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Religious Studies in the University Today : Challenges and Perspectives*

My remarks fall roughly into three sections. First, I shall sketch the situation of Religious Studies as I see it. Then I shall consider some terminological problems and issues in the History of Religions. Finally, I shall take up more philosophical reflections on the university's commitment to truth, with reference to Religion and Religious Studies.

I

As an academic subject within major universities, Religious Studies are among the newcomers. This is paradoxical, since religious rites and symbols are among our oldest known cultural forms. Of course, religious phenomena have not been neglected. Historians have included these among their data, especially the conflicts between princes and priests. Philosophers have examined the conceptual issues raised by claims to spiritual vision and realizations of transcendence. Our best information on so-called primal religions comes almost entirely from sociologists and anthropologists. But as everyone familiar with university politics knows, until a subject has departmental status and a respected place within a faculty, attention to it is likely to be haphazard, marginal, and of uneven quality. Individual historians, philosophers, linguists, and sociologists have made significant contributions to our knowledge of religion. But only recently have we organized distinctive units of research and reflected on the rationale for undertaking Religious Studies in the university.¹

How is it that such an important subject has been neglected for so long? And why has this situation begun to change, even in socia-

* Symposium Paper: Visva Bharati, Santiniketan, 1981.

1. For North American data see *Religion in the Undergraduate Curriculum*, ed. Claude Welch, Association of American Colleges (Washington D.C., 1972), (includes Peter Slater, "Religion As An Academic Discipline," p. 26-36) and Claude Welch, *Graduate Education in Religion: A Critical Appraisal* (Missoula, Montana, U.S.A.: University of Montana Press, 1971).

list republics officially opposed to organized religion? In answer to the first question, we have to acknowledge the legacy of mistrust and misunderstanding left in most societies by the institutions of particular religious traditions. For centuries these dominated the lives and thoughts of people in most regions of the world. From the very beginning, European universities, with few exceptions, were ecclesiastical foundations. Only within this century has chapel attendance, for instance, ceased to be a requirement of membership in the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge. Universities which look back to the European "Enlightenment" as the period of their emancipation, still see in faculties of theology the heirs to those who, in the name of medieval science and revelation, often brutally suppressed those who introduced what we now call scientific method. Somehow the religious motivation of the early experimenters in modern science is forgotten, while the fanaticism of the inquisitors is remembered. Such universities are never again likely to enthrone theology as "the queen of the sciences."

The situation is changing partly because we have learned that, when we depose one ruler, we soon find ourselves under the yoke of another. It used to be said among theists that the devil also quotes Scripture. Nowadays, as we all know, the devil cites statistics. We are learning that it is not Scripture as such, or statistics as such, which is the enemy of truth. It is the dogmatic abuse of power in any social group where rulers suppress potential sources of dissent. Given this fact, thoughtful people look once again to the humanities to restore sensitivity to moral issues. Among the humanities, or at the humanistic end of the spectrum of social sciences, we now find Religious Studies. Especially in the English-speaking world, when Philosophy might have asserted the primacy of Wisdom, it has been preoccupied with mathematical logic and linguistic analysis. With Theology already banished to professional schools, there developed a vacuum which Religious Studies have helped to fill. Even economists are now heard to say that economics alone is not enough. In fact, the founder of my home department was previously a member of our Department of Economics. In order to equip himself for his new role, incidentally, he spent his next sabbatical leave in India.

In recent years also, universities have become more truly universal in outlook, discovering the rich resources of languages and cultures in other lands. During the period of western imperialism, the trader

was often followed by a missionary. Among missionaries, some developed a genuine appreciation and knowledge of the religious traditions they encountered across the world. My own father is an example, ending his academic career as an acknowledged scholar of Theravada Buddhism and the first Director of the Centre for the Study of World Religions at Harvard. To this day in North America, departments of Religious Studies are the most active university centres for the study of Indian, Muslim and Buddhist traditions. Rudimentary though our lectures often are, they go some way towards breaking down the walls of suspicion among ethnic groups at home and abroad. In India too, with its long history of different languages and religious orientations, we might expect the study of religion to help build a base of mutual understanding, without which a country cannot long live in harmony. Religious factions divide us still. Religious Studies help us to know better where others are coming from and how we may foster mutual respect in the future.

As an academic subject, Religious Studies usually come somewhere between History and Philosophy, with a strong input from languages and literature, and increasingly sophisticated acquaintance with the social sciences. This is another way of telling you that we Religion professors are academic supermen and women. In practice, of course, individuals within departments specialize and often have more in common with those in cognate disciplines, than with some members of their own particular department. There is not, or not yet, a common disciplinary focus for Religious Studies. What we have in common within our departments is a commitment to taking the data of the world's religions seriously, initially on their own terms but also critically. Whereas a member of the Philosophy Department in my own university, for example, will look only at the logic of western Christian arguments about God and the world, my interest is in developing a sense of the wisdom in all traditions. This does not mean reducing them to a hypothetical common core. It means asking whether the patterns of reasoning and concepts of evidence, assumed in western-style philosophizing, do justice to the insights of other traditions and the wisdom of our own. We cannot be said to know ourselves until we study our religious heritage in this way.

Our department in Ottawa is typical of many in North America. Of twelve members, three are specialists in the Hebrew and Christi-

an scriptures, three are specialists in other traditions (Hindu, Muslim, and Sino-Japanese), and the remainder work more philosophically and theologically on problems concerning all traditions, for instance in ethics and the psychology of religion. Sociology and anthropology of religion are taught mainly in other departments. Ideally, we should have more specialists in oriental languages and literature, but the bulk of our expertise will continue to be in our own culture. The present student generation is mostly interested in first learning something of its own historical roots. This reflects another modern phenomenon and reason for founding departments of Religious Studies—the increasing secularity of the surrounding culture and secularization of the school system. We cannot today assume that our students know anything more about Christianity than that Christmas is a time for giving and receiving gifts. I have met students of Indian origin, similarly, who know only that there is something called Diwali. Even those who respect their traditions need a university level of discussion of their heritage, to balance their reading of other subjects. Unlike their parents, who often are rebelling against a heavy-handed education in Christianity, this generation is spiritually hungry and eager to learn. They have generally passed the point of thinking that religion means only whom they may marry.

Finally, in this opening sketch of our departmental situation, I should add that departments of Religious Studies are still viewed with suspicion by some authorities in our churches. Their ambivalence is due partly to ignorance. Some pioneers in our departments were so concerned to be non-partisan and non-confessional that they excluded anyone likely to proselytize on behalf of their faith. This made some suppose that they were against all organised religion. Professors are still expected not to make personal convictions their norm when evaluating texts and essays. But students generally wish to know where their teachers stand as individuals. A professor of Religion who has no faith of any kind lacks a certain credibility. Equally problematic is a professor from one tradition teaching another, for instance, a Jewish scholar teaching Islam or a Muslim teaching Hinduism. On strictly academic grounds, we stipulate only that instructors must know their subjects. But what exactly does 'knowing 'religion' mean? And can this be known without some commitment? With this question we turn to the topics of the next section.

II

When I visited India in 1968, I soon learned that the word 'religion' suggested to many people temple, rituals and priestly preoccupations. If I wanted to hear of the depths of Hindu devotion, I needed to ask instead about spirituality. All the traditions and popular practices aimed at realizing *artha*, *kama*, and *dharma*, are relativized by the quest for *moksha*. Even for those who do not seriously embark on the quest in this lifetime, the ideal is there to set the perspective on the other goals. In the history of India, those whose vision has been of the highest bliss are the ones celebrated by all for their spiritual attainments. From the Veda to the Puranas and the hymns of the Saivite saints in Tamilnad, the languages are many and the levels of revelation diverse. It is a misapplication of the concept of *advaita*, I believe, if we infer that such a plurality of faiths is at bottom one. But neither are they absolutely different. This non-difference pertains to the dimension of awareness, through *yoga*, which permeates all the *margas*. Without some sense of this awareness, of its bliss and the union with truth it entails (without the reality of *Sat*, *Cit*, *Ananda*), we miss the point of the preceding exercises.

I was reminded of this fact last year during a course on death and afterlife in different traditions. My colleague, Nalini Devdas, was to lecture on Hindu and Buddhist conceptions. She was given only six hours for each. Our text-book was compiled by an American Sanskritist. His selections included the story of Markandeya, but focused mainly on accounts of traditional rituals and verses to be recited by a son, at his father's funeral pyre. Dr. Devdas dismissed all this as of secondary significance and dwelt instead on the story of Savitri. After preliminary lectures on the Veda, she was still extolling the wonderful qualities of Savitri during the sixth hour. When a student boldly asked what these showed us of the Hindu concept of death, she replied that, for one with the devotion of Savitri, *Yama* is always a friend. Unless the class could see the rituals from this perspective, they had not begun to understand the Hindu tradition. No amount of information about Indian funeral customs and studying Sanskrit could substitute for this insight. Our text-book reflected a westerner's conception of religion. The same is true when western scholars discuss Hindu philosophies in terms of "monism" and contrast 'Semitic' monotheism with 'Hindu polytheism'. They miss the point of the concept of *advaita* and the sense of the many manifestations of the supreme deity, such as we find in both Saivite and Vaishnava traditions.

It is generally agreed that our English concept of religion is imbued with Christian connotations. In *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith even suggested that we banish the term altogether.² This idea has not commended itself, but the accompanying contrast between tradition and faith has. By 'tradition' is meant the cumulative record of past faith, expressed in ritual, in philosophical commentaries, and in the artefacts studied by anthropologists and historians. In Smith's view, these are external phenomena of religion which do not, in themselves, lead us into the real subject. Faith, by comparison, is always inner and personal. It is the involvement of individuals through community in that which is being expressed, however poorly, by the observable activities of the faithful. Faith is each one's relationship with transcendent Truth/Goodness/Reality/God.³ It can be evoked in the class-room, as it was by Dr. Devadas. But no formal scholarship can substitute for the spirit in which a religion lives. Indeed, the suggestion is that, without such faith, no scholar is competent to speak of the truth in religion. Since faith seems inevitably subjective, Smith's position seems to imply that there can be no objective, academic study of religion, such as universities are prepared to support.

Professor Smith does not himself draw this last conclusion. The faith of which he speaks is not partisanship on behalf of a particular creed. Faith is his word for our concern with our own humanity, which is defined by its capacity for transcendence. Smith insists that we allow for this faith dimension, whenever we study human being, including life in the different traditions. Given that each individual can really only know his or her own faith, however, it does follow that only through dialogue with living exponents of each tradition can we guard against studying our respective histories in ways that destroy their hidden meaning. In practice, Professor Smith demands that his students know the scriptural languages of the traditions being studied and focuses attention on the classical authors. His own publications include word studies of different concepts of faith and belief in all major traditions, aimed at disabusing us of the idea that studying religion means studying systems of belief.

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2. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: Macmillan, 1963; now a Harper & Row paperback).
 3. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: University Press, New Jersey, 1979), pp. 3, 17, 93, 169

There are still major difficulties with Smith's conceptual scheme. His critics generally point out that his conception of faith is too individualistic and really only fits his own Protestant heritage. This includes a mistrust of institutional religion which fails to do justice to the sacramental side of faith. What seems to a Christian missionary to be a Hindu obsession with idol worship, for instance, may in fact be the way in which divine grace reaches the level of awareness of the simplest villager. As Raimundo Panikkar has pointed out, the semitic traditions' emphasis on the extreme transcendence of God, fixing a great gulf between Creator and creation, does not escape the problem of conceptualizing God's presence in the world.⁴ It merely shifts the burden from visual to verbal images of God's actions, such as we find in Hebrew and Arabic texts.⁵ Although, late in life, Smith has studied Sanskrit and worked closely with Hindu scholars,⁶ his prior expertise and orientation has been towards Islam. As we can see from a glance at the works of the other leading historian of religions in North America, Mircea Eliade, Smith's approach is not our only option, nor perhaps is it the one best suited to an appreciation of Hindu spirituality.⁷

A major difficulty in any western presentation of Hindu perspectives comes from our western conception of personal self-hood. If we refer to the inexpressible depths of spiritual awareness as a matter of personal relationships, following Smith, how do we reconcile such emphasis on individual involvement with Hindu concepts of *jiva*, *atman*, and *purusha*?⁸ We must acknowledge here that perhaps only a minority of Hindu interpreters subscribes to the hermeneutics of Advaita Vedanta. (I still recall with amazement going through the San-

4. Raimundo Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1973) pp. 11-18.

5. Concerning Muslim calligraphy and iconography see Leonard Librande in *Religion* (Lancaster U.K. 1980).

6. See in this connection K.L. Seshagiri Rao, *The Concept of Śraddhā* (Patiala: Roy Publishers, 1971).

7. Concerning Eliade see Douglas Allen, *Structure and Creativity in Religion: Hermeneutics in Mircea Eliade's Phenomenology and New Directions* (Mouton: The Hague, 1978).

8. I owe this observation to Professor Gerald Larson, University of California at Santa Barbara.

sanskrit text of the *Bhagavad Gita* with a revered pandit, at the Sanskrit College in Benares. Verses which to me obviously spoke of a personal devotee related to a personal lord were swept aside by him, as secondary preludes to the profundity of *jñāna marga*). Against the contemplative abstraction from all particularity favoured by such Schools of Vedānta, we have to set the distinctive individuality of such exemplary characters as Savitri. But where I still automatically think of her as an alien figure from Hindu mythology, my Hindu colleagues, male and female, can readily see themselves in her and her in them. The individual in personal relationship is not for them confined to the ego of this present historical existence, which most westerners assume to be the only life we have. Smith tries hard to allow for such different thought-worlds, by calling for dialogue. But his conception of faith already restricts the terms of reference to the outlook of his own world.

A modern example of western emphases on individual existence is Hermann Hesse's popular novel, *Siddhartha*. This is paradoxical, since Hesse, like Eliade, follows the psychology of C. G. Jung, which is supposed to be most sympathetic to the depths of meaning in oriental symbolism. But Hesse's story of a contemporary of Gautama the Buddha, who insists on making his own way rather than follow the Eightfold Path, is yet another story of the existentialist hero in modern literature. Above all, he must "do his own thing" and be "himself." Hesse makes Siddhartha discover the truth of *artha* and *kama*. He practises austerities and ends his days as a ferryman, replacing the ferryman who had been his own guide to wisdom. But his sense of self never really fits the Indian context. His preoccupation throughout is with himself and his personal relations. I once assigned a class the task of discussing symbols of self-transcendence in this story. Every western student concentrated on Siddhartha or the ferryman. But the one Hindu in the class identified with the river. Even when we read the same stories and study the same words and figures, we unconsciously reflect the hidden assumptions of our cultures.

The problem underlined by such examples is how to recognize the reality which we attempt to discuss objectively in the academic study of religion. As contrasted with many social scientists and linguists, scholars in Religious Studies at least acknowledge that there is a problem here. To this extent, they provide a needed corrective to the way religious phenomena are analysed elsewhere in the university.

Much of the time, however, we ignore the underlying problem, concentrating on such narrower tasks of scholarship as textual studies of the *Bhagavad Gita*. But the ultimate commitment of every university is to increase our understanding of all truth. We cannot allow ourselves to become bogged down in minutiae, and so miss the real subject of our research. Of course, other departments have also been known to study trivia. Preoccupation with secondary issues is not a habit unique to universities. But the challenge to those of us who teach Religious Studies is especially strong, that we do justice to our data without distorting its ultimate significance.

Tricks in terminology alone will not resolve our problem. The issue is not simply whether to use the label 'religion' or not. Some conceptual muddles may be clarified by paying attention to the different contexts in which we use our categories. But the challenge to Religious Studies runs deeper than this. We have to ask how, as philosophers and theologians of religion, we may best articulate the realization of transcendence through immanence which characterizes true religion. We have to consider the whole sequence of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of systems of thought, which alone reflects the presence of eternity in and through our cultural forms. As Professor Smith insists, though not always in the way that he suggests, we have to bring our students, not necessarily to be religious according to our own interpretations, but to appreciate what being religious means, for their lives as well as their thought. In terms of the traditional Indian doctrine of two aspects of truth, the phenomenal and the transcendental, we have, in short, to study the first in such a way as to lead to the second. This is no easy task. But this is what we should expect of Religious Studies conducted in any university worthy of the name.

III

With this much by way of background, let me now give you a definition of religion. For purposes of discussion, I define religion as the present interplay between traditional faith and transcendent hope. Definitions, we must remember, serve only as guidelines to indicate areas of research and problems for analysis. This present definition may not be as suitable as some others for discussing what are called the primal religions, of the kind so frequently discussed by Professor

Eliade and his students.⁹ You will notice again my dependence on the work of Cantwell Smith. I differ from him in stressing the concept of hope, rather than faith alone, and in highlighting the sense of dialectical exchange—the “present interplay”—in the process of coming to the truth in religious matters. It is this notion of dialectical exchange that is philosophically important for our present discussion.

The conventional doctrine of truth in classical religious philosophies is of a fixed, eternal, absolute structure. This is supposed to be mystically perceived and fragmentarily depicted, in language inherently inappropriate because drawn from everyday experiences. Changes in our accounts of eternal reality are then explained by reference to our failure to perceive what the ancient *rishis* revealed. Or changes mean making explicit what they have already given us, but only implicitly. On this account, religious hope focuses on transcending our everyday sphere of existence and participating, however momentarily, in the vision of the gods in the highest heavens. Ultimate truth is thus ancient truth. In terms of our definition, it is given to traditional faith in such a way that our main hope, eventually, is to see continuously what we now glimpse only through earthly disguises. Given such axiomatic utterances of saving insights as “*Tat tvam asi*”, in the Veda, our intellectual task is to deduce what this conception implies for our present understanding of self and world.

As Professors Norvin Hein and K. Sivaraman have recently shown with respect to Hindu traditions, this picture of truth-seeking and doctrinal development in religion is misleading.¹⁰ As a matter of fact, there have always been new insights and new doctrines in the traditions, not always first articulated in Sanskrit. Rather than yearning for timeless truths in some philosopher’s heaven, we should be thinking of an ever-present source of inspiration in the depths of our own

9. See, for example, the publications of Bruce K. Lincoln of the University of Minnesota in *History of Religions*, *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, and elsewhere.

10. Norvin Hein, “Hindu Strategies for Change,” and K. Sivaraman, “The Role of the ‘Śaivagama’ in the Emergence of Śaiva Siddhānta,” in *Traditions in Contact and Change: Selected Proceedings of the XIVth International Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions*, ed. Peter Slater and Donald Wiebe, with Maurice Boutin and Harold Coward, Wilfred Laurier University Press; Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 1982.

being, beyond even the contrast between "being" and "non-being", as this is drawn from physical object language.¹¹ Tradition is constantly transformed by transcendent hope. The present processes of religious thinking constantly reconceive tradition to renew trust in the expected liberation. The logic of religious language is the logic of promise.¹² The tradition is a tradition of promise. Present experience is of the vows and practices which make that promise a reality in the lives of religious people, as modelled on the lives of the saints. Only as we concentrate on the religious dimension of the data discussed in Religious Studies do we learn to delineate the shape of the promise in each historical tradition. The challenge to philosophers of religion, especially, is to articulate a conception of truth which fits this dialectic, instead of assuming, as so frequently happens, a model of truth from the sciences which scarcely applies, even to the lives of the scientists themselves.

What has to be understood by any student of religion is not an isolated set of texts, examined only in the light of other disciplines, but the character of the whole interplay of tradition and hope, as this is known in the lives of students and teachers alike. It is the liberating sense of this whole, and the different patterns giving it shape in our imaginations, that we must evoke through our teaching. Logic in this context means unravelling the implications and recognizing the coherence between segments of knowledge. The logic in knowledge of the situation elicits both what is said and what is implied, in and through the texts, especially the presence of the infinite which qualifies each finite thought. The logic in action of a religious situation both describes how things are and demands their transformation, in the service of ultimate bliss.¹³

As contrasted with the precise formulae found in the sciences, religious language is often said to be symbolic or sacramental. Philo-

11. See on Tillich, Chin-i T'ang and Keiji Nishitani, Frederick J. Streng, "Three Religious Ontological Claims: 'Being Itself,' 'Nothingness Within Somethingness,' and 'The Field of Emptiness,'" also in *Traditions in Contact and Change* and forthcoming in *Philosophy East and West*.
12. For Christianity on this subject see Christopher Morse, *The Logic of Promise in Moltmann's Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).
13. See Frederick J. Streng, "Language and Mystical Awareness," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

sophers of language have found such statements hard to pin down. In fact what happens, through the religious uses of language, is a constant figuring and transfiguring of perceptions, shifting from literal to symbolic, but also from symbolic to literal speech acts, in such a way as to display the reality of the whole. This discovery, or recovery, of meaning is an art, not a science, a gift of the gods, not a magical trick. It is the ultimate objective of all hermeneutics.¹⁴

As Heinrich Zimmer pointed out years ago, Indian philosophy never followed Greek philosophy in making a dichotomy between logic and mythology, to the detriment of the latter.¹⁵ In the Hindu scriptures, mythological portrayals of liberated characters constitute the contexts in which the most profound philosophical utterances are set. The sense of the dialectical development of liberating truth is articulated through a variety of forms—descriptive, prescriptive, poetic, metaphysical—in a pattern of argument which is cumulative, not deductive according to some mathematical computation. At the same time, all utterances are bracketed by contemplative silence and epitomized in the cryptic utterance of sacred *mantras*. A student realizes their full import with the guidance of a guru, who ideally symbolizes the liberated life, into which every student may eventually be initiated. Such is the whole whose truth we have to commend in the academic study of religion.

It is misleading, it seems to me, to analyse the whole complex of religious utterances and procedures as a problematic “shift” unilaterally from “external” phenomena to “internal” vision. At each point along the way, there is both an external focus, in sight or sound, and an inner awareness of the coherence of the whole. Liberation comes in the world, not otherwise, with divinity both immanent and transcendent, relative to the personal identities of those who are on the way. There is not some unit of information, locked in a teacher’s mind, as in some Cartesian box, waiting to be programmed into some student’s mind. Hindu tradition, like the Augustinian tradition in Christianity, knows

14. On symbols, see Peter Slater, *The Dynamics of Religion: Meaning and Change in Religious Traditions*, Harper & Row: New York, 1978 and SCM: London, 1979, ch. 2. On hermeneutics, see Peter Slater, “Three Kinds of Reasoning in Religion,” Supplementary number for *Philosophy of Religion*, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 1982.

15. Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India* ed. Joseph Campbell, (Cleveland: Meridian paperback, 1961), p. 26.

nothing of an isolated self realizing purely subjective truth. To be a subject already implies relationship to other subjects in an environment of various objects. In short, both teachers and students are grounded in the same transcendent wisdom for which, in the classical example of Socrates, the teachers serve as midwives.

What is meant by 'dialectical' in this context is not the simplified schema suggested by Hegel and adapted by Marx. It is literally the talking through and around a subject until its implications are acknowledged. Single statements hide as much as they reveal. While highlighting one aspect of a topic, they obscure another. Only through the juxtaposition of different accounts and different points of view do we gain a sense of the whole. This is not because we are all blind men touching different parts of an elephant—another image of externalized perception. It is because we ourselves, and the depths of truth in which we share, are also part of the picture. The truth is not somewhere else, on another shore. But neither is it just your truth or my truth. To speak the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, we have to judge ourselves in the light of our traditions and enter into dialogue concerning the hope that is in us. We cannot realize this truth without reference to religion.

The truth in religion is found in the dialectical process, not at the end of a chain of arguments. Arguments may be used subsequently to test different claims to truth. How dialogue differs from empty chatter, and how we remain authentic while reconceiving our traditions, are not easy questions for philosophers and theologians to answer. It is the challenge of studies in religion that we acknowledge such questions and listen for answers. In saying all this, I tell you nothing that you did not know already. If it were otherwise, you might well suppose that we had not been discussing religion. For religion is one of those subjects about which everyone thinks they know everything already. Often we do. But that does not prevent us from talking utter nonsense, when we take religious statements out of context. The challenge for Religious Studies is to set the classic texts in their respective contexts, in such a way that they speak to each new generation, as they have spoken to us. The task is never ending. The rewards are never surpassed.