THE FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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We are without a word for this academic discipline, analogous to psychology or sociology. "Religiology" sounds barbarous. "Theology" is a related, but different kind of enterprise(the normative exposition of a particular religious perspective). The absence of a name reflects the fact that Religious Studies is perhaps .the youngest of the academic disciplines, and further suggests that scholars in this area are experiencing all the academic growing pains of a new discipline.

To this point in its young life, generally speaking, Religious Studies has established itself as a critical and analytical academic enterprise, frequently by having internalized and developed methodologies from other fields(history, psychology, sociology). In this regard the influence of figures like Marx and Traud has been marked. Religious Studies has also established its own kind of disciplined descriptive approach to religious experience(phenomenology), which seeks to depict religion as it appears in human experience, as "the encounter with the Sacred"(Mircea Eliade), rather than always reducing religion, consciously or unconsciously, to other modes of human experience(psychological, social, political).

While the analytical and descriptive kinds of research and reflection have been relatively well-established in Religious Studies, scholars in the field have generally shied away from normative questions, in keeping with the practices of most academic disciplines. In what sense must the discipline presuppose, as Robert BeHah has stated baldly, that "religion is true"? In addition to describing and analysing religion, should not scholars be prepared to evaluate religion? Should Religious

themselves be involved in the religious life in some personal, existential way?

Illodc for Religious Studies in the future to continue to be shaped by concern for analysis and description of religion. But I suspect that the normative dimension, alluded to by the foregoing questions, will continue to move toward a place of prominence. This is already to be seen in the influence the "particularisms" of our decade harm has exerted on the field: black theology, feminist theology, ecological theology, liberation theology. Scholars who write from these vantage points have not been content merely to describe religion or to analyze how it has functioned in human life. They have written in order to change religion, and with it society, too.

Normative concerns, I think, will also be more and more in evidence insofar as scholars increasingly ponder the paradox of having to experience •• not just observe — religion in order to understand it with full objectivity. "Understand," after all, means just that: being impressed with the data of religious experience, "standing under" the power of the Sacred, not merely standing apart from religion. It comes as no surprise, then, to note that the New England Section of the American Academy of Religion will focus on "the experiential teaching of religion" at its apiiing meeting at Wellesley, th&s spring.

Perhaps before too long, when the descriptive, analytical, and normative elements of the field have been better integrated, Religious Studies will find a name for itself, a "logos." But some, myself included, find the present situation of growing pains to be a tire of wide-ranging creativity in the discipline. We hope that the discipline will not grow up too soon.