

Teaching Religion and Religious Teaching

by Philip Jenkins



Anna Mueck-Wodecki

Some years ago, I was in Washington, D.C., for the annual convention of the American Academy of Religion, a vast gathering of college professors teaching in the area of Religious Studies, when an astonished cabdriver asked me who all these hordes of people were. When I explained the conference to him, he whistled and said, "Think of it, 7,000 pastors all in one place." I'm not exactly sure if he was impressed or horrified: perhaps he was worried about his tips. But he reflects a common notion, that to have an academic interest in religion must reflect not only a faith commitment, but an active ministry. As the director of a Religious Studies program, I am periodically asked whether I am ordained, or if I am an ex-priest (I'm neither), and whether the title should be "Father" or "Reverend" (each has its arcane charms).

The sheer scale of the academic enterprise called Religious Studies can come as a shock to those familiar with customary complaints about the neglect of things religious in American public life, and especially in the universities, those fortresses of what Stephen L. Carter has termed the "culture of disbelief." In fact, most American universities, even the most avowedly secular, offer some sort of teaching in the general area of religion or religious studies. But while the field of Religious Studies is generally doing very well, its curious arm's-length relationship with the practice of religion has created a paradoxical environment that may well be unique within the academic world, in which the application of lived experience is often discouraged. In public universities at least, religion must of necessity be taught as something that those people over there do, not what "we" do. We must always be cautious about crossing the dreaded borderline that leads us into advocacy: from teaching *about* religion to teaching religion. One consequence is that while all religions may be studied and taught, least attention is

generally paid to those traditions in which students are likely to have a serious or direct interest, and which are most likely to have an impact on the real world. All this at a time when an understanding of religion and religious motivation may for most educated people be the most glaring gap in the appreciation of politics no less than literature or art.

The situation is all the odder because it stands in sharp contrast to other academic trends which favor positions of advocacy and involvement, and the vigorous promotion of particular cultures or interest groups. Briefly, if we follow the logic of typical "diversity" programs on a campus, there is no reason why we should not abandon restraints about preaching from the lectern. I am certainly not suggesting this, but it is useful to ask why standards of self-restraint and objectivity have to be applied so rigorously in one realm, and abandoned so thoroughly in another.

The curious position of religious study in academe can largely be traced to the flowering of such programs and departments during the 1960's, an ecumenical age in which it was far from respectable to assert the superiority of any one tradition. There was therefore no need to view Christianity as any more deserving of treatment than Buddhism or Hinduism, and there was a sense that Christianity could safely be left to the seminaries. Moreover, the scholarship of mid-century tended to view all religions with equal skepticism, in that all were largely artifacts of interest to the anthropologist or psychologist. There was no sense of danger that Christianity itself would cease to be familiar, not least because so many of the Religious Studies teachers of that period were themselves trained in seminaries or divinity schools, and a sizable number were themselves ordained. And the students were presumed to derive from the wider "Judeo-Christian" culture, so why tell them about what they already knew?

Resistance to advocacy or proselytizing was also a prerequisite of teaching such programs in public universities, which were so conscious of being secular institutions. This attitude is

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symbolized by the physical construction of the chapel at my own university, Penn State, in which the architects militantly refused to include any specifically religious symbol, preferring instead a series of abstract designs equally incomprehensible to all, creating a state of ecumenical bafflement. We seemed to be practicing an “absolute separation of campus and state.”

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It was all reasonable enough in its time, but the situation then changed radically with the steep decline of general cultural literacy, which included familiarity with religious traditions. There was also a growing division between the religious liberalism of an older generation and a surging fundamentalism which is quite evident among many students—Christians most obviously, but also among Jews, Muslims, and Hindus. We live in an age that has been described, in the title of Gilles Kepel’s recent book, as “the revenge of God,” when ideas that would once have seemed intolerably fundamentalist have come to reshape politics, whether in North America or Israel, in the lands of Islam and Hinduism. And those ideas which have grown most explosively have been precisely those which had been declared safely dead in the 1960’s, such as Orthodox Judaism, evangelical Christianity, Pentecostalism, even theocratic ideas like Christian Reconstructionism. In American politics alone, we think of the religious element that pervades such basic social debates as those concerning abortion, homosexuality, and women’s rights, to say nothing of Middle Eastern policy. For tens of millions of Americans, unequivocal support for the state of Israel is literally a matter of faith. Most surveys suggest that perhaps 50 percent of Americans accept a biblically based view of creation, a figure with vast implications for educational policy. And yet, university courses on American religion still tend to treat contemporary evangelical and fundamentalist notions as some bizarre product of the backwoods, a kind of subset of snake-handling.

Of course this is a generalization, which would be challenged in some notable departments, but the basic observation is fair. If we just consider the case of Christianity, we find that higher education, like the wider culture, has lost much of the essential sense of familiarity with the everyday reality of the religion. This is suggested by the recent vogue for books on the strange and distant world of the Christian congregation or seminary.

Fifty or 100 years ago, the ordinary reader might be expected to be interested in exotic and unfamiliar settings like the Upper Amazon or New Guinea. Today, we are presumed to be familiar with the basic assumptions of non-European religious groups, but are deeply interested in visiting the world portrayed in Gary Dorsey’s recent book *Congregation*, which explains what it is like to live and worship in a New England congregation of the United Church of Christ: a peculiar modern exoticism. Even more alien is the spiritual realm depicted in Mike Bryan’s *Chapter and Verse*, which records the experiences of the intrepid anthropologist who spent a year in a fundamentalist Southern Baptist seminary in Darkest Dallas.

In short, it is now Christianity which is presumed to be in need of scholarly exposition. The point was aptly made in a thoughtful article some years ago in the *New York Times* by Peter Steinfels. Commenting on the film *Black Robe*, which portrays the experience of 17th-century Jesuit missions to the Canadian Indians, Steinfels writes: “The contemporary audience comes to the theater more primed to be sympathetic to the shamanistic world view of the Indian tribes than to the ascetic missionary faith of seventeenth-century French Jesuits . . . that audience has been better introduced to the inner world of dreams and omens, the She-Manitou and forest spirits, than to the workings of Counter-Reformation spirituality. . . . There is a lesson here in these days of multiculturalism. No less than understanding other cultures, one of its greatest challenges may simply be a sympathetic understanding of the Western culture of a few centuries past.”

Academic departments of religion reflect the wider culture, and this is most apparent in the course offerings for students. Courses that have been flourishing within Religious Studies still tend to be those in Asian religions, as well as preliterate cultures and ritual studies, while the hottest growth areas in the last decade or two have predictably involved issues of gender and sexual preference. Courses on women and religion proliferate, as do those on gay and lesbian religious issues. This does not mean that Christianity is omitted from the curriculum of public universities, and biblical studies are in good health. However, the main thrust of research and teaching tends to be in “Christian foundations” rather than in contemporary issues.

Many departments offer courses in Christianity, but relatively few in individual traditions or denominations, and even rarer are such themes of contemporary interest as Catholic issues, the Evangelical or Pentecostal traditions, or the Orthodox churches. Regardless of whether universities have a duty to teach “Western traditions,” a case can certainly be made for coverage of such individual schools of thought, if only in terms of numbers: Roman Catholics alone are more numerous than the adherents of any non-Christian religion, and even the Pentecostals are probably outnumbered only by Hindus and Muslims worldwide. And as for their “relevance” (that vogue word of the last three decades), would anyone seriously try and understand the emerging Russian state without some appreciation of the historic contributions of Orthodox Christianity? Certainly students of politics know this, and not for nothing is the section on religion and politics the fastest-growing segment of the American Political Science Association. Getting God back into the classroom might be desirable; getting Him into the State Department seems essential.

The commonest type of “religious study” which students are

likely to encounter is an introduction to world religions, which in various forms is a fixture of many large universities. The problems here can be summarized in the cynical description of this class, as "If it's Tuesday, it must be Buddhism." A session on Hinduism will generally lead to one on Buddhism, and one on "other Indian traditions," before moving on to the religions of China and Japan. Ultimately we progress through the monotheist traditions, with an inevitable if unintentional message of evolutionary sequence, until we reach the New Age and post-Christian views which, logically, would appear to be the endpoint of spiritual evolution. Furthermore, the structure of this comparative religion approach offers an uncanny if ironic echo of the old courses of scientific atheism that used to grace university curricula in the Soviet Union. The first weeks always began with a description of the common patterns of world religions, with the aim of showing that they offered nothing distinctive, and were thus all equally human creations.

Textbooks for this vast and profitable market vary greatly in quality, but most make quite depressing reading. Very much "written by committee," they bend over backward to avoid giving the slightest offense, which in practice means avoiding any form of evaluation, criticism, or controversy. To give an absurd example, one of the best-selling textbooks nationwide praises Muhammad to the point of asserting that his words could not have been produced by human wisdom alone, an explicit Muslim declaration of faith which is then immediately contradicted by equally fulsome praise for the founders of other religions. I would probably have preferred a positive Muslim bias to the anodyne desire to avoid insulting anyone.

In this situation, Christianity is considerably less than *primus inter pares*. While this religious tradition is depicted as one among several, it also suffers the drawback of being the spiritual home (however remote) of a majority of students and faculty. This causes a painful paradox: many students come to classes with a definite sense of conviction, quite possibly believing that the area under discussion is the most important thing in the world, literally a matter of life and death. Meanwhile, though at least some of the instructors can reflect this perspective in their personal lives, they are by definition forbidden from expounding their beliefs in detail.

Within the current ethos of higher education, a department is theoretically free to appoint someone who will make outrageous claims about the historical atrocities committed by Christianity, and generally be violently antireligious, as that can be defended on the grounds of academic freedom. The instructor can more or less get away with murder for any period after about A.D. 150, and can freely parade any sort of derogatory tale about the Church Fathers—and of course, some of them well deserve it. He can tell the worst and most discredited legends about early Christian crimes, and draw heavily on the anticlericalism of a Gibbon or a Voltaire. He can tell how Christian monks murdered the noble pagan philosopher Hypatia. But conversely, one has to be very careful about a positive faith commitment, for fear that it may spill over into advocacy, the eighth deadly sin.

At its worst, this suspicion about the religious believer can lead to a tacit demand that the teacher will exercise discretion verging on subterfuge. The dilemma is illustrated by the situation of departments which license instructors to teach occasional courses at a campus. Their résumés often describe years of theological training and ministry, and it is up to the

academic unit or a committee to assess whether these people know the proper lines that exist between religious studies education and religious advocacy, and whether they will respect that. Does the person recognize the distinction between devotional and critical scholarship? Crudely put, do they know when to hold their tongues? The task is unpleasant in many ways, but an error can potentially open the way to complaint and scandal.

This issue of advocacy is ironic, as it is founded upon a notion of objective and dispassionate teaching that is diametrically opposed to much contemporary pedagogical theory, which simply denies that one can escape from one's ideological biases. Overt commitment is inevitable, and desirable. This theme is especially represented in feminist pedagogy, which seeks from the student a degree of personal involvement and "consciousness-raising" that would be utterly unacceptable in a religious context. Courses in Women's Studies commonly demand that students write a paper "from a feminist perspective," and pupils are graded on journals reflecting their intensified awareness of their gender roles and experiences of discrimination. Far from apologizing for such advocacy, feminist teachers assert that these experiential methods are the only means of teaching in this area. Obviously, no public university would tolerate an instructor who demanded that a term paper be written from a Christian or Jewish or Muslim perspective, with the implication that doctrinal error would lead to a lesser grade, and still less a course which demanded the presentation of an intimate spiritual diary. And how on earth would one grade such a thing? There are also classes which discourage male participation: Would anyone care to imagine what would happen to a college instructor whose "Christianity 101" course excluded non-Christians?

The approach to religious "advocacy" also runs contrary to ideas of cultural identity and authenticity. In the study of Islam or Hinduism, for example, it is now considered quite suspect for an academic unit to draw its teachers from Westerners who observe the tradition from outside. These tend to be seen as "Orientalists" interpreting an exotic world for the instruction and amusement of a First World American audience. What we need, we are told, is people who can overcome this colonialist perspective, to teach the traditional from within, so that here at least, it is not just legitimate but essential for a religion to be described by an adherent of the faith, if not actually a partisan.

A similar debate has recently erupted within American Judaism, and specifically in those universities in which Jewish Studies programs of great intellectual quality have proliferated. In July 1996, Queens College in New York City announced the appointment of a non-Jewish professor to chair its Jewish Studies program, a man of strong academic credentials in the study of Yiddish culture, though lacking the doctorate necessary for admission to the academic circus. The response was a furor from Jewish newspapers, on the grounds of ethnicity rather than lack of formal qualifications: one asked why Queens could not have found "a nice Jewish boy to do the job." The resulting controversy soon led to the resignation of the appointee amid charges of racial bigotry. Admittedly, the Queens College case involved the head of a program rather than merely the instructor of a course or courses, but the case raised questions about the relationship between teaching and commitment. If it is becoming difficult to imagine courses on Islam taught by a non-Muslim, Hinduism by a non-Hindu, and even Judaism by a non-Jew, then why is active Christianity not a strong recom-

mendation, or even a *sine qua non*, for courses on Christianity?

One facile answer to this question is that Christianity, unlike the other religions, is associated with those dominant cultural and political trends that have become so unfashionable under stigmatizing terms like the "West," "imperialism," "hegemonic" culture, and so on. The argument always was weak, but is now essentially obliterated: Africa and Latin America have long been shaped by both Catholic and Protestant traditions, and today both are leading centers of Christian growth. How better to study non-European cultures and "diversity" than through a religion which for its first 1,000 years had the great majority of its adherents located in Africa and Asia, and which is rapidly returning to this situation? And logically, the best way to portray these traditions might be through the mouths of Nigerian Baptists, Korean Catholics, or Brazilian Pentecostals. Even to broach the possibility is to see why it could never happen: they would just preach at the students, wouldn't they? The insulting assumption is that Christians in teaching positions proselytize, while members of other religions are merely stating and reasserting their cultural traditions and proper pride, making valuable contributions from their store of life-experience.

There is, in short, no logical reason why, on the analogy of other religious trends, public universities should prevent a development of "Christian Studies" taught from a Christian perspective. Opinions will differ about such a development, but I for one would find it unacceptable, on exactly the same

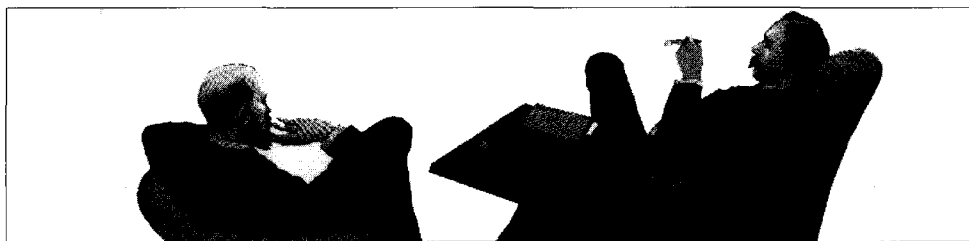
grounds that I would reject the idea of advocacy teaching from any other perspective, feminist, racial, or ethnic nationalist. Like any other specialized ethnic or religious "studies" unit, such operations are only rendered tolerable if, at least in theory, participation is open to nonmembers, to nonadherents: if a Gay Studies program can occasionally be headed by a heterosexual, a Women's Studies unit by a man, a Jewish Studies operation by a Gentile, Black Studies by a white or Hispanic, and so on. The nature of people's interests means that, normally, these exceptions will not be required, but the possibility must be there. The same principle extends to the teaching of regular courses on different religions, where the best approach to the religious outlook of the particular instructor should properly follow the much-maligned military principle of "don't ask, don't tell." That will mean that we have Jews teaching courses on Hinduism, Muslims on Judaism, and—who knows?—Christians on Christianity.

How far such teachers should identify themselves for what they are, to speak from a given position of faith, is a vexed question that travels far beyond the world of religious study strictly defined. Somewhere down the road, we need to think hard about when and where ideas of advocacy, involvement, and commitment belong in the university, whether inside or outside religion classes. It is not only religious orthodoxies that produce fundamentalists and proselytizers, and having a secular university should not mean that it is legitimate to become fanatical about everything *except* religion. <C>

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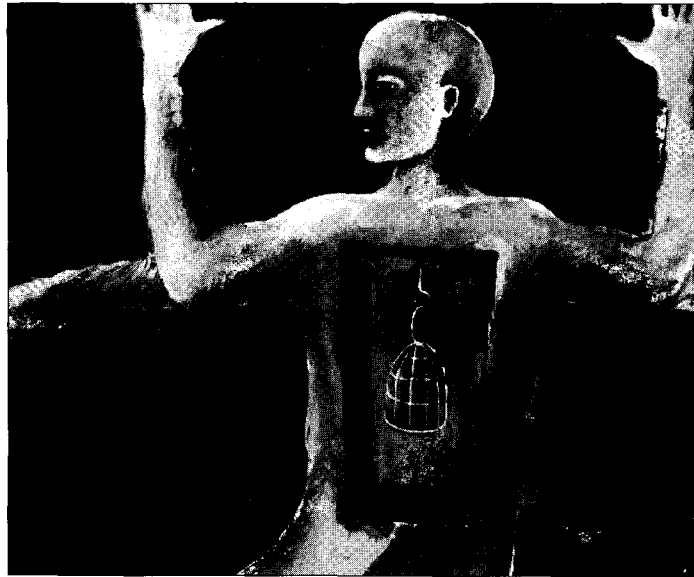
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Germans in the Dock

by Curtis Cate

"The German may be a good fellow, but it is better to hang him."

—Russian Proverb



Anna Myreck-Wodczi

**Hitler's Willing Executioners:
Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust**
by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.;
622 pp., \$30.00

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This is a disturbing book: not simply because the author, an assistant professor of government at Harvard, points an accusing finger at the German people whom he implicitly accuses of having been Hitler's willing accomplices in the implementation of the "final solution" (the eradication of Jews from German society), but for its claim that the general mood of anti-Semitism, pervading all strata of German society in the 1930's and making the holocaust possible, owed a great deal to age-old anti-Jewish prejudices and stereotypes inculcated and nourished by centuries of Catholic and Protestant indoctrination. As Daniel Goldhagen sums up in a

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sweeping, simplistic formula: the "Jew," regarded as an instrument of the Devil in the medieval Age of Belief, came to be regarded as the Devil himself when, from the beginning of the 19th century on, religious faith declined, and with it the medieval belief in Satan.

No one can honestly accuse Daniel Jonah Goldhagen of not having done his homework. The notes and source references, filling more than 120 pages, attest to the diligence of the author's research during the months he spent reading books and plowing through thousands of pages of documents concerning special police battalions and other death-camp units preserved at the Ludwigsburg Center for the Elucidation of National-Socialistic Crimes, near Stuttgart, and other archives centers in Hamburg, Koblenz, and Munich. (One is surprised, nevertheless, by the absence of a badly needed bibliography.)

All of the quotations needed to buttress his thesis are there, from Martin Luther's ferocious anathema against Jewish money-lenders ("They hold us captive in our country. They let us work

in the sweat of our noses, to earn money and property for them. . . . They . . . mock us and spit on us, because we work and permit them to be lazy squires who own us and our realm") down to Thomas Mann's initial sigh of relief ("the Jewish presence in the judiciary has been ended"), the theologian Karl Barth's denunciation of the Jews (an "obstinate and evil people"). In this context, Goldhagen quotes Pastor Niemöller's belated admission in March 1946 that "Christianity in Germany bears a greater responsibility than the National Socialists, the SS and the Gestapo."

Not surprisingly, this disturbing book, with its inflammatory title and provocative central thesis, stirred a furor in the German press last April, not long after the publication of the American edition, a furor that may well become a hurricane when the German edition is published. The general consensus—to judge by the newspaper and magazine articles I have seen so far—is that Goldhagen's book is excessively one-sided (an extreme case of "monocausality," as one reviewer put it) and not particularly original, being large-