

Reports

Report from Berlin Freedom for religions in Germany October 27-28, 1997

Richard A Hutch

Studies in Religion, University of Queensland

To the outsider, German society appears to be open and progressive. It is at the heart of industrial Europe, and is well known for its financial and technological accomplishments. One readily assumes, following such general impressions about Germany, that freedoms which are considered to be basic to the social fabric of other democratic countries are well entrenched there. However, even before leaving Australia to attend a demonstration, march, concert, vigil and conference on the state of religious freedom in Germany, I experienced a hint of what I was told the members of minority faiths, or 'new religions', experience daily in Germany, namely deliberate and active religious discrimination.

Although I had been told that a room had been booked for me in the Congress Palace Hotel in Berlin, this was abruptly cancelled for unknown reasons. Then I was informed that a room had been booked at the Hilton Hotel. Upon arriving in Berlin and being picked up at the airport, I was told by my driver, a Scientologist named Angelina, that the Hilton Hotel had cancelled all room bookings arranged by Scientologists, even those arranged for non-Scientologist consultants like myself, an academic observer, who had arrived in Germany to monitor the "Freedom for Religions in Germany" event. I was then taken to the Inter-Continental Hotel where accommodation was finally secured, but only after being told that no room was available on the day of my arrival but only the following day. The problem was sorted out several hours later after my Scientology hosts negotiated the extra day with the hotel management. When I asked why all the difficulty of hotel bookings and cancellations had occurred, my hosts smiled and said "Welcome to Germany!".

Sunday Evening 26 October: Ecclesiastical panel discussion on Scientology

After settling into my room I received a request from my hosts to meet in the lobby of the hotel to get acquainted and to consider attending a meeting that was to be held that evening in a church in another part of the city. It was a meeting sponsored

by a Protestant (Lutheran) leader in Berlin, who had organised what was billed as an “ecumenical discussion” about Scientology and Scientology’s “dangers”. A dozen or so Scientologists and some of their consultants went to attend the discussion but the feeling tone of the greeting there was tense. Upon entering, we each paid DM10, and were thoroughly photographed by members of the German Press, who continued to photograph throughout the entire discussion of about two hours in length. The reception was ‘chilly’ to say the least.

Among about eight panel members, the Lutheran leader had invited two ex-Scientologists (one German, one American), who told of how they were “held against their will” by Scientologists, and how they believed that Scientology was not a religion but a business, and a “fraudulent” one as well. Another panel member was a professor from Denmark. He argued that Scientology was not a “public religion” like Protestantism (Lutheran) and Catholicism in Germany, but an “occult” religion; and such non-public religions posed a danger to society. Perhaps the most flamboyant member of the panel was Ursula Caberta, director of Hamburg’s anti-Scientology task force and a federal politician. She argued to my astonishment that people who are Scientologists intend to eliminate the German state, and that she and other governmental officials aim to stop it. She suggested that Scientology is a threat to Germany’s social democracy and, therefore, Scientology should be made “illegal.” That some panel members spoke only German, no English, made it difficult to follow. However, translations were provided to the consultants and to English-speaking Scientologists by local English-speaking German Scientologists.

Although there was a brief opportunity for the audience to address the panel members, it was clear that comment in support of Scientology and other minority faiths was not welcomed. When one consultant from the United States, Mr. Clark Austin, Director, Religious Freedom International, asked why German officials failed to follow Articles 9 and 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (effective beginning in 1953) and Article 18 of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), which include freedom of religion clauses, he was told that Germany would not be told “by America” how to conduct its internal affairs. Mr. Barry Fisher, a lawyer, sat next to me as we watched and listened to the proceedings. He also is Senior Vice President of Human Rights Advocates International, a Fellow of the American Academy of Freedom of Religion and Chairman of the Religious Freedom Subcommittee of the American Bar Association. We both agreed that the so-called panel discussion was no fair discussion at all, just a one-sided attempt to tarnish publicly Scientology on the eve preceding the demonstration, march, concert and vigil on behalf of religious freedom in Germany. Whether news of the discussion was broadcast on the late night television that night or during the following day, remains unknown to me. The deliberate ‘staged’ nature of the panel discussion, which allowed nothing sympathetic or informative about Scientology to be entered, struck all the consultants as indeed not only astonishing, but also, and more importantly, worrying. A cloud of sinister feeling

descended on us. As we drove back to the hotel in anticipation of the events to come on the following day, fears about the possibility of violence during the demonstration and march were voiced.

Monday, 27 October, 1997: Demonstration, March, Concert, Vigil

Like many others, the Australian contingent (+/-12), including myself as a consultant and David Millikan as an observer and reporter making a documentary in conjunction with the BBC on Scientology, assembled at the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtnis-Kirche plaza in the heart of Berlin (western district) at noon. The plaza was a short walk from the hotel. About ten police vans were in evidence, parked on an adjacent street. My estimate is that at the outset approximately 2000 people from the international community, Scientologists and non-Scientologists, were assembled as the demonstration phase of the day commenced. Speeches were heard from religious leaders from a number of major and minority faiths, including Christian, Muslim and Shinto traditions. All advocated religious freedom in Germany; not only the free choice between the only current options, namely, the officially 'established' Christian traditions of Protestantism (Lutheran) and Catholicism. The enthusiasm of the assembly kept on building up, and this was facilitated by speakers leading in singing the theme song, "Break Down the Wall of Intolerance," throughout the proceedings, which carried on well into the afternoon. On the same day as the demonstration took place, it was learned that a plunge of 554 points on the Dow Jones industrial average (loss of 7.2%) at the New York Stock Exchange occurred. This international economic event may have overshadowed the demonstration in Berlin, and this was reflected in the disparity of coverage on the local evening television news.

As the demonstration came to a close, the assembly appeared to number in excess of 8000 people¹. It began to move out of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtnis-Kirche plaza, and became a street march to the Brandenburg Gate, which was approximately 4-5 kilometres away through main thoroughfares in the parklands known as the Tiergarten in central Berlin. The Australian contingent proudly carried national flags, and continued to surprise people who asked where the flags were from—"all that way you have come . . . great!" Marching about five or six abreast, the marchers stretched out almost the complete distance and brought traffic to a halt during the evening's peak hour. Lining the streets in the Tiergarten were no fewer than fifty police vans, but no incidences occurred that required the deployment of police, except to direct vehicular traffic. The march elicited heightened camaraderie, and proceeded from beginning to end as a joyous event, but one with clear and serious commitment to the cause of religious freedom in Germany.

As the afternoon came to a close and the sun began to set, a concert was held at the Brandenburg Gate. The concert had been scheduled to take place in the

Deutschland Halle, but use of the hall was withdrawn when, it was said, it was found out that Scientologists would be using it. Also, it was said that the equipment necessary for setting up the concert—stage equipment, electric generators, etc.—had originally been arranged through local German merchants. However, the arrangements were cancelled at the last minute, so Scientologists from France brought in all the necessary equipment. (Were the hall and the equipment together shades of the earlier hotel arrangements matter?). Everyone enjoyed the concert. Black American singer, Isaac ('Shaft') Hayes, and the Scientology jazz group, 'Jive Aces', were featured. As the air temperature grew close to the freezing mark, people wandered back to their hotels and warmed up for the last activity of the day, the candle-light vigil at the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtnis-Kirche plaza, which included a multi-faith religious service.

Tuesday, 28 October, 1997: Human Rights and Religious Freedom Conference

Only on the morning of the day of the conference was the exact location announced to the participants. This probably was done with a view to pre-empting any possibility of a repeat performance of cancellations of venues and facilities by government and business officials, which had dogged the organisers from the outset. The conference was held at the Steglitz Hotel, which was some distance from where the previous day's event was held, and the participants numbered about 75-100. Most of the participants were religious and human rights leaders from around the world, with a sprinkling of Scientology officials who were specifically monitoring the state of freedom of religion in Germany (and also in the more encompassing European Union). Although publicity originally foreshadowed that conference participants would likely be visiting their national consulates in Berlin, only small delegations of Scientologists actually made such contacts. Some suggested that an additional day to extend the work of the conferees would have been desirable.

The exact title of the conference was, "Europe: The Dangers of Intolerance—An International Perspective," and it was moderated by Dr. Gabriele Yonan, Free University of Berlin. The conference had three major phases: (1) presenting reports on freedom of religion in the home countries of participants, including the United States, Japan, Australia, Bulgaria/Eastern Europe, Canada and South Africa (I reported on Australia²); (2) receiving testimonies by Scientologists, members of the Unification Church and written reports from Evangelical Christians about cases of religious discrimination against them in Germany and elsewhere; and (3) formulating and signing resolutions on behalf of the cause for religious freedom in Germany, and sending them to the Chancellor of the German government, Helmut Kohl.

Perhaps the most compelling part of the conference was receiving testimonies about social, political and economic discrimination against members of minority faiths. It was no surprise to hear about reports of religious discrimination in Bulgaria/

Eastern Europe (especially in regard to the recent revival of Russian Orthodox Christianity as a major impetus to Russian nationalism, and the implication that other religions are now legally prohibited from teaching about their beliefs and practices and seeking converts, unless those religions can be shown to have existed in the old Soviet Union and, now, the new Russia, for at least fifteen years). However, those in attendance listened with jaws dropped in astonishment to the testimonies of individuals who have been discriminated against in Germany just because they hold religious beliefs other than those of the officially sanctioned Christian traditions of Protestantism (Lutheran) and Catholicism. Most of us had assumed that religious freedom existed in Germany, but it does not at this time. One wry joke that circulated was to the effect that, "Sure, Germany has religious freedom. The German constitution says so. Everybody is free to choose . . . either to be a Lutheran or a Catholic!"

Three testimonies can be mentioned by way of indicating typical ways in which religious discrimination occurs in Germany (and also outside of Germany by German interests).

First, a middle-class mother of two young boys spoke. One of her sons was attending a private school. She and her husband were Scientologists, but this fact was not known to anyone at the school or in the neighbourhood where the family lived. One day, not knowing how it happened, Scientology brochures appeared in a number of school bags that belonged to members of this woman's son's class. The bags were lined up outside the school room, and no one noticed any other people in the area. The principal of the school sent home a letter with each child. The letter asked all parents to indicate whether they were Scientologists or associated with Scientologists. The parents of the boy could not in good conscience return such a letter and, as a result, the principal instructed them to remove their son from the school, which they did. No one questioned the move or rose to their support.

Second, a man with a small photography business had rented a shop in which he had conducted his business for several years. During the course of time, he had grown interested in Scientology, and had become a Scientologist. As it happened, some correspondence from the Church of Scientology arrived in the letterbox at his place of business, and during the sorting of the mail his landlord noticed the correspondence. When the landlord questioned whether the photographer was a Scientologist, the only possible reply in good conscience was, "Yes." Not long afterward, the lease of the shop was terminated by the landlord, who gave no reason for doing so. Being a Scientologist often means that discrimination happens to you from behind a wall of silence, and that there is nowhere to turn for help, let alone to try to seek legal recourse.

Third, we all heard from an American woman who was a Scientologist from Los Angeles and who had come to Berlin specifically to offer testimony about a recent instance of religious discrimination in her life. It concerns her employment, which was suddenly terminated without explanation. In fact, the young woman said that she had been given glowing reports about the quality of her work only three

weeks earlier during a regular periodic review of employees. As is usual in such cases, the woman has only guesses about how her employer found out that she was a Scientologist; perhaps through a third party who may have overheard a personal telephone conversation. The woman was employed at the Los Angeles branch office of the German banking firm, Deutschbank. Even in the United States, where such actions are illegal if religious discrimination is the cause, it would appear that the long arm of collusion between German business and government reaches out to discriminate against members of minority faiths. The woman took her case to a Federal Court in New York, where she believes that the case will succeed towards the end of the current year³.

Finally, word has arrived from the Federal Administrative Court in Berlin that on November 6, 1997 Judge Werner Meyer decided the pending case about whether Scientology (and, hence, other minority faiths) is a "religion" or a "business." The judge handed down the decision that the Church of Scientology is a religion, and entitled to corresponding benefits such as tax-exempt status and the freedom to recruit followers. In the case, which concerns a Scientology Mission in Germany, the Federal Court ruled that an association is not conducting a commercial activity when it offers services to members. A transcript of the full decision has yet to be received. However, the decision suggests that the collusion between government and business to discriminate against Scientologists is coming somewhat apart⁴. The court took a big step forward to create full freedom of religion in Germany. In the short term, the decision probably will bring moderation to some of the activities of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, which is a national watchdog agency that had been directed by the government in Bonn last June to place members of the Church of Scientology under surveillance. Tactics such as tapping telephones, opening mail and infiltrating organisations, which are normally reserved for neo-Nazis, terrorists and other extremist political groups, had often been used in the German government's campaign to isolate and ostracise German members of the Church of Scientology.⁵ Scientology has led the counter-campaign, but members of other minority faiths also have been subjected to similar officially sanctioned harassment in the past.

It is my suggestion that the Freedom for Religions in Germany event of 27-28 October, 1997 contributed significantly to raising the consciousness of the German judiciary to consider the wider implications of maintaining the activities of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution against the Church of Scientology. The demonstration, march, concert, vigil and conference together represent a significant force applied at the right moment which, if not a direct or sufficient cause of the court's decision of November 6th, nonetheless, allowed Judge Meyer to bring more into accordance German law about religious freedom and the institutional and legal requirements that would be expected of member states of the "New Europe." Not only has the Church of Scientology benefited from the last days of October and the first days of November of 1997. Also hopeful can be those persons who are members

of all minority faiths in Europe, as Germany appears to have signalled its willingness to think beyond its national legal and cultural borders, and to envisage the true meaning of what it is to be a leader in the emerging United States of Europe. I myself remain proud to have been one of the Australians who campaigned in Berlin for such a vision, and I hope that continued steady progress on behalf of religious freedom around the world can be maintained.

Let us continue to be vigilant!⁶

Notes

1. The issue of the number of people attending the demonstration and march is contentious, with the German government and media perhaps underestimating the size of the crowd. Alan Cowell, a reporter for the New York Times Service, wrote in the *International Herald Tribune* on Tuesday, October 28, 1997 that "while the organizers had forecast a turnout of 10,000, fewer than 2000 people congregated to march on a bright, chilly day . . ." (p. 5). Most of the travel arrangements made by international Scientology organisations had been channelled through an American travel agency. It was reported later to participants in the conference that was held on the same day as the newspaper report appeared by Ms. Sue Taylor, who is an official from the International Church of Scientology in Los Angeles, that two days before the demonstration, march, concert and vigil "just under 8000 paid for reservations" for Germany had been processed by the American travel agency (verbal report given to conferees at the Steglitz Hotel on Tuesday afternoon, October 28, 1997). A possible explanation of the report in the media that only 2000 people attended the entire day's event that was mentioned at the time was that most reporters were noticed working only during the early part of the day's event, namely, during the demonstration. As the march got underway, the crowd clearly swelled, and it probably grew to at least 8000 people by all reasonable estimates.

2. I wish to acknowledge and thank James T. Richardson, Professor of Sociology and Judicial Studies, The University of Nevada, Reno, Nevada, USA, for allowing me to assist him as a sounding board for many of the ideas contained in his paper, "'Cults' and the Law: Comparisons of the US, Europe, and Australia," which was prepared during his visit to the University of Queensland School of Law and Department of Studies in Religion during the first semester, 1993. Much of what he wrote in his paper formed the basis for my presentation at the conference. Instructive in regard to the relationship between the European Economic Community (EEC), the emerging European Union (EU) of member states and religious freedom issues is James T. Richardson, "Minority Religions, Religious Freedom, and the New Pan-European Political and Judicial Institutions," *Journal of Church and State* 37 (1995), 39-59. Key institutions are the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (established 1953), in particular, Articles 9 and 14, which cite freedom of religion, and Article 21, which establishes a European Commission of Human Rights to hear, investigate and advise those who bring complaints about alleged breaches of human rights about their rights and proper procedures; the Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly; and the European Court of Justice. Also see, CA Gearty, "The European Court of Human Rights and the Protection of Civil Liberties: An Overview," *Cambridge Law Review* 52 (1993), 89-127; and Donna Gomien, *Short Guide to the European Convention on Human Rights* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Press, 1991).

3. Cases of religious discrimination against minority faiths in Germany have been meticulously

documented in “Germany for Germans: Xenophobia and Racist Violence in Germany,” which has been compiled by the New York based world-wide watchdog group, Human Rights Watch/Helsinki (<http://www.hrm.org/home.html>). This documentation also is included as Appendix A (among Appendices A-W, pp. 111-167) in the Scientology publication, *The Rise of Hatred and Violence in Germany* (Freedom Publishing, n.d.), pp. 111-115.

4. In a press release of November 6, 1997 from the Office of Special Affairs of the Church of Scientology International, Heber C. Jentsch, President of the Church, commented on the ruling of Germany’s Federal Administrative Court. He said that it was “a dramatic victory for freedom of religion” and “a clear recognition of the German government’s policies of discrimination and religious apartheid . . . The decision paves the way for religious recognition for minority religions in Germany, including Scientology.” According to Jentsch, “The ruling confirms what we have said all along: German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel has been disingenuous and deceptive in claiming that the Federal Labor Court had determined whether Scientology is a religious or commercial activity . . . The German government’s denial of the religious character of Scientology has been judicially invalidated in a higher court.” The press release points out that the present decision proves that the jurisdiction in such matters belongs not with the Labor Court, but with the Administrative Courts, which have repeatedly affirmed the religious character of Scientology. Jentsch concludes that “German officials have tried to abuse the German judicial system by using it as an instrument to destroy the Scientology religion . . . (but) . . . The Court has thwarted their efforts.”

5. A persistent theme that first arose during the ecclesiastical panel discussion on Scientology on Sunday evening, 27 October, 1997, and which I later discussed with Dr. Gabriele Yonan who was the moderator of the conference on the following Tuesday, was the unwitting association of new religions or minority faiths with the rise of National Socialism in Germany during the 1930’s. National Socialism had clear religious trappings, involving mythological and ritual elements from German culture, that became stepping stones used by Hitler to create Nazi politics and finally to gain control of Germany. Such an association goes some distance to explain the striking emotional and vehement reaction against minority faiths in Germany. The spectre of National Socialism appears to haunt government officials, many business leaders and “high profile” media-prone people like Ursula Caberta, who readily voice their fears in public. Together they imply that Scientology and other groups are like National Socialism, and are “threats” similar to the danger posed to German social democracy and to the integrity of German life by National Socialism in the 1930s.

6. Lest Australians lapse into complacency about their taken for granted religious freedom that is granted in Clause 116 of the Australian Constitution, which goes to Commonwealth but not State jurisdictions, recent events in the country may give pause for thought. According to Brian Johnston, who works with the legal office (DSA) with the Church of Scientology in Melbourne, a situation is brewing in Australia that “could open the door to selective prosecution of new religions in Australia” (Johnston’s words are taken from his email correspondence of 22 October 1997 to James T. Richardson, Professor of Sociology and Judicial Studies, University of Nevada, Reno, Nevada, USA, which was forwarded from Richardson to the author on 10 November 1997). Johnston points out that each state’s Attorneys General Office supplies a representative to a national forum under the Federal Attorneys General Office called the “Model Criminal Code Officers Committee.” One or more of the representatives has used material written by Dr. M. Singer, obtained on the world wide web, to publish a discussion paper for the forum. The paper is currently under consideration by the Officers Committee,

and it suggests that “The emergence of so-called ‘cults’ and obsessive small religious groups has shown that it is possible to employ high pressure ‘persuasive’ techniques which amount to mental or emotional coercion. In such cases, influence is brought to bear by one person over another so that the latter’s will is overborne and he or she is induced to act or not to act in a particular way. The California Supreme court has found that coercive persuasion may cause the subject to develop serious physical and psychiatric disorders (*Molko v Holy Spirit Association* (1988) 46 Cal 3d 1092). The techniques involved may include isolation, manipulation of time and attention, positive and negative reinforcement, peer group pressure, prohibition of dissent, deprivation of sleep and protein and the inducement of fear, guilt and emotional dependence. The Committee would welcome submissions on whether this sort of harm should be included within the definition of harm for the purposes of the criminal law” (quoted from Model Criminal Code, Chapter 5—Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person—Discussion Paper No. 1, August 1996, published by Model Criminal Code Officers Committee for the Standing Committee of Attorneys-General). (James Richardson has pointed out in his email to the author that Johnston’s statement about the *Molko* case “is incorrect.” Writes Richardson, “What the California Supreme Court ruled on a summary judgment motion is that there was an issue that should be given to the jury. Thus they dismissed the summary judgement motion”.)

Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in Europe

John May

Irish School of Ecumenics

The European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies emerged renamed and reinvigorated from its second conference at the Benedictine monastery of St Ottilien near Munich on 17-20 October 1997. As our host Fr Josef Götz OSB explained to the twenty-five participants, the congregation of St Ottilien was one of the initiators of intermonastic dialogue and exchange with Zen monasteries in Japan. The period spent at St Ottilien was regarded as sufficiently authentic to be counted as part of the Japanese monks' training for ordination. A British Buddhist who had just completed a three and a half year retreat at Samyeling Tibetan Buddhist centre in Scotland said he felt perfectly at home in the Benedictine environment while participating in the Network conference.

Papers by Dr Shenpen Hookham (Britain) on women in Buddhism, Prof Michael von Brück (Munich) on the hermeneutics of dialogue, Prof Aasulv Lande (Lund) on conversion as part of the experience of dialogue, the Dharmachari Kulananda (Friends of the Western Buddhist Order) on engaged Buddhism gave plenty of material for discussion, while morning and evening meditation led in turn by Christians and Buddhists prompted a working group on 'What happens in the silence?'. Josef Götz' motto 'Daily life is the way' and Shenpen Hookham's theme of practice (for women as well as men) in the midst of a busy life opened up questions of identity: Who defines Buddhism? Is Buddhism necessarily Asian? Does the slogan 'engaged Buddhism' imply that Buddhism is normally *not* engaged? Some of these will be taken up at the next conference, planned for early 1999 at Neumühle, Willi Massa's meditation centre in the Saarland region near Germany's borders with France, Luxembourg and Belgium. It is hoped there will be more participation from France, Spain, Italy and Eastern Europe.

The Network secretariat is to be entrusted to Fr Josef Götz, D-86941 St Ottilien, Fax 49-8193-71332, email: josef.ottilien@t-online.de, <http://home.t-online.de/home/ottilien/> Assisting him will be Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Gerhard Köberlin and Ramona Kauth. Aasulv Lande remains the chair of the advisory group, which includes Ursula Baatz, George Evers, Natasja Kärvinge, Elizabeth Harris, John May, Shenpen Hookham and Charlotte Venema.

The Study of Religion A New and Exciting Experience for Australian Students

Victor C Hayes

This article first appeared in The Australian's Monthly Education Review June 1975 and is reprinted for members' interest - Eds.

I was looking over the attentive faces of seventy students in the first History of Religions course at Sturt College of Advance Education, in Adelaide. A saffron-robed Bhikkhu was bringing to them, across 2500 years, the Buddha's tough-minded analysis of our human condition. Later a student, a young Asian girl, spoke softly of her Lord Buddha's compassion as well as his wisdom.

We were half way through a survey of traditional religions - Eastern and Western - which will occupy one hundred hours. It's one way, an important way, of getting into the Study of Religion.

We include whatever resources we find in our community - a turbaned visitor who explains Sikhism's double blend of Hinduism and Islam, or a guest from the Solomon Islands who can analyse what happened and what doesn't happen when European Christianity meets ancient custom religion.

After many years in North America, most of it spent teaching in Religion Studies departments of tertiary institutions, it was good to be back and to see Australian students about to have opportunities that have never really been available in the short history of our nation. And this is the crucial point! The wraps are coming off.

Australia's undergraduates are at last being allowed to explore the seemingly inexhaustible field of religion - a field as old, variegated, fascinating, sordid, noble and contemporary, as the story of humankind. (No wonder both orthodoxy and scepticism are alarmed.)

Something New!

Is this study of religion really something new for Australia? The answer is Yes, despite the fact that some universities are treating religion in History or Philosophy courses. Separate departments, commanding their own budget, organising their own complex of studies, and marking out their own identity, are only now beginning to appear.

There is a lot of misunderstanding about what such departments should be doing and why. I want to speak of this question as concretely as I can.

The puzzlement is understandable. There are no models in Australia. As a people, we identify 'religion' with either a) going to church or synagogue, or b) Scripture (Religious Instruction) in schools, or c) believing in God. The Scientific (ie objective, historical, phenomenological) Study of Religion is a different enterprise altogether.

Student Interest

The 350 students who have elected this year to explore the world's religions at the five Adelaide CAEs were asked, among other things, Why they elected Religion Studies. Overwhelmingly (95 per cent) Sturt students responded: "Out of personal interest". And why not indeed! Religion is a moving drama with a cast of billions. The whole earth is its stage. Its script is part of the history of humankind.

Student reactions to the lectures and readings are familiar enough but nonetheless exciting to observe. There is fascination with the fact of world religious pluralism: great alternative religious systems are seen to live and to 'work' for millions of people.

Hinduism attracts because it takes seriously the proposition that people are different, and can therefore celebrate many ways of being religious without a God. Chinese classical religion is a puzzle because it is without creed or doctrine.

Soon the search for a more adequate understanding of 'religion' begins. There is a dawning awareness of the complexity and dynamics of religious traditions. It is seen that religions are born and grow and change and splinter and wither and die!

Religion Studies departments are necessarily pluralistic. "He who knows one religion, understands none," said Max Mueller, 19th century "Father" of the scientific study of religion. Certain that understanding begins with looking at the facts.

Look, Listen, 'Visit'!

It is basic to the scientific study of religion to get the data, gather the raw material. Look, listen and visit - in person or in the imagination! If another religion is far away from Australia, then bring it into the classroom with descriptive accounts, interviews, and today's media resources: film, slides, recordings.

So into the classrooms of Adelaide we are bringing elegant, pencil-pointed minarets from the mosques of Turkey, soaring Gothic cathedrals from Europe, a mud hut from Harlem, a magnificent pagoda from Burma, a meditation hall from Japan, a lavish new Protestant Church from Oklahoma, a Synagogue from Sydney, a large temple complex and a grubby little Shiva shrine beside a rickshaw stand from India!

What goes on in all these places? The curious mind is alert. Why earth's millions of shrines, temples, churches, pagodas, mosques, synagogues, halls and holy places?

To the places add people, the exotic as well as the ordinary. A whirling dervish from Islam, a Zar dancer from Africa, a voodoo-possessed woman from Haiti, a hard rock-possessed group from anywhere, a magnificently robed patriarch from the East, a Hindu mendicant naked except for hooks in every inch of his body, a Taoist diviner or exorcist from old China.

The press the point that religions have been all-embracing and still are. They gather up not only nuns and priests, not only preachers and contemplatives, not only gurus, ascetics and charismatic leaders, but scholars, artists, philosophers, musicians, politicians, poets. And they embrace endless ranks of ordinary people - the devout, the faithful, the lukewarm, the doubting. What saints and sinners and seekers of ever age and race and clime!

Religion: Something people do

The gods are not religious! In fact, one may argue endlessly about the sense in which the world's myriad gods exist, if at all. But as a human phenomenon, religion exists and, like all else that humans do, it can be observed, carefully described and thoughtfully discussed.

Still the data gathering goes on. There are sacred images and objects, theologies and philosophic systems, sacred literature and endless activities. So into the classroom we bring images of Vishnu and Shiva, of Ganesha and Hanuman, of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Strange properties appear - a Tibetan prayer wheel, an owl-headed pregnant-woman custom god from the Solomons, a photograph of a page from *Codex Sinaiticus*.

Selections are studied from the Sacred Books - the *Tripitika*, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the *Qur'an*, the *Gospels*, the *Hebrew Canon*, the *Analects*, the *Tao to Ching*. We learn of mystic symbols, sacred meals and holy seasons, of mortifications and pilgrimages, of celebrations and festivals.

Even the recorded sounds of religion may come into the classroom as part of the data. The abandon of ecstatic utterance, strictly controlled Vedic chanting, Te Deums and Rock Masses and Bach chorales, the tiny evocative lyricism of a Haiku, ten thousand Moslems bowing in a torrent of prayer, shouts of praise, piercing cries of penitence and possession, and the sound of the *kyosaku's* slap breaking the tangible silence of a Zen meditation hall.

Understand, Interpret!

From the moment we begin to open ourselves to the data, questions force themselves upon us. What's going on? What does it all mean? Are there patterns, meanings in all this diversity? How is religion to be understood? Is there one explanation or are there many? How do religious understand themselves? With what questions and issues are they wrestling? What are human beings after? What do

they really want? How - if at all - are those who take no part in traditional religions different from those who do?

Who can throw light on the data? The historian? The philosopher? The psychologist? The sociologist? The religious interpreter of religion? Yes, all of them have had a great deal to say. So bring their perspectives into the classroom too! With all these disciplines, of course, come our hard-won Western techniques and standards of objective research.

As Australia's educational institutions add departments of Religion Studies, they will steadily become part of a century-long tradition of scholarship dedicated to examining the nature and form of religious life. For while the scientific study of religion is virtually new to Australia, it is not new to older Western countries.

Nine hundred departments of Religious Studies flourish in North American and United Kingdom colleges and universities. There are thousands of professional teachers in the field in tertiary institutions.

Several significant features of this overseas enterprise may be noted:

- (a) The study of religion is now centred not in the church or the temple but in the academy or university.
- (b) The higher the quality of the institution, the more likely it is to have a Religion Department.
- (c) It is the public (State) institutions which have been experiencing a boom in Religion Studies enrolments.
- (d) The seventies has seen the sudden entry of high schools into the field. By the end of 1972, one thousand high schools in the United States were offering religion courses.

Facts Plus Meaning

Scholarly excellence, scientific objectivity - these are crucial in the study of religions. But religion is more than 'facts in the straight historical sense'. Like poetry and art, religion is also profoundly a matter of meanings.

Hence our description of gods, rites and beliefs may be impeccably accurate, yet fail at the crucial point if they do not help us to understand how religions have spoken to persistent and elemental human problems - problems of alienation, disorientation, rootlessness, ignorance, bondage, institutionalised inhumanity, tragedy, sterility and death.

For the study of religion both empathy and objectivity are necessary and interdependent. Confronted with an unfamiliar religious tradition, students are encouraged to 'bracket' their own commitments and preconceptions and to enter imaginatively into that religion's 'way of seeing life'.

For to understand and be fair to people of other faiths, we need to 'see how they see', and appreciate their intention. Then our description and critical discussion will be more truly 'objective', ie true to the 'facts'.

Religions have seen betrayal and negation of their high visions. And yet, it is the yearning for such goals as true holiness, or abundant life, or ultimate freedom, that has driven men and women into the religious life. Traditionally, religions have been the sources of life-meaning, identity, purpose and ecstasy. Is the meeting of such needs fundamental to our being human? What then speaks to these needs in the lives of secular, contemporary, 'post-religious' people?

To answer this last question, students of religion will be alert to new ways of being religious, non-traditional forms of the religious dimensions of life.

A Complex of Studies

It seems appropriate now to offer a systematic summing up of the field of Religion Studies, for it is clear that religion is a vast, complex, many-sided phenomenon which can be explored from many angles and in many ways. Walter H Capps' *Ways of Understanding Religion* and some of the writings of Ninian Smart offer helpful schemes.

The study of religion may be begun at many different points. Each point, says Capps, may be understood as the first moment in a measured sequence, able to bring depth and order to the subject field, and suggests the segments of a course outline. Thus, study may focus on:

- (a) **RELIGIONS** - usually the half dozen major religions of East and West. A more complete examination, however, would cover:
- (i) Living religions - the Semitic trio (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) and their later offshoots; religions originating in the Indian Sub-continent (Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism); religions originating in China and Japan (Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto) and their offshoots; ethnic tribal religions (in Africa, the Americas, the Pacific, elsewhere),
 - (ii) Dead religions - eg Ancient Near Eastern (Sumerian, Babylonian, Egyptian); certain other religions of Indo-European speakers (eg Celtic, Greek, Roman, and Zoroastrianism), pre-Columbian religions of America (Aztec, Inca, Maya); and the proto-historical religions of humankind.
- (b) **THE LINKING OF RELIGION TO OTHER DISCIPLINES** by means of the connectors 'and' and 'of', and approaching religion through the perspectives of these disciplines.

Thus there is the familiar Sociology of Religion, Philosophy of Religion, History of Religion, Psychology of Religion. But there can also be an Anthropology of Religion, a Literature of Religion, a Language of Religion, an Art of Religion, a Theology of Religion and several forms of the Science of Religion.

Similarly there are courses in Psychology and Religion, Religion and Science, Religion and Literature, Religion and Society, Religion and the Humanities, Religion and Urban Studies, and so on.

- (c) HISTORY. Here we can have
- (i) 'A History of Religion', ie we can trace religion's occurrence from earliest times. This can easily become *phenomenology* of religion as the history begins to resemble structural description (pattern-tracing, motif-researching, the analysis of special themes).
 - (ii) We can have 'A History of the History of religion'.
 - (iii) And we can have partial or selective histories, eg 'Western religious traditions', 'religious men', 'religious institutions', 'the religious imagination'.
- (d) QUASI-RELIGIONS - eg secular ideologies that provide life-orientation and exhibit certain functions of religions. This could include Communism, Nationalism, Secularism, Maoism, Humanism and the like.
- (e) THE 'RELIGIOUS'. Although there may be nothing that is pure religiousness as such, it also seems a fact that any human experience or expression may have religious meaning. Let's pursue this point.

New Definitions

There is a truth in the dictum that 'religious life', like the human spirit, cannot be defined; it can only be explored. The fact remains, however, that there is a long history of attempts to define 'religion'.

Religion Studies concerns itself with this history, but also with new assumptions that are now being made about the nature of religion, creative attempts at new definitions, and extensions to our understanding of what is meant by 'religious life'.

Frederick Steng and others have edited an anthology (*Ways of Being Religious*), in which they suggest one of these new descriptive definitions. They write

When one has 'visited' (seen) a wide variety of religious life from all parts of the world and throughout human history, it becomes apparent that religion is a way of life that involves many processes - all of which, in different ways, are directed to a common end. The goal is to reach a state of being that is conceived (by its followers) to be the highest possible state or condition.

"Religion is the general term for the various ways by which people seek to become changed into that highest state." In short, religion is "*a means towards ultimate transformation*". It follows, the editors suggest, that "any reasonably specific means that any person (or group) adopts with the serious hope and intention of moving toward ultimate transformation" is a religion.

Old and New Ways of Being Religious

The Steng book illustrates eight of these ways of being religious. Four of them may be found running through the world's traditional religions. They are

- (a) personal experience of the Holy (or of a divine being) leading to 'rebirth' and 'new life',
- (b) participation in myth and ritual in order to create a special community,
- (c) living in daily harmony with what is taken to be the eternal moral law of the universe, or
- (d) personal discipline (meditation, mysticism) in order to find spiritual liberation.

The other four ways of being religious are more contemporary, humanistic and non-traditional. They include the following of new psychologies which aim at achieving personal integration; pursuing political and social action as a means to a just social and economic order; giving oneself up to sensuous experiences in order to find the Full Life; and putting one's trust in technocracy to achieve a New Life for man.

Obsolescence or Adolescence?

Approaches like this enable Religion Studies to look forward as well as back into the past. If a 'religion' is what people do when they wish to bring about fundamental changes in their personal lives or in our human condition, then it seems likely that religion today is moving not into obsolescence but into a vigorous adolescence!

The future looks bright for the Study of Religion in Australia, for we are beginning to recognise what is widely accepted elsewhere, namely, that 'religion' is a major and basic dimension of human living, a central and motivating factor in history, and a subject field in its own right. We have seen that 'strong' religion departments overseas have fifteen to twenty-five specialists on their faculties in order to do some justice to the richness of the field.

Religion Studies can expect (and, of course, is getting) a degree of 'static' from established doctrinaire positions, whether on the extreme right or extreme left. The religiously orthodox will no doubt continue to claim that they have the final and ultimate truth, and the Enlightenment sceptics will continue to be certain that religion is a load of rubbish.

After all, the polarised positions have had the field virtually to themselves for a long time, and the image of their opposition has been pressed deep into the Australian consciousness. We can be forgiven for imagining there was no alternative!

Dogmatic and exclusive positions simply do not know what to make of an approach that can enter non-defensively into many symbol-systems (religious and non-religious) and be enriched thereby; an approach that does not want to caricature or stereotype or 'put down' the other fellow's faith but to understand it; an approach that does not want finality, and feels certainty to be neither possible nor desirable; an approach that sees 'exclusivism' as no longer appropriate for our time, and in its place accepts pluralism and celebrates diversity.

The argument for Religion Studies, or rather, the simple fact about it, has been concisely expressed by Claude Welch in his *Religion in the Undergraduate Curriculum*:

Religion studies is a field within the humanities or social sciences whose study is justified simply by its contribution to any liberal education that proposes to take into account the whole range of human experience.