



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* by Walter Capps

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## The Journal of Religion

idealistic metaphysics—Leibniz's monadology. According to Leibniz, the genius of the other is grounded in the ultimate good, which is the origin and destiny of all things. Apart from this, there is no warrant for regarding another *Volk* as worthy of interest. Herder introduced cultural relativism within a larger framework of faith in the highest good. Apart from this framework, cultures may be relative, but not worthy of respect.

In this way, Fleischacker traces a different pedigree for some very postmodern proposals about how ethics should now proceed once cultural relativism is recognized. This book is an argument from beginning to end. It is not a compilation of occasional essays, but a careful and elegant moral argument.

KELTON COBB, *Hartford Seminary*.

CAPPS, WALTER. *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995. xxiii+368 pp. \$29.00 (paper).

In this ambitious, wide-ranging survey, Walter Capps draws on wisdom won from a long career as a teacher and scholar in religious studies to trace the intellectual history of the field. Needless to say, this is a formidable task, for the story of the study of religion requires assessment not only of isolated theorists, but of the wider cultural contexts and assumptions that underlie their work—the infrastructure as well as the architecture of the discipline. By and large, Capps proves himself up to the challenge, offering a narrative that is admirably thorough, thoughtful, and illuminating, if also at times somewhat digressive and abstract—a work to be read more for profit than delight. By design, it is also incomplete. A sequel centering on current interpretive trends is still to come.

From the beginning, Capps contends, the disheveled mass of ideas and texts that make up religious studies has been shaped by an overarching analytical paradigm first framed in the age of Enlightenment. It consists of four basic questions and three abiding interests. The four questions, pursued in a loosely historical sequence from Descartes to the present, ask about the (1) essence, (2) origins, (3) description, and (4) function of religion. The three interests address the (1) language of religion, (2) comparison of religions, and (3) future of religious studies.

As Capps sees it, serious general inquiry into the nature of religion took its rise from the work of Descartes and Kant, who framed the initial question by inspiring a search for the pure and indivisible essence of religion—the *sine qua non* that forms its core. For Kant, this lay in “the moral”; for successors like Schleiermacher, it was “feeling”; for Otto, “the holy”; for Anders Nygren, “the eternal”; and so on. In each case, the analytical strategy was to reduce religion to a single core element (*reductio*) and delineate the characteristics of that core (*enumeratio*).

Very different from such formal, philosophical analyses were those which, following the developmental premises of thinkers like Hegel and E. B. Tylor, sought the origin of religion—usually in prehistoric or primitive cultures. Theorists in this tradition set out to find the primordium, the ancient acorn from which the oak of modern ritual and belief has slowly grown. Despite their efforts, both essentialists and primordialists, who often took Christianity as the paradigmatic instance of religion, found their way to success barred by the sheer complexity of their subject. Neither an essence nor an origin could be discovered once scholarship found itself inevitably forced into a “shift from singles to plurals” (p. 106). Increasingly, as Christian provincialism receded and the stunning variety and intricacy of religious phenomena registered their effect, the main line of inquiry

turned to the strategy of morphological description, especially as it came to be practiced by phenomenological theorists like Chantepie de la Saussaye, Morris Jastrow, Brede Kristensen, Gerardus van der Leeuw, C. Jouco Bleeker, Geo Widengren, Mircea Eliade, and others. Yet the more these descriptivists searched for the universal forms and patterns they thought discernible in religious life, the clearer it became that their categories would need a grounding, a rationale, that could not be found without negotiating a new turn, now to the question of function. After all, how we choose to describe religion depends crucially on what we think it does in human affairs. Hence the importance in modern discussion of the two pioneering explorers of the social-psychological function of religion—Weber and Durkheim, whose joint influence appears everywhere in the research programs of more recent decades. Modern theorists from Clifford Geertz and Robert Bellah to Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, J. Milton Yinger, Erik Erikson, and others have all worked in the long dual shadow cast by these two seminal minds.

Among the abiding interests of religion, none is more central than the question of language, which Capps explores in a helpful chapter tracing the divide between continental European interest in signs, symbols, and structures and the largely Anglo-American preoccupation with language analysis, formal logic, and empirical verification. Just as instructive are his balanced assessment of efforts at the comparison of religions and his perceptive concluding reflections on the future of religious studies.

As is often the case with works that offer a panoramic view, occasional slips of fact and the subtler present biases of the field appear in the particulars. Max Müller edited the Sanskrit *Rig Veda*, not its translation; the *Golden Bough* first appeared in 1890, not 1907, as the text seems to suggest. And while the Catholic apologetic interest behind Wilhelm Schmidt's thesis of original monotheism is, as always, dutifully exposed, the transparently antireligious, anti-Christian agendas of Tylor, Frazer, and even Freud, seem as immune to notice as ever. Even so, these are complaints too minor to diminish a study that is remarkably informative, even-handed, substantial, and comprehensive—all in all, the best of advertisements for its sequel.

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WASSERSTROM, STEVEN M. *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995. viii+300 pp. \$45.00 (cloth).

Steven Wasserstrom's aim is to throw light on "the darkest period in all of post-Biblical Jewish history," a phrase repeated several times with slight variation, and he proposes to do so by examining salient themes in the relationship between Judaism and Islam during the first four centuries of the Muslim era in a work described as "entirely propaedeutic" (p. 46). He finds the notions of "influence" and "borrowing" problematic, preferring instead the concept of "symbiosis," discussed at length but inconclusively as suggestive of coevolution, family resemblance, and the like, and is said to have three dimensions: "trajectories, constructions and intimacies" (p. 13). This approach amounts to pointing out parallel developments and hinting at possible dialogue, but studiously avoiding any causal attribution of influence.

Wasserstrom provides us with a very useful summary of a century of modern scholarship on the subject. The topic discussed at the greatest length is the affini-