

Address by Eugene Webb, Professor Emeritus, Comparative Religion &
Comparative Literature, Jackson School of International Studies
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Religion as a Humanistic Study in the 21st Century

I would like to congratulate all of you who are here tonight to be initiated into Phi Beta Kappa. Phi Beta Kappa is dedicated to promoting and recognizing excellence in liberal education — and not just academic excellence as such, I want to emphasize, but excellence in specifically liberal education. My colleagues and I have put in many hours over the years reading the transcripts of juniors and seniors to see if they qualify for initiation into Phi Beta Kappa, and I can tell you from experience that there are students with extremely high academic achievement, even some with perfect 4.0 averages, who do not qualify; rather we look both for excellence and for the range of study in diverse fields that is one of the marks of a genuinely liberal education. So I would like to begin with a few words about what exactly liberal education is, both to celebrate your achievement and also to prepare some background for what I will say about my topic for this talk, which is the way religion is studied today in modern universities and also the way religion is practiced and lived by people under the conditions that this sort of study involves. (Do I need to remind you, by the way, that the word “initiation” is a religious term, and that initiation ceremonies, which are found in religions all over the world, are sacramental enactments of death and renewal that symbolize profound transformations?)

What is it your education has brought you during these years in the university that you are now completing? When you began at the university, you probably expected it would bring you knowledge, and certainly that has happened, although I would like to suggest that that is not what is most important that has happened. If you studied Hindi, for example, with Professor Shapiro, you certainly learned a lot of new words and a new grammar, and that may have been all you expected to learn when you began the introductory class. But if you continued that study to the point of reading Hindi poetry and other Hindi literature, you also developed a sense of what it might be like to live in a different world and a different culture, to experience life differently and to read that experience through different eyes and lenses. In the process of doing that, or in any other course of studies you pursued to some depth during these past four or so years, the most important thing you learned, I would like to suggest, is something that

neither you nor many of your family members may have realized was the real purpose of the education you received here: you developed a new mind, a new kind of mind. You became transformed. You began with the assumption we all, I think, started with, that learning and knowing are a matter of picking up some sorts of mental object (vocabulary, grammar, dates, formulas, and so on) from books and lectures and simply placing them in your heads, where you hope they will remain vivid long enough to be useful in your future careers. And some of that did happen. But that was not what transformed you.

What made you new, what led you through what might even be called a kind of death and rebirth, is that you came through the practice of inquiry to realize that knowledge is not a simple collection of mental objects, but an interpretive activity — an activity you and your professors were both engaged in and will continue to be engaged in for the rest of your lives.

Let me say a little about what this implies that, having just come through it, a little dazed perhaps, you may still be in the early stages of realizing and digesting.

Knowing is an interpretive activity. What does that mean? Interpretation is a process of imaginative construction, in which we put together possible patterns that can make sense of the buzzing, blooming confusion of experience. For knowing to be real, it has to begin with experience. But experience alone is not knowing. Knowing is the interpreting of experience. This is a process in which we first imagine and then try out interpretive patterns to see if they fit what we can notice in the field of our experience. We reflect critically on the relative adequacy of the fit, and if the fit is not good enough, we try again. And we talk it over with our friends and colleagues to see if they have come up with better interpretations, or if they have noticed more that needs interpreting that the interpretations we've come up with so far don't take into account. Knowledge is what we get by doing that. Knowledge, to put it simply, is our best interpretation — the best, that is, that we can come up with for now.

This has two immensely important implications that are worth reflecting on explicitly. One is that knowledge is not certainty. On the contrary, knowledge of the real world is the fruit of processes of interpretation that by their very nature must remain always open to the challenge of new experience and new interpretive possibilities. Think, for

example, of the shift that took place under the pressure of both, in the early 20th century, from Newton's beautiful and highly explanatory physics to Einstein's initially disconcerting but even more explanatory physics of relativity.

The other important implication is that knowing is an inherently dialogical process. As limited inquirers, we know that we can never all by ourselves notice or understand every feature of the realm of experience that may need to be taken into account, and one of the things we learn by studying in a university, is that it is immensely helpful to do our interpreting in the company of other interpreters who can supplement our observations and ideas with theirs and who can warn us when our own interpretations may be beginning to sound a little nutty. And we also learn that we have to be grateful to our colleagues who are willing to risk being a little nutty for the sake of looking at things from a new angle that might in the end prove to be fruitful. Think of Copernicus, Galileo, and Einstein, for example.

This can serve as a segue to the topic of religion. There are various ways to be religious, but in most societies for most of human history, religion has been valued as a source of certainty and stability, and we are all familiar with the common (one might even say stereotyped) idea of religious people as "hidebound" and "conservative." The story of Galileo, condemned to house arrest and silenced for the rest of his life by the Roman inquisition in 1633, has become a perennial symbol of the way religious thinking can resist new ideas and dialogue about them. The trouble for Galileo began brewing years earlier. In 1611 he took his recently invented astronomical telescope to Rome to show it to the Papal court. Some looked through it and were amazed by what they saw that conflicted with the traditional astronomy the Church had become espoused to. But there were some in the college of cardinals who refused even to look through it, because they did not want to be tempted to deviate from customary Church teaching. A few years later, in 1616, the Copernican hypothesis about the movement of the planets around the sun was declared by Rome to be dangerous to faith, and Galileo was ordered not to uphold or teach it.

But Christian and Jewish scholars and theologians in the modern west have since adopted almost unanimously Galileo's principle that "the scriptures tell us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go." This has taken place through a slow process in which the complexity of scriptural data has been brought to attention by scholarly research, and the possibilities

of interpretation of scripture have been vastly expanded by theologians. Which is not to say that this has been an easy or a smooth process, and many people in the Jewish and Christian traditions still find it unsettling to think about. As the Catholic Biblical scholar, Sandra Schneiders, who currently teaches at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, warned her readers in the introduction to her book on Biblical interpretation, “For understandable reasons, some people will be more than a little uneasy with the suggestion that the gospels are works of the imagination appealing to the imagination.”

In what way is this understandable? Peter Berger, a sociologist of religion, says that religion develops out of “a craving for meaning that has the force of an instinct.” A threat to that can lead one to kill, or to prefer death oneself to a life bereft of meaning. And many religious people seem to feel that nothing short of certainty will satisfy that craving for meaning. Religion, says Berger, is “the establishment through human [interpretive] activity of an all-embracing sacred order, that is, of a sacred cosmos that will be capable of maintaining itself in the ever-present face of chaos.” Chaos always threatens, and the awareness that religious ideas are interpretations, not just objective facts known by some non-interpretive process, poses a danger to that sort of religious mind. Hence one of Berger’s other points: that the social world intends, as far as possible, to be taken for granted, and socialization achieves success to the degree that this taken-for-grantedness is internalized in such a way that it can no longer be questioned, or indeed even noticed.

One can see in the Galileo case that what was going on was an attempt on the part of a powerful social institution to preserve the internalized taken-for-grantedness of the sacred cosmos of the late middle ages against the threat of the chaos that might enter with a new way of looking at things.

You will remember what I said earlier about the way liberal education develops an understanding of knowledge as ongoing interpretive process, with the implication that certainty in the sense of a final interpretation that can never in principle be improved upon is simply not possible. And you will remember the further implication: that the real process of knowing is inherently dialogical, an ongoing conversation in which interpreters pool their resources of both experience and ideas. Those who condemned Galileo did so to preserve the possibility of a sense of certainty, and their means was to try to put an end to dialogue by silencing Galileo. Fortunately for science, their power did not extend to places like England and the Netherlands and

Denmark, where Galileo's ideas were discussed and developed and improved upon by Johannes Kepler and others and eventually became the core of the modern astronomy that some of you may have taken courses in here at UW.

So we can understand why the inquisitors in Rome condemned Galileo. But it is not easy for many of us to sympathize with them. However, I would like also to suggest that we might want to consider the further implications of what Schneiders meant about how there can be understandable reasons why some people might be more than a little uneasy with new ways of looking at their traditions and their cherished certainties. She herself, as a modern feminist theologian wanted to present challenges and even to make some of her readers uneasy (as I found she indeed did when I read her book with some of my students in a graduate seminar last winter). But we may owe some efforts of empathy to the vast numbers of people all over the world who are feeling this sort of disturbance. Christians and Jews in the modern west have had centuries of acquaintance with the sort of questions Schneiders warned her readers would be disturbing, beginning with the rabbis in medieval Spain who first raised questions about how, if Moses is supposed to have been the author of the entire Pentateuch, including Deuteronomy, he could in the latter book even have described his own funeral. Many people in other traditional cultures are only now beginning to feel the pressure of modern questions about their traditions, and the experience is deeply disturbing to them. One can understand, I think, even if not condone, some of the violent reactions this produces.

What I would like to suggest for your consideration in closing, is that even as we are grateful for the transformation of our minds that we have received through our liberal educations, we should also try not to forget what this may have cost us ourselves in suffering as we found ourselves forced to relinquish former certainties, waking, as Immanuel Kant once put it, from our dogmatic slumbers. Or if we have not ourselves found this process so disturbing, we should remember that it may be because we are the beneficiaries of generations of others (both Galileos and Cardinal Bellarmine, to acknowledge the agony on both sides) who have suffered it before us. We owe it to those coming behind us, whether new freshmen in this university or people of all ages and stations of life in traditional cultures all over the world, to understand and empathize with the strain they are experiencing, even as we also encourage them to bear that strain and to

persist until they can join us as equal, fully engaged members in the great dialogue for which we too may give reverent thanks to the source of all light.