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Introduction to *How Should We Talk About Religion?: Perspectives, Context and Particularities*

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INTRODUCTION

James Boyd White

This book had its genesis in a faculty summer seminar held in the year 2000 at the University of Notre Dame, under the auspices of the Erasmus Institute. Our topic was the subject of the present book, which asks, as the title suggests, how we should talk about religion, especially in the languages of our various academic disciplines. The idea of the seminar was to collect a dozen people from very different fields and backgrounds, each of whom in his or her professional work has faced this question in a significant way. Each member of the seminar was responsible for leading a two-hour session on his or her work, beginning with a presentation that was then the subject of questions and comments. As we proceeded we found ourselves engaged in a conversation with its own shape and life, which continues today.

The purpose of the seminar was not to produce a book, but to educate ourselves and each other, expanding in various ways our sense of the reality and complexity of religious experience and intensifying our awareness of the difficulty and necessity of talking about it. When we finished our work together, we looked back over what we had done, saw certain common themes and interests, and concluded that we did have at least the beginnings of a book. There followed years of rewriting, editing, and conversation of other kinds, until we had the book before you, which can be conceived of as a kind of extension of the seminar itself.

These chapters should not be read as a series of unrelated essays aimed at distinct professional audiences—historians or psychologists, say, or philosophers—but as composed for the diverse audience to which they were originally given and then rewritten for the even more diverse audience we hope this book reaches. While each of the writers speaks from a disciplinary base, each of

them also questions the nature and limits of that base, both as an independent matter and in connection with the other essays in this book. The writers of these essays know that they speak in different ways, and that these differences are an important part of our subject.

Our experience, supported we think by that of others, is that it is in fact quite difficult to talk about religion in a satisfactory way, whether we are trying to do so within a discipline such as law or psychology or anthropology, or while speaking in more informal ways with our friends and colleagues. There are many reasons for this: it is in the nature of religious experience to be ineffable or mysterious, at least for some people or in some religions; different religions imagine the world and its human inhabitants, and their histories, in ways that are enormously different and plainly unbridgeable; and there is no super-language into which all religions can all be translated, for purposes either of comparison or of mutual intelligibility. What is more, it seems to be nearly always the case that one religion's deepest truths and commitments, its fundamental narratives, appear simply irrational, even weird, to those who belong to another tradition, or are themselves simply without religion. This means that in any attempt to study and talk about a religion other than one's own there is a necessary element of patronization, at least whenever we are studying beliefs we could not imagine ourselves sharing.

Yet it is of enormous importance to attempt to learn to talk about religion well, if we possibly can, if only for the obvious political and practical reason that religious divisions, both within nations and among them, are often intractable and bitter, and mutual understanding very difficult to attain. Yet it is hard even to imagine an intellectually respectable way of doing this. Think of the anthropologist of religion for example: is he or she to assume that there is a cross-cultural phenomenon called "religion," and if so on what basis? "Religion" is our word, and why should we assume that the Cheyenne, say, or the Hindus of the Indian subcontinent have practices or beliefs that parallel what we know in the West? (Perhaps we should use their words, and see what happens.) Or consider the psychologist, say the psychotherapist working on analytic principles: is he or she to regard the religious beliefs and experiences of a patient as fantasies and wishes of a pathological kind, of which the patient should be cured? Or as healthy formations? If the latter, how can that position possibly be explained in the language of psychology?

Or think of the historian of the Middle Ages, interested perhaps in architecture or philosophy: how is she to come to understand the world of religious meaning in which the people whose work she is describing lived, and how can she represent it in anything other than reduced terms? Or, to shift to another field, how is the economist to think about the tensions between the premises of his economic thought and those of his religious life, or the religious lives of his culture? And how is the political theorist or scientist to resist the tendency of the field to reduce religion to its merely civic utility, or to a social formation that can be discussed in purely sociological terms? Such were the questions that brought us together.

Our diversity of discipline and background, of age and nationality, was a great virtue of our work together, but it is true nonetheless that certain common themes and questions emerged from what we did. I sketch out some of these below, very briefly, as an introduction to the much fuller and richer treatment of these ideas in the chapters that follow, presenting them in the form of questions, most of which each of our writers has in some way addressed.

1. *Is what we call “reason” sufficient for a full intellectual, practical, and imaginative life? To the extent it is not sufficient, what else is required, and what relation should it have to reason?* This is obviously a crucial question in the academic study of religion, which almost by definition involves the assertion and use of capacities of the mind, or self, that cannot sensibly be included in any definition of “reason.” Yet as academics we are committed to reason as our primary instrument of thought and conversation; as members of democratic polities we believe in reasoned deliberation as a central political activity; and so on. If we seek to talk about religion as academics, then, our subject challenges our own habits of thought and expression. The question of the limits of rationality thus naturally arises whenever one studies a religion, or thinks about the connection between religious and secular parts of the culture. (This question figures largely in the essays by Ruth Abbey, Luis Bacigalupo, Patrick Deneen, Javier Iguñiz, and Sol Serrano.)

2. *How adequate are our languages of description and analysis as ways of representing religion?* This question is present in every effort to talk about the religions of others, beginning with the word “religion” itself. Why should Westerners assume that the Japanese or Indonesians, say, have any cultural formation that parallels what we call “religion”? Or think of our religious terms: “god” or

“priest” or “ritual” or “ceremony.” Why should we think any of these apply without great difficulty to another world?

It is obvious that in talking about the religions of others we should make a constant effort to be conscious of the implications of our own language, and aware of what is possibly misleading and incomplete in it. But that is much easier said than done. It is insufficient simply to say such a thing as a general matter, and then forget it; our answer must not be stated but performed, enacted in the way we ask questions, respond to them, seek more general truths—in a sense in every sentence we utter on the subject. (This question is addressed particularly by Clifford Ando, Scott Appleby, and Sabine MacCormack.)

3. *To what degree will any serious confrontation with the religious experience of others be a challenge to our own deepest commitments—whether these are theistic or agnostic or atheistic?* The difficulty here is an obvious one: if you insist on maintaining without change your own worldview—your own sense of the way things are, your own sense of yourself as neutral and objective observer—you may not ever really understand what it is like for other people to imagine the world as they do and to live on those terms. One common response to this gap between worlds is to reduce the religion of others to a list of beliefs, and beliefs that you cannot imagine yourself ever sharing—that the gods live on Olympus, that Apollo represents reason, Dionysus passion, that Zeus is the most powerful, and so on—all of which tells you very little of what it would be like to live in such a world. But as you come to extend yourself and your imagination into the other world, to begin to live on its terms, you begin to accept what at the outset you knew you could never accept. The extreme limit of this movement is to “go native,” and begin to think of yourself as a Hindu, say, or an animist, maybe even converting to the religion in question. So where can one stand between the two points defined by the icy objectivist, who can actually see and understand rather little, and the convert who accepts it all as living truth?

This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that, for many people who live in a particular religious world, their particular religion is not just one among many equally valid systems or forms, but represents the absolute, unique, and eternal truth. All other religions are false. This position is I think impossible for the person who engages seriously with the religious life of others, which means that there is in this sense too a profound tension between the worldview of the comparatist and that of the people she is studying. This tension is a necessary part of our subject, and we need to find ways to think about it. My own sense is that it cannot be resolved; what we need to learn is par-

ticular ways of living with the tension in particular contexts. (The essays by Jeffrey Kripal and Bilinda Straight in particular speak to this difficulty.)

4. This brings us to the next question: *can there be a pluralism that does not dissolve into universal relativism?* This question runs through almost everything we did in the seminar. Indeed, it is the necessary consequence of thoughtful comparative work of any kind. How are we to face the enormous diversity of serious belief, seriously engaged in, that characterizes the human world?

One instinct is to seek a larger or more general framework in which two religious systems both have a place, or more general principles of which each can be instances; but this has the double vice of claiming a coherence that may be false and of creating a language that claims to be a super-language into which each religion can be translated. Another approach would be to seek a sharpened sense of differentiation among religions, coupled, one would hope, with an increase in respect for and appreciation of what is distinctive in each. The idea would be that to see our own position more clearly from the point of view of others does not necessarily lead to its dilution, but perhaps to its intensification, though in a context in which fuller recognition of its relation to others becomes possible.

If I may give an example from my personal experience: for many years I attended a church that shared its building with a Jewish synagogue. When people drove by and saw the Cross and the Star of David side by side, they thought something weird indeed must be going on—the creation of some diluted form of nonreligion in which we all participated together. But in fact the experience of the two congregations was the opposite: not that we became more alike, but that we became more different, or at least more aware of our differences. As the rabbi put it, “When we joined up with you we became more Jewish.” Over the years the main lesson for both congregations was how surprisingly different the other one is; but that was coupled, I believe on both sides, with an increase not only in acceptance but appreciation of the other. (The question of pluralism is the particular concern of the essays by Ruth Abbey, Wayne Booth, and Ebrahim Moosa.)

5. *To what degree must any attempt to talk seriously and deeply about religion be communal, rather than simply the voice of an individual speaking to the world?* The suggestion here is that the kind of thought and conversation that will most advance understanding, especially across lines of difference, can only take place under conditions of trust and respect. If this is right, a part of talking about religion well is thinking about the conditions under which it takes place. I think the performance of the seminar as a whole demonstrates the truth

of the principle that talk about religion, to be successful, should be both sharply diverse and deeply communal. Of course one cannot state a set of rules for the successful intellectual community: it is all a matter of tone and style, the effort to recognize and respect particularities of difference. (The essay by Eugene Garver deals explicitly with one aspect of this question.)

6. *What is the significance of the fact that for many people religious experience is deep and individuated, involving the most complete resources of the soul and reflecting profound differences in the structure and motives of the personality?* The point here is that, although religion obviously has its public face—as a branch of culture, as a system of thought, and as a set of practices—it also has a private face, in the world and mind of the individual person, for whom the meaning of what he or she does and believes may be quite different from that of a neighbor whose stated beliefs and external practices may seem virtually identical. This difficulty runs through every effort to talk about religion. How are we to reflect the fact that for one adherent or practitioner a religion may all be a matter of surface obligation, while for another it may call upon and shape and give life to the very deepest aspects of the self or soul? (In this book, the essay by Carol Bier speaks particularly to this question.)

It should be clear by now that the title of our seminar and this book—*How Should We Talk about Religion?*—is to be taken as a statement of the problem we collectively addressed, not as the promise of a prescriptive answer offered by any individual or by us collectively. Each of the authors had his or her own way of talking about religion, and the merit of this collection lies in large part in the diversity of approach—of discipline and background, age and nationality, religious outlook and intellectual commitment—reflected here. Yet perhaps there is something of an answer to our question that can be found in this collection of essays, for we found that we talked together much better—more fully, more deeply, more intelligently—than any of us did alone. To build on one of the themes identified above, if we have an answer to the question “How to talk about religion?” it is this: in intellectual and personal community.

In talking to one another over two intense weeks we found, not surprisingly, that our conversation improved enormously. We came to know each other better, and responded to each other more fully; and as we came to know and trust one another, we discovered that a wider range of sentences became sayable by the speakers, comprehensible by the listeners. (Perhaps a wider range of sentences became unsayable as well.) In some sense a larger part of the mind of

each of us came to be engaged in this conversation than is normally the case in academic life. As we proceeded, the particularities of each person—in training, commitment, experience, disposition—came to be acknowledged as a necessary part of the conversation itself, for they were what we brought to it, and what we were responding to in each other. We were engaged in a kind of collective thought, which over time became richer and deeper. One way to put this is to say that the question for each of us became not only how to talk, but how to listen to each other talk, about religion.

None of this is surprising, I think, but it is different from much discourse about religion. Compare with the kind of conversation I am describing, for example, a standard academic attempt to speak on the subject of religion—as a psychologist, say, or anthropologist or theologian or sociologist—beginning, as Plato somewhere has Socrates advise us to begin every intellectual exercise, with a definition: “By *religion* I mean,” or “By *Protestantism* I mean,” or “By *textualism* I mean . . .” Here one would be attempting to speak in a universal voice to a universal audience, or if not quite universal, in the voice of a discipline to all members of the discipline. This kind of talk is driven by understandable and meritorious impulses toward clarity, rationality, and neutrality, and of course the enterprise can have great value. But we need to recognize that we may get farther in a different direction working in a different mode, the heart of which is the recognition of particularity: the particularity of the speaker and the audience, the particularity of their context, and the particularity of their subject—which is not religion as a whole, but this or that practice or belief, these sentences or actions, this or that way of imagining the world and acting within it, and as seen from this or that perspective, as the object of this or that question cast in this or that language.

The very fact that we were talking across lines of discipline and language, which was from some perspectives frustrating—none of us could assume that the others in the seminar knew what we could expect everyone in our disciplinary audience to know—had the virtue, among other things, of leading us to think and talk not only about our subject, religion, but also about how we were talking: about the assumptions we were making and about the terms in which we cast our thought. All this gave rise to valuable, if imperfect, self-consciousness about our own disciplinary assumptions and habits, what they were and how they differed from others.

This context made it harder than it often is in an academic setting for each of us to come with hardened positions we were prepared to explicate and defend to the last. And even if we had had such positions, the disciplinary context

in which they would have been framed would have been largely meaningless to the others in the group. We were thus forced as it were into a terrain between the languages of our disciplines, or among them, where none of us claimed to know much and all of us were ready to learn. This was an accident of our organization, but one that may have larger lessons for all of us as a general matter.

Our hope in putting together this book is that the reader will have some of the sense that we had, of collective thought taking place across real differences of training, experience, and disposition, and something like our experience of listening to different minds, working independently and together on different versions of the same deep problems of thought and life.

We do not reproduce here the conversation in which we discussed each other's work and the larger issues it presented, but this book does offer the reader the basis for that conversation—the material that gave rise to it—and this should make it possible for him to construct, in his own way, at least the beginnings of such conversation. If that happens the major purpose of the book will have been achieved. This is especially true if our effort to ask how we should talk about religion across lines of disciplinary difference can be seen as related to a larger problem: how to talk about religion across lives of religious difference. In both situations acceptance of difference, willingness to learn, and trust in each other are crucial to any hope of success.

NOTE

A word about the authors, and the point of view from which each proceeded, is presented here not alphabetically but in the order in which their work appears in this book.

- Luis Bacigalupo teaches medieval philosophy at the Catholic University of Peru. His essay deals with the way in which a narrow conception of scientific rationality that entered Western thought in the Middle Ages has distorted much of our thinking both about religion and about rationality itself.
- Clifford Ando, a classicist at the University of Southern California, treats the puzzle of a single event, the transfer of the statue of the goddess known as the Great Mother from Asia Minor to Rome. At every turn he faces up to the opacity of that event, and the inadequacy of our own language of description to comprehend and represent it.

- Scott Appleby, an historian at Notre Dame, addresses the intellectual and imaginative difficulties involved in thinking about fundamentalism as a cross-cultural category. To use this category, or something like it, seems compelled by the facts of recent history; but at the same time it involves us in the deepest puzzles of intercultural and inter-religious thought.
- Sabine MacCormack, from the classics and history departments of the University of Notre Dame, traces out important aspects of the complex relation between Christianity and the religion of the Incas in the Peruvian Andes as it developed over the past five hundred years.
- Bilinda Straight, an anthropologist at Western Michigan University, focuses on difficulties inherent in trying to understand, imagine, and talk about the religion of another culture—in this case that of the Samburu, who live in what is now Kenya.
- Patrick Deneen, a political theorist at Georgetown, uses the work of Tocqueville to trace the complex and paradoxical relation between faith and democracy in America.
- Wayne Booth (1921–2005), who taught in the English department and the Committee on Ideas and Methods at the University of Chicago, argues that a certain kind of rhetorical method can establish a common ground for science and religion—with the aim not of obliterating their differences but rather of enabling more fruitful conversation to take place between them.
- Eugene Garver, a philosopher from St. John’s University in Minnesota, addresses the question “When and why should we listen to arguments based on a religion we do not share?” His answer draws on Aristotle, and a conception of rationality that connects reason to the degree of trust between speaker and audience; in the doing so he raises an issue large in all religious discourse.
- Javier Iguñiz, an economist at the Catholic University of Peru, traces similarities in the premises, methods, and conclusions of Amartya Sen and Gustavo Gutiérrez in their work on economic development.
- Ruth Abbey, a political theorist at Notre Dame, analyzes the work of Charles Taylor, with a particular interest both in the kind of pluralism he recommends and in his intellectual methods, which are opposed to the schematic rationality of much modern philosophy.
- Sol Serrano, an historian from the Catholic University of Chile, writes of the complex relation between Catholicism and modernity in the history of that country.

- Carol Bier, a research associate at The Textile Museum in Washington, D.C., analyzes the geometric basis and theological significance of pattern and design in Islamic art and architecture, connecting them both to Greek philosophy, especially Plato's *Timaeus*, and to Indian arithmetic.
- Jeffrey Kripal, who teaches religious studies at Rice University, writes about the problems and possibilities of talking about religion in the classroom.
- Ebrahim Moosa, who teaches at Duke, was trained as a Muslim theologian. His essay explores the work of Al Ghazālī (1058–1111), whose theory of language and meaning has current relevance in the effort to establish the possibility of more comprehensive and open religious thought, in Islam and elsewhere.