On declaring peace: another critical comment

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Donald Wiebe and Luther Martin have their hearts in the right place, and their intellects more or less where their hearts are, but with trailing edges. They criticize my suggestion in Ursula King's recent Turning Points in Theology (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990) for a World Academy of Religion, "perhaps based on the IAHR" (which they honourably seek to defend). Their criticisms are in part theoretical, and they think that I have conducted a U-turn. I do not think so. Their criticisms are to some extent justified but they are not right. They are justified because I was not sufficiently clear on my proposal for the World Academy of Religion. But let me deal with one or two preliminary points first.

In my review of Marburg Revisited (MTSR 2/2 [1990]: 298-304), I critiqued Martin's contribution for its rather cursory treatment of North American religious studies when he stated that, "[a]part from a few quasi-successful attempts, the promise to realize a new paradigm for religious study remains largely unrealized because of a theological inertia that continues to characterize the study of religion in the American cultural context." Is the glass of the scientific study of religion in North America half empty or half full? Perhaps five hundred marvellous monographs on themes in African religion, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Indian, Islamic, Christian, Jewish, secular and other traditions have been published mainly by younger scholars in the last twenty years. Did you try to recruit anyone for a position in Chinese religions thirty years ago? What was once a problem has now become a plethora. Moreover, I do not like the label "quasi-successful"—why sneer at these accomplishments? Martin should come to Santa Barbara or go to ten other successful, large campuses. Of course he is right that there is theological inertia; but he discounts the enormous strides which have been made in North America in the last thirty years—in Canada especially, I
would add. I prefer optimism and I do not like a pessimism which helps the very forces it deplores.

More seriously, though, I would like to address my WAR suggestion as well as the theoretical issues lying beyond it. I still believe above all in the descriptive and neutral or pluralist study of religions and worldviews. Contrary to what Wiebe and Martin believe, I made no U-turn in my recommendation of such a world academy. But perhaps I did not clarify my ideas sufficiently.

First, I am worried that the IAHR does not typically include certain swaths of reputable students of religion—few anthropologists, few sociologists, few philosophers for starters. Further there are not enough Christian, Jewish, and Islamic scholars or scholars of these faiths (partly because they tend to be tradition-bound, and these religions are often the least well studied for that reason) represented within its ranks, and so on. If the IAHR would incorporate societies of such individuals perhaps things would be different. Societies are like individuals writ large. So even if they may be committed theologically, they could participate in an IAHR based WAR provided that they adhered to the rules of scholarship—namely, objectivity, phenomenological sensitivity, and so forth.

But there is another issue. There is provision in the IAHR for philosophy of religion. Do Martin and Wiebe believe this is a legitimate activity? I do, though I would like to broaden it in two ways as I have written in Worldviews, 1983. First, by making it into the philosophy of worldviews, i.e., of both religious and so-called secular worldviews; and second, by calling it “the reflective study of religion and worldviews.” That is, by understanding that philosophical reflection goes beyond the usual narrow confines of its traditional practice. Questions of the criteria of truth as between religions, the best forms religious education or education about religion should take, reflections on the political implications of different views about the relations between religions—such issues could be an integral part of philosophizing here. At any rate, even if we stick with the narrower view of the philosophy of religion, the scope of religious studies would in some respects go beyond merely descriptive and theoretical concerns. So I would like us to deepen some of our enquiries on this front. This has nothing much to do with re-theologizing religious studies. I think Wiebe and Martin are over-sensitive on this front.

Also, methodological studies are a part of reflection about religions and worldviews, and again in some ways go beyond the basic stuff of the study of religion and worldviews.

So I think the idea of a World Academy of Religion in a period of globalization has merit. It would affiliate not just individuals, I would hope, but organizations as well—which, as I have already stated, are individuals