In his 1959 Reed Lecture, C. P. Snow presented his seminal idea of the "two cultures." For Snow the two cultures were that of science and literature. As a scientist and essayist, he was concerned that the ideas and discoveries of contemporary science were not being adequately and intelligently used by the literary community. Since then, Snow's fairly restricted yet highly symbolic two-culture motif has been used by others to indicate the chasm between the sciences and the humanities, or between science and religion.

Snow recognized that the situation he was addressing was more complex than the two-cultures image conveyed. In fact, the time has come to see if Snow's analysis can be redone in order to take into account the greater complexity of the world in which we live. This complexity is reflected in the fact that we live in a scientific-pluralistic age.

If humanistic thought in general and religious thought in particular is to be an adequate expression of human experience and an effective guide for human action, humanists and theologians must articulate their claims in relation to science and pluralism. Here I would like to summarize three aspects of our present pluralistic age and then employ some features of contemporary science to help account for cultural pluralism in a way that may be religiously meaningful.

The first and perhaps most important aspect of pluralism can be seen in the growing diversity and fragmentation within the scientific community itself. Since the Enlightenment, there has been increasing specialization in all areas of human inquiry. This is most notable in the natural and social sciences, where we have seen the continual birth of new sub-disciplines and hybrid disciplines as scientists acquire and teach new knowledge about our world and about ourselves in that world.

However, while the sciences are giving us increasing knowledge, that knowledge is coming to us in fragmented forms. As Stephen Toulmin argues, the most significant development that accompanied the rise of modern science was not any particular breakthrough in theory or even any new refinement in methodological procedures. Instead it was the development of specialized disciplines of inquiry—and the resulting fragmentation of the human mind. Even a few centuries ago, as Toulmin points out, John Donne prophetically proclaimed, "All Coherence gone"; we now see this lack of coherence in the sense of meaninglessness that invades the minds of even highly intelligent people, whose intelligence, however, is perhaps overly specialized.

One of the basic tasks of religion is to give—through doctrine, ritual, and moral code—a coherent picture of the total scheme of things and our place and purpose in it. Thus one might expect that religion could respond effectively to the loss of coherence and could reorient people regarding the purpose of living. However, this task is complicated by two other forms of pluralism. Both involve religion itself.

Accompanying the fragmentation of knowledge in Western society is the increasing awareness of the rich plurality of the world's cultures and of the great variety of religious ideas and practices in these cultures.

In her book Culture and Commitment, Margaret Mead argued that prior to the Second World War almost all societies were oriented toward the past. Children growing up acquired the traditions—including the life goals, ethical principles, manners, customs, and tastes—of their forefathers. One of the reasons for this relative cultural cohesiveness is that even as late as the early twentieth century, most societies, at least as far as the average person was concerned, were relatively isolated from and unaware of one another.

But with the rise of modern science and technology, all this changed dramatically. With today's transportation and communication technologies, the average person is becoming more acquainted than ever before with the plurality of the ways people live, including the plurality of religious beliefs, experiences, and practices.

This awareness that other humans practice religions different from one's own is one of the major challenges to the authority of any particular religion today. It is no longer possible to regard one's religious tradition as offering the only true understanding of the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. As John Hick writes in his new book, God Has Many Names, "We have come to accept the need to re-understand our own faith, not as the one and only but as one of several."

The third aspect of our pluralistic age is the development over the past few decades of religious studies programs in colleges and universities. These programs represent quite a different spirit from studies in theological schools and from the proclamations of various religious communities. Even though the subject matter may be much the same, and even though similar literary-critical, historical, psychological, sociological, and anthropological methods may be employed, there is still a primary difference in spirit. In the religious studies programs in colleges and universities, the attempt is to appreciate and understand the religious traditions of the world without being committed to any of them.

As a result of this attitude of noncommitment, I suspect that students taking religion courses in our academic institutions acquire a different kind of religious identity. Many continue to practice seriously the faith of their parents that has become theirs; a few discover or undergo a major transformation or revitalization of their faith. But many also begin to acquire an understanding of religion in a wider sense.

It is possible to say that today one must not just be a citizen of one's own nation; one must also regard one's self as a planetary citizen. The same may apply to religion: today a few (but I expect the number will grow) not only regard themselves as members of a particular faith community, but also as religious in a wider sense, as citizens in a much wider and more varied religious world.

Religious thought has always responded to new movements in the larger culture. Taking Christianity as an example, Augustine of Hippo, in the declining decades of the Roman Empire, adopted Neo-Platonic philosophy in order to forge intellectually a credible expression of Christianity for himself and his time. Eight-hundred years later...
plenty of literature that could help teachers explore the comparative structure of such comprehensive religious world-models in the context of other viable religious options.

Perhaps such a proposal would be politically difficult to achieve, since no one—neither fundamentalist nor evolutionary humanist—likes to think, initially, at any rate, of his own most precious story as being comparable to all the rest. But at least it would focus the argument before the school boards at the proper point, and the very controversy over such new courses (What should be included, What left out?) would help to raise consciousness about the logical essentials. And if adopted, these proposals would keep science, and only real science, in the science classrooms. Teachers would need new training in comparative religion and in the methods of history and philosophy of religion and history and philosophy of science, but those training resources are readily available in our nation’s universities. We need, I believe, to move constructively in these directions in order to save ourselves from logical confusion and social turmoil. 

Notes
1. See my Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion (New York: Scribners, 1967), especially Chapters 2 and 3, for a sustained development and defense of this understanding of religion.
2. See, for example, St. Augustine’s De Liber Arth.
6. Ibid., p. 282.
10. Ibid., p. 173.
11. Ibid., p. 170.

MAILBOX

Across the highway
mown hay, noon sky.

The mail jeep
goes by
not even stopping with the bill
a day like this accrues.

Out here news
never arrives
let alone excitement’s
foreign stamp,

but at the field’s edge
tiny cattle graze
until the horizon
is obliterated.

Then crows rise
into the night of their wings
and under a single
country streetlight

the mailbox throws
a shadow like a barn.

Stuart Dybek

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