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*Reappraising Durkheim for the Study and Teaching of Religion Today (Brill, 2001), and*

*Religion as a Human Capacity*

*(Brill, 2004). He is also the author of several articles on the religious history of the Midwest, including the chapter on religion in*

*The Midwest: The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Regional Cultures*

*, edited by Joseph W. Slade and Judith Lee (Greenwood, 2004). His most recent publication is Yankees in Michigan*

*(2008), part of the Discovering the Peoples of Michigan Series published by Michigan State University Press. Currently, Wilson is working on*

*The Battle for Battle Creek: Religious Conflict in a Nineteenth Century Midwestern Town*

*, a book exploring the conflict between Seventh-Day Adventists and Spiritualists in the early history of Battle Creek, Michigan.*

## **The Goals of Liberal Education**

Is religious studies as it is taught at a public university a branch of the humanities or a social science? Is its goal largely cross-cultural interpretation or explanation? This theoretical divide has played out in other fields (e.g., anthropology, history, art history), but it has been especially acute in religious studies where departments continue to be, as Charlotte Allen put it in her notorious *Lingua Franca* article, "shapeless beast[s]...lumbering through the academy with no clear methodology or raison d'être" (Charlotte Allen, "Is Nothing Sacred?: Casting Out the Gods from Religious Studies," *Lingua Franca* 6:7. November 1996: 30–40).

Such amorphousness is the fate of all fields that have not attained theoretical consensus and remain interdisciplinary perforce.

Personally, having grown more and more agnostic about the claims of theory over the years, I'm perfectly happy with the field's fluid nature. However, thinking as a former department chair, I am mindful of the necessity of positing some overarching structure for religious studies, both to promote the smooth running of a department with disparate faculty as well as to promote its programs to potential majors and justify them to administrators. Inspired in part by Michael Root's "perfectionist" social science, Gerald Graff's injunction to "teach the conflicts," and Warren Nord's discussion of teaching religion in public schools, I have decided the best way to deal with religious studies' ongoing identity crisis is to return to an admittedly old-fashioned idea — contextualize the field firmly within the ideology of liberal education and build its coherence on the demands of liberal education.

Unfortunately, the health of liberal education — especially at state universities and public colleges — is none too robust these days. A few years ago, I served as chair of the General Education Review Task Force at my institution, the goal of which is to bring coherence to the University's liberal ("general") education program. It became glaringly obvious to me that there is widespread confusion and outright apathy about the goals and methods of liberal education among both faculty and administrators. This is due to the assumption that education for personal development and citizenship needs to be sacrificed for a greater emphasis on vocational training. Like many others, I believe this "vocational turn" is a tremendous mistake. I for one still cling to the notion that personal development should be a priority in higher education, although I do realize that this is a hard sell to cash-strapped students and their parents — not to mention to the army of administrators who are interested only in quantitative metrics and the financial bottom line. Nonetheless, at state institutions like mine — which still operate (at least in part) with taxpayer dollars — it seems to me that education for responsible citizenship is not only desirable but imperative, especially considering the increasing polarization of civil society in this country today. Moreover, given the fact that American public universities are becoming increasingly attractive to foreign students, liberal education at state institutions represents both an opportunity and a duty to promote liberal values globally. Both of these are compelling reasons for those of us at state institutions to hold the line when it comes to erosions of liberal education.

But what precisely does liberal education consist of in this sense? If indeed it is still important for public higher education to train students for successful citizenship in a liberal society — a society that allows a large degree of free choice among competing conceptions of the good — then liberal education must aspire to three learning outcomes or goals:

1. In-depth knowledge of a wide variety of conceptions of the good
2. The ability to make reasoned choices between rival conceptions of the good
3. The attitudes necessary for respect for, or at least understanding of, other peoples'

choices of the good

And to achieve these goals, liberal education must proceed by three methods:

1. Exposure of students to a wide variety of conceptions of the good, and doing so accurately and with intellectual charity
2. Training of students in those theoretical approaches that allow them to critique the claims of rival conceptions of the good
3. Introduction of students to the critical analysis of the critiques (metacriticism or philosophical criticism)

In short, liberal education aspires to train students to be autonomous individuals with the skills necessary to choose reflectively between rival conceptions of the good and to live comfortably in a pluralistic society.

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