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Response to Roger Cramton's Article

James Boyd White

I want to direct attention to only one of the many important issues raised by Professor Cramton's article, namely the peculiar division between academic and religious thought in our culture. In the academic world we tend to speak as though all participants in our conversations were purely rational actors engaged in rational debate; perhaps some people out there in the world are sufficiently benighted that they turn to religious beliefs or other superstitions, but that is not true of us or, if it is true, we hide it, and it ought not be true of them. Ours is a secular academy and, we think, a secular state. Connected to this view is our sense of a total opposition between the religious and the rational—by definition, one excludes the other.¹

Yet there are facts inconsistent with this standard academic view. Ours is an extremely, sometimes fervently religious nation, at least in its protestations and in some of its behavior as well, and one wonders about an academic world that seems to be blind to this fact. To speak simply in terms of survival, if there were to be a struggle between the majority that thinks itself religious and the minority that thinks itself not, it is easy to predict who would win. But the costs are much greater than that. It would have astonished most of the great religious thinkers of our own tradition, and many other traditions, too, to hear it said that there was a blanket opposition between the religious and the rational, as though religion consisted of nothing more than an act of faith about which nothing could be said. There are of course some people who take such a view of their own religious experience, but the history of the Western world is in large measure the history of sophisticated religious thought and argument. The "religion" that eschews thought would be thought by many not to deserve the name. And one might claim that "thought" as resolutely secular as the modern academic kind is less than wholly deserving of its name, too.

Our fears of religious oppression, and perhaps our fears of religious truth, lead us to maintain a false ideology: false in its picture of the world

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1. Thus it is that Professor Greenawalt of Columbia, to mention a scholar of particular distinction, begins his fine article about the proper place of religious thought in government by accepting the view, if only to complicate it later, that religion is not "rational." Kent Greenawalt, *Religious Convictions and Lawmaking*, 84 Mich. L. Rev. 352 (1985).

around us, false in its picture of ourselves, and false in its conception of what thought is. I have no easy remedy for this problem—surely freedom of religion is essential in the classroom as in life—but I do think we should ask ourselves whether we cannot find ways of talking that will reflect, more adequately than our present languages do, what we know to be true of ourselves, of our minds and our world.