President's Address 1998

Studies in Religion as a Profession

Trevor Jordan,
Centre for the Study of Ethics, Queensland University of Technology

Introduction

Studies in religion as a profession has a key role to play in the management of religious diversity in liberal democratic societies. In particular, it can help mediate between the sometimes competing demands of religious conviction and public life. A society willing to grant individuals a large degree of autonomy over their moral and religious practice, ought not to be a society in which "anything" goes; nor ought it to be a society in which religion is at best privatised, or at worst trivialised. A society which forgoes the imposition of one religious outlook or established religion, does not therefore leave the field off-limits to discussion; though this is often a popular misunderstanding of liberal toleration. As that great proponent of liberalism, John Stuart Mill (1859, rpt, 1991:84) himself pointed out, what we must not legislate, we must nevertheless endeavour through conviction and persuasion to educate and cultivate."It would be a great misunderstanding of this doctrine [of liberty] to suppose that it is one of selfish indifference". Yet a soggy kind of popular liberalism, does seem to use the idea of tolerance as a dampener on all forms of conviction and enthusiasm. From my experience teaching in schools as diverse as humanities, nursing, justice studies and optometry, the issue of religion persistently arises in the discussion of values, culture and professional practice. Whether it is a Muslim student sitting in a class of twenty-eight optometry students discussing professional ethics, nurses wanting to know how to handle the body of Jewish or a Hindu patient, police officers discussing the administration of justice in a multicultural society, or humanities students assessing the confidentiality of the confessional, or the religious influence on current political debates, it is clear that religion continues to play its part in public life. In most cases, these students will not have the time, nor the opportunity, to become experts in the study of religion; yet they will need to draw on sound knowledge in the field to gain insights into the dimension of religion in their workplace.

To achieve this, there has to be group of scholars who commit themselves to the study of religion, who set aside the time and take up the available opportunities to gain knowledge of religions. Students and practitioners in these other fields, and

indeed the general public, need to be able to trust this group of scholars to provide them with sound knowledge. The relationship between scholars of religion and these end-users of religious knowledge is fundamentally unequal and such an imbalance in knowledge and power is typical of all forms professional expertise. For this reason, the practice of studies in religion needs to be grounded in the same ethical frameworks which normatively circumscribe professional behaviours. The more so because in the past decade, university life, like many areas of public life, is being reconfigured in business-like ways. The agenda of universities in Australia has changed from one of public service to one of corporate or private enterprise. Universities are being seen as businesses, as large corporations. The public role of intellectuals within this changing agenda cannot be adequately addressed through adopting a contractual or user-pay approaches. As we move from public to corporate to private, we need to remember that business is not the only model for delivering services in the private sphere. Professionalism, rightly understood, is an alternative. If we are to understand how this alternative will apply to the study of religion we will need to re-examine the characteristics of a profession and how a profession differs from other forms of occupation.

The characteristics of a profession

An important distinction needs to be made between descriptive and normative understandings of professions. The publicly stated aims of a profession may often be at odds with what actually happens. Descriptive approaches tell us how professions are organised and what they achieve. There have been many such sociological evaluations of professions, including Ivan Illich's (1977) provocatively, but accurately named, *Disabling Professions* (See also, Andrews (1992) from a social work perspective and M. Coady (1996) for a largely descriptive philosophical point of view). As Anthony Giddens (1993) points out, professionals might be described sociologically as, on the one hand, "occupants of jobs requiring high-level educational qualifications, whose behaviour is subject to codes of conduct laid down by central bodies (or professional associations); or, on the other hand, they could also justly be described as "a monopoly practice with material and symbolic benefits, often based on social closure rather than social service". Whether or not professions are currently living up to their ideals is an serious practical question, but from a normative ethical point of view what is important is the vision of what a profession ought to be and how a professional ought to act. William May (1989) has argued that the question of professional identity can be fruitfully explored by comparing professions with vocations and careers. He noted the theological heritage of the terms such as *vocation* and *profession*. Vocation implies a calling, a life-long commitment to a public role that is not exhausted by the "bourgeois notion of a job". A vocation encompassed more than work life, could be pursued without remuneration and included as well the roles of husband, wife and citizen. The term career differs from vocation and

profession in not necessarily implying public concerns. If we call someone a careerist, we are usually not paying them a compliment. Careerists do take on public roles but they pursue that public role for private ends. "The careerist travels by public thoroughfares and largely obeys the rules of the road, but towards his or her private destination" (May 1989:3).

The term *profession*, however, has the same public ring to it as *vocation*. To *profess* is to 'testify on behalf of' or 'stand for' something. Profession, then, implies commitment. According to Daryl Koehn (1994: 56), it is the public nature of this commitment that distinguishes a profession from other occupations and grounds its moral legitimacy. Five traits, she writes, are frequently cited as pertaining to a profession. Professionals:

- are licensed by the state to perform a certain act
- belong to an organisation of similarly enfranchised agents who promulgate standards and/or ideals of behaviour and who discipline one another for breaking the standards
- possess so-called *esoteric* knowledge or skills not shared by other members of the community
- exercise autonomy over their work
- publicly pledge themselves to render assistance to those in need and as a consequence have special responsibilities or duties not incumbent upon others who have not made this pledge.

For Koehn the first four traits are neither necessary nor sufficient to define a professional. The fifth trait, however, represents the "atypical moral commitment of the professional" (Koehn, 1994:56). People becomes clients of professionals because they seek a good which they lack the expertise to acquire for themselves. Professionals pledge themselves to provide these goods to their clients. The goods to which professionals devote their learning and skill are genuine human goods which are ends in themselves; for example, health (doctors), justice (lawyers) or salvation (clergy). Koehn's insight is to relate this public pledge to serve a particular good to issues which frame professional responsibility such as: the untrustworthiness of expertise, the insufficiency of client contract, the limits of professional discretion, the good of the professional and the professional and the public good. To explore the professional aspects of our scholarly practice, however, it will be more useful to use William May's more summary organisation of professional traits into three components - the intellectual, the collegial and the moral.

The intellectual component

Professional knowledge, May argues, is knowledge based on access to first principles. This differs from the forms of knowledge required to undertake other occupations. It is different from the kind of handbook or training manual knowledge necessary to accomplish a clearly defined task; for example, fixing a particular model

of washing machine. It is also different from the body of knowledge and skills passed on by tradition from one generation to another. Mastery of specific competencies and appropriation of the benefits of past knowledge is certainly required of professionals, but it never stops there. Access to first principles enables the professional practitioner to adopt a critical approach to problems, not only those which are routinely expected, but also new problems as they arise.

Historically, the distinction between education and training led to the transfer of professional education to universities and away from the apprenticeship model of the older proprietary organisations. (May, 1989: 7) Training smacked of socialisation into a set of practices; on the other hand, education in a university setting is the cultivation of an independent and critical intelligence. For our purposes, this distinction is inflected in a particular way when the distinction is made between the disciplines of history of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*) and theology. The former is characterised, along with other disciplines such as anthropology, psychology and sociology, as an objective approach to the study of religion (Streng, 1985:190). Theology, whatever its critical vitality in the hands of its more able exponents, is viewed as confessional in its presuppositions, origin and environment (Cahill, 1982).

To drive too great a wedge between these approaches seems fruitless, if not dangerous; particularly if it leads us to solve the problem of the intellectual constraints of working within a particular confessional framework, by doing away with any concern for commitment and values in the pursuit of a so-called value-free objectivity. The problem is not with commitment and values per se. None is so political as those who loudly claim not to be political, and none is expressing value so strongly as those who claim to be value-free. As a human science, the study of religion always involves value judgments in deciding what is to be the object of study, of defining what is and is not a religion, and what aspects of religious life should be the object of inquiry. Also, as Cahill pointed out over a decade ago, religious studies benefited over theology in being more politically acceptable to the ethos of the secular university. Since then, things have changed, and many institutions have recognised the dollar value of collaborative arrangements between theological colleges and university faculties. So in recent years, a degree in theology is more likely to be added to university offerings than courses in studies in religion. It is, perhaps, not the first time that a surplus value has been extracted from belief. In considering the intellectual component of studies of religion as a profession, the question is not whether religion and religions constitute a domain of knowledge, but rather what would constitute expert knowledge. It could be argued that religious practitioners are themselves experts on their own religious beliefs and practices. But this view will not stand up to any sustained scrutiny. Robert Redfield (1960) long ago coined the terms 'great tradition' and 'little tradition' to distinguish official and folk or popular forms of religious beliefs and practice within the one religious movement. Religious knowledge and expertise is not evenly spread throughout the membership of a religion; some within the tradition develop religious expertise and in some cases are the keepers

esoteric forms of knowledge. Do these religious experts serve a public good? Are they professionals? Well we can certainly grant them the status that has traditionally been granted the clergy in the West. Clergy possess knowledge about values and beliefs, and more particularly about salvation - the manifest functional goal of all religions, according to Bryan Wilson (1982) - which is the good which clients, in this case believers, would utilise if they could.

Clearly, the expertise of scholars of religion differs from that of the clergy or expert practitioner. They are not competent to offer authoritative advice on spiritual salvation within a particular tradition, at least not in their academic role; rather, the core undertaking of the scholar of religion should be to help those who are not in the tradition to gain knowledge about the religion. Scholars of religion develop expertise in various modes of inquiry that can help foster understanding of religious belief and practice in its varied forms. Now, the expertise of many scholars who are interested in religion is confined to a particular discipline; for example, psychology, sociology, anthropology or history. Or perhaps, they have specialised in a particular language. They will be able to provide knowledge on particular religions or texts to their clients; that is those who pay for, or have a demand for, their services. Yet, there has also been a significant tradition in the study of religion that would argue that the scholar of religion is not simply the practitioner of a discipline who happens to pick religion as his or her subject matter. The tradition flowing from Rudolf Otto (1958), Gerhardus van der Leeuw (1983), and Mircea Eliade (1959), sees the study of religion as offering a unique or sui generis approach to its subject matter. It may be typified as anti-reductive and phenomenological in approach, attempting an appreciation of the beliefs, values and practices of a religion as it is intended by its practitioners. Ninian Smart (1983) describes the methodical approach of this tradition as one of 'structured empathy'. The knowledge such a scholar seeks is not simply knowledge about the psychology, sociology or history of a particular religion but its irreducibly religious dimension as well.

What a scholar of religion, working within this tradition, can offer, then, is a sympathetic and structured knowledge of religious beliefs and practices. Central to the audacity of the classic practitioners (e.g. Otto, 1958; rpt 1923; van der Leeuw, 1983, rpt 1938; Eliade, 1959), so often derided in later times, is a commitment to a structural and comparative approach. To be sure, these scholars read the underlying structure of religion from a European point of view, and their structuralism was essentialist and prone to discount the distinctiveness of particular traditions, often paradoxically drawing on a European reading of an Eastern syncretism to do so. Yet, I believe, the motto of comparative religion remains true, 'Who knows one, knows none'.

While it has been fashionable at various times to insist that there is no such thing as religion, only religions, and no such thing as Christianity, for example, but only Christianities, we ought to proceed again, enlightened and chastened by the wrong turns of the past. Structuralist and post-structuralist modes of thought,

grounded in the linguistic distinction between language and utterance, offered new horizons for comparativism. Even more so the postmodern condition presents us not only with individuals moving between traditions and indeed inventing new ones, but religions themselves are more than ever in contact and conflict. Comparison, in all its political and embodied forms (including violence) is a fact of religious life; to not recognise this and deal with it constructively at the scholarly level would be a serious omission. Some form of comparativism, then, remains a core feature of the professionalism of the scholar of religion. It is demanded of the scholar of religion, even though it is not demanded of the theologian, nor the scholar who is primarily a psychologist, sociologist or historian.

Knowledge of religions provided by professional scholars of religion should endeavour to be structured, comparative, and empathetic, and to be truly professional. That knowledge should also be critical, not just technical or descriptive. Universities in modern times has become increasingly technicist, even in the humanities. Even more so, the work of universities has come to be seen in terms of market forces. Seventeenth and eighteenth century notions that the world of nature had its own laws, and that science and technologies were value free, and that economies worked by universal laws not values, have had some confused resurgence in the public debate. Yet, the critical demands of professional knowledge should always lead it towards the domain of evaluation and judgment. Critically independent thought ought not to imply idiosyncrasy and lack of public concern; rather, it should be the foundation for a critical and transformative engagement with the wider society. As Majella Franzmann (1997) pointed out last year some scholars of religion find it hard to accept that the public expects them to be able to give an informed and critical evaluation of religious beliefs and practices, past and present. Insight that does not, or is not willing to, inform judgment, is not insight at all.

A better way of understanding the relationship between the academic study of religion and the need to form judgments about specific manifestations of religion is to understand that, in some way, the professional study of religion, is not undertaken for the scholar's sake, but always on behalf of someone else. After all, professional scholars of religion are not self-funding; they are paid to research and teach in their discipline. While this might seem, at first glance, to be uncomfortably commercial, we should recall that in the context of professionalism the client is never merely a consumer. Professionals usually act on their client's instructions. They are to help provide a good which the client lacks, but they do not have to do everything the client wants them to. Their responsiveness to client demands is limited by the nature of the good which the client is seeking. Doctors do not have to give patients the medication they ask for, if they do not think it will be in the interest of their health. Lawyers do not have to follow their client's instruction no matter what; they are limited by their concern to help their client seek justice, not just a win in court.

Scholarly professionals ought to be committed to helping their clients seek the truth. We have this in common with other academics. But there still remains the

question of whether the scholar of religion also has a role to play in helping others to achieve a particular kind of self-understanding. Mircea Eliade (1969), for example, argued that the scholars of religion were, in their own way, engaged in the same processes of identifying and seeking answers to the fundamental questions of human existence which motivated religious practitioners. While we must bracket out our assumptions when investigating a particular manifestation of religion, the very process of inquiry itself is a kind of religious 'quest', a concern for what is ultimately important to human existence.

Before leaving the intellectual component, we need to observe that expertise in itself is not a ground for clients to trust a professional. The fact that someone has a skill, does not necessarily in itself ensure that the person with that skill will use it for the benefit of others. That skill may be used to harm as well as help. There always has to be a further commitment on the part of the professional to use their skills only to benefit others. In the same way, the esoteric nature of the knowledge does not indicate professionalism. Koehn (1994:57) suggests that "if knowledge and autonomy over work were sufficient from professionalism, then a coven of witches would qualify as professionals". We might argue about the appropriateness of the metaphor, but Koehn does raise the interesting question of the status of full-time researchers. Presumably, for Koehn, academics count as professionals because they also teach, directly imparting knowledge to clients, helping them obtain a good. The quest for knowledge for its own sake is not out of the question, but surely there should be at least a minimal clientele for one's work.

The organisational component

The second component of a profession is the organisational. It is often said that professionals belong to national or international bodies which set standards for practice. Joining together in such bodies is important in moving people beyond a level of voluntary activity. Someone starts a new practice to meet an unmet need and in the early days there is much experimentation and excitement. Eventually, an organisation is formed, standards set, and then finally those who will not join are excluded. (Andrews, 1992) Ultimately, then, is a professional association more a promulgator of standards or a gatekeeper?

When I started my undergraduate university career in the early 70s, there were very few opportunities to pursue the study of religion in Australia. One of my primary degrees is a Bachelor of Divinity. The Australian Association for the Study of Religions came into being to draw together the many new initiatives in the academic study of religion that emerged in the mid-1970s. Also, in the area in which I teach and research now, there are very few graduates in applied ethics. Our school sought out people with PhDs in cognate fields, but now we have our own graduates emerging in the field and there have recently been some national associations formed such as the Australian Association for Professional and Applied Ethics and the Australian

Bioethics Association.

Merely belonging to an organisation is neither necessary not sufficient for professionalism. As Koehn (1994: 57) points out,"If it were sufficient, Ku Klux Klan members would all be professionals". Nevertheless, according to May, there is a normative vision which should shape professional organisations. When professionals associate with each other it ought to be on a collegial rather than competitive basis. We see this in the traditional academic concern that the fruits of knowledge are to be more-or-less freely shared. Though many academics do make money out of publishing, the primary focus is on the free dissemination of knowledge. This leads to some interesting paradoxes in the current economic rationalist climate, where universities and individual academics now give more concern to protecting and promoting their intellectual property. The royalties earned from books were once seen as merely additional income for academics. Universities now demand a greater share of the income from products produced with their resources. How might this affect the collegial nature of information sharing in the academic world? Will it restrict the free flow of knowledge?

May also argues that, in principle, professional organisations should be peer-based rather than hierarchical. We can see this operating in academic conferences where, ideally, presentations are considered on their own merits. Whether the presenter is a postgraduate researcher, as junior staff member or a professor, they are respectfully listened to and debated. It is interesting here that the AASR differs from some similar associations overseas in not excluding non-academics from membership.

The moral component

It is probably clear by now that both Koehn and May place a heavy burden on the moral component of professionalism in defining the professional's role. Indeed, the atypical moral commitment of the professional is founded upon the nature of the professional-client relationship itself.

Koehn (1994:59) reminds us that the Oxford English Dictionary takes professionals and clients to be correlatives, defining a client as 'someone who receives professional services'. The professional-client relationship is not a philanthropic relationship, in which the giver has all the power to set the agenda. Nor is it a fiscal or contractual relationship, in which two parties enter into agreement (explicit or implicit) for an exchange of goods or services. A contract spells out what each party is entitled to; you get what you are pay for. Each party, in theory, has equal power. May (1989: 6) argues that "the professional exchange should differ morally from a market-place transaction in two important ways. First, a market-place transaction assumes an encounter between two self-interested and relatively knowledgable parties". Wariness marks the exchange and it is assumed that each party will act out of self-interest. "Let the buyer beware". But in a professional exchange we cannot assume two relatively knowledgable parties. "An asymmetry exists between the

professional and the client, disproportionate knowledge on one side and ignorance on the other". The client is relatively powerless in this situation. A professional relationship, is covenantal in nature, it is an unequal relationship based on trust; in particular, the client puts her trust in the professional to always act in her best interests. The only counterbalance to this position of vulnerability is the professional's public pledge to further the client's interests.

In academic life, there are many opportunities to experiment with equality in the classroom, to engage in collaborative learning, to rearrange the furniture in one's office to break down hierarchical barriers or to spend a lot of time socialising with one's students; nevertheless ultimately, if we have any reason for claiming a specific expertise, there will always remain a fundamental inequality between teachers and students. In this power relationship, students are vulnerable. They start a course knowing very little about it and trusting that the teacher will impart sound and up-to-date knowledge to them. It is sobering to think that you could make it all up and they would not know!

Why do clients put themselves in such a vulnerable position? Because the professional can help them obtain a good end which they themselves would have pursued if they had the necessary knowledge. If we could meet our own health needs or justice needs we would not need recourse to doctors or lawyers. And if our clients had access to the resources and skills we have, they would not need us.

Some implications may be that we are obliged to some degree to itch where people are scratching. The curriculum should be context driven, not just teaching subjects because we can teach them. This does not necessarily mean merely giving the punters what they want, but it does mean working with them to develop relevant and interesting offerings.

If professionals pledge themselves to pursue a public good on behalf of their clients, then what is the public good to which scholars of religion commit themselves? Surely that good end is the pursuit of truth. Our task is not to know everything, but rather to be guardians of tools, the means, by which the truth can be found. Scholars of religion who research in living communities also carry added responsibilities to act professionally and recognise the vulnerability of the individuals and communities which they study; for example, they should not abuse the trust put in them by their hosts, by not revealing that they are undertaking research; certainly, they should not distort the truth.

But is there something more required of scholars of religions than these general academic demands? Is there also a responsibility on our part to ensure that students grapple with ultimate questions, if not develop an appreciation of the transcendent? Should we not go further and cultivate a commitment to making a difference in the world?

In a university, the pursuit of such goals is always within the context of the cultivation of critical intelligence. For me, the study in religion is essentially a form of religious criticism, of writing on (and over) religion. Such an approach is demanded

by the phenomenon of religion itself. Van der Leeuw (1983:206) rightly observed, "For apart from some kind of criticism of life no religion whatever is conceivable". As a form of critical intelligence, the study of religion should not only describe and explain the religious situation, but also offer critical judgment, assessing whether particular religious beliefs and practices further human domination or emancipation. Also, scholars of religion need to grasp not only the history of religion, but also the future of religion. We must be able to understand religions of the past, the present and forms of religion yet to be conceived. A structural, comparative and empathetic outlook can make this possible.

Scholars of religion have a professional responsibility to nurture the civic self; that is, to cultivate an awareness of individual responsibilities in a communal context. We are publicly accountable for our work, for the decisions and values which inform it. The religions we study also have this dimension of social and moral responsibility. It is not our role to make people dependent on us for knowledge and to confine our intellectual pursuits to the university. We should endeavour to be public intellectuals.

In the early days of religious studies in Australia reference was often made to the 'religious illiteracy' instilled by our predominantly secular forms of education. Teaching and researching on religions allows us opportunities to educate and inform others. The more informed individuals are about religion and religions the more they can make informed choices about religion and the less likely to be wrongfully deceived. Thus, scholars of religion can make a vital contribution to building what has been called 'social capital', the trust which acts as a kind of glue holding us together in the pursuits of common goals. According to Eva Cox (1995), social capital is built up working together, voluntarily in egalitarian organisations. She tends to underplay the role of religious organisations in her assessment. Perhaps they are not egalitarian enough. But egalitarian organisations are not born overnight and enormous amounts of public goodwill and social cohesion has been built up by religious groups (and suspicion as well, no doubt). Either way, it seems to me to be very important to recognise the vital role that scholars of religion can play in building up understanding about and between religious traditions.

Just as the department in which I was trained, stipulated that honours students and postgraduates must study a religious traditions other than the one in which they had a major interest, so too would we all benefit be devoting some of our teaching and research time to transformative engagement with the contemporary religious situation. To do this, scholars of religion need to acknowledge their professional responsibilities and orient altruistically to meet client needs. The only alternative, in the current climate, is the barbarism of a business-like agenda in which knowledge of transcendence and ultimate concerns are bartered like trinkets in a gift shop. As always, we stand on the threshold between the sacred and the profane.

References

Andrews, D. 1992. Beyond the professionalisation of community work, *Social Alternatives* 11, 3, 35-38.

Cahill, P. J 1982. *Mended Speech: the crisis of religious studies and theology*. Crossroad, N. Y.

Coady, M. 1997. The moral domain of professionals, in *Codes of Ethics and the Professions*, ed. M. Coady and S. Bloch, 28-51. Melbourne Univ. Press, Melbourne.

Cox, E. 1995. *A Truly Civil Society*. ABC Books, Sydney.

Eliade, M. 1959. *The Sacred & the Profane: the nature of religion*. trans. W. R. Trask, Harcourt Brace & World, N.Y.

- 1969. *The Quest: history and meaning in religion*. Chicago Univ. Press, Chicago

Franzmann, M. 1997. Mad, bad or just invisible? Studies in Religion and 'Fringe' religions, *Australian Religion Studies Review* 10, 2: 5-12

Giddens, A. 1993. *Sociology*. Polity Press, Cambridge.

Illich, I. 1997. Disabling professions, in *Disabling Professions*, 27-39. Marion Boyars, London.

Koehn, D. 1994. *The Ground of Professional Ethics*. Routledge, London.

May. W. 1989. *Vocation, Career and Profession*. Australian Institute of Ethics and the Professions Monograph Series, Vol. 1, No.1.

Mill, J. S. 1991. *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford.

Otto, R. 1958. *The Idea of the* Holy. trans. J. W. Harvey, Oxford Univ. Press, London.

Redfield, R. 1960. *The Little Community and Peasant Society and Culture*. Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Smart, N. 1983. *Worldviews: crosscultural explorations of beliefs*. Charles Scribner's, N.Y.

Streng, F. 1985. *Understanding Religious Life*. 3rd ed., Wadsworth, Belmont, Ca.

van der Leeuw, G. 1986. *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*. rpt, 2nd ed. 1964, Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton.

Wilson, B. 1982. *Religion in Sociological Perspective*. Blackwell, Oxford.