RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN A RELIGIOUSLY PLURAL SOCIETY
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Graduate studies are, in any society, an amazing luxury. To get a sense of this, we have only to ask ourselves this: if faced with a choice between maintaining its scholars or its garbage collectors, which would a society pick? Yes, scholarship is a great privilege, and the adequate response to privilege is gratitude and responsibility. Today I'd like to explore with you what is entailed in the responsibility graduate religious studies bears in relation to North American societies and the world. I will necessarily speak from the perspective of a citizen of the United States but, I hope, with some suggestions that can be critically appropriated by Canadians. I will also confess that when George Bush was (sort of) elected president of the United States I tried, unsuccessfully as yet, to reactivate the Canadian citizenship I held as a child.

In my 1999 presidential address at the American Academy of Religion annual meeting I spoke of three publics that religious studies must address and engage. These publics are the university, the churches, and the public. Today I want to focus on the third, public life because this "public" is often ignored as scholars engage with churches and universities. Does our often esoteric and specialized study in Religious Studies departments contribute in any way to critically important public conversations?

The question I'd like to consider is this: Can religion, which has so often divided people and set them in opposition to one another, serve the *common good* in the twenty-first century? Is it possible to be passionately committed to

one's own religion and, at the same time, humble about its universal truth claims? This question has been made utterly urgent by recent terrorist activity ostensibly based on religious convictions. Can people who *study* religions offer resources that address the dramatic problems of public life in an increasingly small world? I believe that we can do so in several ways, but that we also lack some critical information that would make us more effective public intellectuals.

First, I must sketch the present situation of religion in North America. North Americans are becoming increasingly religious, even though many of us shy away from thinking of our commitments as religious because we are critical of some features of religious institutions and people. But Christians--Protestants and Roman Catholics—and Jews, though still numerically dominant in North America, no longer fill the religious landscape. Several years ago Professor Diana Eck at Harvard University published a study entitled "On Common Ground: World Religions in America." The book includes a directory that includes Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain temples, Islamic Centers, Sikh gurdwaras, Baha'I temples, pagan groups, and Zoroastrian Centers. I do not know of a comparable study for religions in Canada, but I expect that a similar situation exists here. Professor Eck also found that religious loyalties are shaped by ethnic identities: "There are Hispanic Baptists, Chinese Catholics, and Cambodian Buddhists. Los Angeles has over 200 Buddhist temples with congregations from all over the world." These religious groups do not exist across vast geographical distances from one another as in the very recent past. We are neighbors, on the same block, across the street, or down the road from one another.

The diversity of North American religious life is rapidly creating a new, demanding and stimulating situation. What does it mean to be religious in a society in which one's own religious beliefs and practices are not broadly

shared? In such a situation, can religion serve the *common* good rather than act as an isolating and self-aggrandizing force? Can people of diverse religions find warrants *within* their religion for working together with those of other religions to create social and economic justice in the world? Can a liberal interest in broad religious freedoms be modified by progressive commitment to the common good?

In his book, Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy, Stephen Macedo cites religious enthusiasms alongside tribalisms of various sorts as dangers to liberal democracy.[1] His view of religion as divisive and potentially dangerous to the common good is shared, I think, by a multitude of North Americans. Historically, it is a well-earned reputation. And presently religion's divisiveness is easily documented by religious strife across the globe. Both outsiders and insiders often view religion as essentially partisan, irrational, and unconcerned with the realities of people's lives. This caricature of religion will need to be overcome if religion is to serve the common good. Macedo warns that we must not ignore the amount of "moral convergence it takes to sustain a constitutional order that is liberal, democratic, and characterized by widespread bonds of civic friendship and cooperation."[2] Before such moral convergence can be approached, religious people of all persuasions will need to undergo a great deal of critical self-scrutiny. This is precisely where people trained in religious studies can help. Our study of our own and others' religions reveal similarities and differences that can promote understanding and conversation. I will mention these ways and then return to discuss each further.

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1 Stephen Macedo, Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard, 2000), 276.
2 Ibid., 2.

First, we can model fruitful interreligious dialogue. Second, as historians we can identify the concrete social, political, and institutional circumstances in which doctrinal and practical decisions were made as a basis for asking whether those decisions need to be revised in our own circumstances. Third, we can explore underdeveloped strains within our religious traditions that offer alternatives to those strands of fanaticism that invite media attention. Fourth, we can model fruitful self-criticism.

These suggestions of what religious studies scholars *can do* can be summarized: we can offer our training in analytical and *critical* thinking in public discussions on issues central to the common good. We can, in gratitude and responsibility for the privilege of study, help people who do not have this opportunity to respond to a changing religious situation in non-fearful and generous ways. For religions must change if we are to flourish in a religiously plural society. Yet change is deeply unsettling on psychological and intellectual levels, frequently prompting increments of fundamentalism and fanaticism.

In a religiously diverse society, what it means to be religious is changing. The struggle to believe, and to believe *in*, a dogmatic system is no longer quite at the center of what it means to be a religious person today. From John Bunyan in the seventeenth century, to the existentialist movement in the twentieth century, the anguished intellectual struggles of individuals to believe certain difficult doctrines have occupied much of the literature about religion. But religious communities are not primarily communities of people who believe and think in unison. They are communities of people who come together to encourage each other--to "egg each other on"--to live out, to body forth, their commitments to religious worldviews and values in very practical and concrete ways. Insight into specific teachings can occur through *practicing* religious commitment in such communities.

Second, if religion is to serve the common good in the twenty-first century, students of religious histories can point out the danger of religious chauvinism, whose most blatant form is religious wars. Most religions have a shameful past in which religious coercion has been practiced whenever there has been the power to do so. It is time to notice that people of different religions have more in common with one another than do people who claim no religious orientation. But sibling rivalry lingers and can be a very potent form of conflict, as anyone who grew up in a family can attest. Can religious and cultural diversity become an asset as religious people imagine and implement the *common* good?

A more subtle form of religious chauvinism than religious wars has been prevalent in scholarship itself. In the mid-twentieth century the theologian Paul Tillich pointed out that scholars tend to describe their own religion on its most profound level, while considering other religions on their most superficial levels, as "futile human attempts to reach God." Religious Studies scholars can show that it is possible to believe strongly in the divine revelation of one's own religion while recognizing that its beliefs and practices emerged in history as human efforts to give form and substance to that revelation. As human products, then, religious beliefs, practices, and institutions are always in need of critical scrutiny. Religious people must constantly ask: Do our religious institutions, language, and rituals effectively body forth our trust in the generous and life-giving heart of the universe?

What if, instead of thinking of religions primarily as defined by beliefs, we were to think of religions as based on communities, worldviews, and practices that encourage their members to *treat* each other in certain ways. If, for example, we understand the center of reality as a loving, life-giving energy, we will realize that we must treat one another and all living beings with respect and

responsibility. When we think of religions as providing orienting pictures of a greater whole in which all living beings are interrelated and interdependent, we will not worry so much about possessing the only Truth. We will become interested--fascinated--by others' ways of describing and practicing their commitment to the good of the whole. We will come to understand the ultimate mystery in which we live and the richness of considering our own religious identities in conversation with people of religions other than our own. For finally, the diversity of American public life is not merely to be tolerated; it is a profoundly exciting opportunity to learn from, and delight in, our religious differences.

The fourth contribution religious studies students can make is in the area of cultural criticism. For example, if religion is to serve the common good, the assumption that religious and social values necessarily confirm and support one another must be questioned. Historically, religious warrants have been regularly invoked to sanction social arrangements, economic policies, political stances, gender roles and expectations, and assumptions about race and class. But a religious identity should challenge rather than reinforce the values of North American consumer and entertainment culture.

Consider an example from my childhood: My parents placed John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress on my bedside table and urged me to read it. I sometimes did, when nothing more exciting was available. The Pilgrim's Progress, a seventeenth-century devotional manual that was a best seller for centuries, offers some not-so-subtle gendered instructions for living a Christian life. When the protagonist, Christian, receives training in how to conduct the Christian life, he is taught to be on the alert for, and to fight against, adversaries of all sorts. When Christiana, Christian's wife, is given parallel instructions, she is taken to a shed where a sheep is being slaughtered. Her

instructor says to her, “You must learn of this sheep to suffer, and to put up with wrongs without murmurings or complaints. Behold how quietly she takes her death and, without objecting, she suffers her skin to be pulled over her ears.” These devotional instructions supported and reinforced—rather than challenging—both characters’ gender socialization in seventeenth-century England. A deliberately chosen and cultivated religious life should instead provide an alternative perspective from which to look critically at one’s socialization and one’s society.

Finally, religious studies scholars can suggest that some forms of traditional and contemporary spirituality do not contribute to the common good. The word "spirituality" is often used today as an antonym to "religious." People say, for example, "I'm not religious, but I'm a very spiritual person." What does this statement mean? It could mean that the person rejects religious organizations but acknowledges some of the values ordinarily associated with religious worldviews. Or, the person who claims to be "spiritual but not religious" may avoid religious community and practices, thinking of spirituality as disembodied, a transcendence of body by mind. It could, and often has, meant that the person claiming “spirituality” without religion seeks to disconnect spirituality from political and social responsibility.

No spirituality should help us transcend the needy world in which we live, a world that requires our attention, our affection, and, most of all, our work. Christianity has traditionally been very concerned about the danger of attachment to power and possessions, but the equal dangers of resignation, passivity, cynicism, and indifference to the suffering and struggling of other living beings have not been articulated as frequently or forcefully. To be sure, the possibility of transcending our immediate circumstances is, in some

situations, a useful insight. But as a statement about what Christianity most centrally *is*, it is dangerous.

Similarly, Christians often emphasize the power and majesty of God in ways that de-emphasize human responsibility. Theologies that focus on humans' child-like dependence on God can fail to challenge to mature acceptance of responsibility and accountability. In the last presidential election, over 50% of eligible Americans did not vote. An even more alarming statistic is that among 18-24-year olds, voter participation was below 30%. Among Western-style democracies, the United States is 52nd of 58 in voter participation.3 The feminist philosopher Dorothy Dinnerstein once wrote, "We never feel as grown-up as we expected to feel when we were children." Because we do not always (or, perhaps, often) feel confident and capable, we evade responsibility. Yet *we are* the grown-ups.

To summarize: I defined religion in a way that highlights, not beliefs and institutions, but relationships within and across communities and among all living beings. Religion is about how we care for one another, for life in its many forms, and for the earth's precious and vulnerable resources. Second, I suggested that we need to think of religions as offering resources for vivid and passionate engagement with our needy world in collegial conversation with religious others. Third, I urged that we distinguish between our religious commitments and our socialized assumptions and attitudes. Finally, I urged that we resist disembodied spiritualities and accept the responsibility of working together to address the urgent needs of our unjust world. For there is a great deal of work to be done.

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3 Fred Newman, "The Performance of Revolution," in Postmodern Psychologies, Social Practice, and Political Life, Lois Holzman and John Morss, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 167.

Having discussed several short-sighted attitudes I inherited from my fundamentalist upbringing, I should acknowledge an attribute of fundamentalist religion that I continue to value highly and have endeavored to bring with me through radical changes in my religious convictions. That quality is passion. I miss, in much of liberal Christianity, the passion with which my parents held their religious loyalties. I do find this passion, however, in the socially concerned Christianity of Walter Rauschenbusch. That tradition is alive and well today in a variety of social movements from religiously motivated ecological movements to political activism.

The task of finding common ground from which to imagine the common good does not require that Americans adopt a religious "melting pot" ideology. The distinctive character of each religion must be maintained, even strengthened. Americans can learn to describe their own religion articulately and yes, passionately, while yet listening attentively and respectfully to others' descriptions of *their* religious worldviews and values. As a Christian I must ask, What does it mean to follow Christ in a religiously plural society? And I must trust that others will ask, What does it mean to follow the prophet Mohammed, or the Buddha, or, what does it mean to be a faithful Jew in a religiously plural society?

In short, I believe that a new humility must inspire efforts to relieve the social ills of North American societies. Scholars can model a new willingness to converse and to work across religious barriers, beyond mainstream Protestantism and Catholicism with people of other religious commitments.

The challenge for Christian theologians is to identify and articulate the *theological* reasons for social concern and action in cooperation with religious others. As so frequently in the history of Christianity, practice is once more preceding theology. Myriad local cooperative ventures among churches,

temples, and congregations are already in process, and have been for at least the last fifteen years. At the end of their 1984 sociological study, Varieties of Religious Presence: Mission in Public Life, the editors offer their reflections on their study of socially active congregations in relation to others that are unengaged from social concern. Their cautious conclusion is instructive. A congregation, they say, "though profoundly shaped by social context and the social class of its members [can] in a limited way [transcend] the determinative power of its context" by invoking values from its religious tradition. "Neither religious beliefs or social factors. . .completely determines the other."4

This is a critical finding; its importance cannot be overestimated. What it means is that people can, to some extent, transcend the social conditioning of their class and social location when the values of their religious tradition are presented to them with articulate passion. Religious traditions provide one of the few alternative perspectives Americans have from which to examine and remedy the social health of our nations and our small planet. It is our religious traditions that urge us to look beyond the Gross Domestic Product, the Dow Jones, and the Index of Leading Economic Indicators to assess "how we're doing" as a nation.

At the age of one hundred years, at the close of a richly productive life, the nineteenth century African American educator Anna Julia Cooper wrote: "It's not what you say, or even what you do that matters. It's what you *stand* for." Becoming a person, a community, or a nation unified *enough* to stand for something is not easy in a culture organized by consumption and pacified by entertainment. In fact, those of us who study history know that personal and

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4 David A. Roozen, William McKinney, and Jackson W. Carroll, Varieties of Religious Presence: Mission in Public Life (New York: Pilgrim, 1984).

communal integration has ever been easy or automatic. Becoming a person or a society that can stand for something is, and has always been, a project, a specifically *religious* project. For we do not, finally, have the prerogative of *not* being religious. Our loyalties, longings, and goals effectively organize and direct our choices. Whether acknowledged as religious or not, they constitute our religion. We can be religious in ways that are isolating and self-serving. Or we can be religious by working to spread the gifts of love, beauty, and life to all living beings.

It is an exciting and a demanding time to be both a religious studies scholar and a person with religious convictions and commitments. In the rich religious diversity of our world, let us accept the responsibility of grown-ups to work together to address the needs of our planet. Let us seek the conversations that help us to recognize, to appreciate, and finally to delight in, the many ways of seeking and bodying forth the sacred that surround us in the twenty-first century.