The Sacred and the Secular: Religion in the State University

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The Sacred and the Secular: Religion in the State University

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It is, indeed, an honor for me to be able to present the Sixth Annual Presidential Lecture at The University of Iowa where I have had the privilege of teaching for most of my academic career. When invited to give this lecture the temptation was considerable to present something in the area of my current research, for example, Luther’s ethics in his 1515/16 lectures on Paul’s letter to the Romans, but I decided soon after the invitation arrived that I would try to deal with a more general question which has been in the background of all my work during the more than three decades I have taught here, namely, “How does one deal with the sacred in an essentially secular setting?”

The first director of the School of Religion, M. Willard Lampe, had written that “religion, theoretically and practically, is inseparable from education; hence it should be taught, even in a tax-supported university, not indirectly or surreptitiously, but unapologetically, comprehensively, and in line with the best educational procedures.”

The first question which this exhortation raises seems to be, what is this “religion” that we ought to study in the university? Virgilius Ferm, who once edited An Encyclopedia of Religion, observed when dealing with this word, “the term religion belongs to that large class of popular words which seems acceptable as common coin of communicative exchange but which on closer examination fails to carry the imprint of exact meaning.” The customary efforts to explore the meaning of this word with the help of its Latin roots may lead to all kinds of intriguing speculations but do not make for precision.
Other definitions are so inclusive as to permit one to define everything of concern to human beings as religious. For some the term "religious" has for all practical purposes become coextensive with "human." Whatever is specifically human is *ipso facto* religious. Here "religion is the capacity of the human organism to transcend its biological nature through the construction of objective, morally binding, all-embracing universes of meaning." The only non-religious phenomena in the human sphere are those that are grounded in man's animal nature, or more precisely, that part of his biological constitution that he has in common with other animals. In this context Max Mueller's understanding of religion as a "disease of language" becomes comprehensible and may explain the decision of *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* simply to ignore this troublesome term.

The situation has been further complicated by the fact that the word "religion" has taken on a very negative meaning not only for those who claim to be enemies of the study of the subject because they consider it unworthy of serious consideration in a university or threatening the "wall of separation" between church and state, but also in the writings of one of the most important theologians of this century. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth has a chapter in his massive *Church Dogmatics, Volume I, Part 2* with the title "The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion." In chapter 2 of this volume Barth refers to religion as unbelief and writes: "Revelation does not link up with a human religion which is already present and practiced. It contradicts it." [By the way, it is in the light of this point of view that we must understand the sympathy for atheism as practiced by Marxist communism on the part of Barth and his followers. To Barth the denial of "religion in general" or the God of the philosophers was not only excusable but actually praiseworthy. This explains among other things the fierce opposition of Barth to the Nazis and his relative tolerance of Stalinist Communism. The Communists were atheists, i.e. they objected to "religion." To Barth this seemed understandable and even commendable. The Nazis, on the other hand, were anti-Semites and hated Jews. Since for Barth the only true revelation is connected with the Jews, i.e. the Old and New Testaments, anti-Semitism is, indeed, revolt against God.]

Thus, not only people who consider themselves irreligious but also some who are devoted to their faith find the academic study of religion of doubtful value. I recall people standing at the doors of
Macbride auditorium, here at The University of Iowa, handing leaflets to the students attending classes of the large course dealing with Judaism and Christianity, trying to persuade them to drop the course because participation would threaten their faith.

By now it may be apparent that we could spend most of our time discussing the problems raised by the term religion. I have tried to show my hand by using the word “sacred” as defining the subject matter of religious studies. It is a word which has been given considerable prominence by the students of comparative religion associated with the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule. Professor Eliade used it to define the nature of religion in his seminal work *The Sacred and the Profane,* but when defined as “the power, being, or realm understood by religious persons to be at the core of existence and to have transformative effect on their lives and destinies,” even the term sacred seems rather vague.

I shall try to overcome this vagueness by identifying and addressing four aspects of religion and examine their relationship to the basic concerns of the university. But this proposal immediately opens another Pandora’s box. What, indeed, are the basic concerns of the secular university? John Henry Newman had defined this ideal University as “a place of teaching universal knowledge,” and added, “this implies that its object is, on the one hand, intellectual, not moral; and, on the other, that it is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement.” He had immediately continued: “If its subject were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students.” But as this quotation indicates, Newman spoke of a quite different institution from the modern secular university. He was convinced that “[The University] cannot fulfill its object duly, such as I have described it, without the Church’s assistance; or to use the theological term, the Church is necessary for its integrity.”

However, it is part of the very charter of an American state university functioning in a pluralistic society that it fulfill its task without the assistance of any church. Professor Sinclair Goodlad suggests four types of expectations and goals commonly proposed for the secular university. “First, a socially defined goal of equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills suitable for given occupations . . . . Second, . . . the social goals of the ‘consumers’ of higher education—of students and perhaps more importantly of their parents—for the
social status which a degree . . . is believed to confer, and for a ‘meal ticket’—a job qualification to be achieved as quickly and as efficiently as possible. Third, there are the personal goals of some students to achieve independence in criticism or to acquire a philosophy of life. Fourth, there are academic goals of unhurried and careful elaboration of theory supported by minutely detailed observation within the context of a discipline offering the support and respect of fellow scholars, and the possibility of ‘international visibility.’”

It is obvious that this list is somewhat arbitrary. Several of the goals most cherished by some may seem irrelevant to others. In the secular university the very ranking of these goals is a problem. Students, faculty, parents, administration, regents, legislators, etc., see these goals differently and would assign varying priorities to them. Some considered marginal at best by faculty may justify the commitment of large sums of money by parents. In a pluralistic society, in contrast to the society Newman envisioned, the university “has no integrating or commonly accepted ethos, but tolerates an immense variety of beliefs, life styles, moral standards and forms of art.” But it is precisely because of the pluralistic character of the goals of the secular university that the study of religion in its broadest context is so useful, not because it provides simple answers to be adopted by everybody, but because it furnishes a broad context in the search for goals for all participants. If religion in all its forms is an effort at world-construction, in Peter Berger’s phrase, “the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant,” the study and analysis of this extraordinary effort should be undertaken by the university. Regardless of one’s own religious stance, the mere examination of this endeavor, regardless of its outcome, is bound to contribute to the development of communal and personal priorities.

We may now be ready to return to our examination of the various facets of religion: First we note a “cognitive aspect.” All religions deal with certain propositions demanding assent. “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord.” (Deut. 6:4) is such a proposition. And so is, “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself,” (II Cor. 5:19) or “Allah is God and Muhammed is his prophet.” Every religion enunciates statements which demand assent from its adherents. These propositions are part of the religious quest for a humanly significant universe. For some people, especially in the West, this cognitive aspect of religion seems preeminent. Religion is considered
a system of beliefs that must be accepted. This understanding of religion is prevalent among the intellectual leadership of religious communities. But while theology or the theoretical elaboration of the religious system of meaning is important it is not as important for the total religious community as theologians would like to think.

Secondly, and for many people in our culture by far the most important element of religion, is its moral aspect. Particularly for men and women influenced by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, morality and religion are seen as substantially identical. Religion is considered a moral system and morality is seen as virtually the same as religion. It is true, of course, that this has not always been the case. Plato was so offended by the morality of the gods of popular Greek religion that he banished them from his ideal state, and even Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have been reproached by some critics on moral grounds. Indeed the basic objection to Christianity by the political authorities of the Roman Empire was based on moral reasons; the Christian objection to emperor worship was considered unpatriotic. Be that as it may, it is obvious that religion is in the mind of many people so profoundly linked to ethics that the introduction of religious practices such as prayer and Bible reading, is assumed to assure the improvement of morality.

Thirdly, religion has a profound emotional dimension, it involves some of the most deep-felt and penetrating sentiments of human beings. This fact led the 19th century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher to define religion as the "absolute feeling of dependence." He suggested that the variety of forms which this feeling assumes among various ethnic groups and individuals explains the differences among human religions. Because of this emotional aspect of religion all purely intellectual criticism may appear to the religious person irrelevant and immaterial. It may also help to explain the interdependence of art and religion resulting in music, literature and visual arts so profoundly linked to a particular faith as to become almost incomprehensible without some understanding of the religious source. The emotional dimension can be so powerful that people even after they have abandoned the cognitive elements of their religion may remain attached to their faith because of non-rational feelings associated with emotions they may find as difficult to explain as to escape.

And this brings us to the fourth and last aspect of religion, the
communal dimension. Religion is always the function of a community. It creates, maintains, and gives meaning to human communities. We observe that it is commonly involved in the rites of passage from birth to death. This function of religion explains the development of quasi-religious rites of passage even in societies officially atheistic. The present debate among our Jewish fellow citizens about the question, "Who is a Jew?" illustrates the communal dimension of religion very clearly. Recently Ari L. Goldman observed in The New York Times, "In the United States, it is difficult to pick up a Jewish journal, open mail from Jewish organizations, or hear a sermon in a temple or synagogue without encountering the words 'who is a Jew.'" But various groups of Christians as well as Muslim are confronted by the same question. What constitutes membership in a religious community? Does it depend on assent to propositions, behavior according to certain moral standards, or the presence and awareness of certain feelings? It is apparent that many people understand religion almost entirely in communal terms, as participation in the life of a religious community. Such participation may occur even though all the other aspects of religion discussed so far may be missing. While frequently ignored by theologians, the communal aspect of religion is for many people who consider themselves religious an essential, if not the essential aspect.

Even though we have not been able to come to a precise definition of religion we have observed the power and pervasiveness of the phenomenon. In recent years it has even returned to the book review sections of our most prestigious newspapers. For example, the front page of The New York Times Book Review of February 12, 1989 featured a long article by the novelist Dan Wakefield with the intriguing title, "And Now, a word from our Creator." He not only detailed the return of "God" and religion as a force in serious fiction but reported the claim of at least one science writer, the author of God and the New Physics that "it may seem bizarre, but in my opinion science offers a surer path to God than religion." While one may want to question the reliability of this observation it illustrates the broad and pervasive interest in religion and in God in our time. How should the university deal with it? It is not unusual in an American state university simply to ignore it or treat it as an embarrassment hoping that the inconvenient topic might go away. One sometimes has the impression that religion has taken the place occupied by sex in the nineteenth century. Everybody knew then that
sex existed but it was not mentioned in polite society. In many universities religion appears to suffer the same fate. The University of Iowa made an innovative decision more than fifty years ago to deal with the subject of religion in a straightforward and pluralistic manner. This pioneering venture has demonstrated two facts: (1) The university is a major resource to the study of religion and (2) the study of religion is a valuable resource to the academic task of the university.

Because of the many-dimensional character of religion as observed earlier it can be most adequately investigated with the help of the broad resources in the social sciences and the humanities available in the university. The scholarly resources of a research university will enrich and deepen the study of religion. If, indeed, such study deals with epistemological problems, if it has to ask, ‘What can we know?’ it is most likely to aid in finding an answer in conversation with others who have to ask the same question from different perspectives. Similarly, the moral question, ‘What must I do?’ is clearly not an exclusively religious concern and its profound religious dimension can be probed more adequately in the context of the university. Even the most specifically religious question in the Kantian triad, the eschatological question, ‘What may I hope for?’ is best addressed in the context of all the humanities.

The same is true for the other aspects of religion mentioned before. To deal with emotions and feelings without the aid of psychology and especially the psychology of religion seems irrational, and to explore the artistic expressions of religious feelings isolated from the insights supplied by art and music history would make a comprehensive understanding very difficult. The communal dimension of religion is best understood in dialogue with sociology and anthropology as the works of sociologists of religion, quoted in this presentation, have demonstrated.

But if the assistance in the study of religion of the resources of the university is manifest, so is the aid the study of religion supplies to the many central endeavors of the university. It may be especially obvious in the humanities, since no human culture can be understood in isolation from its religious setting, but it is helpful in the social sciences as well. Furthermore, students of law and of medicine would benefit in their work with men and women if they would see them against the background of their religious environment, making use of
the comprehensive understanding of religion here proposed. The religious dimensions of the political conflicts from Sri Lanka to Ireland and from Armenia to Lebanon and the Sudan are obvious. The study of religion might have informed those who a few years ago approached the Ayatolla Khomeni with a cake and a King James Bible of the ineptness of such an overture. Indeed, I would be willing to argue that the absence of any understanding of the reality of religion, apart from Washington prayer breakfasts or the fulminations of the tel-evangelists is related to the failure of some of our leaders to comprehend the influence of religion as it affects the political lives of men and women everywhere in the world.

So far we have discussed the value of the study of religion at a secular university for religion as well as the university. One difficult issue has been avoided, how does this effort relate to the religious commitment of the people involved in this study? We have observed the subtle power of religion in the lives of human beings. Can it be approached in an objective and scientific manner without falsifying it? Is the very character of religious commitment so fragile, so idiosyncratic, that scholarly scrutiny is impossible? To answer this question one would have to analyze religious commitment with some care since it is a fairly complex phenomenon pertaining not only to people commonly regarded as religious but also to those whose commitment is apparently fiercely anti-religious.

Two forms of religious commitment seem generally observable. When dealing with this issue in the past I have suggested that the first form of religious commitment apparent to everybody and affecting by far the largest number of people is commitment as the acceptance of a historical-cultural tradition. The tradition may be Hindu or Buddhist, it may be Zuni or Dobu. For most Americans it is generally Jewish or Christian. This commitment is a form of self-acceptance. It is the admission that this is the kind of man or woman I am. These are my antecedents, this is my history and my culture, this is how I came to be who I am. In a sense it is a commitment to a specific history and culture. Many people accept their religion as a bond to the past. To illustrate what this may mean specifically, I shall use the model of Christianity as an example since this is the tradition which has been the object of my research.

The historical-cultural commitment means in the instance of Christianity a commitment to the church as the guardian and herald of
certain historical values. Here it is both a bridge to the past, and an effort to find new ways of expressing these values creatively in the present. It is also a commitment to the Bible as the document which has shaped me and my people. It is a clue to Dante as well as Shakespeare, to Emerson as well as John Updike, to Goethe as well as Hesse, to Pascal and André Gide. Considering my particular situation in time and space, if I do not know the Bible I will have trouble knowing myself. This book is important not only for what it meant at the time it was written, but also for what it has continued to mean in every age that followed, from the Rabbi’s interpretation of the Talmud to Bultmann and Barth in our century. It is also a commitment to the validity of the religious experience. Even if I never shuddered in awe before the vastness of the universe and the beauty of holiness, this commitment means that I shall respect such experiences in others and be grateful for them—just as I respect the painter and the composer and appreciate their accomplishments, though I may not be able to paint or compose. The university is an excellent place where such a commitment can be examined, interpreted, perhaps deepened, changed or even abandoned, on the basis of serious study and reflection. This process does not demand any belief in the supernatural and can be dealt with by anybody who wants to learn.

But there is also a religious commitment which involves the acceptance of a specific social-moral perspective. Persons so committed assert that religion and ethics belong together. They give assent in thought, word, and deed to the moral vision of their faith. This is in a sense a commitment to righteousness. While this is possible within the context of all religions I shall again illustrate it from the point of view of the Christian faith. Here the church is seen as a moral and maternal community that both teaches and upholds these values and helps her children to put them into practice. Here morality receives a dimension of significance that it does not have if approached from a purely prudential or rationalistic point of view. The Bible is seen not so much as the record of particular cultural tradition as a collection of sayings offering moral guidance. It is considered the “Good Book.” This popular expression reflects the ethical connotations the Bible has for all those who read it in the light of this type of commitment. The Bible is the guide to the good life and the passages that contain clear moral exhortations are the favorite passages of those committed in this second sense. Religious experience is here seen primarily as moral experience and the person who has learned to live the good life
in peace with the neighbor is the religious individual. Here, too, scholarly study can help to clarify and deepen or critically evaluate this moral commitment by seeing it in a cross-cultural and historical context.

There is an element of the religious reality which does not belong in the secular university. Worship, however valuable to the individual or the community, should be left untouched. It could be examined from the outside, as in a course on liturgy in the School of Music, but not practiced. Anything which demands ultimate commitment, total belief or unbelief, does not properly belong in the university. Here everything must be left open-ended, subject to further examination and revision. Those who claim to have found the ultimate answer are entitled to enjoy it and share it with like-minded friends. If these discoveries are brought to the university for study and evaluation they become forthwith penultimate and subject to critical analysis. This applies to final answers in all fields and religion is no exception.

At this point it may have become more plausible why some friends as well as enemies of religion would like to keep the sacred out of the secular university. The sacred, "the power, being or realm understood by religious persons to be at the core of existence and to have transformative effect on their lives and destinies" is bound to be sensitive and controversial. But what right does the university have to avoid such issues? If they are examined "not indirectly or surreptitiously, but unapologetically, and comprehensively" they will aid the entire universitas, the association of masters and scholars leading the common life of learning, to clarify its complex and controversial goals. Not because the study of religion supplies these goals ready-made and in a final form but because such study illustrates and encourages the perennial search.

Notes
1 M. Willard Lampe, The Story of an Idea: The History of the School of Religion of The University of Iowa, University of Iowa Extension Bulletin, No. 806, Iowa City, Iowa, September 1, 1963
2 The Philosophical Library, New York, 1945
3 Ibid. p. 646
5 The description of the Luckmann position in Peter Berger, The Sacred
Canopy, New York, Doubleday, 1967, p. 177

6 Ibid.

7 Max Mueller, Essay on Comparative Mythology, 1856 as quoted in Berger, The Sacred Canopy, p. 175


9 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Volume I, 2; Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1956, pp. 280 ff.

10 Ibid. p. 303.


14 Ibid.


16 Goodlad, p. 6

17 Ibid.

18 Berger, p. 28


George Wolfgang Forell joined the faculty of the School of Religion at The University of Iowa in 1954. Except for occasional semesters lecturing in universities and seminaries in Europe, Asia, and Africa, as well as in America, his career has been centered in Iowa City. Director of the School of Religion from 1966 to 1971, he was named Carver Distinguished Professor of Religion in 1973. His national and international reputation is based on his work in the field of Christian ethics, especially in the period of the Protestant Reformation. His many publications include Faith Active in Love: The History of Christian Ethics, The Augsburg Confession: A Contemporary Commentary, Christian Social Teachings: The Proclamation of the Gospel in a Pluralistic World, and The Luther Legacy.