

**RELIGIOUS STUDIES:
UNRESOLVED METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

by

Walter H. Capps

I have recently completed a comprehensive description and analysis of the work of religious studies (Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline, Fortress Press, 1996) in which I have advanced the following thesis: the academic study of religion is such an integral product of the Enlightenment, and of Enlightenment methodological warrants and sanctions, that it manifests itself as having been created by a single argument, and its development can be approached and traced as a continuous narrative. In short, the purpose of religious studies is to make the subject of religion intelligible, and what intelligibility there is is a product of the workings of the distinct methods and traditions of scholarship that came into being during and following the period of the Enlightenment. There is another way of saying this, namely, that while religion is coterminous with human life, understanding of religion is of rather recent origin. In shorthand fashion, what understanding there is has been shaped by Descartes' quest for certainty, facilitated by Immanuel Kant's attempt to identify that without which religion would

not be what it is. And I discovered that there were at least four dominant orientations to the subject that carried the encouragement and blessing of the Enlightenment: the first sought to define religion, the second to account for its origins, the third to give religion comprehensive description, and the fourth to assess its function. There is a fifth orientation, that was present from the beginning, and found much greater prominence later; this fifth orientation is in the business of comparing one religion with another. Thus, alongside attempts to define, root, describe, and account for the purpose of religion is a continuing attempt to respond to the question: "are all religions true?" And my overall assessment is that the scholars, writers, and thinkers who have been at work on these issues have done remarkably good work; yet it is also accurate to report that none of the questions has been brought to full clarity, and certainly not yet to agreed-upon resolution.

Established on this basis, within this framework, the purpose of this paper is to identify some of the methodological issues that seem to be of considerable importance at the moment. And please understand that the spirit of my inquiry is one of inventory-taking. We can take these persistent, looming methodological issues in any order, for they come in no particular sequence of priority. I'll simply list them as follows:

The first is **the relationship between religion and ideology**. This is a perennial item of interest in the academic

study of religion, but it has assumed even greater importance because of two phenomena Ernest Gellner, among others, has identified with particular forcefulness. Some years ago, the anthropologist Mary Douglas observed that the resurgence of conservative religion (with which she included conservative ideology) has "taken religious studies by surprise." To this Gellner has added that, first, the downfall of Soviet Marxism and, second, the rise of religious fundamentalism worldwide, were also not expected or anticipated. In sketch, why are these facts important to the study of religion? The answer must be that in situations like these, it is exceedingly difficult to differentiate religion from ideology. For example, is the resurgence of fundamentalism a religious occurrence primarily, or is it an ideological occurrence? If it is both at once, how does one distinguish the religious components from the ideological components? I think the response must be that the theoretical distinctions we employ when distinguishing religion and ideology are virtually impossible to sustain when the focus is upon particular cultural contexts. Or, put in another way, when either cultural religion or cultural ideology is intensified, it is very difficult to distinguish one from the other. And while we're at it, isn't there some way to learn precisely what claims religion makes on ideology, and ideology upon religion? Why within the United States, for example, should a debate concerning abortion divide religious communities as well as political communities? And how does it happen that the subject of abortion is

the mechanism through which religion assumes cultural, ideological, and political form? These are only some of the questions concerning interdependencies between religion and politics that have not been adequately addressed.

A second area of inquiry concerns **the ways in which interaction between religious traditions plays a formative role in the descriptions and definitions of those same traditions.** The primary insight here is that religious traditions themselves are not static or monolithic phenomena, but find their constantly changing and shifting identity in contact and relationship with each other. Taken with utmost seriousness, this recognition means that no tradition can be defined in terms of its own singularity or self-created identity. In point of fact, there is nothing really new in this insight, for through the centuries the substance and form of each religion have been products of contact, fusion, and syncretistic activity with others. Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and the other traditions have achieved definition in relation to other religious and cultural perspectives with which they remain in contact, and in relation to which they are similar, distinctive, and dissimilar. Accurate depictions and portrayals of any one of them can only be rendered via an acknowledgment of the multiplex ways in which each tradition has been shaped in its contact with other social, cultural, religious, and political traditions and influences.

My suggestion is that this recognition must become thoroughly internalized within the discipline. We need to know more about the dynamics of borrowing and the instrumentation of susceptibility: why do some elements fit a developing pattern and other elements are rejected? We have already thought rather carefully about causal connections, and about influences. But all of this becomes even more intriguing and crucial to the understanding of our subject when we acknowledge that the formative factors function reciprocally within some internal patterns of fittingness, suitability, expediency, adaptability, timeliness, and preparedness.

A third subject area that is deserving of more attention than has been received to date concerns **the influences of the founders** on the temper and character of a tradition. It is rather shocking, when one thinks of it, that the usual phenomenological portrayals of the major religions of the world reference myth, ritual, magic, sacrifice, deity, et al., but direct very little attention, if any, toward the function of the founder. Behind every great religious tradition lies the mind, intellectual, and/or spiritual sensibility of at least one individual, apart from whom the tradition probably would not have come into the world, carried the influence that it came to acquire, or been associated with the ideas to which it directed attention. Do we know why some persons functioned as founders as others didn't? Are founders of traditions like holy cities, in that there are a select number of them

and almost everyone knows how to acknowledge them? But, if this is true, how do we know that it is true? And on what basis is the acknowledgment given? How is discernment effected? Of course, here I am thinking about personality studies as well as anthropological studies, psycho-historical studies, gender studies, political studies, cultural studies, and even studies in the art and science of rhetoric, including studies of leadership.

The final subject is this quick survey concerns **relationships between canonical traditions and the "ordinary-life-philosophies" that seem to be congruent with these traditions.** The insight here is that hardly anyone -- yes, hardly anyone -- practices the canonical traditions as formally expressed. Yet, throughout the world, under the sponsorship of each of the traditions, certain aspects of the canonical traditions are inserted into distinctive orientations to reality to create what must be called "ordinary life philosophies." Another way of saying this is that we tend to approach and treat the traditions in their ideal form, and then we who know the reality tend to add that there is always a gap between the ideal and actual practice.

My suggestion is that we approach actual practice as the reality, and see the ideal form as one of the contributing factors, perhaps carrying the status of Aristotle's **formal** cause (alongside of which there were also efficient, material and final causal elements). A phenomenology of religion that treats **ordinary-life religion** with real intellectual seriousness

is yet to be created. But it would seem to be a development that is entirely in order, given the real nature of the subject under our analytical and interpretive scrutiny.

In the final paragraph of my recently-published book, I suggested that religious studies would have been much different had Rene Descartes been willing to settle for knowledge, and not insisted on certainty. This shows just how much the academic study of religion has been sponsored by Enlightenment methodological interests and sanctions. But I added that even within these constraints religious studies provides so much challenge and excitement that it will keep scholars and inquirers energetically involved for generations to come. I hope in these brief remarks that I have identified some of the intellectual challenges to which such methodological excitement might become attached.

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