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Source: *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Summer/Fall 1988, Vol. 71, No. 2/3, The Santa Barbara Colloquy: Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone (Summer/Fall 1988), pp. 373-379

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41167555>

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RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND CREATIVE REFLECTION

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WHEN ONE SEARCHES for the large and persistent themes in the transcript of the spirited discussions of this colloquium, one is struck by the prominence of the subject of theology. It is present (indeed, from the first paragraphs) in the proposal that was submitted to and approved by the National Endowment for the Humanities. It is commented upon in several of the formal papers. And, on numerous occasions, it became a topic of considerable interest and sharp divergence of opinion in the conversations of those who participated in the project. This collective evidence suggests that theology is a subject that is not quite willing to die, even among those who understand their enterprise to be something different from the intentions and substance of theology.

How is this to be explained? Why is there a continuing and expressed interest in theology, even among those who are fully aware of the distinction between religious studies and theological studies? Or, to put the question in another way: why, when it was clear from the beginning that the two undertakings are separate and distinct, does the subject of theology continue to intrude into discussions of the nature and purpose of religious studies?

A possible answer is that the persistence of interest in theology lies in some possible foreshortening regarding the range of the habits of mind that sometimes occur when religion is formally studied under the auspices of religious studies. Or, to put the matter in bolder form, when religious studies first distinguished and then distanced itself from theology, it found itself taking safe harbor in selectively descriptive and analytical habits of mind. To certify that it was not engaged in theology,

it was careful to restrict itself to methodologically safe intellectual efforts. It did this, at least in part, to demonstrate its full and complete emancipation from theology. Consequently, from emancipation day forward, religious studies has steadfastly avoided anything that might be perceived or construed as belonging to theology. But this tacit working agreement may have created an intellectual situation within which some of the constructive and creative work that might be applicable to the subject has already been pre-empted, because it has already been assigned to theology. In short, methodological circumspection may have come at the cost of relinquishing intellectual capacities to which the study of religion is entitled, and for which it is well equipped.

In making this suggestion, I do not wish to replot the old ground, or bring any suspicions to the propriety of the original distinction, which is the surest and simplest way of guaranteeing a full and complete honoring of constitutional principles regarding separation of church and state.

But while there are compelling constitutional reasons why religious studies should not become theology, there are no incontrovertible reasons why it should restrict itself to the employment of only those habits of mind that will protect it against being confused with something else. Ironically, its behavior in this respect can become more binding than liberating. In still feeling compelled to define itself in contrast to theology, it is in danger of remaking itself definitionally parasitical upon theology. Further, by agreeing that theology has the corner on creative and constructive intelligence where the subject of religion is concerned, it has made not unwarranted but certainly unnecessary concessions, and has agreed to operate under somewhat diminished intellectual capacity. Religious studies is entitled to the full use of creative reflection. It is entitled to engage in speculation regarding the nature of religion. It has every right to advance theories regarding the truth and falsity of particular truth claims. It is even in position to propose some religious insights of its own. The only restriction—and that is methodologically circumspect too—is that it does so in a manner that suits its own nature, and not that of some other intellectual undertaking or enterprise. In short, if religious studies makes effective use of creative and constructive intelli-

gence, it is important that it not offer its findings as some substitute for or alternative to theology.

But how, one might ask, would religious studies be different if, thoughtfully and deliberately, it were to make fuller use of “creative reflection”? How would its scope of operation be altered were this to be added to its manner of proceeding? How would religious studies change were its legitimate intellectual work not restricted to purely descriptive and analytical habits of mind? The answers lie in some carefully-fashioned amendments to the canons of interpretation that are presumed when religion is approached, in the words of the name of this project, “within the limits of reason alone.” This canon makes some principles certain.

First, a working definition: the purpose of religious studies is to make the subject of religion intelligible. And intelligibility refers to the mental activities by which something is made comprehensible or is understood. Religious studies is a collective intellectual undertaking whose purpose is to comprehend, or render intelligible, the complicated and complex subject we call religion.

Second, the academic study of religion, in the western world, is a product of the intellectual aspirations of that period and movement of thought we commonly refer to as the Enlightenment. Certainly it has predecessor intellectual models prior to the Enlightenment, and it draws upon historical, philosophical, hermeneutical, literary and textual legacies that are much older than the Enlightenment. But the Enlightenment is the fundamental historical and cultural period in which religious studies is rooted. Enlightenment expectations define the intellectual orientation from which it continues to draw its sustenance.

Third, being of this lineage, it is altogether fitting that religious studies would conduct its fundamental work within the university. In other words, it is appropriate that the university is the central and primary institutional environment within which the work of religious studies is carried on, and carried forward. Being an intellectual undertaking that belongs to the university, religious studies is conducted according to the rules, methods, and resources by which the university is constituted.

Fourth, within the university's environment, the humanities and the social sciences provide the methods and modalities of intelligibility by which religious studies is elucidated. That is, religious studies belongs both to the humanities and to the social sciences, which make it "polymethodic" (to use Ninian Smart's fine coupling) from the outset. And, being a product of the Enlightenment, while being nurtured within the university, religious studies is also open to the varieties of habits of mind that Enlightenment philosophy surveyed under the categories of rationality. As the title of this colloquium emphasizes, Immanuel Kant called one of his treatises *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, while confessing, "I have denied knowledge in order to make room for faith." Placing considerable confidence in rational inquiry, the Enlightenment thinkers were careful to identify rationality's modalities. Note that Kant himself wrote three fundamental critiques; one about the work of *cognition*, a second about *moral consciousness*, and a third about *aesthetic sensitivity*. And he understood all three to describe the activity, indeed, the rational activity, by which experience is made intelligible. In the most explicit sense, rationality itself is best represented not in any one of its three identifiable modalities, but in the composite.

Furthermore, Immanuel Kant was able to approach the subject of religion via all three pathways, and not only through the avenue of pure reason. Indeed, were he to make a choice between the three, he would select practical reason as offering the most reliable access to the subject of religion. But, if he had more time, he might have made an even more impressive case on behalf of aesthetic judgment, for he left a number of theoretical and interpretive possibilities open, in his third critique, to which more extensive application to religion would no doubt prove fruitful. And, as we have said, he wrote *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, which explored in detail the applications of the first critique to the subject of religion. Conclusion: the methodological strategies implicit in each of the three Kantian critiques are applicable to the subject of religion. If any one were trusted by itself, and in isolation from the others, the interpretation of the subject would be partial and fragmented.

Robert Brumbaugh of Yale was among the first to note that each of the three Kantian critiques gives prominence to one of

the three principal times tenses. Past tense tends to dominate in the first critique, while present tense is associated with the chief question of the second critique (“what ought one to do?”), and the third critique, on aesthetics, is ruled by the future tense, as it is appropriate to its central question, “for what may one hope?” Brumbaugh has further pointed out that methodological stances are time-tense sensitive. Some are better able than others to gain access to the past; others are more suitably equipped to deal with the present, and/or the future. Brumbaugh can make his point by citing the Kantian case as his prime example. But, had he chosen to, he could have made similar observations via the vehicles of Plato’s, Aristotle’s, and, perhaps most especially, Wilhelm Dilthey’s propositions.

The conclusion from this must be that the subject of religion, as with most subjects of intellectual significance, is accessible from the resources and vantage points of several modes of apprehension. The implication must be that the discipline is strong to the extent that it employs all of the appropriate modalities of intelligence—or habits of mind—for each is equipped to do something distinctive.

But the deeper truth must be that religion is a dynamic reality whose nature is shaped, at least in part, by the kind of intellectual attention it receives. The history of the academic study of religion, over the past twenty years, provides numerous examples of the fact that the study of religion does indeed affect the subject of religion. The attempt to understand religion contributes something to religious understanding. There is here a complicated give-and-take, a reciprocal interaction, between our understanding of religion and the content of religion. In other words, it is altogether too simplistic to think of religion as being a fixed reality, out there somewhere, about which we, active knowers, wish to gain some understanding. Rather, it is a thoroughly dynamic reality that is shaped and formed as our understanding grows. The more we learn, the more resilience the subject has. In this respect, understanding plays both a constitutive as well as a descriptive and analytical role. Our understanding of the subject significantly contributes to the substance of the subject.

I wish not at all to reintroduce theology, to make religious studies subservient to theology, or to rekindle the old contro-

versy. But I am equally unwilling to delegate all possible uses of the creative or constructive intelligence, where religion is concerned, to theology. This happens, I suspect, because religious studies practitioners tend to view themselves primarily as reporters concerning actions that belong to and originate with others. While this may be generally accurate, there are important ways in which the reporter is an actor too, and the reporting becomes part of the action. As I wrote years ago:

Persons sometimes view religion from the outside looking in, sometimes from the inside looking out, and sometimes from the inside looking around. Where they stand has a bearing on what they see, and what they see is instrumental in what they do. What they do influences what they discover, and how they understand has an effect upon what they understand.

My attitude, in this respect, has been influenced by a rereading of Robert Hutchins' little book, *The Learning Society* (1968). There has probably been no American educator who was more determined to protect higher education from utilitarian exploitation. And yet Robert Hutchins had no difficulty talking aspirationally about education, even describing the university as being "a symbol of human integrity, a trustee for civilization." He identified persons who have their vocations within the university as belonging to "an intellectual community for whom knowledge, life, the world and truth is whole." Hutchins took it for granted that when this community is working effectively, it can be counted upon, in Aristotle's words, "to enhance the common good."

I think the same vision applies to the academic study of religion. And I affirm that religious studies best approaches and serves such purposes when it remains truest to its inherent nature. Certainly it needs to continue describing and analyzing the religious traditions of the world. Certainly it needs to engage in the most thorough and detailed historical studies possible. But, along the way, it might also tell us what (if any) good religion is, and how the religious spirit might be advanced. Furthermore, it is not against its nature to advance some theses concerning whether or not there are grounds for cooperation between the religions of the world, or even as to whether or not religion is a detriment or enhancement to the progress of civilizations. It need not shrink from getting itself involved in moral education, that is, if it were to develop the capacity to do so.

Indeed, it need not resist the impulse to draw constructively and creatively from the uncommonly resourceful fund of knowledge of its creation, at its disposal. Few fields and disciplines have access to more compelling information and resilient knowledge.

I am not urging scholars in our field to act and sound like theologians, or to take any steps that would re-confuse. But religious studies is in position to take some deliberate constructive steps, in accordance with its own nature, and in keeping with its own cultivated capacities.