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Recommended Citation

White, James Boyd. "How to Talk about Religion." *Law Quad. Notes* 44, no. 2 (2001): 66-8.

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How to talk about religion

— BY JAMES BOYD WHITE

The following essay is to be part of an Occasional Paper published by the Erasmus Institute at the University of Notre Dame. It is drawn from an introduction to a book currently in progress, How Should We Talk About Religion?, to be based on the proceedings of a faculty seminar held last summer under the auspices of the Erasmus Institute at Notre Dame and to be published next year by the University of Notre Dame Press. (When they become available, full copies of the Occasional Paper and information on the forthcoming book will be available from the Erasmus Institute, 1124 Flanner Hall, Notre Dame, Indiana 46556-5611, or by e-mail to Erasmus@nd.edu.) James Boyd White was the director of the seminar; the other members, drawn from several disciplines and several parts of the world as well, were:

- *Luis Bacigalupo, who teaches medieval philosophy at the Catholic University of Peru.*
- *Clifford Ando, a classicist at the University of Southern California.*
- *Scott Appleby, an historian at Notre Dame.*
- *Sabine McCormack, from the Classics and History departments of the University of Michigan.*
- *Belinda Straight, an anthropologist at Western Michigan Univesity.*
- *Patrick Deneen, a political scientist at Princeton.*
- *Wayne Booth, from the English Department and the Committee on Ideas and Methods at the University of Chicago.*
- *Eugene Garver, a philosopher from St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota.*
- *Javier Iguiniz, an economist at the Catholic University of Peru.*
- *Ruth Abbey, a political theorist at the University of Kent.*
- *Sol Serrano, an historian from the Catholic University of Chile.*
- *Carol Bier, a curator at the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C.*
- *Jeffrey Kripal, who teaches religious studies at Westminster College.*
- *Luis Gomez, who teaches Buddhist studies and psychology at the University of Michigan.*
- *Ebrahim Moose, who was trained as a Muslim theologian and teaches at Stanford University.*

This project had its genesis in a faculty summer seminar held in June 2000 at Notre Dame University under the auspices of the Erasmus Institute. Our topic was how to talk about religion, particularly in the languages of our various academic disciplines.

Our experience, supported we think by that of others, is that it is most difficult to do this well, whether we are trying to talk about religion within a discipline, such as law or psychology or anthropology, or even 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 there is no superlanguage into which all religions can be translated, for purposes of understanding, comparison, or mutual intelligibility. This point can be put even more strongly: The deepest truths and commitments of one religion, its fundamental narratives, are likely to appear simply irrational, or even weird, to those who belong to another religious tradition, or who are themselves without religion; this means that the attempt to study and talk about a religion (other than one's own) is likely to have a built-in element of patronization, at least when one is studying beliefs one could not imagine oneself sharing.

Yet it is of enormous importance to learn to talk about religion well, 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. And 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 simply 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 Samburu of Kenya, or the Hindus of the Indian subcontinent, have practices or beliefs that in any way parallel what we know in the west? (Perhaps we should use their words, and see what happens.) Or consider the psychologist, especially the psychotherapist: 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, and if so, how can that position be explained in the language of psychology? Or think of the historian of the Middle Ages, interested say in architecture or philosophy or social life more generally: How is he to come to understand the world of religious meaning in which the people he is describing lived, and how can he represent it in anything other than reduced terms? Or: How is the political scientist or theorist to resist the tendencies of the field to reduce religion to its civic utility or to treat it as an object to be discussed simply in sociological terms? Or, to shift to another field, how is the economist to think about the tensions between the premises of economic thought and those of the religious life of his own culture, in which he perhaps participates? Such are the questions that brought us to our work together.

The working idea of the seminar was to collect a dozen or so people from very different disciplines and backgrounds, and of different religious outlooks, too, each of whom in his or her professional work faced our 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.

Our main object 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 sense of the difficulty and necessity of talking about it in our various languages and disciplines. When we finished, we looked back over what we had done, saw that certain themes and questions emerged prominently in our conversations across our lines of difference, and we came to the conclusion that we did have at least the beginnings of a book.

Here are the questions that recurred most prominently in our work:

1. Is reason alone, however defined, 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?
2. How adequate are our languages of description and analysis for the representation of religion?
3. To what degree must confrontation with the religious experience of others be a challenge to our own commitments — whether these are theistic or agnostic or atheist — in order to be real and valid?
4. Can there be a pluralism that does not dissolve into universal relativism?
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?
6. What is the significance of the fact 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?

It should be clear by now that the title of our seminar — *How Should We Talk About Religion?* — is to be taken as a

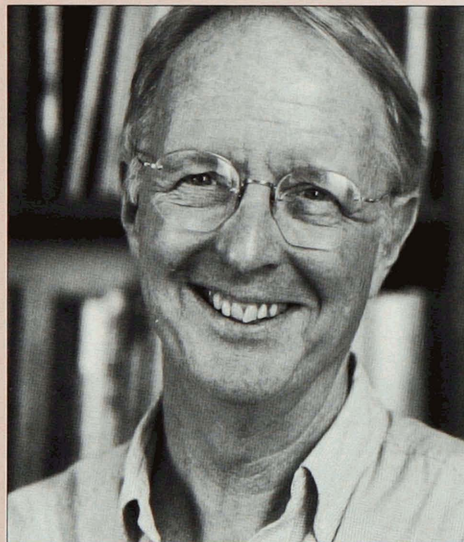
statement of the problem we collectively addressed, not as holding out the promise of a prescriptive answer, offered by any individual or by us collectively. Each of the authors had his or her own way of talking about religion, and the merit of our work lies to a large part in the diversity of approach — of discipline and background, of age and nationality, of religious outlook and intellectual commitment — reflected in it. Yet perhaps there is something of an answer to our question that can be found in this collection of performances, 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 religions?" it is this: In intellectual and personal community.

For in talking to one another over two intense weeks we found, not surprisingly, that our conversation improved enormously as time went on. 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 and 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, I think, surprising, 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 *fundamentalism* 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 towards 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 — we could not assume that our audience knew what everyone in our disciplinary audience knows — 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 up with hardened positions we were prepared to explicate and defend to the death. And even if we had had such positions, the disciplinary context to 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 us as a general matter.



James Boyd White *is a graduate of Amherst College, Harvard Law School, and Harvard Graduate School, where he obtained an M.A. in English. After graduation from law school, he spent a year as a Sheldon Fellow in Europe and then practiced law in Boston for two years. He began his teaching career at the University of Colorado Law School and moved in the mid-1970s to the University of Chicago, where he was a professor in the Law School, the College, and the Committee on the Ancient Mediterranean World. He served as a governor of the Chicago Council of Lawyers and is a member of the American Law Institute and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, and in 1997-98 was a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar. At Michigan, he is a professor of English and an adjunct professor of classical studies as well as the L. Hart Wright Professor of Law. He is also chair of the Michigan Society of Fellows. He has published numerous books:* The Legal Imagination *(1973),* Constitutional Criminal Procedure *(with James Scarboro, 1976),* When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community *(1984),* Heracles' Bow: Essays in the Rhetoric and Poetics of the Law *(1985),* Justice as Translation: An Essay in Cultural and Legal Criticism *(1990),* "This Book of Starres": Learning to Read George Herbert *(1994); Acts of* Hope: The Creation of Authority in Literature, Law, and Politics *(1994); and* From Expectation to Experience: Essays on Law and Legal Education *(1999). His new book,* The Edge of Meaning, *will be published by the University of Chicago Press this summer.*