

February 10, 1986

TO: Prof. Ninian Smart
FROM: Prof. Walter Capps
RE: RS 200B Session, February 18

As background to my presentation in the RS 200B Seminar on February 18, I've prepared an outline of considerations to be discussed, all of it pertaining to "teaching about the Vietnam War within a Religious Studies curriculum."

A. Genesis of RS 155

1. Initial conferences at the Hutchins Center, 1977 and 1978
2. Intentions of the undergraduate course, initiated in 1979
3. Evolution of the content of the course, 1979 to present

B. Distinctive characteristics of the class

1. its size (currently the largest class in the UC system)
2. its employment of a narrative mode, and its use of eye-witnesses
3. its involvement of national leaders of the post-war recovery process
4. its attempt to come to terms with a process whose outcome has not been determined, and toward which the class might make a significant contribution
5. its interdisciplinary character (cf. the national education reports regarding the role of interdisciplinary courses at the upper-division level)
6. its therapeutic functions (e.g. Vets offer confessions, students participate in healing rituals, etc.)
7. its status as a religious studies class -- what makes it so? why do students associate the class with the acquisition of self-knowledge? how does it happen that in learning about the Vietnam War, students also learn something fundamental about the nature of religion?

C. Pedagogical Questions Raised by the Incidence of the Class

1. the role of emotion in the learning process (cf. John Dewey, "learning by doing," the engaged participant, John Goodlad's report that most classrooms today are "emotionally flat")
2. extra- or para-academic intentions and/or consequences in an academic offering: to what extent can or should such intentions be legitimated? to what extent are academic intentions consonant with personal interests?

3. the use of outside speakers in a university class (cf. Studs Terkel's and Robert Coles' "ordinary Americans," speakers as authorities vs. speakers as data, and the advantages and perils of one-time-per-quarter speakers)
4. the personalizing of the subject (as in the use of eye-witness accounts) -- does it violate the separation of church & state? is it consistent with the view that religious studies is "about" rather than "of" or "for" religion?

D. Significant Substantive Questions

1. is the study of the war fundamental to the nature and function of religious studies? if so, can religious studies offer anything distinctive to the subject?
2. educationally considered, how should the "success" of the course be explained and measured?
3. are there longer-range implications for the discipline? for undergraduate education? for the preparation of graduate students? for applicable hermeneutics within the university? for the relationships between education and larger national and international interests and aspirations?
4. if RS 155 is an example rather than an anomaly, what are the other species?

February 10, 1986

INTRODUCTION:

1. an unwieldy topics -- religious studies, the humanities and public policy issues
2. assorted readings are meant to emphasize one or the other of these subject areas...
/summarize the readings....
 - (a) Capps' essay
 - (b) the national reports on education
 - (c) Bill Bennett's report

MY PROPOSAL:

1. the recent origins of religious studies -- in the 1960s significant background factors:
 - (a) theologians dissatisfied with theological interpretation of perception of "non-Christian religions" within theological curriculum....
-- contest between Karl Barth & Paul Tillich
 - (b) philosophers moving into logical positivism and linguistic analysis (Needleman: "philosophy -- where are you?")
 - (c) psychologists abandon psychoanalytic theory, and become behaviorist

CONCLUSION: "meaning" is absent from the University...
Religious Studies seems able and equipped to take up the quest....
e.g. RS 1, or 1, or 30 "THE RELIGIOUS QUEST"
e.g. Tillich's domination of RS curricula
e.g. Eliade's contributions.....
Tillich provided: "Religion and...."
Eliade provided CONGENIAL ACCESS to the larger religious world for persons with trained Christian theological proclivities...

Larger Point: students have always sought some meaningful coherence...in the beginning, RS seemed willing to provide it (possibility: no one is providing it today...)

AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES, from the beginning, sustained enough of the theological interest to maintain an interest in educational coherence too....

THE NEXT PHASE: Education must wrestle with Great Society and Counter-Culture incentives....
-- the liberalizing of the academy....
-- liberal philosophy = accepted common sense...
-- new courses offered, and a progressive social program was underwritten by the University...
ecological and environmental awarenesses, certified by new academic programs...
ethnic and racial awarenesses, certified by new academic programs.....

Scene shifts from the university to the work of the National Endowment for the Humanities....

NEH PROGRAMS....substantive, but liberal....
and particularly in the States....
20 million Americans get in on these programs each year.... (provide description....)

Joseph Duffey...head of NEH... his wife, Anne Wexler, chief secretary to President Jimmy Carter...
Duffey ran for Senate in Connecticut in 1976

1980...Moral Majority gets its start....
and among its targets is the NEH....
the NEA...

the public-school system....
any institution influenced by John
Dewey and progressive education....
dubbed: "social engineers...." and "problem
solvers..."

And Bill Bennett is appointed head of the NEH...

Bennett wages an all-out attack on humanities
programs that are, in point of fact, politi-
cal programs....accuses some programs
of sponsoring "ethnic thumb-sucking"
The President cooperates by trying to cut the
funds of the ENDOWMENT in half....

(Now the truth can be told: Bennett came to California
to try to establish an alternative Council to the
one that was in power....

Bennett reasonably successful...but faced two
gentlemen: Sidney Yates, Congressman from
Illinois....
and Senator Pell from Rhode Island...)

And Bennett's legacy to the Endowment is his treatise,
TO RECLAIM A LEGACY....(which you have all
read)

Summarize the findings: (1) BACK TO BASICS, as in
Reagan's "America is Back Again."

(2) a canonical list....to define "cultural
literacy..." (C.D. Hirsch...University
of Virginia)

(3) a reassertion of western culture on the
grounds that it is "our culture"

(4) Bennett: a patriot on behalf of the teachings
of the Founding Fathers, because he be-
lieves the contest between "free world" &
communist totalitarianism is the dominant
fact of our time....

e.g. taking schoolchildren to the Lincoln
Memorial this week....teaching THE
FEDERALIST PAPERS in classrooms...

WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS LEAVE US....?

1) Religious Studies, caught in a double-bind? --
its professionalization within the academy...
its ACADEMIZATION, within the University, seems to
be the price it must pay to be taken
seriously by academics....

BUT, its performance throughout the country has not
been as impressive as might have been forecast...
The development that was forecast in the 1960s
has failed to materialize....

en RS programs within state universities
and RS programs in private universities...
(Why should this bother me? because there is no
evidence that the state universities have
contributed anything distinctive)

Another way of approaching the dilemma: RS followed the
natural evolution from its quasi-theological point of
initiation to what is now a curriculum dominated by
history-of-religions considerations...I mean, history
of religions in the formal, academic sense....

WHAT IS THE CONCLUSION: Religious Studies has become
richer intellectually, but of diminished educational
stature...

OR, (another version) Religious Studies has become
well-accepted within the world of the University...
by those who make decisions within the University...
but of decreasing student interest, perhaps....

BECAUSE, if one can put it this way, THE QUESTIONS
~~WRTSINHTSANNIOFISEWRESEATING AREAMORNTOREACADEMIC~~

My question: Is this the way it will go? Or is there still a way
of correlating the three elements in my title, that is, in
ways that does justice to all three of them...?