

**How Should We Talk About Religion?
Inwardness, Particularity, and Translation**

By
James Boyd White

Hart Wright Professor of Law and Professor of English
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

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In 1425 one of the great universities of Europe was founded at Leuven (traditionally called Louvain in English), in what is now Belgium. That well-known Dutch humanist from whom the Erasmus Institute takes its name was one of the university's early lights. So it was fitting that on November 10–11, 2000, as part of the university's 575th anniversary celebrations, the Erasmus Institute and the Catholic University of Leuven cosponsored a major conference titled "Catholic Intellectual Traditions in Contemporary Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences."

At the conference James Boyd White, distinguished student of law and of literature, addressed one of the knottiest questions faced by scholars concerned with recovering for contemporary research the intellectual traditions of Catholicism—or, for that matter, of any religion. How can we set about finding a language faithful simultaneously to religious experience and to the canons of academic discourse? White did not offer an answer to this question, but rather a set of ways to begin thinking our way through it. The audience at the conference—representing widely different disciplines and perspectives—found his talk genuinely moving and very helpful. I think you will, too.

How Should We Talk About Religion? is also prelude to a book written by members of an Erasmus Institute Faculty Summer Seminar led by Professor White in June 2000. This forthcoming volume, with authors from four countries and multiple fields, will be rich in the diversity that White celebrates in this Occasional Paper.

James Turner
Director, Erasmus Institute

How Should We Talk About Religion? Inwardness, Particularity, and Translation

James Boyd White

I want to begin with the simple and obvious point, supported by common experience, that it is extremely difficult to talk about religion at all, whether we are trying to do so within a discipline, such as law or psychology or anthropology, or in speaking in more informal ways with our friends. There are many reasons for this: it is in the nature of religious experience to be ineffable or mysterious, at least for some people or in some religions; different religions imagine the world and its human inhabitants, and their histories, in ways that are enormously different and plainly unbridgeable; and there is no superlanguage into which all religions can all be translated, for purposes either of comparison or of mutual intelligibility. What is more, it seems to be nearly always the case that one religion's deepest truths and commitments, its fundamental narratives, appear simply irrational, even weird, to those who belong to another tradition; this means that in any attempt to study and talk about a religion other than one's own there is a necessary element of what I shall call patronization, at least whenever we are studying beliefs we could not imagine ourselves sharing.

Yet it is of enormous importance to attempt to learn to talk about religion well, if we possibly can, if only for the obvious political and practical reason that religious divisions, both within nations and among them, are often intractable and bitter, and mutual understanding very difficult to attain. And it is hard even to imagine an intellectually respectable way of doing this. Think of the anthropologist of

religion for example: is he or she to assume that there is a cross-cultural phenomenon called “religion,” and if so on what basis? “Religion” is our word, and why should we assume that the Samburu of Kenya, or the Hindus of the Indian subcontinent, have practices or beliefs that parallel what we know in the West? (Perhaps we should use their words, and see what happens.) Or consider the psychologist, say the psychotherapist working on analytic principles: Is he or she to regard the religious beliefs and experiences of a patient as fantasies and wishes of a pathological kind, of which the patient should be cured? Or as healthy formations? If the latter, how can that position possibly be explained in the language of psychology?

Or think of the historian of the middle ages, interested say in architecture or philosophy: How is she to come to understand the world of religious meaning in which the people whose work she is describing lived, and how can she represent it in anything other than reduced terms? Or, to shift to another field, how is the economist to think about the tensions between the premises of his economic thought and those of his religious life or that of his larger culture?

In this talk my aim will not be to presume to offer any final answer to the question of my title, How to talk about religion—I think there is none—but rather to explore it in a tentative and inconclusive way, with the hope of complicating (and perhaps enriching) our sense of the importance and interest both of the question itself and of our own performed responses to it.

1.

I want to begin by reading a short poem by George Herbert, the 17th century Anglican priest and poet, in which he addresses a certain highly specific problem of talking about religion, in this case his own:

The Windows

Lord, how can man preach thy eternall word?

He is a brittle crazie glasse:

Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford

This glorious and transcendent place,

To be a window, through thy grace.

But when thou dost anneal in glasse thy storie,

Making thy life to shine within

The holy Preachers; then the light and glorie

More rev'rend grows, & more doth win:

Which else shows watrish, bleak, & thin.

Doctrine and life, colours and light, in one

When they combine and mingle, bring

A strong regard and awe: but speech alone

Doth vanish like a flaring thing,

And in the eare, not conscience ring.

The fundamental question Herbert addresses here is internal to his own religion. It is how a human being can possibly understand, interpret, and give meaning to what is to Herbert the holy word of God. Man is by nature but a piece of glass, brittle and crazed. (Not in the sense of “insane,” I think, but as we say a porcelain surface may be “crazed,” that is cracked in myriad and random ways.)

The answer to his question, how man can preach, is this: “by grace.” This is a term the poet does not attempt to define or explain beyond saying that it is through grace that the glass that is a human being is raised from the ground, where it is fragile and useless, and given a place in the wall of the temple, as a window. And “grace” does not stop here, for the window is, sometimes at least, turned into what we call a stained glass window, full of color and telling a sacred story. This happens to the window through a process of heat and annealing; to the preacher, of whom the window is an image, through a similarly transforming process, by which the sacred story becomes as deep a part of his nature as color is fixed in the glass. By this “annealing” of the sacred story the light and glory of the word will shine through the preacher and reach others—“and more doth win.”

In the last stage of the poem, the speaker reimagines what he has said, shifting his theme slightly. What is needed to preach—to speak about religion in this role—he says, is a combination of color and light, doctrine and life; it is not simply the learning or intelligence of the preacher that will work, not his faculties or attainments or doctrinal correctness, but an inner transformation that can be seen in all he says and does: the “annealing” of the “sacred story.” That is the true work of grace, and when it happens, “it brings a strong regard and awe.”

This poem about words thus points to, calls upon, and expresses what is beyond words, the life and heart of the person speaking. Speech alone, mere words on the page or in the air, however artful and informed they may be, “vanish like a flaring thing, and in the ear not conscience ring.”

In one dimension this is a profoundly interior poem, about the internal experience of a person, this person, struggling to make meaning where he cannot, trying to do justice to his materials, and coming to terms with his necessary failure. At the center of his experience, or at least his hope, is the possibility that the self or soul can be transformed at its deepest point, for which the image of the stained-glass window is his metaphor. In some sense the poem is written to express the poet's otherwise incommunicable sense of the reality and importance and beauty of inner life, when it is transformed by "grace."

In another dimension, and necessarily so, the poem reaches out to a publicly shared world of theological thought, argument, and doctrine; theology, indeed, provides much of the language in which the poem is written. To understand the poem we need, for example, to understand such things as the role of preaching in the kind of Protestant church in which Herbert was a priest.

In this connection it is well known that the Protestant move to scripture alone—*sola scriptura*—proved to be more complex than was perhaps originally thought, since scriptural texts, like any texts, need to be read to be understood, are susceptible of conflicting interpretations, can be reduced to sentimental or authoritarian dogmas, and so forth. The written word alone, that is, is in the end not enough; something must happen to it for it to have life, or the right kind of life, in the minds and souls of those who hear it, individually and as a community. It requires a certain kind of reading, and speaking too. This is a task of the preacher, and it is a formidable one indeed. It is not a matter of speech alone, but of transformations at the center of the self; transformations that would reveal themselves, as I imagine it, in the speaker's face, his manner, and his voice.

Herbert's way of thinking about the problem of "preaching" is of course also informed in other ways by his own theological tradition. He does not explicitly say so, but in this poem at least there is little sense that the relation he expresses in the word "grace" is in any sense reciprocal. Thus, if you were a Protestant preacher reading this poem, you might ask yourself something like this: "So 'grace' is what is needed, and this, in a wonderful image, is how it works. But how do I acquire 'grace'?" So far as this poem is concerned, that is a matter entirely external to the soul in question, something simply given, or withheld, by the Deity for his own reasons. We are here at least on the edge of the Protestant doctrines of predestination, election, and human helplessness.

But there is something else that cuts the other way: the main image of this poem, its image of grace itself, is that of a stained glass window, an image of a kind that was a large item in the controversy of the time between Protestants and Catholics, and in this respect Herbert is lining up on the side of the latter. And this is not merely a matter of rule or decorum; it has to do with the whole way the world is imagined, whether as neutral or as full of perpetual revelation; and with the way the divine presence within it is imagined too, whether as expressed in "words alone"—*sola scriptura*—or in image, color, form. Herbert is not a nature poet, but here we have the expression of an impulse that later finds the divine at work in nature itself; after all, here light is divine. In putting together these two theological strains, one Protestant, the other Catholic, Herbert is imagining—and making a claim for—his own Anglican church as representing a true middle way.

One could go on at length, but for our present purposes the point should be clear. This poem expresses a profound sense that meaningful and valuable talk about the most important parts of the poet's religion is impossible, even from within the religion

in question. This is partly because of the immensity and ineffability of the divine itself; partly because of the limitations of human nature; partly because of the limits of human language. Yet nonetheless Herbert does find a way to talk, in a poem, which, in a paradoxical way, expresses with great clarity and precision the impossibility he speaks of, and, beyond that, manifests his confidence in the reality of a transforming grace that will, not only in the dimension of speech but in that of life, make the impossible miraculously possible—and he does all this in “words alone.”

This poem, as I say, is written from the inside, about the speaker’s attempts to talk significantly about the truths of his own religion. What happens when we look at his situation and his language from the outside? If we are Christians, or educated in a Christian tradition, we may have at least a vague idea both of the struggles in which Herbert is engaged and of the theological premises upon which they are based. But if we move outside of Christianity altogether, and imagine ourselves approaching this poem from a position defined by conservative Judaism, or Sunni Islam, or Hinduism, or Taoism, or total secularism, the whole effort becomes much, much harder. Part of the problem can be defined as a kind of ignorance—there is much one simply needs to know about 17th century English Protestantism in order to understand this poem—but part of it is deeper than that, and in two ways.

First: the kind of knowledge that is required to understand this poem is not just the capacity to articulate theological positions or to repeat doctrine, but the understanding of what these things meant to living people. Can we attain that understanding? What happens to us when we do, or try? Second, and more generally: it seems to be a characteristic of the side of life we call religious that at

a deep level it makes no sense at all to those outside the religion in question. The religious stories and myths of another people are to us inherently and permanently incredible. We know the Hindus believe in many gods, but we, as Westerners and perhaps Christians or Jews, also “know” that those gods certainly do not exist. This means that in studying their religion there is an element of what I earlier called patronization, which simply cannot be avoided. It might be checked, at least a bit, by the recognition that one’s own religious stories and myths, truths and practices, make equally little sense, and are equally incredible, to those outside one’s own group—though this, as we shall see, presents its own problems. And when we recognize in addition that the speaker living within a tradition we are studying from the outside may find it as impossible to make certain sense of it, to speak with confidence, to know what he would like to know, as it is for George Herbert in “The Windows,” it makes our question, how to talk about religion, seem itself even more profoundly problematic.

My reading of Herbert’s poem thus suggests three aspects of the difficulty of talking about religion, especially the religion of others. First, that we are likely or even compelled to speak from a position of intellectual or spiritual superiority, or what I call patronization, for those who believe what we do not. Second, this fact, coupled with the distance that naturally exists between those who live within a religion and those who do not, is likely to make it difficult or impossible for us to attain the desired imaginative and sympathetic understanding of the meaning of the religion in question, its texts and rituals and practices, to those whose lives it shapes. Third, any talk about religion must come to terms with the main point of Herbert’s poem, that even for one who belongs to a particular religion it may seem or be impossible to talk adequately about it,

even to oneself. For at the center of much religious experience is a sense of ineffability, immensity, mystery, which simply cannot be expressed. To put it in terms of my title, the requisite translation of one religious world into another language, whether religious or secular, is impossible both because of the uniqueness of each religious world view and because the inward experience at the center of much religious life is in any event imperfectly expressible.

2.

I wish now to consider a situation in which we are probably all outsiders to the religion in question.

In the American Museum of Natural History in New York, on the main floor of its new Earth and Space Center, one can find the 15 ton Willamette meteorite, the largest in my country and the sixth largest in the world. Not long ago a coalition of Native American tribes in Oregon filed a suit to compel its return to them, for it was found on what was at one time tribal land. This land was actually ceded by the Indians to the United States Government in 1855, which in turn leased it to a mining company from whom the Museum purchased the meteorite in 1906. Therefore the Indian claim rests not on property rights in the usual sense, but rather on a Federal statute, The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which provides for the return of human remains and objects of religious significance to native peoples, irrespective of ordinary property rights.

The claim is that the members of the relevant tribes consider the meteorite, known as Tomanomos in the Chinook language, to be a spirit that traveled to the Willamette Valley as a representative of the Sky People. They believe that a union occurred between sky, earth, and water when the meteor rested in the ground and collected rainwater in its basins. At one time, tribal members made

pilgrimages to the meteor, collecting the water from its cavities for medicinal use and dipping arrows in it for courage during battles and hunts.

The statute requires the return of “sacred objects” held by any museum receiving federal support; it defines “sacred objects” as “specific ceremonial objects which are needed by traditional Native American religious leaders for the practice of traditional Native American religions by their present day adherents.”

How should a judge approach the decision of this case?

A first instinct for many of us would be to focus on the question of sincerity: Do the members of this tribal league want the meteor back because they really believe it is sacred, or do they want it for some other purposes, for example as a tourist attraction? After all, it has been a century and half since they visited it for purposes of homage, or to dip their arrows in its waters. And presumably they do not still use arrows for battle and might not for hunting either. Or do their leaders perhaps just want to show the people that they can stand up to the federal government and get something from it? Or, more positively, is this artefact important to the process of identity-formation in a community that the national government improperly disbanded? One can imagine the kind of testimony each side would advance on such issues, and the sorts of cross examination too. (Perhaps one could ask similar questions about the Museum too: what are its stated purposes, and are they “sincere”?)

Likewise one would expect argument based on the specific terms of the statute: is this a “ceremonial” object, is it in fact “needed” for the practice of the religion in question, is it needed by “religious leaders,” and are the present tribal members in fact “adherents” of this religion? But in a sense all of these arguments about the meaning

of terms, and about sincerity of belief, however relevant and important to the argument and decision of the case in the real world, would have the effect of obscuring other questions, also present, of great interest and difficulty.

For example:

- Must it be shown that the tribe's present members actually believe that the meteor is a Sky Person, or only that members of their tribe once did? Or is "belief" in our sense of the term not quite relevant? However we answer these questions, how do we explain our conclusions?

- Must it be shown that the present members of the tribe will make pilgrimages to the rock if it is returned to them, and use its water for the medicinal and military purposes described, or only that their ancestors did so?

- Must it be shown that the practices, or at least the beliefs, concerning the meteorite have continued without interruption since a time before the arrival of the European? That is, ought the Native Americans be entitled to revive or invent a religious ritual, or only to continue one?

- How are the words "sacred" or "religious" to be defined: as requiring an element of the supernatural? A personal deity? A deity that is omnipotent and good? Why?

To put this last question more generally: Since this statute does not protect cultural objects but only religious ones, by what criteria is the field of religion to be distinguished from that of culture? By belief in the supernatural? In a personal deity? A deity that is omnipotent and good? By distinctive ritual spaces and actions and clothing? By spaces set aside? People set apart? The recognition of mystery? How, then?

What I have called the element of patronization is necessarily present here, for in all likelihood not a single lawyer or judge who deals with the case will believe for one second that the meteor is a Sky Person or that its waters have special powers, nor will they have any ready way of respecting the beliefs and practices of the Native Americans. Rather, the issue before the courts is how to deal with claims made by people who do purport to believe and to do such impossible things. What is more, the lawyers and judges in question will probably be immune to any sense that their own religious beliefs and practices, if they have them, are from the Native point of view every bit as impossible and ridiculous. And if, as may well be possible, the lawyers and judges—that is, we—believe that we have no religious views at all, we shall be even more immune to the sense that the beliefs we do have, beliefs that in a sense substitute for religion—that the universe is a system of purely physical causes, say, or that the healthy human community is one that has a high GNP—are from other points of view, say that of these tribes, equally implausible or crazy. Here, then, is the question: What would it mean to try to correct for this tendency, to try to treat with real respect and imaginative engagement the beliefs and practices of others which one does not share? Would it in fact require a kind of belief in the unbelievable, a momentary conversion of sorts? This is a serious and disturbing question.

In addition, serious attention to these claims has to recognize that what is at stake in any claim to religious significance and value is something inward as well as outward, a kind of experience—like George Herbert's—for which no language is adequate. The statute says that there is something special about religion, something precious, a kind of universal human value, but what can that be, both in general and in this particular case? How can it be expressed?

How should the law talk about this complex problem? I have no formulaic answer, but I could say at least this much: that the lawyers and the judges should address the questions I have articulated, among others, showing their awareness of their complexity and the difficulty of talking about them. Wise talk about religion, that is, in this context as in Herbert's, will recognize first of all the impossibility of the task, then proceed, as Herbert did in his poem, to do what can be done nonetheless. What is called for is in a sense a legal version of "The Windows," an argument or opinion that recognizes the inherent inadequacy of our minds and languages, yet finds a way to speak nonetheless, and one that is more complex, multi-dimensional, and self-doubting than is usual in the law. This should include a recognition that success here is not merely intellectual, but requires the engagement of the mind and imagination in a self-transforming way. And like every process of self-transformation, the end cannot be foreseen or predicted.

Notice this as well, that the question for the lawyers and judges here is highly particular in character: not how to talk about "religion" in general, but how to talk about this claim based on this religion; and how to talk not in the world in general but in the courthouse, and in a context that is defined by this statute and its evident or implied purposes, by the Constitution, and by our understandings about the role of courts in our society.

To put it in the terms just suggested, there is here in fact a lot of particular material with which to make one's legal poem about the impossibility of talking about religion. This particularity is in fact one reason why one could imagine a reasonably successful effort: not an explication of all there is to say about religion in general, or about this religion, but an answer to the question, What should the law do

or require in this case? Success will lie not so much in conclusions reached or truths asserted, as in the recognition of the impossibility and difficulty and complexity of the situation, coupled with the invention of ways of addressing it, as Herbert did. We can imagine a judge writing an opinion we would admire, that is, and its excellence would be not only in its outcome but in its quality of thought and expression, in its manner, voice, and style.

In fact the meteor case was never tried but was settled out of court. The tribes agreed to drop their claim to ownership of the meteor, and the Museum agreed that the tribes could have access to it for historical, religious, and cultural purposes. The Museum also agreed to place a description of the meteor's religious significance to the tribes on the wall next to a statement of its scientific importance to the Museum; and agreed as well that if they ever withdraw it from display, title will revert to the tribes. The Museum will also have an internship program, bringing young Native Americans to the Museum, both to interest them in the Museum's activities and to make their perspective available to the Museum on a host of issues. The agreement thus seems to have given each side far more than it would have had it simply won the lawsuit—a true example of legal creativity. And the essence of it is a kind of genuineness of respect for the other, coupled with a willingness, on both sides, to learn what the other has to teach.

So far I have traced out some of the difficulties, not to say impossibilities, of talking about religion in two contexts. First, that of the insider, George Herbert, who finds that he cannot do what he calls "preaching"—his human nature prevents it, his language is inadequate—though he manages to write a poem that in an important sense is a successful piece of preaching. The second context I have mentioned is the law, where we work as outsiders to religion,

trying to figure out how the religious claims of others should be thought about and resolved. Here too we can at least imagine the beginnings of successful speech on the part of the judge or lawyer who is trying to apply—that is to make sense of—a particular statute; and we have the example as well of a very successful settlement agreement.

In both cases, in the poem about preaching and in the imagined judicial opinion about the meteorite, it is important to see that there is no solution at the level of proposition or doctrine alone. I cannot say, in a kind of manual for poets, preachers, or judges, “Here are the rules for your activity; if you follow them you will do well.” Instead, in both cases, we need to do something different: to have a sense of what the perplexities and problems of the situation are, and the inherent difficulties of talking about them, and to ask how fully these perplexities and difficulties are acknowledged and faced. If the judge, or preacher, or poet, finds a way to recognize what we see to be the intractable and structural issues that inhere in the situation she addresses, and in the very activity in which she is engaged, and shows us in addition some we had not imagined, and nonetheless goes on to create a text in which these recognitions all have a place yet which also achieves some degree of coherence and order, we shall admire what she has done, and learn from it, and be grateful for it, even if in some way we disagree with its conclusion, its propositions, or what Herbert called its doctrine. —Doctrine and life, colors and light; we need both, and we need them to combine and mingle in an order like that of the poem.

3.

Now I want to shift to a third context, imagining the problem not from the point of view of poet, preacher, or judge, but as many of the people in this room probably see and experience it, asking: How should we talk about religion in the language of our academic disciplines—anthropology, say, or psychology or history or economics or philosophy? How can we do that and do it well?

I shall approach this question by describing briefly an actual occasion on which I found myself among a group of people talking about religion, and then use that as a kind of laboratory specimen, asking what we can learn, or begin to learn, from this experience.

In June of 2000 I had the pleasure of directing a faculty seminar held at Notre Dame, in the United States, under the auspices of the Erasmus Institute. Our topic was the subject of my talk tonight, how to talk about religion, especially in the language of our disciplines. The idea of the seminar was to collect a dozen or so people from very different disciplines and backgrounds, each of whom in his or her professional work faced this question in a significant way, and to ask each of them to be responsible for leading a two hour session on his or her work. Our object in doing this was to educate ourselves and each other, both expanding in various ways our sense of the reality and complexity of religious experience and intensifying our sense of the simultaneous difficulty and necessity of talking about it in the languages of our various disciplines.

This, in outline, is what happened: A teacher of medieval philosophy from Peru spoke about the scepticism of Augustine; a classicist from California about the puzzle of understanding presented by the transfer of the statue of the goddess known as the Great Mother from

Asia Minor to Rome; an historian from Notre Dame about the intellectual and imaginative difficulties he has faced in thinking about “fundamentalism” as a cross-cultural category; a classicist and historian from Michigan about the blend of indigenous and imported elements in Andean Christianity; an anthropologist, also from Michigan, about the difficulties inherent in trying to understand, imagine, and talk about the religion of the Samburu in Kenya; a political theorist from Princeton about different versions of democracy and the kinds of faith that animate them; an English professor and rhetorician from Chicago about his hope that a certain kind of rhetorical method can establish a common ground for science and religion; a philosopher from Minnesota about the question, “When and why should we listen to arguments based upon a religion we do not share?”; an economist from Peru about the similarities in the premises, methods, and conclusions of Amartya Sen and Gustavo Gutierrez in their work on economic development; a political scientist from Australia about the work of Charles Taylor, with a particular focus on his special kind of pluralism; an historian from Chile about the proceedings of a committee in Chile (in which she participated) concerned with the crimes against humanity committed by the military there; an art historian from Washington about the geometric basis and theological significance of design in medieval Islamic art and architecture; a professor of religious studies from Pennsylvania about the effect of comparative religious thought on the belief structures of those who engage in it; a professor of Buddhist Studies and Psychology at Michigan about the ways in which different individuals make different use of their religions, depending upon their own psychological structures and needs; and a Muslim theologian from Stanford about the work of the medieval Islamic theologian Al Ghazali and its relevance today.

Obviously this diverse group was not representative of anything other than themselves, certainly not a statistically significant sample. If you added another dozen voices they would not replicate these voices, but add to them. But that is a large part of the point: What might be called talking about religion, even in university settings, takes place in an extreme diversity of ways, driven by different motives, informed by different learning, shaped by different minds with different hopes of success.

Each of the participants in the seminar had his or her own way of talking about religion, his or her own language and aims and assumptions. To a large degree the merit of our work lay in just this variety—of approach, of discipline and background, of age and nationality, of religious outlook and intellectual commitment. It was clear from the outset that one could not sensibly hope that such a group, or any group, would work out a single way of “talking about religion” in which all people, or all scholars, should engage. What we discovered that we might hope to do instead is to identify some problems and perplexities we all share, and think about ways they might be addressed.

I will suggest some of these problems in a moment, but first I want to say a bit more about how this particular instance of talking about religion proceeded. For, despite what I have said, there was perhaps to be found in this collective performance the beginning of an answer to our question, and an answer paradoxically related to the very diversity I have mentioned. The fact is that we talked together much better—more fully, more deeply, more intelligently—than any of us did alone. If a single answer does emerge from our work to the question “How should we talk about religion?” it lies then not in any specification of language or technique or set of

philosophical assumptions, but in our way of working together, which I might sum up in a phrase this way: “in intellectual and personal community.”

For in talking to one another over two intense weeks we found, not surprisingly, that our conversations improved enormously. We came to know each other better as time went on, and responded to each other more fully; and as we came to know and trust one another, we discovered that a wider range of sentences became sayable by the speakers, comprehensible by the listeners. (Perhaps a wider range of sentences became unsayable as well.) In some sense a larger part of the mind of each of us came to be engaged in this conversation than is the normally the case in academic life. As we proceeded, the particularities of each person—in training, commitment, experience, disposition—came to be acknowledged as a necessary part of the conversation itself, for they were what we brought to it, and what we were responding to in each other. We were engaged in a kind of collective thought, which over time became richer and deeper. One way to put this is to say that the question for each of us became not only how to talk, but how to listen to each other talk, about religion.

None of this is I think surprising, but it is different from much discourse about religion. Compare with the kind of conversation I am describing, for example, a standard academic attempt to speak on the subject of religion—as a psychologist say or anthropologist or theologian or sociologist—beginning, as Plato somewhere has Socrates advise us to begin every intellectual exercise, with a definition: “By *religion* I mean,” or “by *Protestantism* I mean,” or “by *fundamentalism* I mean . . .” Here one would be attempting to speak in a universal voice to a universal audience—or if not quite universal, in the voice of a discipline to all members of the discipline. This kind

of talk is driven by understandable and meritorious impulses towards clarity, rationality, and neutrality, and of course the enterprise can have great value. But I think that we also need to recognize that we may get farther in a different direction by working in a different mode, the heart of which is the recognition of particularity: the particularity of the speaker and the audience, the particularity of their context, and the particularity of their subject—which is not “religion” as a whole, but this or that practice or belief, these sentences or actions, this or that way of imagining the world and acting within it, and as seen from this or that perspective, as the object of this or that question cast in this or that language.

The very fact that we were talking across lines of discipline and language, which was from some perspectives frustrating—we could not assume that our audience knew what everyone in our disciplinary audience knows—had the virtue, among other things, of leading us to think and talk not only about our subject, religion, but also about how we were talking—about the assumptions we were making and about the terms in which we cast our thought. All this gave rise to valuable, if imperfect, self-consciousness about our own disciplinary assumptions and habits, what they were and how they differed from others.

This context made it harder than it often is in an academic setting for each of us to come with hardened positions we were prepared to explicate and defend to the death. And even if we had had such positions, the disciplinary context to which they would have been framed would have been largely meaningless to the others in the group. We were thus forced as it were into a terrain between the languages of our disciplines, or among them, where none of us claimed to know much, and all of us were ready to learn. This was an accident of our organization, but one that may have larger lessons for us as a general matter.

4.

Although one cannot sensibly hope to work out a single way of “talking about religion” in which we all should engage, a single language based on a single set of assumptions, the experience I describe seems to teach that it is possible to structure a conversation in such a way as to give it the virtues of increasing self-consciousness and depth, as we more or less accidentally discovered.

What can one hope to emerge from such a conversation? Not a set of agreements as to definitions, intellectual premises and modalities, and so forth, but instead the identification, as I said earlier, of some problems and perplexities that we all share, and some ideas about ways they might be addressed. Here I would like to suggest, very briefly and in the form of questions, the main set of difficulties that emerged, at least for me, from our work together:

1. For the purposes of my first question I want you to think of “reason” not as logic or deduction or induction, but in a very full way, as all the intellectual and imaginative practices in which you engage as an historian, say, or lawyer or anthropologist or economist. *So defined, is “reason” sufficient for a full intellectual, practical, and imaginative life? To the extent it is not sufficient, what else is required, and what relation should it have to “reason”?* This is obviously a crucial question in the academic study of religion, for religion almost by definition involves the assertion and use of capacities of the mind, or self, that cannot sensibly be included in any definition of “reason.” Yet as academics we are committed to “reason” as the instrument of thought and conversation; as members of democratic polities we believe in reasoned deliberation as a central political activity; and so on. If we seek to talk about religion as academics, our subject thus challenges our own habits of thought and expression. In this way the

question of the limits of rationality naturally arises whenever one studies a religion, or thinks about the connection between religious and secular parts of the culture. This question is a challenge to pure secularism.

2. *How adequate are our languages of description and analysis for the representation of religion?* This question is present in every effort to talk about the religions of others, beginning with the word “religion” itself. Why should westerners assume that the Japanese or Indonesians, say, have any cultural formation that parallels what we call “religion”? Or think of our religious terms: “god” or “priest” or “ritual” or “ceremony”: why should we think any of these apply without great difficulty to another world?

The obvious goal here is that in talking about the religions of others one should make a constant effort to be conscious of the implications of one’s own language, and aware of what is possibly misleading and incomplete in it. But that is much easier said than done. It is insufficient simply to say such a thing as a general matter, and then forget it; our answer must not be stated but performed, enacted in the way we ask questions, respond to them, seek more general truths—in a sense in every sentence we utter on the subject—a bit as Herbert’s deepest nature and life are present in his every phrase.

3. *To what degree will any serious confrontation with the religious experience of others be a challenge to our own commitments—whether these are theistic or agnostic or atheistic?* This presents a version of the problem I have referred to as the patronization inherent in the study of the religions of others. The difficulty is an obvious one: if you insist on maintaining without change your own world view—your own sense of the way things are, your own sense of yourself as neutral and objective observer—you may not ever really understand what it is like for other people to imagine the world as they do and to live on those terms.

One form this patronization takes is the reduction of religion to a set of stateable beliefs, and beliefs that you cannot imagine yourself ever sharing—that the gods live on Olympus, that Apollo represents reason, Dionysus passion, that Zeus is the most powerful, etc.—all of which tells you very little of what it would be like to live in such a world. But as you come to extend yourself and your imagination into the other world, to begin to live on its terms, you begin to accept what at the outset you knew you could never accept. The extreme limit of this movement is to go native, and begin to think of yourself as a Hindu, say, or an animist, maybe even converting to the religion in question. So where can one stand between the two points defined by the icy objectivist, who can actually see and understand rather little, and the convert who accepts it all as living truth?

This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that for many people who live in a particular religious world their religion is not just one among many equally valid systems or forms, but represents the absolute, unique, and eternal truth. All other religions are false. This position is I think impossible for the person who engages seriously with the religious life of others, which means that there is in this sense too a profound tension between the world view of the comparatist and that of the people she is studying. This tension is a necessary part of our subject, and we need to find ways of thinking about it.

Consider the problem from the inside for a moment. Suppose you are a missionary, seeking to bring the good news of your religion to others, say Buddhists or Hindus. With what attitude do you do this? That they are simply benighted souls whom you will enlighten and save? Perhaps a part of you has to believe this, is glad to believe it; but another part, I think, must recognize the value of the other reality you are confronting. I think right at the center of the moment

where one religion confronts another there is a deep and unavoidable tension. My own sense is that it cannot be resolved; what we need to learn is particular ways of living with it in particular contexts.

At a personal level I know no better response than that of a friend who is both a seriously believing Catholic and a true comparatist, the child in fact of an anthropologist. Once she told me that when she is in church she knows that the Roman Catholic church is the one true church, unique and sacred; when she is in her study at home she knows that it is one among many valid religious cultures. Now she says: I know I have to know both things all the time.

4. This brings us to the next question: *Can there be a pluralism that does not dissolve into universal relativism?* This question runs through almost everything we did in the seminar. Indeed, it is the necessary consequence of thoughtful comparative work. How are we to face the enormous diversity of serious belief, seriously engaged in, that characterizes the human world?

One instinct is to seek a larger or more general framework in which two religious systems both have a place, or more general principles of which each can be instances, but this has the double vice of claiming a coherence that may be false and of creating a language that claims to be a superlanguage into which each religion can be translated. Another approach would be to seek a sharpened sense of differentiation among religions, coupled, one would hope, with an increase in respect for and appreciation of what is distinctive in each. The idea would be that to see our own position more clearly from the point of view of others does not necessarily lead to its dilution, but perhaps to its intensification, though in a context in which fuller recognition of its relation to others becomes possible.

If I may give an example of what I mean from my personal experience: the church I happen to attend shares its building, and a good

deal more, with a Jewish synagogue. When people drive by and see the Cross and the Star of David side by side, they think something weird indeed must be going on—the creation of some diluted form of nonreligion in which we all participate together. But in fact the experience of the two congregations is the opposite: not that we become more alike, but that we become more different, or at least more aware of our differences. As the rabbi put it, “When we joined up with you we became more Jewish.” Over the years the main lesson for both congregations has been how surprisingly different the other one is; but that has been coupled, I believe on both sides, with an increase not only in acceptance but appreciation of the other.

5. *To what degree must any attempt to talk seriously and deeply about religion be communal, rather than simply the voice of an individual speaking to the world?* The suggestion here is the one I developed at some length above, namely that the kind of thought and conversation that will most advance understanding, especially across lines of difference, can really take place only under conditions of trust and respect. If this is right, a part of talking about religion well is thinking about the conditions under which it takes place. And as I said earlier, I think that the performance of the seminar as a whole demonstrates the truth of the principle that talk about religion should be both sharply diverse and deeply communal to be successful. Once more one cannot state a set of rules for the successful intellectual community: it is all a matter of tone and style, the effort to recognize and respect particularities of difference.

6. *What is the significance of the fact that for many people religious experience is deep and individuated, involving the most complete resources of the soul and reflecting profound differences in the structure and motives of the personality?* The point here is although religion obviously has its public face, as a branch of culture, as a system of thought, and as a set

of practices, it also has a private face, in the world and mind of the individual person, for whom the meaning of what he or she does and believes may be quite different from that of a neighbor whose stated beliefs and external practices may seem virtually identical. As I suggested in connection with the poem by Herbert, this question runs through every effort to talk about religion. How are we to reflect the fact that for one adherent or practitioner a religion may all be a matter of surface obligation, while for another it may call upon and shape and give life to the very deepest aspects of the self or soul?

These are of course not the only questions one could learn to ask from such experience nor necessarily the most important. But I do think that our hope, at this stage of understanding at least, ought not to be to frame a set of propositions for which we can argue, but to articulate a set of questions that we can bring to our future work. I mean what I have said as a tentative essay of my own in that direction.

What does all this mean for those of us who write and think about religion not as poets or lawyers but as academics, committed to the language and methods of particular disciplines? What I think is called for in us, like the poet and the judge, is not a set of answers or propositions we can defend for all time, but a certain kind of thought: an openness to the limits of our languages and minds, to the reality of the experience of others, to the challenge that that reality poses to ourselves and our own beliefs—even the beliefs of the secularist—and to the necessity that our conversation be in the end deeply communal, responsive to the minds of others. Our task is to find a way to speak that recognizes the impossibility of translating the full meaning of one religious world into the language of another

culture or community; that respects the ultimate ineffability and uniqueness of religious experience; and that does these things by focusing always on the particularity of the religion in question, of the issue we are trying to raise and address, of the audience to which we are speaking, and of the position from which we speak. As the judge in the meteorite case is to write what I called a legal poem we are to do something perhaps even more paradoxical, to write poems in the language of anthropology, or psychology, or political science, or philosophy, or history. To put it in a phrase one could say that what is called for in us is a deep and alert whole-mindedness. This is not exactly common in the university or in the culture at large, and it might be the distinctive contribution of people who pursue the question of religion from many perspectives and in many languages to provide an example to the rest of the university, the rest of the world, of a kind of thought and understanding that perhaps in our other capacities we should struggle to attain as well.

James Boyd White is a graduate of Amherst College, Harvard Law School, and Harvard Graduate School, where he obtained an M.A. in English. After graduation from law school, he spent a year as a Sheldon Fellow in Europe and then practiced law in Boston for two years. He began his teaching career at the University of Colorado Law School and moved in the mid-1970s to the University of Chicago, where he was a professor in the Law School, the College, and the Committee on the Ancient Mediterranean World. In 1983 he moved to Michigan, where he is a professor of English and an adjunct professor of classical studies as well as the Hart Wright Professor of Law. He is also chair of the Michigan Society of Fellows. He served as a governor of the Chicago Council of Lawyers and is a member of the American Law Institute and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, and in 1997–98 was a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar. He has published numerous books: *The Legal Imagination* (1973), *Constitutional Criminal Procedure* (with James Scarborough, 1976), *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community* (1984), *Heracles' Bow: Essays in the Rhetoric and Poetics of the Law* (1985), *Justice as Translation: An Essay in Cultural and Legal Criticism* (1990), "This Book of Starres": *Learning to Read George Herbert* (1994), *Acts of Hope: The Creation of Authority in Literature, Law, and Politics* (1994), and *From Expectation to Experience: Essays on Law and Legal Education* (1999). A new book, *The Edge of Meaning*, will be published this year.