

Walter Capps, the Study of Religion, and the Humanities.

Shortly after his death, my colleague Ninian Smart noted that the great scope of Walter's scholarship was its strength. The range of Walter's scholarship was indeed vast. As a new Assistant Professor he wrote extensively on classical theological and philosophical problems, including articles and essays on Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy as it related to theology, the problem of God in Henry Dumery's philosophy of religion, comparative theological patterns in the Church Father Irenaeus, Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Luther, Kant's *via positiva*, secularization, and a series of articles on ecumenicism in the years immediately following the Second Vatican Council.

His first book, *Ways of Understanding Religion* (1970) set out the classic approaches to the study of religion since the end of the nineteenth-century and was followed by *Ways of Looking at Religion* (1972), a collection of readings from these classical approaches. Both of these volumes were used extensively in the United States as introductory texts for graduate students beginning their careers in Religious Studies. Early on he was deeply interested in the religion and psychology and published two books in that area, *The Religious Personality* (1970) which he co-authored with his brother and *Encounter with Erikson* (1976) which he co-authored with Gerald Bradford and which explored the use of historical biographies in understanding religion following Erik Erikson's ground-breaking study *Young Man Luther*. In 1976 he edited and published a collection of papers from a conference on Native American religious traditions under the title *Seeing with a Native Eye* which brought together the work of a young generation of scholars who have now gone on now to distinguish themselves in this area of the study of religion.

He was fascinated by the new theologies that were emerging in Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. His *Time Invades the Cathedral: Tensions in the School of Hope* (1972) and *Hope Against Hope: Moltmann to Merton in One Theological Decade* (1976) fully explored this theological ferment and especially the work and thought of Ernst Bloch, Jurgen Moltmann, Johannes Metz, Emil Fackenheim, and the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton. In the same way that the First World War had compelled European

Christians to reconsider the cultural meaning of Christianity, the Second World War and the Shoah, the destruction of European Jewry, forced this new generation of Jewish and Christian theologians to explore the cultural meanings of these great eruptions violence. Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Auschwitz became the over-powering challenges to faith in the second half of the century and beyond. Neither Judaism nor Christianity could continue without this confrontation between human destructiveness and transcendent hope. Indeed, Walter saw these theologians of what became known as “the school of hope” as the counter-point to the “death of God” theologians who had emerged in the mid-1960s in the United States and whose radical secularism had practically and intellectually limited the search for the sacred. *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, the principle of hope, could still seek the sacred and the transcendent.

His *Silent Fire: An Invitation to Western Mysticism* (1978) which he co-authored with Wendy M. Wright was intended as a teaching book where he could orient his students toward the fundamental interpretive problems of mysticism. In *The Monastic Impulse* (1983) he sought to understand how monasticism had been the source for much of the religious and theological creativity of Western Christianity. His *Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience* was first published in 1982 and then revised in a second edition in 1990. He edited a collection of readings directly related to his class, *The Vietnam War Reader* (1991). There were still other books to come. In 1989 he completed his *Thomas Merton: Preview of an Asian Journey*, a small and utterly fascinating volume which he dedicated to Mrs. Eulah Laucks one of his earliest students and life-long supporter of his intellectual work, and in 1990, he published *The New Religious Right: Piety, Patriotism and Politics*, the result of extensive interviews with the central figures of the activist Evangelical Protestantism. His final book was *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (1995), a book he insisted on working on at the same time he was running for Congress in 1994 and a book nominated for award within the American Academy of Religion. A number of other contributions, including a series of articles and essays on Vaclav Havel, a book-length manuscript titled *Finishing the War: The Moral and Spiritual Challenges of Vietnam*, and an edited and translated edition of Anders Nygren’s *Religious Apriori*, an essay in honor of His Holiness the XIV

Dalai Lama of Tibet, and two essays in Professor Juha Pentikainen's *Religion: Global and Artic Perspectives* of the Norwegian Institute of Social Science at the University of Tromsøe are in-press or have come out in the just the past six weeks.

But the immense scope of his scholarship does not mean that there were not lasting concerns in his work, issues he reintroduced time and time again, wove into his work on the history of the study of religion, the theology of hope, the meaning of the Vietnam war, or the intellectual engagement of Thomas Merton and Vaclav Havel. Let me very briefly sketch three of those abiding concerns. The first emerged in his earliest lectures and first books and articles and was to reappear throughout his work. Religious Studies was what he called "a second-order discipline." Certainly, this discipline was as we have heard in the passage read by Richard Comstock from Walter's *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* a child of the European Enlightenment. But it was not the same as religion and could never assume that its interpretations were final and totalistic. Walter made this argument at a crucial time in the development of the study of religion in public universities such as ours. In 1963 the United States Supreme Court in a landmark decision concluded that the study of religion in state-supported universities and colleges did not violate the separation of church and state. It was that decision which spurred the growth of departments of religious studies throughout the United States. Walter's argument clearly set forth the limits of religious studies as a discipline. It could not become a new theological discourse. Religious Studies, the second-order discipline and child of the Enlightenment, was a descriptive discipline, like every other discipline and field in the university, and could not presume normativity. That remained the purview of traditional institutions of religious learning. It was Walter's commitment to Religious Studies as a second-order discipline which would allow him to see the necessity of multidisciplinary and cross-cultural, comparative studies as the foundations of a department, and to which he devoted so much of his energies on this campus.

The second abiding concern was his own liberal Protestantism. He would return to his Swedish Lutheranism over and over again. Very early in my own career he encouraged me to read the scholarship of what was known as the "Uppsala School" in the



study of ancient Near Eastern religions and the "science of religion." The scholars of the Uppsala School were among the first to break free of Christian theological concerns in their work and for the first time to recover the varieties of ancient Israelite religion, the religion of the Hebrew Bible, which for them was not the earliest form of Judaism. Rather, early Judaism and early Christianity were both distinctive appropriations of this earlier religion, but cast in the amber of the world of late antiquity. In the hands of these scholars, the religion of the Hebrew Bible which once appeared familiar was made strange. The Christian theological paradigm which moved from the religion of law in the "Old Testament" to the religion of love in the New was suspended. The economy of salvation did not lead "naturally" from old to new covenants, and for the first time we could begin to understand the distinctive contributions of the religion of ancient Israel to larger and global experience of humanity. It is significant that Walter would dedicate his last book to Geo Widengren, perhaps the most well-known and influential scholars of the Uppsala School. And it is equally significant that Uppsala University would acknowledge his contributions by granting him an honorary Ph.D. in 1997, in recognition of the intellectual exchanges that he strove for throughout his professional life between the United States and Sweden, but also because Walter had inscribed the distinctive scholarship of that university's faculty in comparative religion in the very center of his own work and the work of Religious Studies in North America.

It was this liberal Swedish religious tradition which led him to third abiding concern, community. Religion could too easily be trivialized when it broke triumphantly into the public arena. It was this same liberal religious tradition which led him to his great respect and admiration of Thomas Merton. Walter wrote in his introduction to the unique dialogue that took place at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in 1968 just a few days before Merton would embark upon his last journey to India and Thailand that "Merton did not approach the religions of Asia as being competitors of Christianity, or even rivals for the truth. On the contrary, his disposition was to approach them as being compatible with Christian beliefs and practice, as if each might assist the other in coming to a fullness of insight and knowledge." Merton had dethroned the vertical system of truth and salvation and replaced it with a horizontal equality of

religious traditions and systems of truth. He saw in Merton's thought and journey of faith the possibility of real renewal of the foundations of community.

His concern for community led him to a life dedicated to the humanities. I think he believed that the humanities were so critical to the fashioning of Merton's equality that we could not proceed with business as usual. A humanistic education was not simply the add-ons for general education; the Humanities were not for entertainment while students pursued their true interests, their vocations and professions; the Humanities were not a service industry for business and technology. They were the necessary center for liberal education, directly related to the community's quality of life, the perspective, the horizon, the disposition from which would come true tolerance. In short, the Humanities were the guarantor of citizenship. And do not believe that Walter was only interested in the Humanities in a university curriculum. I think he understood their necessity to extend to all areas of the community.

And from Thomas Merton he could move easily to another giant of the intellect, Vaclav Havel. In Havel, Walter saw the true intellectual, the true model for his own life. Being an intellectual meant not only the formal life of scholarship in universities and colleges. It meant engagement with the critical issues of the day. In one of his last articles, "Interpreting Vaclav Havel," Walter wondered whether a political philosophy like Havel's could function effectively in a world like ours. Havel would not be limited by the reform of political methods and procedures. Rather, there must be a revision of our view of reality, in which we subject ourselves to an authority which is now ignored – "of real persons in their life-world." Walter was attracted to Havel's frequent references to the soul and spirit, and the points where "living in truth" takes place. Walter and Havel were united in a common concern, intellectual engagement, now registered in Havel's words as "the universal consultation on the reform of the affairs which render man human."

Thomas Merton and Vaclav Havel encompass like bookends the scholarly and intellectual movements of Walter Capps' life.