

Téma: *Religionistika versus apologetika*

The privilege of addressing you this evening is one for which I am deeply grateful. As most of you know, the presidency of the Academy involves a certain small amount of work in addition to presenting this address. What you may not know is that this work puts one in touch with some of the most thoughtful, effective, and good-willed leaders in our business. Leadership at all levels of the Academy is important, in part because of the topic I am about to call to your attention. The responsibility on this particular occasion is a deep one because the Academy is at a crisis point in its self-definition, which in turn is critical for the definition of the study of religion. The crisis has been building for many years, as is the nature of such things, but it has been given sharp focus in the report on the profession by Ray L. Hart published in the Winter, 1991, issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (Hart). The visible part of the crisis is the feeling of many people engaged in theological studies, particularly those who themselves are committed to the practice of religion, that they are not welcome in the Academy. They believe that the Academy defines the public objectivity of religious studies in terms of Enlightenment skepticism and holds in contempt the kind of thinking that requires long years of yogic or spiritual practice and that in the Christian tradition has been called "faith seeking understanding."

Often the discontent centers on whether the kinds of theological education appropriate for seminaries find their professional home in the Academy. But the discontent is also felt by professors in liberal arts colleges who see their teaching task as helping students become more sophisticated in their faith.

Prior to the complaints from people in theological studies, the chief complaint about the Academy came from some who believe religious studies does indeed require skepticism and distance from religious practice, the complaint, namely, that the leadership is still too fixed on the Christian theological model. The leadership in all my years of involvement, however, has attempted consciously to guarantee representation from all perspectives. That attempt has been overwhelmingly successful. No one approach to the study of religion dominates the leadership of the Academy, and nearly every approach that can be identified is represented. The result is the robust diversity and intellectual power that characterizes our regional and annual meetings. The life of the Academy is by no means in crisis but is flourishing. The crisis is in the sense of identity.

I propose to address the crisis of identity by putting forward eight theses. That might seem a lot for a Saturday evening but it is eighty-seven less than the most famous bunch of theses. (The reference to Luther is theological, that to counting is scientific.) My point is not to secure agreement on the theses but to deepen the discussion of the identity of the field of religious studies and to encourage reflection on how each of us relates to that identity.

*Thesis 1.* Religious studies, as properly represented in the American Academy of Religion, comprises all those disciplines and angles of inquiry that individually can contribute to the understanding of some aspect of religion.

By "religion" I mean whatever any of those disciplines or approaches might mean by religion, including any listing of historical religions, any social science criteriological definitions such as having social maintenance functions, rituals, myths or cosmology, or

spiritual practices. Dimensional analyses need also to be included, such as the religious dimension of art, morals, politics, philosophy, and so forth. So do definitions of aspects of religion that arise from specific disciplines, such as psychology of religion, anthropology, sociology, and literature. Disciplines are also part of the field if their subject matter includes elements of religion, such as philology and hermeneutics for dealing with texts that have religious import, archaeology for dealing with religious relics and architecture, history for the study of religions in history and for the history of religions, and the constructive, normative, and critical disciplines for the analysis and assessment of religions' suppositions, claims, cultural consequences, and obligations, those disciplines often called theological.

The contradictory of this thesis is the claim that some of the aforementioned disciplines or angles of study do not belong properly to religious studies. This might be because their definitions of religion are mistaken or beside the point, because their methodology or approach is faulty, because their sense of understanding or explanation is inappropriate, or for a host of other reasons. Indeed, any approach to the study of religion is vulnerable to criticism. All of the unimpeachable standard disciplines themselves have altered through criticism over the decades or centuries.

But whether a discipline or an angle of inquiry does or does not belong properly to religious studies is a question within the conversation of religious studies itself, or within the discipline itself insofar as it attempts to understand religion. Therefore all these disciplines and approaches properly belong to the study of religion until they are convincingly demonstrated to be inappropriate. That demonstration would be a proper part of the study of religion.

*Thesis 2.* The contributing disciplines and angles of inquiry do not need to communicate with one another in order to do their work; but they do need so to communicate if they are to present themselves within the Academy as part of the field.

Each discipline or approach has a kind of integrity of its own, with self-definition, self-criticism, and a kind of ongoing self-regulation concerning what to study and how. The self-regulation is based upon its history, upon the serendipity of new finds and new ideas, and upon a more or less well-defined community of peers constituting a guild or an intellectual project. The field of religious studies, in the corporate person of the Academy, must always be careful not to dictate what a discipline should be doing, what research counts as legitimate, and what teaching is to be respected within the component disciplines. In a certain respect, what the component disciplines and approaches do is a private matter within those communities, for their work must be sensitive to their own internal dialectic.

The contradictory of this part of the thesis is the horrendous prospect of censorship and delegitimation. We have observed the tragedy of our colleagues in the American Philosophical Association, who have demeaned themselves by claiming that their philosophical opponents are not mistaken but illegitimate, "not real philosophy." May the Adityas, Vasus, Rudras, Asvins, and Maruts keep us from that disgrace!

In another respect, however, any of the disciplines or approaches within religious studies does need to communicate with other disciplines and approaches if it wants to present itself as more than private, as saying more than "this is what we say religion is," as claiming that something true and valuable is known here about religion that should be respected by anyone interested. The field of religious studies is not itself a discipline but a topic area within which many approaches make themselves public to one another and thereby represent their work as true, or at least as less false than what previously had been asserted. Although in their private mode the disciplines have their own professional associations and need not regard their topic as even being the same topic as studied by other disciplines, in the private mode the disciplines make no claim for truth that anyone outside the private community logically should respect. To make a truth claim is to present one's topic as well as one's claims as

public, and to acknowledge that other disciplines too can address that topic. To gain publicity, the disciplines do need to communicate with one another with all the efforts of translation, of objectifying assumptions and methods, and of learning one another's disciplines that communication requires.

The contradictory of this part of the thesis is the claim that the results of a discipline's inquiry are objective and public in themselves irrespective of whether they bear upon any other approach. They may in fact be valid and the validity might be appreciated by all who work within the discipline. But unless a common discussion allows the assertions to be expressed and explored more broadly, the validity cannot be asserted objectively and publically with reference to a topic or subject matter, such as religion, that a discipline shares with other approaches.

*Thesis 3.* Objectivity in religious studies consists in the sustain ability of results through a process of criticism that makes the results vulnerable to correction. The complexity of this philosophic thesis requires clarification through some distinctions that people ought not have to think through after dinner and drinks but that are at the heart of what makes religious studies academically objective. First is the distinction between truth and objectivity. Truth, as people have said since Aristotle, is the property of assertions that assert of their subject what the subject is and deny of it what it is not (*Metaphysics* .IV.7.1011b26). To put the point in more contemporary terms, truth is the characteristic of interpretations that represent the interpreted subject appropriately in the respects in which the interpretation interprets the subject. The meaning of truth, which I have just indicated, is different from the criteria by which we can tell when an assertion is true, a topic to which we shall return in a moment.

Whether an interpretation is true is a function of the reality it interprets; either the reality is as the interpretation asserts, in the respect in which the interpretation is made, or reality is not that. An interpretation is true or false whether the interpreter or an interpreting community knows it or not. There are two relative modalities of truth, however, private and public. A truth is private, relatively speaking, when the interpretive context in which a case can be made for it is an individual or a group with a closed discourse. A truth is public, relatively speaking, when cases can be made for it in a variety of interpretive contexts, indeed, in any interpretive context that might be relevant. The relativity of the private-public distinction is illustrated in that an interpretation might be publically true within a specialized discipline, available for correction by all who practise the discipline's methods, at the same time that the interpretation is private with respect to the other disciplines whose differing methods might provide other interpretive contexts. The previous thesis asserted that the various disciplines of religious studies might proceed quite well within their individual publics but that they must communicate with each other if their interpretations are to be public as pan of the field of religious studies.

The criteria for determining whether an interpretation is true depend on any or all of the conditions that allow us to engage the subject matter. In very limited contexts, truth might be a characteristic we are willing to assert because a given method has been followed. But those contexts are indeed limited because methods themselves are always up for criticism. A number of years ago Van Harvey, following Stephen Toulmin, characterized the process of appraising claims according to diverse criteria as making a case." I know of no way to improve upon that general slogan. The point is that different kinds of cases are relevant to different subject matters and also to different disciplines. For an interpretation arising within one discipline to make itself public to other disciplines is for it to be prepared to make a case for itself that is accessible within the approach of the other disciplines, or to show how the other disciplines ought to respect the original case.

Objectivity is not merely being public but is rather a subjunctive property of a truth-claim with its cases. Objectivity is the sustain ability of the claim through a process of criticism that would correct the claim if correction is needed. Objectivity is thus not an actual status but a status concerning how the claim would fare in diverse circumstances. When a new interpretive context does correct an interpretation, we see that the claim was not as objective as previously thought but now has been corrected and can be taken to be objective until yet another correction seems needed.

The philosophical supposition behind this point is that human thinking is always in the middle, always assuming things that need correction and sometimes finding that correction. The question to ask about candidates for knowledge is not whether they are derived from a sure foundation nor whether they have passed all the tests. The question is whether they are vulnerable to correction and are sustained while vulnerable. An intellectual discipline is distinguished from random thoughts by its methods of making itself vulnerable to correction. Attempts to render truth-claims invulnerable to correction are desperately mistaken.

Objectivity in religious studies then comes when its component disciplines and approaches make themselves vulnerable to correction by each other. Of course not all disciplines are relevant for the correction of others, and not all attempts at criticism do more than beg the issue. Whether a criticism is a valid correction is itself a matter for which a case must be made. But the objectivity of a truth-claim requires its vulnerability to correction. A claim is objective to the extent that the cases to be made for it can be sustained through critical processes that would correct it. The criteria for determining whether the claim is true can be exercised only in a public and objective context.

*Thesis 4.* The phrase „theological studies" comprises those disciplines within religious studies that deal with first-order normative issues in religion.

By "first-order normative issues" I mean the matters about which religions intend to suppose or assert something true, good, or obligatory insofar as these are religiously important. These suppositions or assertions include characterizations of religiously important ultimate realities, for instance God, the Absolute, Brahman, the Tao, Principle, human origins and destiny. They also include matters of belief and practice for the living of the religious life. And they include nonnative analyses of the religiously important aspects of history, culture, the arts, and society. Theological studies of course begin by analyzing what religions assume or assert about these normative issues, and theology in this broad sense is generally sensitive to the nuances and variations of symbolic religious meanings in both illocutionary and performative senses. But theological studies also go on to examine what ought to be said about the true, the good, and the obligatory in nonnative religious issues, to assess whether religions have it right, and to make practical judgments about how to face those issues both within and without institutionalized religious practice. Theological studies in this sense are nonnative disciplines, going far beyond description or any attempt to limit themselves to value free analysis. Thus they are not immediately continuous with those disciplines which believe their objectivity consists in value-neutrality, and they need to make a case for nonnative judgment to people schooled to attempt to shun it. Nevertheless, like the value-neutral approaches the theological disciplines ought to be publicly objective in the sense defined in the third thesis, namely, that their nonnative judgments need to make themselves vulnerable to criticism from all sides and to sustain themselves through the process of correction.

The relevant oven contradictory of the thesis that theological studies make normative judgments about religious matters is the claim that there are no publically sustainable, objectively correctable, nonnative judgments to be made. Admitting the difficulty of making such judgments, the claim they cannot be made at all is itself extremely difficult to sustain. It founders on the self-referential question of its own truth. And it founders on the broadly

accepted content of many normative claims such as "might. does not make right" and "justice is obligatory and its failure defines fault."

The relevant covert contradictory of the thesis is the claim that normative theological judgments always unfairly superimpose one person's, group's, or religion's way of valuing things on others'. Sometimes this claim is made by pure relativists who say that no normative judgments are better than others, a position hard to sustain normatively. At other times it reflects an historical observation that the normative judgments are imposed because of the power of the imposer, not because of the validity of the arguments justifying the theology. These observations are not limited to the power politics of imperialism, but also apply to the inevitable historical power of an established discipline. Nevertheless, the public debate within religious studies, as in any academic field, is precisely to sniff out and identify the unfair influences that power alone might have on the persuasiveness of argument. The more antecedently powerful an established mode of analysis, the more vulnerable it is to criticism on that account, and the more ready it should be to adopt corrections where it is shown that power corrupts its arguments.

*Thesis 5.* Both individuals (including those who are not religiously affiliated) and religious communities need intellectual guidance and critical reflection on religiously important issues, and rightly can turn to theological studies to pursue that in disciplined ways. The bite of this thesis is that there are practical religious as well as purely intellectual reasons for undertaking theological studies. The practical religious reasons most often give particular historical shape to theological studies that they might not have when pursued for purely academic reasons. An individual, for instance, even one who is unaffiliated with any religious tradition and alienated from the common religions of the culture, might ask theological questions because of an encounter with great suffering or tragedy, or to make sense of a profound mystical experience, or to cope with a child's plan to marry someone from a different religion. Religious communities, in turn, usually establish institutions that include thinkers and an environment for theological reflection for the sake of acquiring the best normative theology possible; these institutions include schools, universities, seminaries, monasteries, temple complexes, ecclesiastical bureaucracies, and religious conferences and councils.

There are two important contradictories to this complex thesis. The first is that religious people do not really need theological study because religion is performative rather than intellectual. The argument here is that our understanding of religion has been skewed by the Christian, indeed by the Protestant, preoccupation with theological orthodoxy. Orthopraxy, rather, is at the heart of religion, and is even at the heart of what masquerades itself as concern for true belief. This argument against the religious importance of truth has some small historical merit, because indeed the shape of theological studies, as well as of religious studies, has been skewed by the Protestant Christian interest in doctrine and belief. Nevertheless, orthopraxy by itself is sufficient only under wholly static conditions when no problems are perceived and no alternatives present themselves. In all other conditions orthopraxy is underdetermined if praxis is to be related to concrete circumstances, and the normative issues of theological studies are required to be addressed in order to determine orthopraxy. This holds for religiously alienated individuals as well as for organized religious communities, and neither individuals nor communities can fail to be affected in our time by modernization and other changing conditions that call for theological reflection.

The second and more important contradictory is that theological studies are not the right place to go in order to gain practical religious intellectual guidance. Rather, guidance must be sought from revelatory sources that, while not necessarily a-cultural, are transcendent of those cultural norms for good thinking that guide theological studies. This is an extremely

complicated argument that has been fought out in our own time with immense practical consequences in American education.

To simplify the matter for the sake of brevity, the argument against theological studies on behalf of revelation has been associated with Karl Barth's kerygmatic theology, and the defense of theological studies as critical reflection on first-order normative religious issues has been associated with Paul Tillich. The differences between those two Protestant theological giants have been unfairly exaggerated. Nevertheless, in American academic politics, during the two decades after the Second World War, the Barthians attained to power in many of the major Protestant seminaries and delegitimated their Tillichian opponents as "mere philosophers" caught by the religion of culture, not real theologians at all. The Tillichians and many others who were associated with them often left or were forced out of seminaries to found liberal arts departments of religious studies, not based on a seminary model but on the critical examination of religion in culture. Although the Tillichians and their theological colleagues were genuinely theological in the sense of asking first-order normative questions, they were soon joined by social scientists, philologists, comparativists, and non-Christian area or tradition specialists to make up religious studies departments as we know them today. There are analogues to the Barth-Tillich distinction in Roman Catholicism and Judaism. If history is the judge, the Tillichians seem to have won the day within Christian theology with the argument that alleged revelatory spirits must be tested, and the tests come back to the complex business of making a case for your revelation.

It may be true historically to say that the field has been won by the conception of theological studies as critical reflection on normative, first-order religious issues, and that this conception can easily acknowledge and honor revelations of many types. Nevertheless, there is a deep uneasiness on the part of theologians in nearly every religious tradition that the larger public theological discussion will not honor their revelation. Part of the discomfort in the Academy felt by some people associated with theological studies is the belief that they should not have to submit the revelatory or authoritative base of their tradition's practice to public examination. The next two theses address aspects of this point.

*Thesis 6.* Theological studies need to relate to the history and symbols of concrete religious traditions, analyzing their suppositions in context and reconstructing them in terms of the contemporary nonnative discussion.

Both theoretical and practical considerations justify this thesis. The theoretical ones have to do with maintaining a continuity' between the most abstract concepts used in theological studies and their origins in early and late symbolic guiding principles of behavior in religious matters. Abstraction is always a matter of selection, and critical abstraction controls for normative judgments about what is worthwhile to select out and what can be left behind. Even the most abstract notions, such as Emptiness, Being, Nothingness, Goodness, Obligation, Harmony, Suffering, Sin, and sometimes' God, are distillates of matters that are religiously interesting in concrete practice. Perhaps philosophy of religion is well defined as the critical study of what is left out and what is carried along in religious abstraction; in this sense, philosophy of religion is a crucial part of theological studies.

The contradictory of the thesis along its theoretical lines is the claim that theologians can just make up their symbols as they need them, without respect for history and traditional developments. The answer to the contradictory is that any symbols have depths like archaeological layers and that instant symbol-making cannot control for the hidden implications of these. Even the sheer rejection of a symbol requires knowing what is implied in the rejection if it is to be sustainable while vulnerable to correction.

The practical reason for relating theological studies to the concrete symbols and significant practices of religion is that this addresses the real context within which religious questions need practical theological guidance. A theologian thinking in and for a religious

community needs to appropriate and articulate the symbols of the community's cultural linguistic system in a normative contemporary mode. Perhaps much reconstruction is required in order to appropriate the traditional symbols into a normatively defensible theological claim. Perhaps also the traditional symbols need to be greatly supplemented to address present realities, and perhaps they need to be rejected or sharply modified in the present situation. But unless they are addressed, the theologian is not dealing with the religiously important first-order normative issues as they are faced by the religious community. To be what Christians call a Church Theologian, or what might more universally be called a theologian within and for a religious tradition, is critically to appropriate and reconstruct the tradition's symbols. The contradictory of the practical side of the thesis is the claim that religious identity need not have a past to continue, reform, or reject. But without a past there is no responsibility, and religious judgments lose any practical relevance. To be religious just for the present is to be religious in theory alone.

In their efforts to relate practically to the symbols of concrete religious traditions, theological studies are often greatly aided by those disciplines within religious studies that sometimes eschew normative first order issues. Historical, comparative, and social scientific approaches give access to the symbols and their concrete roles through history that sometimes are obscured by theological studies that jump prematurely to normative judgments.

*Thesis 7.* Theological studies need to be public and objective in the same sense that applies to religious studies generally, and religious communities should have just as great a commitment to this as should scholars with purely intellectual motives.

To be able to sustain one's case while being vulnerable to correction from any angle is the only ground one might have for asserting that normative claims on first-order issues are true. Precisely because the first-order issues often have to do with what people ought to be, do, and believe in religious matters, there is a great practical importance to the pursuit of truth in theological studies. Theological truth might well be a different kind of truth from classifying, reporting, or describing. If it is, a case needs to be made for that, such as Lindbeck and others have made, and that case examined. Then whatever criteria for truth are appropriate to theology's kind of truth need to be applied and the results assessed. To the extent a theologian can sustain a case under conditions of vulnerability, to that extent the case can lay claim to being true and it should be respected by anyone who takes the trouble to follow the issues. To the extent the case cannot be sustained, its public and objective claim to truth is in question. When an important first-order religious claim is in question, religious individuals and communities, as well as scholars, have a vital interest in pressing ahead for the truth.

The rough contradictory of this is that the criteria for truth do not lie in making a case but in the authority for the source of truth. But an authority needs to be identified and justified, and the appeal to authority itself needs to be justified. Most thinkers who appeal to authority address all these issues, which is to say they make a case for their authority. But if the task of justification is dismissed with the assertion that the authority is authoritative and that's that, then the claim to truth is implicitly abandoned and a retreat is made to the claim that this is what I or my community believes is true. That fact that something is believed is an historical or sociological observation about the situation, not a nonnative claim that the belief is true and that anyone should believe it.

A subtler version of the contradictory is that the authority of revelation cannot fairly be appreciated and judged unless the critic enters into the community of practice and faith and gains a crucial probative experience. Edward Conze, the great British Buddhist, argued that no religion based on a yogic practice could be understood by a Westerner whose cognitive model is science because they respect very different ideas of experience (see Conze:17-21). For the Western science model, experience has to do with sensation, and one can learn to construct instruments for sensing and to interpret the sensations mathematically with a decade

or less in graduate school. For the yogic model, however, experience means the cumulative wisdom that results from physical discipline, from habits of healthy and moral living, from years of cultivated associations with more experienced people, and from many decades of meditation, contemplation, or prayer. Similarly it can be argued that one must be an observant orthodox Jew in order to understand Judaism, or a practising Christian in order to derive the understanding for which faith is seeking. The yogic requirement of experience so common to many religions stands opposed to the Enlightenment sense of experience as proving or disproving things by a quick positivistic test. And it is that Enlightenment mentality that some religiously committed thinkers believe characterizes religious studies.

But quite to the contrary, the experiential yoga argument is a powerful public critique of Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism in religious studies. The range of valid applications of Enlightenment thinking is far narrower than some people once believed, and this point is being widely recognized. All this is to say that the varieties of the faith-seeking-understanding position have sustained their case that a fair judgment concerning some kinds of theological matters requires participation in their community of practice and belief. For a theological claim to be publically vulnerable does not mean that it must be reduced to what is easily grasped by an external observer. The state of religious studies now is that the conditions of authentic dialogue among adepts in different religions are far from established; moreover even the categories according to which theologies can be compared are only beginning to be formulated. Because of the relatively primitive state of religious studies in these regards, public vulnerability is difficult to attain. Nevertheless, such vulnerability should be sought if the truth of theological matters is important. Scholars of theological studies with concern for the authority of their own tradition should not fear that it could legitimately be condemned by being subjected to inappropriate external standards; they should fear rather that the work of making their claims publicly vulnerable will be too hard for anyone to bother.

*Thesis 8.* The field of religious studies embraces all the world's religions, not only as subject matter but as presenting scholarly traditions, including theological studies. Religious studies as embodied in the American Academy of Religion developed at first very much as an American phenomenon, with historical conditions shaping its course, such as the initial focus on the teaching of Christian religion, the disputes between Barthians and Tillichians, the effects of Vatican II, and the conversations between Christians and Jews. The dialectic of public objectivity has driven the field to widen so as to include all religions within its survey, and that same dialectic requires respect for the styles and standards of scholarship and critical reflection in all those traditions. Respect, of course, does not imply acceptance. Just as Western styles of scholarship are constantly changing, as from the narrow rationalism and empiricism of Enlightenment thinking to richer kinds of participant-observer critical reflection and speculation, so are the styles and standards of scholarship in other traditions in transition. Modernization is affecting other religions' senses of self-understanding as it did those of Judaism and Christianity a century and a half ago. Moreover, the dialogue among religious traditions itself is affecting their senses of inquiry and understanding. All styles and standards of inquiry and understanding, including those typical of Western intellectual culture, need to sustain themselves under conditions of vulnerability to all angles of criticism. The discomfort currently felt within the Academy by scholars who believe their faith is not respected in public academic discourse, or that it is threatened if made vulnerable, will be magnified many-fold in the case of scholars faithful to traditions other than Judaism and Christianity. If the dialectical development of religious studies from its origins in Western disciplines of thought requires it to make itself public and vulnerable to other traditions of disciplined inquiry as represented in other religious traditions, then we must face the question of the integration of theological studies into religious studies squarely.



Discomfort is always felt when the assumptions of one's project are objectified and placed in a larger context. The discomfort is intensified when one's own symbols and heroes are not predominantly honored in the larger context. So we may understand those among us who believe their scholarship and religious practice are not honored in a context that prizes Enlightenment skepticism. So we may also understand those who identify with the science of religion and believe the context is preformed and controlled by a theological agenda. My remarks are intended to intensify the feelings of discomfort even more on both sides, because they call for an engagement of the issues at every level.

Let us take pride in belonging to an academic profession blessed with such diversity of disciplines and angles of inquiry that its subject matter cannot for long be obscured by the limitations of anyone.

Let us take comfort from the dual tolerance of religious studies, that it encourages each approach to work out its own development on its own terms, and that it welcomes each approach to present its results for scrutiny and use in the larger field.

Let us take courage to formulate our inquiries so that they are vulnerable to correction, both within our disciplines and within the more general dialectic of religious studies.

Let us acknowledge that the normative issues of faith and practice, intellectual and performative, verbally articulated and danced through space, are susceptible to critical analysis, disciplined formulation, speculative reconstruction, and normative valuation. In this acknowledgment, let us honor the sources of authority and revelation while engaging in critical discussion of how they are understood and justified.

Let us embrace the human need for practical answers to religious questions, and the peculiar shapes this human need gives to theological studies both for communities and for individuals. In this embrace, let us not confuse practical need or traditional inertia with good reasons for addressing the normative issues one way rather than another.

Let us admit the necessity for theological studies to come to terms with the concrete symbols embodied in religious scriptures, traditions, and experience, recognizing both that the symbols need to be understood in terms of their original and developing contexts and that the critical evaluation and reconstruction of them is an essential part of theological study. In this admission, let us recognize the mutual needs of theological studies and the non-theological disciplines of religious studies for one another.

Let us insist that if theological studies are to present their judgments as true, interesting, valid, and worthy of respect, they should engage in making vulnerable cases for them that all the perspectives on the field might address. In this insistence let us be aware that not everyone will be willing to enter into religious life and practice sufficiently to be able to judge a case, but that the need to do so is respected by all.

Let us move forward from the study of the world's religions by the scholarly traditions of the West alone to the engagement of mutual understanding, of critical objections to Western scholarship, and of new disciplines and languages that might embrace a larger culture of inquiry. In this step into a genuinely omnicultural understanding of religious studies, let us not abandon the hard-won methods of making our inquiries vulnerable to correction that have given Western scholarship its sympathies, sharpness, and dispassionate piety before the facts. But let us also expect that an enlarged field of mutual engagement will change us all for a better that cannot now be told. Excellence in the study of religion is vulnerability to correction.