



Thayer S. Warshaw – A Tribute

1915-2000

Charles R. Kniker
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This is a tribute to a man who may be the single most influential person in the last thirty years in developing pedagogy to teach about religions in public education. To celebrate the many contributions that Thayer made, and to reflect his diverse interests and complex personality, we thought it helpful to have reflections from several colleagues. Jim Uphoff chose to describe Thayer's involvement in curriculum planning in the years following the landmark *Abington v. Schempp* (1963) case. Like Jim, Nick Piediscalzi is a retired Wright State University faculty member who shared workshops and many conversations with Thayer over the years. In addition to analyzing Thayer's contribution to the field, Nick notes two other recently deceased pioneer scholars in the public education religion studies movement, Robert Michaelsen and Ninian Smart.

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James Ackerman writes about what some would describe as Thayer's "finest hour" -- his partnership with James Ackerman in directing four-week summer workshops at Indiana University on "Teaching the Bible as/ in Literature," a Lilly Endowment project lasting nine years and culminating in the tenth year with an N.E.H. Institute. The seeds planted in that garden have produced many flowers, including teachers who developed unique lesson plans, and helpful books edited and/or written by Ackerman and Warshaw (unfortunately, only the second edition of a co-edited student textbook is still in print).

I write about Thayer's involvement as editor. He became the founding editor of a newsletter for the National Council for Religion and Public Education (NCRPE), a coalition of ecumenical religious groups and educational organizations that was formed to promote teaching about religion. Thayer, then "retired," became the manuscript editor for *Religion & Public Education*. Due in no small measure to his influence, the journal became a highly respected forum for scholarly articles in the field. Charles Haynes, active in several organizations and now Senior Scholar with the First Amendment Center, was NCRPE's next to last president. Charles provides a perspective on the impact Thayer had on others, ranging from professional education circles to persons engaged in formulating legislative policies.

Like all such tributes, the writers apologize in advance for not covering other dimensions of our unique friend and colleague, a long-time car dealer (with his father), who became a brilliant classroom teacher. Thayer may have viewed himself a reluctant pioneer. Our perspective is that he was a sparkling schoolroom saint.

Tribute to Thayer S. Warshaw: The Early Years

James K. Uphoff
Professor Emeritus of Education at Wright State University
President, Ohio School Boards Association, 2001

It was during the 1962-1963 school year, just before the *Schempp/Murray* court decision of June 17, 1963, that a neophyte teacher, Thayer S. Warshaw, came to an awakening. He discovered that his low-level high school literature students reading Steinbeck's *The Pearl* were "completely ignorant of the Bible." In 1991 Thayer wrote, "I inaugurated my Bible unit (later a semester course) because my students were biblically illiterate. They could not recognize biblical allusion -- even outright quotations -- in secular literature, often missing the work's resonances or the author's central theme or crucial point. In addition, many biblical passages themselves

are excellent examples of well crafted writing, quite suitable for study in a literature class.”

Thayer Warshaw was a student of literature. Recognizing that the Bible was the most quoted and analogized collection of books in Western literature, he set about adding first a unit and then a full semester of instruction in Bible as Literature. A March 1964 article on this topic in the *English Journal* brought massive publicity and support from a very mixed audience. His school superintendent even provided him with a secretary to help him respond to the volume of mail. Academics applauded his scholarly approach to the subject and one lady from the heartland who was still angry over the Court decision wrote, “Congratulations for what you are doing, even if it is for the wrong reason.”

Working with other scholars in the field such as James S. Ackerman at Indiana University, he developed workshops for teachers. They could accept only 70, but had nearly 900 applicants. Out of this work and his own teaching experience a textbook for high schools entitled, *The Bible as/in Literature*, was published by Scott-Foresman. In 1997 he reported that several hundred school systems around the country were still using this book in the curriculum. Several other books resulted from Thayer’s interest and talent in this field. All provided needed help for those who wished to teach about religion in the public school curriculum.

When Nick Piediscalzi and I co-founded and then co-directed the Public Education Religion Studies Center (PERSC) at Wright State University in Dayton, OH in the early 1970’s, Thayer Warshaw became one of the first members of our Professional Advisory Council (PAC). His unique combination of a scholar’s background and “real-life” high school teaching gave him a key role in our work. Thayer helped us develop guidelines for the K-12 public school academic study about religion. Those guidelines, developed about 1973-74, are still used and reprinted in many places today. As a result of the work of the PAC, Wright State hosted a major national symposium on the *Schempp/Murray* decision on June 17, 1973. It featured Justice Tom Clark who wrote the majority opinion in the case.

Thayer S. Warshaw played a major role in the development of quality teaching materials and academically appropriate teaching methods for the inclusion of religion in the K-12 curriculum. He should rightly be described as a pioneer who blazed a clear trail for those who have followed him.

**Three Guiding Lights: Thayer Warshaw, Robert Michaelsen,
Ninian Smart**

Nicholas Piediscalzi

Professor of Religion Emeritus, Wright State University
Visiting Scholar, University of California, Santa Barbara

Two other pioneers in the field of public education religion studies passed away recently: Robert Michaelsen and Ninian Smart. I will report briefly about my last visit with Thayer Warshaw, a few months before his death, and then pay tribute to Michaelsen and Smart, two scholars whom Thayer admired and sought to emulate.

Although he was suffering from the debilitating effects of a stroke and was losing his eyesight, Thayer went out of his way to make my three-day visit to his home comfortable and enjoyable. He arranged for a neighbor to meet me at the train station. With the help of his housekeeper, he provided delicious meals. He hired a car to return me to the airport. Each of these acts of hospitality was an embodiment of his generous spirit that neither illness nor infirmities could dampen or eliminate.

We spent long hours talking about our work and interests, about mutual friends and our indebtedness to our wives. At night, I read to him from a new biography of one his favorite philosophy professors at Harvard. This led to long and animated discussions about objectivity and how one may study religions objectively without losing a sense of empathy. One afternoon was devoted to perusing with delight Thayer's extensive collection of Walt Kelly's Pogo books.

Those precious three days with Thayer reinforced my deep admiration and appreciation of him as a scholar, teacher, and friend. They also revealed once again Thayer's courageous and indomitable spirit. In middle age he left his family business at financial cost to himself and his family to become a high school teacher. While teaching high school English he dared to return to teaching about the Bible. And in his final year he did not permit his infirmities to deter or defeat him. Once again he took control of the situation and became a source of courage, wisdom and love for his family, friends and colleagues—a true *mensch*!

Robert Michaelsen

Robert Michaelsen was founding chair of the department of religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, a distinguished scholar, author, administrator, and past president of the American Academy of Religion. He devoted a great deal of time and energy to establishing, extend-

ing, and deepening the study of religions in American public schools. His *Piety in the Public Schools: Trends and Issues and Trends Between Religion and Public Schools in the United States* (1970) served for many years as a foundational text for everyone entering the field and remains an indispensable book for anyone desiring to gain an understanding of the complex and intricate relationship of the study of religions and public education. Like Thayer, he was a founding member of the Public Education Religion Studies Center Professional Advisory Board. And like Thayer, he was admired for his kindly and generous spirit and wise counsel. In retirement he devoted many hours to expanding our knowledge of and empathy for the plight of Native Americans. He also founded a visitation program for inmates at a federal penitentiary.

Ninian Smart

Ninian Smart was a renowned international scholar, prolific writer, and past president of the American Academy of Religion. Before joining the faculty at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he taught with Robert Michaelson, Smart was the founding chair of England's first department of religious studies at Lancaster University in the early 1950s. During his tenure at Lancaster he helped many other universities in England establish departments of religious studies. At the same time he spearheaded the movement in Great Britain to introduce the academic study of religions in England's state supported schools. Once in the United States, he gave his full support and creative energies to helping his American colleagues expand and improve the study of religions in the public schools. Smart was a champion par excellence of the empathetic study of religions. He insisted that an academic study of religions must deal with more than the objective facts; it also must consider "the inner feelings and values which animate belief . . . This is often a hard task, but its necessity is shown by the terrible lessons which come from not understanding other people's points of view."

Michaelson often quoted Abram Sachar who said, "The task of the teacher is to illuminate." Then he would continue, "To illuminate is defined in many dictionaries as 'to light up,' 'to give light to,' 'to elucidate,' 'to make resplendent,' 'to shed a luster upon'—this is our vocation as teachers." Although they no longer are with us, Warshaw's, Michaelson's, and Smart's professional contributions to the study of religions and their empathetic spirits continue to lead us out of darkness into light and to shed a luster upon our profession.

**Thayer Warsaw and the Indiana University Summer Institute on
Teaching the Bible in Secondary English**

James S. Ackerman
Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies
Indiana University

In 1969 I accepted an appointment in Hebrew Bible at Indiana University. Part of my job description included directing for three years a summer institute for secondary school teachers of literature. Aristotle wrote that every play must have its *peripeteia* (crucial turning point), and the most significant event in my professional life was meeting Thayer Warsaw. It occurred in upstate New York at a conference focused on teaching religion in public school education. I had not yet moved to Indiana; I had no idea what kind of training secondary school teachers of English might need; and I didn't yet know the extent of the grant provided by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. in Indianapolis. But after the two-day conference, I did know one thing: with his experience, high intelligence, sensitivity, and great sense of humor, I had to have Thayer as my partner in running the institute. He gladly accepted the challenge, and for what turned out to be the entire decade of the 70's, he and his wife Bernice drove out to Bloomington, their car loaded down with a range of materials that would be useful for secondary school teachers of English.

Thayer was an experienced teacher of English in one of the best high schools in the United States. He had been featured in *Time* magazine as the first teacher to enter the potential minefield of teaching the Bible shortly after the Supreme Court *Schempp* decision outlawing prayer in the schools while encouraging the objective teaching of religion. I was an ivory tower guy who had never taught one day in any kind of high school. I was trained in biblical studies, not at all aware of the various ways that teachers of literature could approach the Bible. To the best of my knowledge, Thayer, through his classroom experience, was the pioneer who developed the following four approaches.

The Bible *for* Literature

This approach focused exclusively on the contents of important biblical passages without any attempt to analyze them from a literary point of view. This relatively safe approach could be used by teachers who wanted their

students to pick up biblical references in Shakespeare, Milton, or Conrad. The Bible *in* Literature

As an example of this approach, if a secular work went beyond occasional references to using a biblical story as central to its structure, like Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, it would necessitate a close study of *Genesis* 1-4).

The Bible *as* Literature

In the early days almost all teaching of the Bible was called "Bible as literature." By turning this into a sub-category of possible approaches that teachers of literature might take, Thayer was leaving open the path for the study of the Bible as great literature in and of itself. The Bible was studied for its own sake, as literature, whereas biblical scholars at that time focused exclusively on a study of the Bible for the light it could shed on the religion of ancient Israel and/or early Christianity.

The Bible *and* Literature

In this approach, for example, when a teacher wanted to develop a course around a particular literary theme, like the nature of evil, or the brother's keeper, the book of *Job* or *Genesis* 4 might be included in the course. Thus it was Thayer who conceptualized the structure of the institute, and all I had to do was to search at Indiana University and elsewhere to find suitable faculty.

One feature that made our institute especially useful and appreciated by teachers was its practicality, borne out of years of Thayer's classroom experience. Every afternoon during the four weeks of the institute we met for 90 minutes, in which Thayer discussed "the Bible in the classroom," ways of dealing with the wide range of pedagogical and even constitutional issues that teachers might face when they got back home. We had First Amendment experts as guest speakers, as well as representatives from various religious faiths who told the participants how they regarded the Bible, warning them of particular passages or expressions that might cause controversy within the community. Thayer gave about half the lectures, and at all times he assumed a leadership role in guiding the discussions.

At the time Florida State University had developed a summer program on religion, aimed at secondary school social studies teachers. The result was a unified Florida curriculum on the study of religion. Thayer realized

that our participants would be coming from all walks of pedagogical life – some teaching senior honors students, others teaching below average freshmen; some wanting to take a Bible *in* literature approach, others wanting to take a Bible *as* literature approach; some wanting to develop a three week unit on the Bible into an already existing course, others wanting to devote an entire semester to the study of the Bible. Thus Thayer brilliantly made the sole institute requirement the development of (a) curricular unit(s) that would be suitable to each participant's particular situation.

The Institute on Teaching the Bible in Secondary English turned out to be a great success story. High schools had moved away from curricula that every student had to take, and instead they were allowing students to satisfy their English requirement through electives (the two top electives in the U.S. were science fiction and Bible as literature). We were inundated with applications, and the Lilly Endowment extended the grant. All in all, we offered ten summer institutes, finishing with an N.E.H.-supported institute for teachers of college English. During those ten years we trained over 500 teachers from all 50 states, as well as from five foreign countries. Our Institute, however, reached out to more than those 500 teachers. We published eight books (most of them edited by Thayer, several of them written by him), including a student textbook that we co-edited that is still in print, based on the materials that were developed over those ten years.

I haven't said enough about Thayer as a person and about the relationship that developed between us. He was a man who had both plunged into biblical scholarship and spent more than two decades of his life in the classroom, yet he wore his wisdom and his experience lightly. With his wonderful New England charm, accompanied by a unique wit that English teachers would especially love, everyone relaxed and enjoyed themselves when they came into his presence. The daunting work that he had put in preparing his Bible courses (samples of which he would faithfully U-Haul from Massachusetts to Indiana each summer), plus the telling classroom anecdotes that were always right on target, left no doubt in anyone's mind that Thayer's advice could be trusted, and that these teachers could go into the classroom knowing they were *at least* as well trained in Bible as literature as they were in Shakespeare. Thayer and I were a perfect complement to each other. I think that a letter I wrote his three daughters shortly after his death will express the depth of my feeling for this very special person.

Dear Ellie, Shirley, and Maggie,

I certainly can make no claim for sharing the breadth and depth of grief and other feelings that, based on my experience of my parents' deaths (one, expected for years,

the other, unexpected, in an instant), I know you will be dealing with for a long time to come. I can only state bluntly that over the years of our working together-intensely throughout a decade of summers, and on a steady, ongoing basis for the past thirty years – Thayer had become a second father to me. He knew it, and I think that his feeling for me was more than just a working-professional relationship. I was mightily moved, let me tell you, on the day your family permitted JoAnn, John and me to join in your folks' 50th anniversary festivities, when he took me aside as we were exiting the room to tell me that I was the one person he would have sorely missed had I not been there along with his oh-so-beloved family. We had come as a surprise, but in some deep way he had expected me to be there!

One week from the day Shirley called me with the ultimately inevitable, but nevertheless shocking and soul-shaking news of Thayer's death, I gave a paper at a conference in Austin, Texas for high school history teachers. I don't know why they asked for me, because Thayer and I had spent our careers working with literature teachers. My topic, however, was on "The ethics of teaching about religion in the public schools." As I pulled my thoughts together that week, it became very clear that I did indeed have some things to say. You guessed it: while I have learned from hundreds of scholars in biblical and literary studies, everything I know about how to do it right in the public schools – in Bible or in religion – comes from your father. As I wrote down my thoughts during that week, I was both sitting shiva with you and communing with my inner-Thayer. It was both a tough and a triumphant week. The paper and following discussion went fine, and I was even invited by a top NEH executive to apply for a grant to offer a summer institute on the subject. Had Thayer and I been in our primes, we might have jumped at the chance (we did do one NEH summer institute for teachers of English). But the expertise the NEH is looking for is now in the grave, and I have no idea when such an amazing combination of knowledge and experience (setting aside Thayer's many endearing personal qualities) will ever again arise in the land.

Thayer knew about and had a loving concern for every member of my family, especially Alex, and she loved him nearly as much as I. We'll miss him sorely; but as long as I continue to have anything to do with biblical literature in the public schools, Thayer will live on in an active way. After that, it will be through deep and fond memories of one of the closest personal relationships I have ever had in my life.

With big hugs to the three of you, and with condolences also to Ed and Nick, and to all three of your families.

Jim

“The Truth Shall Make You Shudder”

Charles R. Kniker

Associate Director of Academic Affairs, Board of Regents, State of Iowa
Former Professor of Education, Iowa State University

I have forgotten the year I first “met” Thayer Warshaw. I was reading a denominational publication for youth that contained an article about an innovative public high school English teacher from Massachusetts who was teaching his students about the Bible in literature. One of the memorable segments from that amazing piece was a pretest Thayer Warshaw gave his sophomore charges. The instructor shared some of the humorous answers provided by his pupils to the fill-in-the-blank sections of famous biblical statements. Among the funniest to me – I used it in speeches for years – was the response to the statement, “The truth shall make you ____.” The student sage offered this observation of life, “The truth shall make you shudder.”

When Thayer and I first met in person at an NCRPE meeting in the mid-1970s, in Kansas as I recall, I was delightfully astonished by his weathered wit and wisdom. He had seen it all. He knew what worked and what didn't work in the classroom. He appreciated precise rhetoric, but pressed all to turn their pedagogical theories to actions. Graciously, but tenaciously, he sought the truth. And he didn't mind if the truth would make us shudder.

Thayer stated at an NCRPE meeting that he wanted some relief from editing the newsletter for the group, which by the mid to late 1970s had become a small band of stalwarts seeing fewer institutions put in the time, effort, and finances to develop teacher training programs and curriculum of

quality that would truly impact the public school systems of the country. I agreed to help as a book review editor.

Several years later, Thayer declared it was time for him to retire. At an NCRPE meeting, the choices he and I presented to its board were to either discontinue the newsletter, or make a concerted effort to produce a journal that would include both scholarly articles (including legal analyses of relevant court cases) and teacher-focused “how to do it” case studies. The board, with concern about the financing of such an enterprise and the effort required, reluctantly agreed. Thayer offered to assist. If I would become editor-in-chief, he would become the manuscript editor. That convinced the board to go ahead. As they say, the rest is history. The journal, slowly but surely, grew in size and stature, eventually becoming a refereed publication. There is more than just the journal.

Little did I know what great experiences I would have over the next decade, both professionally and personally. Among his self-chosen tasks as “manuscript editor” was reading 50 newspapers, journals, and other sources and writing a “news” column. Our weekly phone calls were filled by reflections, insights, suggestions, and visions for this emerging field of religion. With his red pen, he truly “bled” over articles. More than one writer, who first grumbled about Thayer’s editorial intrusions, later thanked us for his work.

In time, the leaders of NCRPE and the editorial board of the journal decided to honor Thayer by establishing the Thayer S. Warshaw Prize. Annually, we wanted to recognize the best essay on a topic related to religion and public education. Thayer resisted our efforts. In part, he felt he didn’t deserve it. In part, I surmise, he wanted to be proud of any article that the editorial committee would select. Year in and year out, he knew that this infant field was still growing intellectually, and distinguished articles would be difficult to locate. We didn’t want Thayer to worry. Although we never put it in these terms, I believe the selection committee was using the criterion that the prize-winning essay had to be one that made readers shudder over some truth.

Earlier, I said I benefited personally from knowing Thayer. I could give many examples of his care and compassion. He and his wife Bernice, were gracious hosts and delightful conversationalists. One example. When he learned our younger son, a high school junior, would be flying from Iowa to Boston to participate in a special Harvard University program, Thayer volunteered to meet him at Logan Airport. Fog developed and Tim’s flight was diverted to Cleveland. Thayer waited for many long hours at the airport, until Tim arrived on another flight. Thayer called Tim over the next few days, helping him because the luggage had been delayed. Several

times, he took Tim to dinner. Over the years, as our contacts became less frequent, whenever we spoke, he always asked first how our family was doing.

In his final years, after losing Bernice and fighting tough illnesses, Thayer faced the reality of death as he had faced life – he knew the truth and it didn't make him shudder. In our last phone conversation, he said, "I am ready for the angel to sound that final trumpet call; but I don't think I could see it or hear it."

Thayer, we miss you. Thank you for all you did for us.

The Educational Legacy of Thayer Warshaw

Charles C. Haynes
Senior Scholar, First Amendment Center

Thayer Warshaw's time has finally come.

Who could have predicted ten years ago that in the year 2000 the President of the United States would send religious-liberty guidelines to every public school in America? Included in the packet were strong statements about the importance of "study about religion" in the curriculum – statements that Thayer's work over several decades had helped to shape and inspire.

How far we have come. Thayer labored tirelessly to convince educators that teaching about religion (or, as he would have insisted, teaching about *religions*) can and should be done in ways that are consistent with the religious-liberty principles of the First Amendment. Today, thanks in large measure to the pioneering work of Thayer and others, the question in public education is no longer "*Should* we teach about religion?" – but rather "*How* should we teach about religion?"

Consider this: According to a study the First Amendment Center recently published with the Council on Islamic Education, all of the existing national and state social-studies standards now encourage considerable study of religions. Oxford University Press is publishing a 17-volume series, *Religion in American Life*, written by leading scholars for young adults and already popular with many teachers. Columbia University Press is distributing *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*, a CD-ROM used in many classrooms to expose students to the extraordinary religious diversity in America today. Statewide programs in California and Utah are preparing hundreds of teachers to integrate religious studies into their courses. And the list goes on.

Thayer knew about much of this before he died, and he was pleased with the advances in a movement he held dear. But he would be the first to point out that those same social-studies standards largely ignore religion in the modern world, treat some of the major traditions superficially, and neglect to address the historical changes within religions over time. He would be distressed at the lack of attention to religious studies in teacher education. And he would be appalled at the efforts of some to use this “new consensus” to promote unconstitutional electives in “Bible history” (a subject he knew something about).

Yes, public education is finally beginning to take religious studies seriously. But the challenge of getting it right will take the insight and commitment of many more Thayer Warshaws. Fortunately, Thayer has left us a wealth of articles and books that set a very high bar for anyone interested in tackling the difficult task of preparing teachers to teach about religions. More important, Thayer Warshaw has provided us with an outstanding example of the kind of dedicated teacher and meticulous scholar we will need as we work to complete the task of treating religion fairly and accurately in the curriculum of our public schools.