Confessions of a Former Establishment Fundamentalist

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Living in the most disturbed institution in a society which shows all the signs of acute cultural and social crisis is not very comfortable. It does, however, present great opportunities if we can take advantage of them. The present generation of students is not inclined to accept anything without question. We all have some experience of what that means in the realm of politics. In the field of religion, though, the consequences are somewhat curious.

The establishment view of religion in American universities today is what I have called "enlightenment fundamentalism." This is the view that science and historical scholarship have effectively disposed of fallacious religious beliefs. If the study of religion has any place in the university at all, which is doubtful to enlightenment fundamentalists, it is to disclose the true reasons why religious believers have been so misguided. The present student generation is not at all prepared to accept these presuppositions. In fact many students feel that there is probably more of importance in primitive shamanism than in all the cut-and-dried rationality that college professors serve up to them. Indeed there are people on every major campus in America practicing magic at this very moment.

As with every other aspect of our present situation this one is full of danger and of possibility. Let me be a bit autobiographical in indicating how I have tried to cope with it. I have taught a course on the sociology of religion for about fifteen years now, and I realize that it had more enlightenment fundamentalism in it for a long time

than I had thought. Theoretically, as a student of Talcott Parsons, I was never a positivist and always granted religion an autonomous sphere of existence, indeed a very important sphere since it had to do with the fundamental ordering of human experience. But what came through in my lectures, I am afraid, was the assumption that social scientists understood what people are doing when they are being religious in ways deeper than they do. *We* have all these wonderful concepts which can explain what *they* are doing. Those poor benighted religious people down there are sort of blindly going through their religious practices, but we social scientists with our conceptual frameworks and our functional analyses really know what is going on. Thus in spite of my theoretical recognition that religion deals with the most fundamental issues, I was really arguing that my own allegedly scientific concepts had a higher ontological status than the religious realm I was studying. It was a normal phenomenon in the course in earlier years to produce several crises of faith in the students. There would be a Bible-belt Protestant or a Jesuit-belt Catholic for whom the whole presentation was simply shattering. I came to expect that there would be such cases, and they subtly confirmed my own presuppositions. It did not consciously occur to me that what was going on was a conflict of religious world views. What I was doing, I thought, was science; what the poor people I studied were doing was religion, and my science understood their religion.

What I have come to see in the past five years, and very much under the influence of students caught up in their own cultural revolution, is that I was not only offering an alternative religious view of my own, but a peculiarly desiccated one, because utterly conceptual, that was designed to cope with the great issues of religion

mainly by screening them out in a maze of intellectualization. I don't mean that all my concepts and analyses were wrong. For their limited purposes, I think most of them were right. But they were attempting to carry a burden of illicit implication out of all proportion to their limited usefulness.

In trying to extricate myself from what I now see as an untenable situation, I have not attempted to avoid taking a religious position. On the contrary, I have come to see that whatever fundamental stance one takes in teaching about religion is in itself a religious position. What I have tried to do is avoid having my own view color everything that gets across in the course and subject my own position to conscious critical analysis.

Specifically in teaching my course last year, I no longer began with an articulated conceptual scheme and then moved toward concrete examples. Rather I began with an attempt to get the students to face the religious dimension of existence directly, to some extent chaotically and without concepts. To this end I included a great deal of religious utterance in my early lectures, often poetry, with very little analysis of my own added; I used a film of a primitive ritual; and I assigned Norman O. Brown's *Love's Body* as the first book on the reading list. The latter was designed as a kind of depth charge to stir up the students' unconscious religious depths. It showed them a kind of book which could not be read, outlined, reduced to a few simple generalizations, and fed back to me in an examination. Many of the students, the ones who are most affected by the present cultural revolution, were ready to groove on this kind of approach at once. Indeed the problem with them would be to wean them to

any kind of conscious reflection later on. But others were uncertain, at times considerably anxious and not sure "what is going on in this course."

As much as possible in a course with 120 students and one reader, I tried to make the teaching a two-way flow. I had a certain amount of class discussion, including one session where they were all asked to bring *Love's Body* to class and be prepared to read a paragraph from it and say something about it. Perhaps even more important I tried to sense the class reaction by talking to students after class and in office hours and getting my reader to catch as much as he could of class reaction. I tried to give up any notion of "what had to be covered" and respond to what students were interested in discussing, letting the reading list, which carried respectable items by Durkheim and Weber as well as the Norman O. Brown, be the superego of the course.

Still it was not a course in religious experience but a course in ways of thinking about religious experience and what such experience does to personalities and societies. The point, finally, was to increase understanding, and understanding requires concepts. So I did gradually introduce concepts, trying to indicate how provisional they were, what their uses and limits were, and some of the alternative concepts for dealing with the same problems. The concepts seemed to come alive for the students when introduced in this way far more than had previously been the case. Before perhaps only the top ten per cent of the students, those already prepared to use abstract analytic concepts, really got excited about the course and did something creative with it. Now it seemed that about fifty percent were really involved, not just with the material, which interested almost everyone, but with the concepts as well.

I required a term paper which had to be based on a religious event or experience observed or participated in at first hand. The subject could not come from books, though concepts from the reading or lectures could be used to analyze the material chosen. The range of papers was remarkable—from Pentecostal church meetings to LSD trips, from profound experiences of nature to apprehensions of the sacred in group experiences. And best of all, they were as rewarding for me to read as they seemed to be to the students to write. Several of the students said to me, "I have been waiting years for the chance to write that paper."

Clearly there is a danger in responding to the present intense interest of many students in religion of losing any intellectual reference point at all. That was not my intention, and I often had to argue for the usefulness of conscious reflection and analysis. On the other hand, if we believe what we have long said in the tradition of the study of religion out of which I come, namely that religion is concerned with the deepest dimensions of human experience, with the problem of man's wholeness, how can we keep those issues out of the classroom without hopelessly distorting the very subject we are attempting to teach? Personally I am not afraid, as I said in the last chapter of my recent book (*Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World,* 1970) of blurring the boundary line between religion and the teaching of religion. Above all, we cannot accept as eternal the way that boundary has been drawn in the past. Indeed the whole issue of boundaries and separations in the academic world is involved in the present crisis. We have gone such a long way in specialization and differentiation that our whole culture is threatening to come apart at the seams. It is certainly a time to think in new ways about integration, about how things might fit

together in new ways. We need not lose all the benefits of the old differentiation if we realize that differentiation and integration are dialectically involved with each other and require a kind of rhythmic alternation of emphasis for healthy growth. One of the special opportunities in teaching religion at the present is that it is one of the few fields concerned with integration, with problems of the whole. Perhaps it is the only such field now that philosophy at so many universities is given over to narrow technicism.

Finally, let me say that teaching religion in a way that tries to respond to the current cultural crisis is itself a kind of religious discipline. For how can one try to integrate culture if one does not also try to integrate oneself? Norman O. Brown said recently in talking about his own development that he had been trained to be an abstract intellectual, and an abstract intellectual is a mind without a body. I realize that when I started teaching I was a disembodied ghost presenting abstract concepts. I have finally learned that that really isn't teaching. Especially in the present situation, students are not going to care about the little generalizations you give them for purely abstract reasons. They need to see humanly why they are important. I have learned that the primary resource you have as a teacher is yourself, your whole self, mind and spirit and body, and unless you are willing to teach with your whole self, with everything you have, you are not really going to teach at all. Needless to say, I haven't gotten very far in my efforts. But I can say that every effort has been enormously rewarded.