.

This is not to say that I ignored what scholars would write about the universal significance of certain myths and symbols or of certain characteristics which appear to be essential to all religious traditions; but this still said more about the nature of human consciousness, its ideals and aspirations, than it did about the Truth which is supposed to persist over and above what any human chooses to believe about it.

Even in reading the writings of the great theologians, metaphysicians and mystics from divergent traditions, it appeared that however their ideas might agree at the pinnacle of abstract purity, and however phenomenologically

similar their religious experiences may have been, it was doubtful that they could have achieved the heights that they did, had they not worked their way up from a particular, established, and ongoing community of faith.

If nothing else had reached me in the study of religion, at least one thing had: the realization that religion involves vastly more than an intellectual assent to pithy pearls of wisdom in that it demands ethical rigor and scrupulous devotion to various ritualized practices, and thereby provides a sense of communal "we-feeling" with members of that same tradition, giving, in virtue of the shared practices and beliefs, meaning to an entire range of human experiences and activities which would otherwise be meaningless. In this way, even the least learned and most literal-minded of religious practitioners shared a common ground with the mystics which have arisen from the same tradition, despite the gulf between them in terms of conceptual gradiloquence.

Later in my studies, while pursuing an interest in the philosophy of religion, I found myself drawn to the so-called "philosophical fideist" position which would contend that there are no rational, demonstrable, incontrovertible, extra-religious grounds for assessing the truth or falsity of any fundamental religious belief, or for either invalidating or justifying any ongoing religious tradition. In matters religious, therefore, one might use Kierkegaard's

words and say that "truth is subjectivity."

It would take too long here to explain why this view is not to be confused with certain forms of relativism, subjectivism or irrationalism, but the practical upshot of it is that, in its characterization of religion, it emphasizes the degree to which a person is committed to a particular form of life, the difference his beliefs make to the way he conducts his life and views his experiences; it attends to what the religious man must sacrifice, submit to, and put to the test on behalf of his commitment; and it focuses upon the tension which it sees as necessarily existing between a religious way of life, and the life of common-sense, secular man, that is, if you will, the tension between the sacred and the profane.

Philosophical fideism therefore eschews all attempts to empirically or metaphysically establish the validity of religion by trying to "objectively" ground the truth of certain religious beliefs. It argues that such an enterprise can only be self-defeating since there is no access to Reality independent of what is already "given" to us in the form of life of which we are already a part. This "form of life" may be religious or it may not; but either way, it seems that whatever a person attempts to prove regarding the truth of religion as a whole or certain religious beliefs in particular, will inevitably wind up presupposing the very truths which were brought into question.

The role of philosophy, then, is to describe, not proscribe; it leaves religion as it is, allowing the individual participants to speak for themselves, neither attempting to criticize nor defend their basic affirmations. If one is to speak of the "truth" of religion at all, he can only refer to what is given and lived as true within a particular religious frame of reference. And this kind of truth will be much more elusive and open-ended than either the rationalist or empiricist might wish. Justification of religious beliefs or practices, therefore, would only have significance from the "inside" of an ongoing community of faith where there are common presuppositions, attitudes and ground-rules for sense and nonsense. But, of course, on the "inside" there is rarely a need to "justify" oneself in the sense in which we have been speaking.

On top of any personal prejudice I may have had against the view that all religions are essentially the same, or even that they are all but partial glimpses on the One, Eternal, and Unchanging Truth, I had now found at least two reasons for dismissing these sorts of views as unsound and irresponsible, when taken as the Final Word on the True Nature of Religion.

The first objection is that the views in question tend to treat religions as if they are all intending to be self-consistent philosophies concerned solely with the

ultimate nature of Reality; and it views any discrepancies between them primarily in terms of the articulated ontological theories which could be derived from them. To me, this kind of over-intellectualization of religion completely overlooks the attitudinal, mythopoetic, and (pardon the expression) existential dimensions of the various religions, which are prior to any detailed, philosophical, conceptual systematizations.

Secondly, in philosophical fideism I had found a possible basis for my earlier uneasiness about these sorts of views, in that I now understood them to be, themselves, as religiously "biased" as the religious views which they were attempting to synthesize and for which they had tried to provide a metareligious overview. Not that this accusation necessarily invalidates the possible truth of their claims concerning the nature and essence of religion, but it rejects the notion that these claims can be substantiated on extra-religious or metareligious grounds.

That is, in order to give content to the notion of "sameness" when referring to the essential unity of all religions, or to specify in any way the nature of this Truth towards which all religions point (however inadequately they are thought to do so), is to appeal, in turn, to certain conceptions of reality, divinity, humanity, etc., which are themselves derived from a particular religious viewpoint, no matter how synthetic and all-embracing that

viewpoint is. Furthermore, when advocates of these claims about the essential unity of religions presume to tell us what divergent historical religions REALLY mean, or what they really SHOULD be saying, in order to fit them into their nice theories, and at the same time do violence to what participants in those traditions would say about themselves and the nature and truth of their beliefs, then I do not understand how they can persist in claiming for themselves any sort of religious neutrality whatsoever. For, once again, from the point of view of philosophical fideism, questions of meaning and truth can only be asked and answered from within the framework of a given religious form of life, which itself must remain "groundless."

Therefore, my feeling was that, though Truth may indeed be One, to understand in any meaningful sense what that might mean, to ascribe even minimal content to it, would necessarily involve the acceptance of certain fundamental religious beliefs, attitudes, and unverbalized presuppositions common to an ongoing religious community or tradition. Insofar as the contents differ in their articulation from one frame of reference to the next (if they are allowed to speak for themselves) it is of absolutely no significance to the person on the outside to be told that they are all One.

In summary, what finally emerged from my academic endeavors in the study of Religion was a general appreciation

of various forms of religiosity, the recognition of the inviolability of all truly religious forms of life, and the belief that an "outsider" to a particular tradition could never presume to know better than the participants themselves the nature, meaning, and truth of their religious activities and beliefs. Far from finding the Answer to the Quest, I was left with the small comfort of discovering that studying about religion would never provide me with grounds for the kind of certainty I had been hoping to find. That sort of certainty simply could not be had except within the confines of a religious community where Truth could only be subjectively evaluated in terms of the strength of one's commitment, the depth of one's strivings, and the sanctity of one's life. And how to get from the "outside" to the "inside" was a problem that certainty could not be solved solely by rational means.

So it was small comfort indeed to find that, as things stood, I was doomed to being perpetually on the outside looking in, regardless of my appreciation of, empathy towards, and basic agreement with the human enterprise which constitutes religion, in all its multifaceted dimensions. Instead of finding a Cosmic basis for religious Certainty, I had wound up with a Philosophical justification for my personal Uncertainty.

I would like to add, however, that if there exists in the academic study of religion, a potential danger that

persons of a certain temperament will become too self-conscious and critical to again participate whole-heartedly in an ongoing community of faith (whatever the tradition), I see an equal danger in the idea that the study of religion could become, itself, a "new religion." For what this suggests to me, in its most destructive form, is that a person could be led to believe that through the reading of Wisdom Literature, he has thereby become wise, that in learning about various forms of sacrifice and sacrament, he has achieved some form of sanctity, that in sampling the writings of the gifted mystics in all the traditions, he has, as a result, "transcended" all doctrinal religious bias by rationally assenting to lofty mystical insights which originally were so hard-won by the mystics themselves, or that by merely acknoledging the reality of the Eternal and the Sacred, he has thus overcome the profane world of history.

To me, this violates the very nature of religion for it no longer involves the living struggle and paradoxical character which is at the heart of the tensions between the divine and the human, form and chaos, eternity and history, permanence and change, strength and weakness, hope and despair, ethical obedience and human frailty, joy and grief, life and death. Instead it leads to the over-intellectualization and tidy compartmentalizing of the profoundest human achievements, whereby the highest ideals of mankind, which

have evolved from the aforementioned struggles and paradoxes, become the mere objects of philosophical assimilation and metaphysical speculation. If the witness of the heart has been excluded from religion, it is no longer religious.