SECOND EDITION

THE SACRED QUEST

An Invitation to the Study of Religion

LAWRENCE S. CUNNINGHAM
JOHN KELSAY
R. MAURICE BARINEAU
HEATHER JO MCVOY

Second Edition

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Preface

This textbook derives from a generation of experience teaching undergraduates in a course introducing the academic study of religion at the Florida State University. For well over two decades, that course has remained one of the most popular in the undergraduate curriculum. Some years ago, a team of faculty and graduate students "wrote up" and duplicated the core lectures as an aid for the students. From that somewhat modest beginning came the first edition of *The Sacred Quest*.

We are still convinced that the "core" of the course (reflected in the chapters of this book) remains valid. Nonetheless, some of our examples seemed a bit dated, we were needlessly obscure in places, and our discussion materials needed freshening. We have tried to remain faithful to our original vision while taking into serious account the many useful suggestions and criticisms of those who have used the book in their own classes.

This book is brief by design. We know that we cannot replicate the readings that an individual instructor might wish to use in class. Therefore, we trust that the individual teacher will flesh out what we have only hinted at and provide ancillary materials to enlarge the material base of the course.

Since the first edition appeared, Lawrence S. Cunningham has left Florida for the more austere pleasures of Northern Indiana, while John

Kelsay has moved up in the academic ranks to become director of graduate studies in the Department of Religion at Florida State. The two graduate students who joined in working on the first edition, Roy Barineau and Heather McVoy, have finished their degrees and moved into full-time careers.

We wish to thank our publisher for the continued support of *The Sacred Quest* and our reviewers: Professor Gerald McCulloh, Loyola University of Chicago; Professor George Saint-Laurent, California State University, Fullerton; and Professor Daniel Pals, University of Miami. They gave us valuable suggestions for improvements as we prepared this new edition.

This book is dedicated to the many students who have sat in our classes over the years. They have been our toughest critics and our best supporters.

Lawrence S. Cunningham
The University of Notre Dame

John Kelsay
The Florida State University

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Introduction

THE BREADTH AND DEPTH OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

To study religion is a difficult yet necessary endeavor. Both the difficulty and the necessity are due to the same facts: the breadth and depth of the impact of religion on human culture.

As to breadth, we must consider that human beings show a perennial penchant for religious expression. It is common to speak of human beings as *homo sapiens*, that is, "the creature who thinks"; there is good reason also to use the phrase *homo religiosus*, "the creature who is religious." We can find examples, here and there, of persons or groups who espouse no religion. But overall, the history of human culture bears eloquent testimony to our religious capacities. Indeed, wherever we find evidence of culture, we find evidence of religion.

At the same time, we must contemplate the depth of religion's impact. Just as our cultural history bears witness to the religious tendencies of humanity, so it indicates the power of religious conviction to motivate peo-

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ple. Consider the beginnings of Islam. In Arabia, in the seventh century C.E., a young merchant named Muhammad is seeking spiritual truth.[1] He has a religious experience and understands himself to be a messenger of God. By the time of his death some twenty-two years later, he is able to describe Arabia as "solidly for Islam"—that is, under the guidance of the message he has proclaimed. And within another generation, the community founded by Muhammad manages to conquer and control most of what we know as the Middle East, including parts of northern Africa.

Alternatively, consider the Protestant Reformation. In sixteenth-century Germany, an obscure monk, under vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to church authority, is assigned to lecture on the Bible to theology students. His superiors hope the work of preparing and delivering lectures will take the young man's mind off his worries, for he is a tormented soul, constantly aware of how far short he falls of the ideals he espouses. As he prepares his lectures, this young monk—his name is Martin Luther—arrives at an interpretation of Scripture that places him at odds with important aspects of established church teaching. He challenges church authorities, and when he is ordered to submit, he refuses. Within a generation, the face of Europe is altered, for Luther's religious understanding connects with developing nationalist tendencies to create two Europes: one Protestant, the other Catholic.

In either case, we see evidence of the power of religion—of the way it reaches to the depths of the heart and mind, providing motivation and direction for human life. That such evidence continues to mount is clear; one only has to read the papers for a week.

Any intelligent account of religion must deal with the breadth and depth of its impact on human affairs. As we have said, this makes the study of religion difficult and necessary. The necessity of the study seems evident: Those who wish to understand humanity must comprehend its rich and diverse experience of religion. Equally evident is the difficulty: How can we ever hope to deal adequately with the phenomenon of religion, with its enormous scope and power?

In all probability, we cannot. What we can accomplish, however, is the development of an increased understanding of certain aspects of the religious life. The field of religious studies is devoted to the development of such understanding. To that end, it makes use of a variety of approaches. For example, it is possible to learn a great deal from the study of sacred texts: the New Testament of Christianity, the Qur'an (sacred in Islam), or the Upanishads (Hinduism). Many scholars of religion focus their attention on the form and substance of such texts, producing critical editions of them and commentaries on them. Scholars also concentrate on describing the origins and development of religions such as, for example, Judaism, Buddhism, or Shinto. Others focus on comparisons of particular types of religious behaviors: Sacrificial rituals, prayer, and meditation come to mind.

Another approach is to deal with religion from the perspective of philosophy, in particular, to attempt to understand the nature of religious language or to evaluate arguments for or against religious faith. Finally, it is possible to study religion in the manner of intellectual or social historians who trace the development of religious ideas or institutions over time.

The diversity of approaches to the study of religion mirrors the variety of religion itself. We (the authors) do not wish to disparage any of the perspectives outlined above. Our position is that the breadth and depth of the phenomenon of religion justify all these approaches, and we make use of most of them at various points in this book. At the same time, we have our own perspective and approach, indicated in the form and substance of this book. In essence, our approach is a version of the phenomenological method, advocated by such scholars as Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, W. B. Kristenson, and Mircea Eliade. It is our conviction that this approach provides a perspective that unifies a number of others and that allows us to make the best use of the findings of scholars with more specialized approaches and techniques.

A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD

We begin with a quote from Mircea Eliade:

> A religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied *as* something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it—the element of the sacred.[2]

At the outset, a phenomenological approach to religion resists all types of "reductionism"—the tendency to interpret religion as a function of one or another nonreligious aspect of human existence. A phenomenological approach will not be inclined, for example, to explain religious beliefs as the result of "wish fulfillment"—a point of view articulated by, among others, Sigmund Freud in his famous book *The Future of an Illusion*. In this book Freud noted that there is a correlation between many religious beliefs and psychological needs—the belief in a God who is all powerful and who loves human beings, for example, relates to the need to feel secure in an overwhelming and often insecure world. He went on from this point to argue that the religious belief is a function of the psychological need. Thus, belief in God originates in and is explained by this fundamental human need.

A phenomenological approach need not deny the obvious truth that many, if not most, religious beliefs are related to psychological needs. But it

will resist the attempt to say that religion is reducible to psychology, that the beliefs and practices of religious people can be fully accounted for in psychological terms.

Similarly, a phenomenological approach resists the attempt to make religion a function of economic or political interests. We can argue, for example, that differences in religious belief or practice often correspond to differences in economic or social status. Thus, in the United States we used to say that a farm laborer who began as a Baptist would, upon improving his economic status, become a Presbyterian. If the family continued to "move up" in the world, that farm laborer's children might become Episcopalians, and so on. One obvious problem with such an approach is that the scenario does not always hold. There are upper-class Baptists, for example, and there are poor Episcopalians.

From the standpoint of a phenomenological approach, however, a more basic issue is at stake. Again, a phenomenologist need not deny the obvious truth that religion and economics are related. Given the breadth and depth of religion's impact on human cultural experience, it would be surprising if this were not so. The question is how they are related, and whether we can reduce religion to a type of economics or explain the persistence of religion in terms of political needs. To adopt a phenomenological perspective is to answer in the negative.

It must be clear, however, that there are no "purely" religious phenomena. In this sense, a phenomenologist should be ready to affirm the importance of psychological, economic, and other perspectives in the study of religion. The German sociologist Max Weber captured the emphasis we are seeking when he argued that it is necessary to affirm a "relative independence" for religion as a motive for human action. During the course of his life, Weber wrote a number of studies focusing on the relationship between religion and economics. As he put it, religious practices and ideas are not fully explained by economic interests, though religious life is related to and influenced by economics. Similarly, religious factors do not fully explain economic interests, though again there is a way in which religion shapes economic interests. The point is to understand the interplay between religion and other aspects of human life. For that reason, it is necessary to resist the tendency to reduce religion to economics or to explain it as a premodern form of psychology.

At its simplest, a phenomenological approach leads to an effort to understand religious thought and behavior *from the point of view of religious persons*. A large part of our purpose, then, must be to identify and understand the *intentions* that lie behind religious behavior. As we shall argue in Chapter 1, the identifying aspect of religion has to do with a notion of the sacred that is related to certain ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. A "religious" person or group is one who demonstrates in various ways a sacred-regarding intention. We can identify four stages of a phenomenological approach.

Gathering Religious Data. A phenomenological study of religion begins with certain facts drawn from observation of the behavior of religious people. The facts presented in this book are not drawn from one group or religious tradition only: Our observations come from a number of different traditions, cultures, and geographic regions. We are interested in what Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, and other believers say about the nature of religious experience. We are likewise interested in the rituals, books, symbols, and art works that various people use and consider part of their religion. Some of the examples will seem familiar; others will seem strange. In this respect it is important to stress the need for openness. Our emphasis will be on describing and understanding religious experience from a number of different points of view. We will not be arguing for the superiority of any particular religious tradition.

* ***The Search for Patterns.*** Analysis of the data of religious experience indicates a number of common patterns. As an example, consider the widespread use of water as a symbol of cleansing and purity—as in Christian baptism or in the ritual ablutions of Muslims, Hindus, and Jews. Similarly, most religions mark off sacred places, acknowledge sacred persons, respond to questions about the nature and purposes of evil, and engage in moral teaching. Such patterns form the basis for many of the chapters in this book. They constitute the framework for a phenomenologically oriented discussion of religion.

Analysis of the Structure of Patterns. It is one thing to identify patterns that cut across several religious traditions. It is quite another to argue that such patterns indicate common meanings. Here, we make a distinction between the meanings assigned to symbols in particular religious contexts and the more universal meanings standing behind the religious use of symbols.

For example, we know that Orthodox Jews visit the ritual bath (called the *mikveh*) on the eve of the Sabbath. Similarly, we know that pious Hindus bathe daily, before morning prayers. One of the central rites of Christianity is baptism, which involves the suggestion of bathing or washing. Pious Muslims wash with water before they perform their obligatory prayers. Roman Catholics commonly sign themselves with holy water upon entering a church.

To observe the frequency of bathing rituals among different religious groups is to notice a pattern. It is not to identify a common intention behind the behavior. In particular religious contexts, water carries a variety of meanings. Thus, the Christian attaches an interpretation to the baptism of her child that is quite different from that which a Hindu attaches to his morning ablutions in the river Ganges. Nevertheless, we can move beyond these differences in interpretation and notice that the ritual act of bathing or

washing almost universally signifies a desire to appear pure, refreshed, and cleansed in the presence of the sacred. Something deeply embedded in the religious mentality seems to insist on such cleansing. The use of water symbolizes this.

The same issues of structure occur with respect to any number of religious behaviors. For example, what meanings, both particular and universal, stand behind the common practice of religious meals? What is the significance of marking off certain places as sacred? The phenomenological approach, as we employ it in this book, does not require that we evaluate the significance that believers in a particular tradition attach to their rituals. It does allow us to think about whether there are meanings that transcend particular religious contexts.

The Suggestion of Generalizations. It may be, then, that after one examines a variety of religious phenomena he or she will feel enabled to make some generalizations about various patterns, and perhaps even about the phenomenon of religion itself. We shall be very spare in doing so, but it should be noted that there are scholars of religion who are quite ready to make such generalizations and to develop overarching theories of religion. From time to time we shall consider such theories in order to suggest some of the fruits of a phenomenological approach.

ATTITUDES AND INSTITUTIONS IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

Over a century ago, John Henry Newman said that the university is the place where "mind clashes with mind." He meant that university study is an occasion for confronting, testing, analyzing, and ultimately accepting or rejecting new ideas. Newman's general description of the university has particular application to contemporary religious studies. In particular, as the study of religion has developed in North American universities, there is a great need to recognize the difference between the type of study that tries to understand and make a contribution to some particular religious tradition and an approach that focuses on understanding a variety of religious phenomena in the context of human cultural history.

Earlier in this introduction, we listed a number of specific ways in which to study religion. Many, if not all, of these have their roots in centers of learning sponsored by particular religious communities, which particularly focus on the task of training religious leaders. Modern studies of the Bible, for example, developed in the context of schools whose mission was to train ministers, priests, and rabbis to serve as leaders of various Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish congregations. Especially for Protestants,

with their historic commitment to the authority and holiness of the text of the Bible, such study could be seen as an act of devotion, as well as scholarship. We could make similar points concerning the study of theology; even disciplines such as comparative religion developed largely in the context of Protestant and Catholic departments of theology in European universities.

The link between religious studies and the goals of particular religious communities provides an important chapter in the development of contemporary religious studies. Indeed, this chapter is still being written, with much of the creative work in writing and teaching about religion continuing to occur in the context of universities, seminaries, and divinity schools that serve and are supported by participants in particular religious traditions. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, the study of religion in North America began to find a home in the context of universities supported not by traditional faith communities but by public funds. Especially in the United States, where institutional commitments to the separation of church and state are deeply entrenched, the growth of courses and departments devoted to religious studies raises questions about purpose. What, exactly, is the place of religious studies in public institutions? How shall we talk about the purpose of courses in religion in the context of institutions that were not created by, and do not exist to serve, particular communities of faith?

It is in this connection that we recall Newman's statement concerning the university as the place where "mind clashes with mind." While the public institutional context does not rule out faith on the part of students or faculty, it does suggest a different or perhaps additional purpose for the study of religion than in the context of institutions supported by faith communities. In general, those studying religion in public institutions have tended to see their work as connected to the tradition of humanistic learning. Therefore they have focused on religion in the context of trying to understand the history, literature, art, and science of *homo sapiens*. One might express the different understandings this way: The study of religion in public institutions has focused on an exercise in historical and cultural understanding, rather than on understanding and developing a particular religious or theological tradition.

As departments from the public setting have begun to make their contribution to the wider discipline of religious studies, the difference (and tension) between "humanistic" and "theological" approaches to religious studies has become part of an ongoing debate among students of religion. Indeed, the debate now transcends distinctions between types of institutions. Faculty and students at divinity schools, for example, discuss the value of a humanistic emphasis in connection with their overall theological aims. Similarly, faculty and students at public institutions argue over the place of theology, or better, constructive religious thought in their attempts to understand religion.

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