On making peace: a critical reply to Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe

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I have been asked to respond to Luther Martin's and Donald Wiebe's article "On Declaring WAR: A Critical Comment." Most of their discussion concerns Ninian Smart who has provided his own response to their criticisms. I shall therefore restrict my reply to their comments on my review of Marburg Revisited: Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religion (MTSR 3/1 [1991]: 142-146). But I shall also include some of my own reflections on Ninian Smart's proposal of a "World Academy of Religion," primarily under attack, because he has written on this idea in the book Turning Points in Religious Studies (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990) which I edited and to which Luther Martin and Don Wiebe referred towards the end of their article. The reader needs to know that, meanwhile, Donald Wiebe has also published a review of this book in the journal Religion where, in a longish paragraph, he already argues against the idea of such an academy to which he has given the acronym "WAR."\footnote{See Religion 22 (1992): 295-296.} Professor Smart and I have written a reply to this review which will appear in another issue of Religion. Thus my remarks, following here, are already part of an ongoing debate which—by the time this article is printed—may have developed even further through discussions at the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting in San Francisco in November 1992.

This by way of introduction to explain the background from which I am writing. Now to my reply.

First I must comment on the chosen title "On Declaring WAR." This seems to me to express a deliberately confrontational, perhaps even
belligerent, stance on the part of the authors. It is unfortunate that the proposed “World Academy of Religion” allows this abbreviation (one, though not the main, reason why I am against this name, although I strongly support the proposal itself), but the choice is quite deliberate so that the most negative associations can be called upon. This is more than opposition; it is an outright attack. But why and for whose benefit?

I am much in favour of sharp intellectual debate and reasoned argument—and that is what journal and book publications, academic colloquia, and conferences are all about—but I do not find it helpful, nor appropriate, to use the language of war or war-like tactics in speaking about colleagues when one happens to disagree with them. I also take exception to the view that my mode of thinking, expressed in my earlier book review, is described in the article above as “adversarial” and “not easily distinguishable, if at all, from that of Wiebe.” I do not advocate recourse to fights of war because the metaphor of war is burdened with such a negative, life-destroying heritage, with associations of suffering and destruction, and with memories of personal pain, that I think we should be wary of using it, especially in the context of studying religion. On the contrary, we ought to draw on our expert scholarly knowledge, which includes the awareness of multiple religious factors contributing to war and of the massive negative history of hate, violence, and destruction associated with religions, to help make peace and thus transform our belligerent world rather than attack each other in a war-like, fighting spirit.

In other words, whilst I can agree with much of the intention of Martin’s and Wiebe’s arguments, I strongly disagree with the manner in which they are expressed and some of the methods which they prescribe rather exclusively for the study of religion. It is wholly appropriate to give attention to the problem of potential and actual “interference of religious practice in the academic study of religion,” to enquire whether there exists a “theological domination of the superstructure which still shapes the academic study of religion,” to be perturbed by the presence of “fideism” in religion departments or by the possibility of religious studies being “retheologised”; yet much depends on the definition of the terms used here and to whom they are applied. More often than not Christian theology seems to be the target, but whose specific theology is meant is left rather unclear. Much of the criticism, here and elsewhere, seems to concern the institutional and financial power which some Christian denominations wield in influencing academic policies and curricula, or the ambiguity of roles of teaching staff in religion who work in academic institutions but also act as religious specialists and functionaries in denominational groups. This can have a negative and restricting effect on the academic study of religion, but one cannot apodictically affirm that this is always and everywhere the case, for