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## Is Religious Sensibility Accessible to Study?

*In December 1978, Frei gave the George F. Thomas Memorial Lecture, speaking about G. E. Lessing. The body of the lecture was a revised version of material he had presented for years earlier in his first Rockwell Lecture (see chapter 1 in volume 2 of this collection). In the introduction to this new version of the lecture, he devoted some time to asking what it meant to write, as a historian, about religious sensibility—and it is that material that we reproduce here.* (CPH 1978k. YDS 10–168)



The occasion to which it is my honor and privilege to make a small contribution is steeped in the history of our discipline, the study of religious phenomena, whether one regards it as short or wizened with age. And of course, one could look at it either way. Permit me a couple of reminiscences to illustrate the point. The first recalls a brief remark the man whose memory we honor made to me one day in late August 1956. I had just delivered myself a paper before a small group on a theologian who has for years now haunted many of my waking hours—Karl Barth. It was a paper, incidentally, that came to see the light of day through the kindness of Professor Paul Ramsey, the editor of a joint enterprise, who asked me several times to *revise* and *shorten* the essay of which this paper was a part. I complied immediately with each request, each time *doubling* the amount I had previously written. And each time Professor Ramsey indulged me,

went to bat for me, and made it stick, and the only penalty he ever exacted was to make me submit to one brief but extremely pungent characterization of my writing habits, for the accuracy of which I can, alas, only vouch. Should any of you be looking for an extraordinarily generous and understanding editor for a book, see me after this lecture; I have someone in mind. But I digress, a bad omen indeed after only a few seconds of talk. Anyway, the paper delivered, the usual post-mortem discussion finished, Professor Thomas, his customary, invariably courteous tone laced with just a touch of pensive doubt, said to me: "I didn't know there was so much *to* Karl Barth." Obviously, he was still not at all sure that there really *was*, except quantitatively, as his astringent review of the printed essay was to make plain some months later; but it seemed equally evident that the young man trying to adjudicate the age-old battle between those who believed in harmony and those who believed in conflict between revelation and natural theology was to be given every chance and every benefit of the doubt, even if he had a dubious case on his hands and very likely the wrong point of view. It was a typically generous and even-handed remark by a man I had learned to admire from a distance. Beyond that, it was a brief echo of the age-old struggle to make theology rationally accessible to a skeptical modern audience—a struggle to which Professor Thomas had made his own scholarly and thoughtful contribution.[1]

If this reminiscence is an oblique pointer to the long history of religious thought in the West, the other is a reminder of the brevity of our academic discipline. As many of you here today know far better than I, Professor Thomas, no matter what his own predilections about the issue just mentioned, developed together with his colleagues a department that became not only a pioneering enterprise but a *model* in the modern study of religion. The conference in honor of George Thomas held at Princeton ten years ago was an auspicious affair—if not a signal that our tender young discipline had come of age then at least an important *rite de passage* in its youthful life, to which we all, even if we weren't present, paid heed. The volume of essays Paul Ramsey and John Wilson edited from the papers delivered on that occasion still reads very much like a report on the present state of the field. If one wants to know the intellectual problems and shifts in the study of religion in the last generation, since the dissolution of the neo-orthodox consensus in Protestant seminaries and of the derivative

1. [This anecdote refers to the pieces Frei wrote for Paul Ramsey's festschrift for H. Richard Niebuhr, reproduced in volume 2.]

existentialist hegemony over the study of religion in undergraduate schools, the place to start out from is Ramsey and Wilson, *The Study of Religion in Colleges and Universities*. This is all the more remarkable for the twin facts that in the intervening decade the country's college population has undergone a more than ordinarily sharp ideological change—whether it was a revolution we don't seem to know yet—and we have entered an evidently long-range period of economic hardship and contraction in higher education, especially in liberal, humane learning. Consolidation rather than expansion is bound to be the order of the day, especially since departments, like individuals, especially members of minority groups, may well have reason to fear the old rule of thumb "last hired, first fired." We recall in that connection that we ourselves have stressed that we are not a discipline but a field, and that our procedures are no different from those in a variety of other departments or fields. If departmental diaspora looms, we ourselves may have mapped it.

But whether consolidation is our *intellectual* watchword likewise is a different question. It will be interesting to see the fortunes of the Princeton volume in the next decade. We have largely gained our independence from theology, probably also from "ultimate concern" but not from some cognate methods. Shall we be able to expand intellectually with discipline and yet with some relaxation of that *Furor Teutonicus*, *Methodenwut* in the years ahead? That may be an important question for us.

Just what do we usually say we do when we study the various topics under which we study religion? What are the various ways in which groups and individuals show themselves to be religious? Our answers have customarily been to look at such sometimes overlapping things as institutions, at patterns of ritual and myth, religious ethics, exegesis of texts, beliefs—and experience. The last-named has been a particular snarl for us, for unlike the others it is not directly and publicly accessible, and yet it refuses to go away and remain a modest epiphenomenon. No matter how sophisticated we get and how much we learn to ease ourselves and our students away from misplaced, misleading questions, we still catch ourselves wondering what it was like to live in fourteenth-century Burgundy or seventh-century Ceylon and to experience the world, including its religious aspect, in that fashion. And even if we have excellent records and the analytical accounts of trained scholars who in addition know how to write well, still, in shamefully secret moments—when our colleagues can't hear us—we ask ourselves, "I wonder what it *felt* like, what the experience was of being religious at that time and

in that way." In a different though related way we sometimes wonder what it would be like to have a special religious experience we haven't had, say a mystical illumination. At moments of such temptation one recalls Paul Ricoeur's expression about a "second naïveté" in the interpretation of texts, especially narratives, a notion in which he is, oddly enough, joined by such an unlikely bedfellow as Karl Barth. We also broaden that desire out—from texts to, let us say, the social experience of the past. Ever since the Romantic era there has been the hope that one might apprehend a world, and specifically a life world, which we know only through the peculiar prism of critical consciousness, in a *postcritical* mode also, which will join even if it cannot recapitulate, the precritical experience.

What are our options when we begin to talk like that? There are issues of philosophical stance here that interweave with those of technical pedagogy. (a) We can declare such questions out of bounds because they are pseudo-questions. When we have posed our other questions about religion we can certainly claim that there is no private question left over and no private language for posing it. All endeavors to do more may be seen simply as codes that reduce to variations on a given cultural sign system. Or else one may view them as language that has been misplaced through the reification of concepts, a case of language idling its motors and coming up with a lot of pseudo-empirical generalizations.

(b) At the opposite extreme we can declare, with Schleiermacher and the phenomenological tradition in various garbs, that consciousness is an Ur-phenomenon *sui generis*, and that experience, consciousness at work—whether or not we think of religious experience as a special category—must be got at in a distinctive way. In this tradition religion is a distinctive state, the source of, but not identical with its public embodiments. I want to talk about this outlook for just a moment, for I am finally sympathetic to it and yet regard it as seriously defective and a real problem in the present state of religious studies. Together with one short digression this will help direct us, I trust, to our main topic.

Despite itself, it seems to me, the phenomenological tradition is a late inheritor of the Cartesian *res cogitans* / *res extensa* dualism or the mind/body dualism. That may not be a bad thing, but the phenomenologists themselves don't really want it, and I don't either. So allow for our purposes that it is a bad thing. The form of the dualism is that of self or consciousness, i.e., subjective self-presence and the entailed sharp distinction between private and public knowledge, or, if not that, then some other similar dualism, e.g.,

between "objectifying" and "non-objectifying" knowledge, between understanding and explaining, between knowledge of self and of other selves, between selfhood and self-manifestation—and then you have the job of declaring away the obstacle you yourself have created. For this position it has normally been clear that a religious experience *can* be studied, not directly but through the embodiments, with which it should not be confused, but from which it must nonetheless not be separated. The condition of the accessibility of consciousness and experience is almost invariably the universal *prevalence* of that state—a claim arrived at not as a result of empirical generalization but of phenomenological and transcendental analysis. This itself involves an appeal to the necessity for an elemental affinity for the thing to be studied. Reduced to an over-simplified, unfair banality, it's the old ploy about your not being able to understand music if you're tone-deaf, but—it goes on—fear not, for in fact you're *not* tone-deaf. (As a matter of fact you couldn't be if you tried.) But your musicality or your affinity for religion is not a specific, given content of your consciousness; it's a pre-given, transcendental condition for understanding any specific instance of it that comes to be given to consciousness. That's what makes it universal and, in its own indirect way, accessible.

(c) A third option for dealing with religious experience in the study of religion is summed up in Paul Ricoeur's famous phrase "hermeneutics of suspicion." What it says, it seems to me, is that the outlook just described is not an idling of motors at all; it is very meaningful, but the transcendental deduction of the pre-given consciousness is *itself* subject to a transcendental deduction or perhaps one should say trans-transcendental deduction. The condition for its *own* possibility is uncovered. The great masters of this interpretive point of view, in which *projection* of one kind or another, is the condition of consciousness generally and specifically and most of all of any kind of religious *a priori* are Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. What is the condition, the possibility underlying experience that makes us project the surface contents of experience that we do, especially when we talk religiously?

(d) Finally, one should simply mention the view that Hegel, Gadamer, and others imply for our question (they do not address it directly), that a second naïveté, a grasp of experience-as-such, whether of a past naïveté, or now, is out of our reach. They do not rule out the question as meaningless, nor do they transcend it into a hermeneutics of suspicion. But since all thought and therefore all language is mediation, we cannot hope to mediate ourselves into immediacy at the end of the process. This position need not

detain us because, while it is heavily freighted at the philosophical level, it is doubtful that it ever becomes an actual guideline for the academic study of religion, including the study of religious experience. This is true, I believe, even though it is often unusually fruitful in retailing the actual history of religious phenomena and religious beliefs.

I find myself sympathetic to a loose and non-technical mixture of the first and second responses, diametrically opposed though they seem. Schleiermacher and the phenomenologists have preempted terms like "consciousness" and "experience" by turning them into ingredients in high-level conceptual schemes, usually involving or at least implying a special type of anthropology, a statement about the essence of being human. In order to sit loose to, if not actually avoid that kind of privileged language and yet affirm that questions of subjectivity and access to it make sense, are important and not fugitive, I want to substitute the vaguer, broader term "sensibility" for consciousness and experience.[2] It is used commonly and with laudable imprecision in our day, enjoying a resuscitated life after a lapse of over a century. Some of its present uses bear some resemblance to *some* of the way in which it was formerly employed.[3] Quite apart from the ways in which it might or might not jibe with earlier uses, the two present ones I seem to have heard have tried to peel out obvious overlap, and I'm quite content to have it that way. We talk about *individual's* responsive capacities, a combination of their various affective and mental habits as they are ordered (or

2. [Struck through in the manuscript: "It's an eighteenth-century term that seems to have lapsed and then enjoyed a fairly recent resuscitation, but without the specificity it had in its earlier incarnation." In the margin of the manuscript at this point are some brief bibliographical notes, referring to R. S.Crane (probably "Suggestions toward a Genealogy of the 'Man of Feeling'"); A. O. Lovejoy (possibly "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms"); René Wellek (possibly "The Concept of 'Romanticism' in Literary History") and R. F. Brissenden (*Virtue in Distress*).]

3. [In the manuscript here, there is a note on definitions of "sensibility": "(1a) eighteenth and early nineteenth century: sensibility of mind and feeling obviously an individual capacity. R. F. Brissenden, in *Virtue in Distress*, 54, taking his evidence largely from the eighteenth-century tradition in British moral philosophy, equates 'sentiment' and 'sensibility,' sometimes in contrast (1b) to a refinement of a particular kind, possibly at the price of a lack in another area—*Sense and Sensibility*—where emotional sensitivity or hyper-sensitivity doesn't guarantee good judgement. (2a) The present use (to which I want to put it), seeing it used that way by others: the responsive capacity characterizing a particular person, a combination of his or her various affective and mental states ordered in his or her specific hierarchy. (2b) Also at present: the specific attitude or outlook characteristic of a group and hence of its individual members, often a representative outlook of an epoch or period, including both intellectual stance and emotional disposition. (2c) Finally: common sense, good judgement (but only as adjective, not as noun)."]

perhaps disordered) into the individuals' particular hierarchical shape. But this present use is for various reasons, I think, overshadowed by the other, overlapping one: we talk about an attitude or outlook characteristic of a group, and to that extent of its individual members, perhaps a representative outlook of an epoch or a period, including both intellectual stance and emotional disposition, not so much a group's "ideology" or "worldview" as its way of learning and using a common vocabulary.

## A PLEA FOR SELF-AWARE METHODOLOGICAL LOOSENESS[4]

What we have here is obviously in a way quite superficial and—in contrast to phenomenological ambitions—merely descriptive rather than being descriptive of a formal essence that is intuited, a *Wesenchau* that would demand an explanatory theory about the intentionality of consciousness and the overlap of the horizons of the life worlds of experiencer and the interpreter. But precisely that "superficiality," that surface quality or accessibility to description allows one to place "sensibility" in relation to other endeavors to describe the same set of data or the same phenomenon.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of a typical or group outlook in description does not rise or descend to levels where explanatory theories *either* of the purely *Geistesgeschichtliche* kind *or* of the sociology of knowledge or social analysis are immediately called for. It might indeed call for such, and it might well be compatible with either—once one reaches beyond the *purely descriptive* task appropriate to such a loose and fairly obvious phenomenon, which as such does not necessitate a special language or explanatory scheme. If one goes the further distance, my own hope is that the kind of description of sensibility, of an outlook and something of its felt quality, might be combined easily and naturally with social-critical or similar accounts.

The procedure of *Geistesgeschichte*, despite the pummelling it has taken, is always a tempting context for sensibility description. It takes or seems to treat experience or consciousness as an essence and distributes it over a group or epoch. Making ideas the manifestation of the essence itself, it explains the present collectivity by the history of its own manifestations. Linguistic and social-scientific scholars alike have criticized the procedure sharply and effectively, but it remains tempting because it presents a general

4. [Frei marked this heading for deletion—but it is too good to lose.]

scheme that seems so self-evident, so fitting, precisely because it takes experience/consciousness seriously and treats collectively held ideas as their expression. Isn't, we might ask in this mood, Hegel's "objective spirit" without its ontological moorings or a more recent equivalent thereof, the same as the sensibility of an age? The answer, I think, is "no," precisely because of the self-enclosed character, the technical quality of the scheme and the high-level explanatory claims of a pretty nearly causal kind, involved in intellectual history.

The temptation to connect sensibility-description and *Geistesgeschichte* is very real and should therefore be resisted all the more firmly. Its unrealistically self-subsistent character consigns every other explanatory procedure to "background" or "context." People and cultural groups become sheer consciousnesses or minds to whom all activities, all institutions, linguistic and societal structures, and the like adhere as though in secondary reflection only; and the *procedures* that take such other factors into consideration are of course related similarly adventitiously and subordinately to *Geistesgeschichte*.

The alternative is not an indiscriminate mixture of sensibility-description and explanation, but their careful and steady coinherence guided by rules or criteria of appropriateness that are operative even when one cannot adduce them as a separable set. But one such guideline could be put like this: if in sensibility-description one can find formally parallel descriptive features spanning several different fields of reflection whether the case is that of an individual or a group, one has enough for adequate description. There is no *need*, just as there is no *use* in probing toward something further back in felt attitude, experience, or consciousness. And similarly, one has enough to allow one to interweave such description with other accounts in a fashion that is non-reductive and yet has a complex coherence.