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# THE INTERPENETRATION OF NEW RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Walter H. Capps

STEPHEN TOULMIN once wrote that "men demonstrate their rationality not by ordering their concepts and beliefs in tidy formal structures, but by their preparedness to respond to novel situations with open minds." The novel situation that faces students and faculties of religious studies programs is the appearance of new religions. Here I wish to ask: How will the study of new religions affect the academic study of religion as a whole?

One sees that religious studies has yet to develop the methodological apparatus to trace, discern, and understand new religion. Until this happens, new religion will be approached as though it were old religion or an updated version of old religion. My thesis is that in this way the significance and force of the new religions will be missed.

One also sees that religious studies itself has contributed to the formation and content of the new subject. New religion has come into being, at least in part, through the process by which religion has been studied in recent years within the academy. The corollary follows: the new creation has profound implications with respect to our understanding of the enterprise we call religious studies.

It is a radical suggestion to make, I believe, for it introduces some ambiguity into operational principles we had understood to be well set. Many of us have been laboring for some time under the assumption that religious studies and religion can be neatly and permanently distinguished. We have taken this as a programmatic fact. We believe religious studies to be thoroughly and unqualified analytical work. Above everything else, we aspired toward accuracy in reporting. We wanted the account to be

full and impartial. We worked to avoid serious omissions. We tried to remove all biases from the reporting procedures. The penchant for objectivity regulated both the substance and temper of religious studies.

However, more recent awarenesses conspire to make us wonder if the earlier distinctions can be sustained with such clarity and simplicity. In the first place, a survey of the history of religious studies will show that the new discipline was fostered from the beginning by suppositions that a prevailing religious outlook could support. Religious studies, at least in part, was prompted and sanctioned by specific forms of religious self-consciousness. Faculty and students argued that the enterprise made demonstrable educational sense; but, for many persons, it also made considerable religious sense. The academic interests that initially appeared in religious studies curricula generally were congruent with the personal religious attentiveness of the scholars and teachers responsible for such academic programs. Religious studies faculties of America were staffed largely by persons originally trained in one or another branch of Christian theology, most usually of a Protestant variety. Many of these persons aspired toward a vocation in theology before the new academic possibility became a reality. For many of them (or us), the initial interest in religious studies was cultivated through exposure to theological forms of reflection. That many were able to move from theology to religious studies also suggests that the new enterprise provides a more suitable form of academic vocation for persons with updated religious sensitivities. It has created a profession through which new ideas and insights can be brought into line with on-going, longer-term patterns of personal religious conviction. In this way, religious studies has been a significant carrier of a particular kind of religious development. The fact that religious studies and religion could be neatly distinguished without being in conflict simply indicates that their relationship belonged to, and was supported by, a conceptual framework in which the mode of inquiry prescribed that all overt religious avowals be bracketed or suspended. But the religious quotient was nevertheless there. In the present time it is taking a new form.

It is evident that there are significant methodological shifts associated with the appearance of new religion. Because new



religion is in process of formulation, it cannot be penetrated by methodologies trained upon the permanent and static. If permanence is regarded as being normative, the sense of new religion's protean, dynamic character will be missed. In the past, religious studies has been preoccupied with stable factors: essences, norms, rules, laws, patterns, and structures. The worldview of religious studies tends to exclude the phenomena of metamorphosis, transposition, transformation, and transmutation, and even finds borrowings and syncretisms difficult to work with. But new religion—because it includes the phenomena of old traditions in new places, traditions undergoing transformation, as well as the prospect of genuinely new religious possibilities—will force the methodological reconstruction. The very presence of new religion will encourage the older mind-set to disengage. A method trained on "what is the case?" will miss its emergent quality, creative tendency, and fluid malleable form.

There is still another intriguing dimension to this series of observations. The relation of new religion to the ideas and methods by which new religion will be understood is much closer and more direct than the relation stipulated by the traditional academic paradigm of religion and religious studies. The traditional paradigm was designed to make almost any subject accessible, and to treat it in an objective manner. By contrast, the methodologies by which new religion will come to be discerned *must be designed primarily for the purpose of studying new religions*.

It is a very small extension of this thought to consider the possibility that a revised methodology will also play a role in stimulating new religion. Paul Fussel, in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), showed that World War I could not be fought with effectiveness until writers learned how to describe its nature and character. Based on this analogy, it may very well be that new religion cannot come into being until a way is found to talk about it. Finding a way to talk about it will assist its coming to be. The cultivation of a new methodology is symbolic: something is yearning to be born. Looked at from the other side, new religion stands as a sign that the parent methodological paradigm has run its course, and is making a transition to a new way of doing and approaching things. New religion illustrates that religion is being perceived via new interest spectra.

The larger historical note is that the appearance of new reli-

gion, stimulated and given content, in part, by religious studies, is a sign that the dominance of the scientific method, based on an Enlightenment mode of understanding, is being seriously and, perhaps, successfully challenged. It was within the framework of that approach that the fundamental operational distinctions could be certified. And yet, as resourceful as the approach was—and is!—it failed adequately to recognize that Enlightenment truth and the truth to which the religious traditions bear witness are not always equivalent.

Religious studies was constructed upon a set of interrelated Enlightenment convictions, which can be readily identified: (1) objects of investigation have essences, which are discrete and unchangeable; (2) religion can be routinely investigated by the scientific method; (3) an agreed-upon sense of "objectivity" makes truth publicly or commonly accessible, regardless of what the subject is; (4) analysis can be separated from attitude; and (5) dispassionateness is a fit mode of scholarly inquiry, most able to make truth accessible. All of these assumptions presume the cardinal one, which is that clarity appears through the process of breaking things down into smaller and smaller pieces, so as to be able to discover the irreducible core. In this way, through a process by which the symbols, beliefs, and ceremonies are to be disassembled, the essence of religion is to be discovered.

The methodological transformations now occurring are challenging the assumption that Enlightenment methods offer the highest yield of truth about religion. They attest that the monopolizing compact between the Enlightenment and religious studies may need to be broken because of the nature of religious studies' subject. The Enlightenment made the subject manageable, but Enlightenment-influenced approaches deal only with religious studies' manageable aspects. It is one thing to exercise intellectual discretion, to deal with those aspects of a subject which are methodologically accessible. But it is something else to suggest—if only by example—that the subject has no additional accessible aspects. This is the impression that has been left. Religion has been translated into religious studies so that a certain kind of mapwork might be invoked. In being translated, the subject has also been pared. Increasingly, we are seeing the ramifications.

The new mood has no interest in removing all canons of objectivity, or in staking its claim against the older methodology in



radical, blatant terms. Rather it offers an alternative to the dominance of the detached retrospective posture. It expands the range of methodological possibilities. Instead of believing that all truth can be found, it says that some must be made or won. There is no intent to create *ex nihilo,* however. Rather, it knows that the materials it has to work with can be nuanced in ways that give distinctive configurations. In giving shape, it also brings things into formation. In bringing into formation, it is also lending constitution. In lending constitution, it is also calling into being.

Thus, religious studies has come to the place in its own development when it no longer need restrict itself to studying fundamentally already-happened phenomena. I am not wishing that religious studies would abandon this objective: indeed, I would hope that it might do what it has been doing even more effectively. At the same time, there are other goals and services within its grasp. As with many of the sciences, religious studies is in position to be more constructive and creative with the phenomena it studies. It can lend new formation in seemingly countless ways because of the immense body of materials at its disposal. Simply by putting these materials together in different combinations, it will encourage patterns and formulations which have not surfaced before. Faculty members do this routinely in the way they organize curricula and classes. Students do it with the use to which they put course content, indeed, with the interests through which they select which courses to take. Both faculty and students do it repeatedly in the most common processes of pattern-formation by which they seek to make the results of their intellectual work cohesive.

And one of the products—it is both product and catalyst—is new religion: new religion as conceived within academic programs in religious studies, stimulated, in part, by the objective study of religion.

The transformation of religious studies is still in process. This process, in turn, is part of a larger transformation that is taking place in science and society. Religious studies is moving beyond the dogma of the Enlightenment. Its new place in the academic enterprise cannot yet be forecast, but its new office will appear as the methodological weight of scientific inquiry shifts from the eighteenth century toward the twenty-first. In this way, religious studies may come to offer a view of human life that looks out beyond the gates of our present understanding.

# UNDERSTANDING THE NEW RELIGIONS

Edited by
Jacob Needleman
and
George Baker

A Crossroad Book
THE SEABURY PRESS • NEW YORK

1978
The Seabury Press
815 Second Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10017



Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Main entry under title:
Understanding the new religions.
"A Crossroad book."
1. United States—Religion—1945—Addresses, essays, lectures. 2. Cults—United States—Addresses, essays, lectures.
I. Needleman, Jacob. II. Baker, George, 1941–
BL2530.U6U5 200'.973 78-14997
ISBN 0-8164-0403-8
ISBN 0-8164-2188-9 pbk.

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