

COMMITMENT, THEOLOGY, AND THE DILEMMA OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES AT THE STATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The dominant practice among scholars in Religious Studies has been to exclude committed religious belief from the teaching of religion. Theology was once the center of the academic study of religion, but its present-day exclusion has deprived Religious Studies of a methodological center characteristic of a true academic discipline, and thus Religious Studies appears to be merely a marginal interdisciplinary program rather than a discipline in its own right. Theology was once taught in a denominational way that is inappropriate to the pluralism of a secular university. Another understanding of theology, however, is as a distinctive worldview offering a unifying perspective on life, a worldview which has the same rights on the campus as any other contemporary worldview. The presence of theology so understood would restore the methodological center to the discipline of Religious Studies and would enhance that intellectual pluralism to which the modern university is committed.

I. Dialogues

Consider the following dialogue:

STUDENT: Wasn't Constantine's baptism just a shrewd political move on his part?

HISTORY PROFESSOR: It's hard to say, because different historians have advanced so many explanations over the years, and there's no way of proving that one of them is better than the others. Anyway, it's more important to understand each of these historians than to try to decide if one of them is right.

Or consider this:

STUDENT: Don't all our beliefs have to be grounded in something that we all know is true?

PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR: Well, I've given this some thought, and I do have my private opinions about it. But it would be unfair of me to

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criticize other philosophers in class just because I happen to disagree with them, and I don't have the right to try to change whatever you believe about rationality.

One more:

STUDENT: Isn't it better for everyone in the long run if we just let poor nations starve?¹

POLITICAL SCIENCE PROFESSOR: Some people think this is what we should do and some don't.

II. *The Abandonment of Commitment*

Among the professional responsibilities of scholars, it would seem, is the obligation to challenge notions which students hold uncritically in order that these opinions may be replaced by more adequately-grounded ones. On a factual level, it seems clear that if a student in a biology class has an idea that AIDS can be spread by casual contact, the professor has both the right and the duty to explain that this is not true. Historians correct students' false notions about the past and scientists challenge students who hold unscientific ideas about evolution, just as my colleagues in the School of Engineering ensure that their students have correct ideas about how to build a bridge. Higher education sometimes requires changing what students believe about the material covered in their courses.

On a deeper level, higher education challenges not only the causal opinions of students but also their more fundamental notions about values and ethics, about what life is and how it should be lived. A teacher who was content merely to instruct students in the philosophical tradition but who did not motivate them to examine their assumptions and opinions and to develop better ones would not be reckoned by my philosopher colleagues to be doing an adequate job. It is only with a small amount of hyperbole that Allan Bloom writes about the effect that liberal education is to have on the student: "He must learn that there is a great world beyond the little one he knows, experience the exhilaration of it and digest enough of it to sustain himself in the intellectual deserts he is destined to traverse. . . . The importance of these years for an American cannot be overestimated. They are civilization's only chance to get him."² Higher education is a sort of therapy, and those to whom it is applied are expected to be changed in some significant way by its application.

¹The student has no doubt been reading Garrett Hardin's "Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor," *Psychology Today* 8 (September 1974): 38.

²Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 336.

With this in mind, I find it puzzling that there seems to be a consensus among scholars in Religious Studies that, whatever else practitioners of the discipline might seek to accomplish, challenging or altering the opinions of students is not among their goals. The following statements are representative:

[Religious Studies] is not aimed at persuading students to adopt any religious or ethical position.³

The study of religion does not in the first instance determine the truth or otherwise of a faith or ideology.⁴

The scientific investigation [of religion] has nothing to do with the validation or invalidation of religious claims.⁵

If Religious Studies as an academic discipline does not seek to “determine the truth or otherwise” of beliefs and “has nothing to do with the validation or invalidation of religious claims,” then it would seem that anything goes: If a student believes in creationism, or in voodoo, or in the superiority of the Aryan race, these notions may be corrected by paleontologists, philosophers, or anthropologists respectively, but not by his or her professor of Religious Studies. Whatever a professor’s private opinion, classroom teaching must refrain from criticizing the religious and ethical positions of others; all notions must be treated as equally valid.⁶

This, of course, is not how higher education is supposed to work. Professors are expected to have opinions as well as knowledge of the views of others. And, with due care to avoid indoctrination, professors are expected to argue for their opinions. Indeed we usually think that a student’s intellectual development comes about just by means of exposure to such professors. Even though there is some danger that intellectual apprenticeship to a major professor might become an unthinking form of discipleship, we normally trust the professor, the student, and the pluralistic environment of the university itself to lead the student forward to a mature position of intellectual independence.⁷

³Claude Welch, “The Function of the Study of Religion” in K. D. Hartzell and H. Sasscer, eds., *The Study of Religion on the Campus Today* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges, 1967), 9.

⁴Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion* (New York: Seabury, 1973), 11.

⁵J. H. Whittaker, “Neutrality in the Study of Religion,” *Bulletin of the Council on the Study of Religion* 12 (1981): 130.

⁶See also the remarks of Carl A. Raschke in his “Religious Studies and the Default of Critical Intelligence,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (1986): 131-38, esp. 136: “To enforce the now familiar regimen of deference and respect for anything that appears to have the faint signature of ‘religious’ life is to perform a lobotomy on one’s critical intelligence, which the tutored professional is expected to possess.”

⁷See, e.g., William G. Perry’s study of the intellectual development of students at Harvard (*Forms of Intellectual Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* [New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970]).

The common feature of the caricatures with which I began this paper is that none of the professors was prepared to take a position in response to the students' questions: "Yes, Constantine was a political opportunist" (or "No, he was not"); "Yes, there are some beliefs which all rational persons are obliged to hold" (or, "No, there are no such beliefs"); or "Yes, there are limits to what we can do about world hunger" (or, "No, we are obligated to do what we can"). In Religious Studies, however, it appears that the avoidance of commitment has become the controlling ideology. Fears of indoctrinating students or of appearing to be illiberal cause professors to appear either to have no opinions about the most important controversies about religion or to think that they have no right to present their convictions in class.⁸ They may do research in theological matters, but their students will never hear of the results. These professors come to their classes as reporters and not as participants in the important issues within the discipline.⁹ Alone among the programs in the Humanities, students in Religious Studies may find out what books their professor has read, but are unlikely to learn what he or she committedly believes to be true. A social scientist, so it seems, is permitted to teach from the standpoint of a committed Freudian and a philosopher as a committed Wittgensteinian, but a scholar in Religious Studies may not teach from the standpoint of a committed believer in a particular religion.¹⁰

III. The Origins of Non-Commitment

Why, according to the established protocol, may one not teach about religion as a committed believer? It seems clear, at the beginning, that

⁸A reader of an earlier version of this paper objected to this section, arguing that although a professor ought never to indoctrinate students, a student who had already been indoctrinated may become dedoctrinated in the course of his or her study of religion. Distinguishing indoctrination from dedoctrination, however, is sometimes slippery: in present-day discourse, "dedoctrination" often means implanting the canons of enlightenment rationalism, while "indoctrination" means implanting anything else (see William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in Pluralistic Conversation* [Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1989], esp. 55-73).

⁹"Religion professors can discuss truth in one sense, to be sure: they can argue about what the beliefs of various individuals and groups really were. But the truth they can discuss is thereby limited to historical, psychological, and sociological truth. . . . They can report the ideas others have expressed about deity; they cannot themselves discuss the truth of these ideas. If physicists were so constrained, physics departments would become departments in the psychology, history, anthropology, and sociology of physicists" (David Ray Griffin, "Professing Theology in the State University" in David Ray Griffin and Joseph C. Hough, Jr., eds., *Theology and the University: Essays in Honor of John B. Cobb, Jr.* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991], 11).

¹⁰Throughout this paper I am writing as an evangelical Christian. I believe that these comments and those that follow apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to all members of Religious Studies programs who take their faiths seriously. I believe that it would be presumptive of me, however, to attempt to specify just how these remarks apply to adherents of other religions, so I leave it to others to make the necessary transpositions.

the official abandonment of commitment among scholars in Religious Studies is a distinctively American phenomenon, a fact that can be attested by an examination of literature from Britain and elsewhere on the subject.¹¹ Furthermore, it is clear that the exclusion of commitment from American Religious Studies was imposed not by the university nor by the state, but was imposed by scholars within the discipline itself.¹²

One of the reasons for this abandonment of commitment was the historical setting of Religious Studies in the university. Religious Studies emerged as an academic discipline at a time when its founders were still smarting from conflicts between scholars and fundamentalists. James Smart has written: "In Germany since early in the nineteenth century there was a form of historical criticism practiced by conservative scholars such as Beck and Von Hofmann and in Britain it had been long clear that one could be both critical and evangelical. But in America a false dichotomy was established between the terms 'critical' and 'evangelical.'" ¹³ Faced with this false dichotomy, most of the shapers of the new discipline of Religious Studies chose to identify themselves as critical scholars and to regard theological commitments as alien to scholarship. As Laurence O'Connell has written, "For a long time religious studies found its *raison d'être* in its emancipation from theological studies. It was fashionable to highlight the so-called objective, non-normative character of religious studies at the expense of theology, which was supposedly subject 'to external ecclesiastical control and governed by internal intellectual criteria.'" ¹⁴ In our day, attacks on the teaching of evolution by "scientific creationists" and intemperate political statements by fundamentalists have perpetuated the notion that committed belief is alien and even hostile to the academic study of religion. As Jacob Neusner has written, "Among our colleagues are some who do not really like religion in its living forms, but find terribly interesting religion in its dead ones. . . . Religious experience in the third century is fascinating. Religious experience in the twentieth century is frightening or absurd."¹⁵

¹¹ See, e.g., Raymond Holley, *Religious Education and Religious Understanding: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religious Education* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

¹² The current protocols are not the products of legal and judicial constraints (see the discussion "What the Courts Say" in *Religion and the Curriculum: A Report from the ASCD Panel on Religion in the Curriculum* [Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1987], 19-21, and Griffin, "Professing Theology," 19-29).

¹³ James Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church: A Study in Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 74.

¹⁴ Laurence J. O'Connell, "Religious Studies, Theology, and the Humanities Curriculum," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52 (1984): 732, citing Charles Davis, "The Reconvergence of Theology and Religious Studies," *Studies in Religion* 4/3 (1974/75): 203.

¹⁵ Jacob Neusner, "Religious Studies: The Next Vocation," *Bulletin of the Council on the Study of Religion* 8/5 (1977): 119. Similarly, Hans Küng asks, "At a time of unparal-

A second factor in the separation of commitment from academic Religious Studies arose from ecumenical and interreligious sensitivities and a necessary regard for pluralism. Especially in the state university, the study of religion could not be restricted to the faith and practice of a single denomination. An early approach to teaching religion in a pluralistic setting was to establish programs in which representatives of various religious communities, each committed to his or her own denomination's faith, would represent that faith in their academic work. Programs in religion naturally came to include professors who held various opinions about religion, and academic meetings brought together scholars from state universities and from Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish schools and seminaries. In the midst of the resulting diversity, it seemed most appropriate to concentrate on scholarly talk about religion, about which common ground could perhaps be found, than on the discussion of religious commitments, which seemed only to be divisive. Sensitivity to ecumenical issues has perpetuated a general agreement that committed beliefs should be kept private on the fear that, as Smart has expressed the notion, "the raising of theological issues will be injurious to the cooperation of Christian and Jewish scholars."¹⁶

IV. *A Field Without a Center*

The most important outcome of the abandonment of commitment by scholars in religion is that, in the modern university, Religious Studies has become a subject-matter in search of a discipline. Modern Religious Studies is defined as a field in the Humanities on account of the phenomena examined by its scholars and taught in its courses: the religious beliefs and practices of human beings. Within the field, historians study the history of churches and of doctrines, philologists pore over ancient manuscripts, and sociologists examine the inner workings of religious institutions. Since committed beliefs have been excluded from professional discussion, the distinctive method that once typified the learned study of religion and provided its center—theology—has been rejected by most present-day practitioners as uncritical, ecumenically insensitive, or otherwise inappropriate to the intellectual life. In consequence, Religious Studies is left with no method of its own and borrows its methods from other programs and departments in the university. These developments have impoverished Religious Studies as an academic enterprise, distorted its character, and made it more and not less likely to be placed on the periphery of the university.

leled elimination of taboos, is God to be the last taboo?" ("God: The Last Taboo?" in Griffin and Hough, eds., *Theology and the University*, 62).

¹⁶Smart, *Strange Silence*, 181. Smart is here summarizing the commonly-held attitude, which he himself does not hold.

It has been argued that the interdisciplinary character of Religious Studies is the strength and not a weakness in the field.¹⁷ Franklin Littell has written that, precisely because of their interdisciplinary character, departments of Religious Studies preserve the intellectual catholicity which one characterized all learning: "There is overpowering evidence that the modern university—with its specialized departmentalization—has largely lost sight of *man*. Many of the students who work in the Department of Religion do so precisely because they find there a surrogate for a true university." For Littell, the university has been "shattered into a thousand meaningless fragments" and Religious Studies finds itself as surrogate for a true community of scholars.¹⁸

So it may seem to Littell, but to others the interdisciplinary character of modern Religious Studies diminishes the seriousness with which it is likely to be taken by those outside the program. Richard Schlatter writes, "We usually maintain that each of the disciplines has an internal coherence, a method of investigation, a methodology, which justifies its existence by distinguishing it theoretically. Mathematicians think mathematically, historians supposedly think historically, and so on. . . . Does the study have such an internal logic of its own?"¹⁹ That, so it appears, is the problem: in respectable academic programs mathematicians think mathematically, historians historically, and philosophers philosophically. Interdisciplinary programs lack this essential characteristic of an academic discipline. There appears to be no agreed-upon method by which Liberal Studies scholars think "liberally" or according to which scholars in Women's Studies think "feministically."²⁰ Since most scholars in Religious Studies eschew any attempt to think "religiously" in public, the lack of a distinctive method of inquiry in Religious Studies undermines its claim to be a genuine academic discipline,

¹⁷Viewed historically, single-discipline academic programs seem hardly to be necessary to the academic life. As Frederick Rudolph has noted, departmentalization is a late nineteenth-century innovation in academic life, and its effect has not been completely positive: "For the catholicity of outlook and acquaintance with universal knowledge which had seemed so often to be a mark of the best of the old-time professors there was now substituted a specialist's regard for the furthest refinements of his own interest" (*The American College and University: A History* [New York: Random House, 1962], 400-01).

¹⁸Franklin Littell, "Preface," in Maurice Friedman, T. Patrick Burke, and Samuel Laeuchli, *Searching in the Syntax of Things* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), x-xii.

¹⁹Richard Schlatter, "The Nature and Formation of Academic Disciplines" in Hartzell and Sasscer, eds., *The Study of Religion on the Campus of Today*, 19-20. Of course not all mathematicians and historians think mathematically or historically in the same way. Sub-disciplines and sub-methodologies exist within established disciplines, and the boundaries are fluid: the physical sciences were once a branch of philosophy under the heading "natural philosophy."

²⁰The last is an awful word, implying as it does that all persons in Women's Studies are feminist ideologues. It seemed better, however, than "femininely" or "womanly." The problem of selecting from among such outrageous adverbs illustrates the problem: programs that cannot be neatly encapsulated appear to be lacking in intellectual precision.

and seems to relegate it to the marginal position of other interdisciplinary "studies" programs on the campus.²¹

V. Theology as a Worldview

Not long ago, theology dominated the academic study of religion, just as it once ruled the entire curriculum. Scripture was studied in order to defend the doctrines which had been derived from it. Non-Christian religions were examined in order to teach prospective missionaries about the faiths of those whom they would seek to convert. The psychology of religion was a pastoral discipline, teaching the clergy how to deal with the souls in their care. "Theology" meant the received doctrines of a particular denomination, and "Religious Studies" was catechesis, the transmission of that faith to the next generation.²² Theology understood in this way was properly excluded from the practice of modern Religious Studies: it was, as its critics knew, often intellectually uncritical and, if attempted in a state university, it would have violated the most elementary notions of separation between church and state. Most important, denominational theology of this sort was non-ecumenical and poorly adapted to a pluralistic setting.

There is, however, another understanding of theology which is not only sensitive to pluralism but which is especially appropriate to the pluralistic context of the modern university. This is an understanding of theology as the articulation of a comprehensive worldview, a worldview with no rights over other worldviews, but one which claims for itself the same rights which other worldviews and their adherents enjoy in the university. For the present purposes, a worldview may be defined as a comprehensive and unifying perspective on the world and one's place within it, a perspective that provides a framework for understanding individual facts and issues, and from which the individual receives guidance for the living of life.²³

²¹Raschke has written: "The notion that an effective field of inquiry could be organized around a body of data or as a cluster of 'studies,' as in 'black studies,' 'women's studies,' or 'American studies,' without an underlying conceptual architecture was unique to that heady age of ethno-idealism and self-confident positivism [of the 1960s]. . . . The field must now face the wincing fact that all the aforementioned factors, in which the operative assumptions of the 'discipline' have been embedded from the beginning, have been quietly erased, particularly in the last four years" ("Religious Studies," 132).

²²A department which understood its mission in this way was usually not called the Religious Studies Department but the Theology Department or (in more evangelical colleges) the Bible Department. Theology departments in church-related schools were often renamed Religious Studies departments as they moved in the direction of objective academic study and teaching of religion.

²³I am intentionally using the term "worldview" in a general way. Many recent discussions of worldviews owe much to Thomas Kuhn's notion of paradigms in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962 [2nd ed. 1970]). See more recent discussions in Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); Gary Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* (Notre

In his *Worldviews: Cross-Cultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, Ninian Smart describes some of the worldviews that dominate the present world. According to Smart, a worldview made up of elements of Catholicism and Iberian and indigenous cultures prevails in the region that he calls "the Latin South." Another worldview combining Islam with native cultures rules "the Islamic Crescent." Until very recently, Marxist ideology was dominant in what Smart calls "the Marxist Bloc."²⁴

It is somewhat easier to speak of the worldviews which prevail elsewhere in the world, however, than it is to identify those which predominate in our own. Perhaps the most dominant of contemporary Western worldviews is what Jacques Ellul calls "Technique."²⁵ It is clear that, for many people, Technique functions as a worldview: it offers a perspective of the world and one's place within it (largely by defining the world in technological terms and excluding other understandings from serious consideration), and from it one receives guidance for living. According to Technique the world is a complex of technical problems, and the wise individual devotes himself or herself to the solving of these. As Frederick Ferré has written, this worldview ignores non-quantifiable aspects of human experience like beauty and justice, and forces opposing notions "into the inhospitable framework of metaphysical models that allow them no room."²⁶ Other contemporary worldviews employ psychological, political, or aesthetic definitions, offering unifying perspectives consistent with these and largely excluding other considerations from their schemes.²⁷

Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982); Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a World View* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983); and Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*. The idea of comprehensive worldviews does not depend upon Kuhn, however, and similar concepts have been developed independently. Examples include R. M. Hare's notion of *bliks* ("Without a *blik* there can be no explanation; for it is by our *bliks* that we decide what is and what is not an explanation" [in Antony Flew, R. M. Hare, and Basil Mitchell, "Theology and Falsification" in Basil Mitchell, ed., *The Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 17]) and the neo-Calvinist thought associated with Abraham Kuyper in the Netherlands (see Albert Wolters, "Dutch Neo-Calvinism" in Hendrik Hart, Johan van der Hoeven, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition* [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983], 113-31).

²⁴Ninian Smart, *Worldview: Cross-Cultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Scribner's, 1983), 37-61.

²⁵See Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage, 1964).

²⁶Frederick Ferré, *Philosophy of Technology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1988), 132. In a similar way, John H. Leith remarks, "Modern people are sometimes deceived by the power of science to solve problems into believing that it will solve mysteries" (*The Reformed Imperative* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988], 47). It is perhaps more accurate to say that technology as a worldview compels us to think of all questions as statements of problems and so prevents us from even noticing those questions which point to mysteries. The latter, being ruled out of bounds, are considered to be off the playing field of rational discussion.

²⁷Frederick J. Streng, Charles L. Lloyd, Jr., and Jay T. Allan describe these as "nontranscendent ultimates" in their *Ways of Being Religious* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 334-35.

It is the Christian claim that Christianity is a comprehensive worldview which gives its adherents a unifying perspective of the world and one's place in it and, in consequence, provides them with a framework for understanding and guidance for living. It is important in this connection to notice that the difference between Christianity and other worldviews is not that Christians see most things in the same way as do others who are not Christians, but then add to the commonly-held set of ideas about the world one or more theological statements about the existence of God, the Trinity, and other doctrinal matters; it is not that, whereas the nonbeliever believes a set of propositions (1 . . . n) to be true, the Christian insists on adding (n+1) to the set. This observation is the converse of Gary Gutting's remark: "Nonbelief in religion is in fact always the reverse side of some positive set of beliefs that regulate the nonbeliever's life. . . . Any disagreement between believers and non-believers involves substantial positive claims on both sides, so that the portrayal of nonbelief as the mere withholding of assent is inaccurate."²⁸ Just as the worldviews of nonbelievers do not consist of Christianity from which something has been subtracted, Christians do not present their views as corrections or additions to secular perspectives which, except for their disbelief in God, are considered satisfactory; they claim instead to offer their own comprehensive worldview as an alternative to the views of their non-Christian counterparts.²⁹

VI. Taking Theology Seriously

To think of theology as the explication of a distinctive worldview answers the objections of those who think of theology as the in-house transmission of denominational beliefs and thus as a violation of the intellectual pluralism that must characterize the university. Once theology was the queen of the sciences and dominated the curriculum. The present danger is not that a particular theology will dominate Religious Studies or the university, but that those who recall old battles between intellectuals and believers will decide *a priori* that of contemporary worldviews religious belief alone has no right to be visibly present on campus.³⁰ William Placher has written: "I do not know people in

²⁸Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, 2. Kai Nielsen has remarked: "The thing to see here is that being a Jew or a Christian is not just the having of one framework-belief, namely a belief that there is a God. . . . Rather, as Wittgenstein and Malcolm stress, what we have with a religion is a system, or as I would prefer to call it, a cluster of interlocking beliefs, qualifying and giving each other sense and mutual support" ("Religion and Groundless Believing" in Frederick Crosson, ed., *The Autonomy of Religious Belief* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981], 93).

²⁹This does not mean that all Christians agree in the details of their worldviews, nor that the worldviews of Christians and others do not overlap. There is a large number of practical matters about which, say, Christians, Marxists, and Moslems may be expected to hold similar views. It is often those points of overlap between worldviews which offer the most fruitful occasions for dialogue. See Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, 138-49.

³⁰Robert Wuthnow has written: "Knowledgeable persons in the academy recognize of

academic circles who dismiss all religions except Christianity as intellectually trivial or morally dangerous. I encounter quite a few people who think that those who do not share the presuppositions of a certain kind of enlightenment modernity are intellectually trivial and morally dangerous. Genuine pluralism opposes both of these theses."³¹

What would it mean for the university to take theology seriously as a worldview? Within the university, theology offers an alternative to commonly-accepted worldviews, and, by so doing, it enables not only believers but also others to become more aware of the assumptions that underlie those views. The danger in adhering to an unchallenged worldview is that its assumptions may come to be taken uncritically to be the truth. In some ways we are like members of primitive societies whose names for themselves mean "the people." Our own commonly-held view of things is "sense"; it is the views of others that appear to be exceptional and which require labelling. The public presence of alternative positions within the academy restrains imperialistic claims on behalf of the commonly-held position. It was once Christian theology which needed the experience of pluralism to expose its humanly-constructed character; theology is now in a position to provide a similar service for other ideologies and worldviews. The public presence of theology, once seen as the antithesis of pluralism, may thus become a means of establishing genuine pluralism in the intellectual life of the modern university.³²

A second value of the presence of theology in the university is that Christian intellectual commitment not only entails belief in the teachings of the Christian faith but also points its adherents in the directions which, minimally, should be of interest to other intellectuals and which, maximally, may point to solutions to neglected human problems. Nicholas Wolterstorff notes that worldviews include a special class of beliefs which he calls "control beliefs." These beliefs regulate not only

course that Christians are a minority group; whether it is statistically true or not, Christianity has long been seen as a dying remnant from a less enlightened past. But unlike other minority groups, Christians are not the subject of affirmative action, special programs, or efforts to promote greater tolerance. . . . Universities that might bend over backwards to start programs in women's literature, in African-American or Hispanic culture, or in Jewish studies would never consider a comparable program in evangelical studies" ("Living the Question—Evangelical Christianity and Critical Thought," *Cross Currents: Religions and Intellectual Life* 40/2 [1990]: 171-72).

³¹Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, 155. See also Robert L. Wilkens' remark in his 1989 Presidential Address to the American Academy of Religion: "It has come time to ask whether 'critical' reasons as defined by the Enlightenment is the only intellectual trait we should honor, the only song we must sing" ("Who Will Speak For the Religious Traditions?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57 [1989]: 702).

³²In their preface to *Theology and the University*, Griffin and Hough write that the combined message of the *estschrift's* essays "is that theology, at least theology of a particular sort, is not only appropriate in the university but vital" (viii). One may disagree with its authors on specific points, but taken as a whole this recent volume is an important instance of how theology may be practiced in the university.

whatever else the believer is likely to regard as true but also what intellectual projects he or she is likely to undertake.³³ Control beliefs generate research programs; they call attention to specific problems which other scholars might not have noticed, and they suggest models for problem-solving that might not be thought of otherwise.³⁴ For Wolterstorff, Christian control beliefs include a vision of the goal of human life. That goal is *shalom*, a state of affairs characterized by peace, enjoyment, and justice. A scholar's Christian beliefs, when fully held, lead to a commitment of his or her intellectual life to the goals entailed in the Christian worldview: "If the activities of the [Christian] scholar are to be justified, that justification must be found ultimately in the contribution of scholarship to the cause of justice-in-shalom. The vocation of the scholar, like the vocation of everyone else, is to serve that end."³⁵

VII. The Restoration of Commitment

This paper has noted that most American scholars in religion have abandoned religious commitment in their public professional activities. We have seen that, as John Dixon has written, "departments of religion are the only departments forbidden to be committed to their own subject, . . . [that] we can do anything we want to do with the study of religion except one thing: we cannot, professionally, take it seriously, believe that it is true, or act on that belief."³⁶ We have seen that, in consequence, Religious Studies has appeared to be merely one of several interdisciplinary programs, seeming to lack that characteristic method of inquiry which is necessary to the existence of an academic discipline. What would the public presence of religious commitment mean for the Religious Studies program?

First, what it would not mean: it would not entail a return to the intellectual imperialism of earlier departments of theology in denominational schools. It would not mean that the theologies of Christians

³³Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 63-70. Gutting writes that a paradigm provides "a basis for an on-going activity of problem-solving in the community that accepts it" (*Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, 125).

³⁴Robert Farrar Capon writes: "Theology . . . receives in the mail a gross of very odd flashlights from the Lux Invisibilis Flashlight Co. It then takes these and proceeds to point their mysterious light not only at God but also at creation and, in the process, discovers movements, shapes, and colors it never saw before" (*Hunting the Divine Fox: An Introduction to the Language of Theology* [Minneapolis, MN: Winston, 1985], 16-17).

³⁵Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, 113-14, 116.

³⁶John W. Dixon, Jr., "What Should Religion Departments Teach?" *Theology Today* 46/4 (1990): 365. Thomas J. J. Altizer has written: "our academic world has succeeded in creating a field of religion in which everything exists except the very center and ground of religion itself" ("Total Abyss and Theological Rebirth: The Crisis of University Theology" in Griffin and Hough, eds., *Theology and the University*, 175). See also Raschke's remark, "The outcome has been a strange sort of reverse Tertullianism—Jerusalem has been forsaken in favor of Athens" ("Religious Studies," 134).

only would be visibly present in the program.³⁷ And it would not mean that everyone who taught in the department would have to be a committed believer, whether in Christianity or in some other religion.³⁸ If it was necessary to argue above that the presence of theology in the university would enhance that intellectual pluralism to which the university is committed, then it is also clear that the presence of commitments other than those of Christians is needed in the Religious Studies program in order to further that same pluralism. The presence of those who are committed to non-religious worldviews is as essential to the proper pluralism of the Religious Studies program as is the public presence of believers.

The restoration of commitment and of theology to programs of Religious Studies would restore the discipline's missing center. Theologies have been described above as comprehensive worldviews which provide frameworks for understanding from which the individual receives guidance for living. Religious Studies programs should be characterized by the presence and advocacy of many of these views and by discussion and debate among them.³⁹ The distinctive method of Religious Studies as an academic discipline would thus become the explication and mutual examination of various theologies and non-religious worldviews.⁴⁰

³⁷Nor should it be the case that the job security of one whose convictions changed during the course of his or her employment would somehow be in jeopardy, as an earlier reader of this paper wondered. See Schubert M. Ogden's discussion of recent statements by the American Association of University Professors in his "Theology in the University: The Question of Integrity" in Griffin and Hough, eds., *Theology and the University*, 67-80. A Religious Studies program which thought it important to have, say, a committed Mennonite on its faculty would have no option, should the incumbent change his or her convictions, but to go out and hire another one.

³⁸One reader wondered whether according to this paper one must be a "model Christian" to teach Christian theology, and by what criteria such a person would be selected. Of course not everyone who teaches about a religion must be a committed believer in that religion, but it would be inconsistent with the thesis of the paper to think that one could teach as a committed believer without actually believing. How much of a personal commitment is necessary? It is desirable from a pastoral standpoint that the Christian professor also be a fully-developed Christian in his or her private life as well. But since intellectual gifts and sanctity are not often given to an individual at the same time, the latter cannot be an academic consideration.

³⁹The literature on the testing of worldviews is large, and the issues involved cannot be discussed here. In general, however, I would expect it to be the case that differing theologies and worldviews would be relatively immune to small-scale empirical criticism, but capable of examination on the basis of consistency and comprehensiveness. "Is it defended in terms of its self-consistency, adequacy to the facts, or illuminating power (rather than in terms of the claim, whether explicit or implicit, that its basic ideas are revealed truths)?" (Griffin, "Professing Theology," 30). See also Barbour's remark: "There is increasing resistance to falsification as one moves from simple laws to limited theories, comprehensive theories, paradigms and finally metaphysical assumptions. Yet at none of these levels . . . can an accumulation of counter-evidence be completely ignored" (*Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 130; see also 112-18). Other recent discussions include Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, 114-22, and Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, 138-49.

⁴⁰Does this proposal mean that all religions and quasi-religious worldviews must

Does this require that everyone in a Religious Studies program participate in this enterprise or be prepared to advocate a theology or other worldview? I think that it does not. There will always be room in religion programs for those who wish to do their professional work only as historians, philologists, or sociologists. But it may be essential to the full being of a Religious Studies program that among its members there be enough people willing to participate in the explication and discussion of theologies so that the latter is perceived to be the central activity of the discipline. As we have seen from this paper's opening dialogues, historians are expected not only to know the opinions of others about the motivations of Constantine but to be willing to commit themselves to one or another of these opinions; philosophers are expected not only to exegete Kant but also to take positions for or against the adequacy of Kant's views. To expect commitment on the part of a majority of religion scholars is to expect them to participate in the service of truth that is required of other scholars in the humanities.

Finally, we have seen that this is the purpose of higher education to encourage students to examine their assumptions, to criticize their opinions and to develop better ones. Especially when students' assumptions and values often go no deeper than the business-school virtues of profit and personal advancement, it would be important not only to the Religious Studies program but to the larger society that there exists a place on campus where life-commitments based on other goals—those that historically have included self-sacrifice, the service of others, and the search for what Wolterstorff calls justice-in-shalom—are modelled for students' examination and possible adoption. And I think that it is clear that if this does not take place in the Religious Studies program, it is unlikely to occur elsewhere in the modern university.

somehow be represented? Clearly there are practical limits imposed by the size of Religious Studies programs in most universities. Although the argument of this paper does not entail any particular procedure for selecting religions to be included, I believe that most departments' focus should be on the religious traditions that have shaped Western culture, on the principle that it is more important to know one's own cultural forebears than those of others.

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