REVIEW ESSAY

ON RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND THE RHETORIC OF

RELIGIOUS READING

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In The Politics of Religious Studies (1999) I set out to provide an understanding of Religious Studies as a legitimate academic discipline committed to achieving scientifically respectable knowledge about religion. I maintained, that is, that Religious Studies in the university context must be a social science that must strive, as all scientific endeavor, to be free from religious, political, and ideological determination. And I further argued that as the natural and social sciences achieved increasing success as they freed themselves from religio-ideological and religio-political determination, so Religious Studies could only achieve success if it liberated itself from the lingering influence of religion and theology. The essays in this volume, however, also make it clear that there are still many scholars in the context of the modern university who believe that religion and theology have a rightful role in every scientific and scholarly undertaking, and especially so in the study of religions and religion in the university. This position is no more clearly articulated than by Paul J. Griffiths in his recent Religious Reading (1999). I think it valuable, therefore, to look closely at the kind of case Griffiths attempts to make on behalf of a religious study of religion in the university, and particularly because he so clearly exemplifies the tendency in these discussions to resort to assertion and pronouncement rather than argument and debate; it very clearly illustrates the continuing arrogance of the religious and theological mind in the modern university.

One of Griffiths' aims in Religious Reading, as he puts it in the subtitle of the book, is to provide an account of “the place of reading in the practice of religion”. According to Griffiths, being religious is
being able to offer a religious account of human existence. And for Griffiths, a religious account is characterized by the qualities of centrality (making sense of human existence), comprehensiveness (taking account of everything in relationship to human existence), and unsurpassability (having central elements in the account that are non-negotiable). Griffiths also maintains that being religious is not intrinsic to being human, which implies that being able to provide a religious account of things requires learning and training. That is, one needs both knowledge and skills to be able to provide a religious account of existence, and one of the essential skills involved, Griffiths insists, is that of reading (and hearing) religiously—a skill that involves much more than mere intellect. As he puts it, religious reading includes “capacities and proclivities that will make it possible for ... [one] to act in accord with what is prescribed or recommended by the [religious] account” (15). Thus the skill of religious reading also involves other skills such as “the ordering of the will and the appetites away from the self, away from self-centered gratification, and toward God first, and other humans second” (17) which are achieved through worship and prayer.

Acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills for providing a religious account of things, Griffiths claims, can be achieved without training in a purpose-designed institution because, he writes, “[t]here is nothing about religious reading as a skill that requires for its transmission any technology more complicated than the human tongue, ears, and brain” (63). The Christian catechumenal process which is open to the whole Christian community, he points out, provides a ready example of this. Nevertheless, Griffiths also acknowledges that there are some institutions (such as seminaries and monasteries, to which he, strangely, adds such non-elite institutions as churches, mosques, and temples) dedicated to the enterprise of training “virtuoso religious” readers (61). Where these specialist institutions exist, he claims, they have a particular structure (involving authority, hierarchy, tradition, and community) that constrains what and how readers should read and compose—although similar constraints, it seems, also characterize the catechumenal process. Because universities are created to support persons who give their lives to reading and writing, Griffiths believes that they too can provide a context for religious reading, although he does not indicate whether he thinks this institution should be purpose-designed for creating ordinary or extraordinary religious readers. Whatever the case, however, Griffiths thinks