

Appendices

	<u>Pages</u>
Robert Michaelson	35-68
Robert Bellah	69-83
Jacob Needleman	84-98
Jonathan Z. Smith	99-115
Louise A. Greene	116-131

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To Be and To Be Perceived: Religion
and the Study of Religion

by

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I should like to begin with some reflections on a distinction sometimes employed when the topic of this symposium is addressed: "Descriptive and Normative Dimensions of the Religious." For, to slightly rearrange an old tag, there is an intriguing mixture here of some things old, some things new, some things borrowed and, I presume, some things blue. I must ask that you divide this phrase neatly in half, into "Descriptive and Normative" on the one hand, and "Dimensions of the Religious" on the other. For there is a gap of at least a century of intellectual development between these components in the title, and this must be sorted out if our discussion is to proceed in an orderly fashion.

To take up the first. It would be of some interest for an intellectual historian to determine when and under what conditions the distinction between the "normative" and the "descriptive" entered into currency in the language of the disciplines. The arguments for the distinction, especially in discourse about religious studies, appear to

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be a subtype (indeed, a poor imitation) of the nineteenth century debates in the academy over the nature of Wissenschaft combined with more arcane and archaic distinctions between "Athens and Jerusalem," the "Divine and the Human Sciences," and "Reason and Revelation." The distinction between the "normative" and the "descriptive" frequently may be decoded as the distinction between theology and every other perspective on religion with the word "normative" being understood, as it was when first coined, as a synonym for "canonical." This is most apparent in the literature of tension between theology and the history of religions or the phenomenology of religions--whatever these latter terms may signify. This primary distinction has been frequently confused with one between the "insider" and the "outsider," the "emic" and the "etic" to use contemporary anthropological jargon, although I know of nothing in principle that would prevent an "outsider" from doing theology or an "insider" from doing everything else.

The distinction between the "normative" and the "descriptive" as stated has, for me, little theoretical value. It does not yield the sort of clarification that analogous distinctions in other disciplines provide--for example, as between the formal and the empirical, the nomothetic and the polythetic, definition and classification. It has rather served as a tactical distinction in matters of academic and legal governance in attempts to

establish the legitimacy of religious studies within European state university systems in the nineteenth century or American state universities in more recent times. It is a lay, juridical distinction rather than a theoretical one. Despite appearances, its major texts have not been Harnack's 1901 lecture on Der Aufgabe der theologischen Fakultäten und die allgemeine Religionsgeschichte or Troeltsch's 1900 essay, Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte or the Barthian distinction between the Gospel as "Word of God" and Religion. Rather they have been decisions such as that of the French Ministry of Education in 1885 when it closed down the Catholic Theological Faculties and established the "Fifth Section of Religious Sciences" as part of the École Pratique des Hautes Études: "we do not wish to see the cultivation of polemics, but of critical research; we wish to see the examination of texts and not the discussion of dogmas"¹ or the United States Supreme Court decision in School District of Abington v. Schempp (374 U.S. 203, 225, [1963]) in which Mr. Justice Goldberg declared: "It seems clear to me...that the Court would recognize the propriety...of the teaching about religion, as distinguished from the teaching of religion, in the public schools."² The distinction is a strategic one; it does not deserve to be raised, in this naive form, to a distinction of theory.

Continuing these initial historical reflections, it is possible to raise a further argument. Not only is the distinction between the "normative" and the "descriptive" one of politics rather than theory, but it is also anachronistic. It does not conform to the present state of the discipline. The distinction rests on the notion of a separation between intact and insulated realms of inquiry. It speaks out of a period when the norms of theological inquiry were given by a canon; when the ideology of the human sciences was governed by goals such as "objectivity" and "value-free." The most superficial glance at current theological practice will reveal that the canon has largely been abandoned or is perceived as problematic. An equally superficial reading of the literature of the human sciences will reveal that the creativity, the subjectivity of the individual "describer" stands at the very heart of the enterprise. To put it in another way, the Kant of the first and third Kritik is the presupposition of every mode of intellectual inquiry, be it described as "normative" or descriptive."³ If anything is to be salvaged from the distinction between these two poles, it is that they are indices of style or mood, rather than sharp theory. It is the same kind of distinction pointed to by contemporary taxonomic debate between the "lumpers" and the "splitters" or in Isaiah Berlin's delightful contrast between the "hedgehog" and

the "fox"--the former being one who relates everything to a single, central vision, a unifying principle in terms of which all things have meaning; the latter being more playful, one who revels in the variety of the world and who does not insist on relations. But the distinction cannot be formulated with any rigor, and, as such, must be abandoned as a theoretical principle.

The second half of the phrase, "Dimensions of the Religious," is no less problematic. It is, upon reflection, a most curious phrase. An adjective (i.e., "religious") has been transformed into a substantive, into an abstract noun which is then declared, as if it were a solid object, to have dimensions! This particular abstraction has caused much mischief--as thinkers as diverse as W. C. Smith in The Meaning and End of Religion and H. Penner, in his call for definitional stringency, eloquently testify.⁴ This abstraction, all too easily employed within our discipline, utterly vitiates the preliminary distinction. One can be normative with respect to the canons of a particular religious tradition; it is a contradiction in terms to speak of being normative with respect to the "religious." Similarly, it is difficult to comprehend in what sense one might meaningfully be said to be engaged in a description of religion in general which, by definition, nowhere appears (indeed, it cannot appear). Religion in general is not an empirical term, it is a second-order abstraction. The

formulation becomes impossible when "description" is applied to "the religious." One can comprehend what might be intended by someone declaring that they are describing the religious dimension of something. I cannot imagine any sense in which a descriptive account of the "religious" could be meaningful. An inversion has occurred with the most peculiar consequences. Two terms, the "normative" and the "descriptive" which might possibly be rescued as meaningful ways of categorizing operations performed on first-order phenomena have been impossibly conjoined to a second-order abstraction, resulting in, at the very least, a fallacy of misplaced concreteness.

It now becomes possible to return to our initial observations on the tactical nature of the distinction between the "normative" and the "descriptive"--now taking into account this curious word, "the religious." It is, of course, the case that the strategy was largely successful. Since the nineteenth century, religious studies have been carried out in two parallel arenas, the seminary and the academy, as both a "Divine" and a "Human Science." Standing at this juncture, a century since the Dutch Universities Act of October 1, 1877 first established this dual possibility, we may begin to assess its consequences, especially for the humanistic study of religion in whose interest the distinction was first created.

The problem may be simply formulated: How does one study religion without a canon? For a canon that can, in

principle include everything (i.e., "religion in general" or "the religious") is no canon at all; a discipline that cannot describe and defend its limits is no discipline at all. The cost of abandoning the normative, if, in fact, truly and systematically undertaken, would have been collapse before the "terror of freedom" or an impossible amateurism. Both have frequently occurred, as witnessed to in any annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, but the problem has most usually been avoided by duplicity, by covertly employing a canon. But, as this canon is now private or secret, it is shorn of those communal, consensual sanctions that confer authority upon a canon.⁵

This dilemma can be illustrated on the sheerly "descriptive" level. Until the 1950's, most departments in American universities were titled "Departments of Theology" or "Departments of Bible and Religion." That is to say, most departments were located in church-related colleges and universities and consisted of seminary curricula translated, relatively unchanged, into the undergraduate realm. In the 1950's, "Department of Religion" became the more popular title. But a glance at the composition of the faculty, the curricular designs employed and the textbooks used reveal that, by and large, they remained mini-seminaries with some additional courses in world religions.⁶ (One acid test would be whether there were separate appointments for both Old and New Testament, i.e.,

whether the Bible retains a privileged position). In the last fifteen years, most new departments (as well as many older programs through name-change) have been called "Departments of Religious Studies." Both the shift to the adjective "religious" and the plural form "studies" ought to be significant. [If meant, the adjective serves to signal that there is no longer an intact entity called "religion"--it is an aspect of something else.] The plural should serve to signal that there is no longer an agreed upon procedure but rather a loose constellation of methods and disciplines not one of which would be held to be unique to the study of religion nor capable of grasping the diverse phenomena. This position has been positively stated with elegance by Ninian Smart. The science of religion "is an enterprise which is aspectual, polymethodic, pluralistic and without clear boundaries."⁷ But if this be taken seriously, its methodological and political consequences would appear to be that Departments of Religious Studies be dissolved, their degree granting powers suspended, and committees be created analogous to those in "area studies" (if, indeed, the area can be defined).

Quite similar conclusions can be drawn from an examination of the titles of courses listed by programs in religion in college catalogues. In the 1940's and 1950's, the majority of courses were entitled Religion or Religions of X (a place name) or the X (a proper name) Religion or

Tradition. That is to say, religion was understood as an entity defined by geography or history. In the late 1950's and 1960's, a significant number of courses were introduced with the formula Religion and X (Literature, Culture, Science...or what have you), the idea being that there was a "sphere" called "religion"--no longer identified with any given historical tradition--that could be juxtaposed to or interrelated with some "secular sphere" of human activity. In the 1970's, new titles have tended to be constructions such as Religious X (Autobiography being the most frequent). Here the leading notion appears to be that there is a religious perspective or approach to some subject or area of human experience which has non-religious dimensions as well. (The definition of the "religious" in such formulations is extremely vague. The "religious" most frequently appears to function as a sort of "extra-plus," e.g., "the most integrative"). The "religious" has come to mean some loosely characterized "quality" of life or experience.

The end result of these shifting strategies is profoundly disturbing to anyone committed to the humanistic study of religion in that a distinction originally, and naively, conceived to guard against privacy, privilege and subjectivity has been converted into a license to practice the same in forms more extreme than imagined by the nineteenth century proponents of Wissenschaft. Freed from the normative, from traditions, and history, and communities,

all of the traditional items of religion have become simply at-hand, immediate, unendingly accessible. There is, for such a view, no problem of interpretation (except in matters of taste) as there is no distance to be overcome, no translation to be faced and, at least by implication, no necessity for scholarship. Some departments appear to have allowed anything to become a part of their curriculum, secure in the fact that if one of their faculty chooses to teach it, then "it" must be relevant to "something" about religion--whatever that has come to mean. I doubt that any department or discipline can long be justified as cabinets of curiosities in which are displayed each individual professor's (the term is meant literally) collection of idiosyncrasies.

At the risk of being unfair, it can be argued that a prime theoretician of such an approach, for all his references to "cumulative tradition," would be Wilfred Cantwell Smith who denies, with brilliance, the generic term "religion" but insists that the study of religion is the study of persons, of the individual and personal acts of faith which may vary not only between individuals in the same tradition but also within the same individual from day to day. Smith insists, paradoxically, that "no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion's believers." But, who are they? There is no longer an entity called religion, the individual "can speak authoritatively

only for the present and with final authority only for himself." What saves this "personalist epistemology" (Smith's term) from being utterly solipsistic is Smith's vivid, but unclarified, sense of the unitary reality of God which stands as the "end" of each individual's faith--but this is surely to allow some sort of a theology in by the back door.⁸

If we are to avoid our present stance, despite all the real work that is being accomplished, of a side show alongside of the academy, we must be driven by the confusion of what we have taken to be the "descriptive" back to ask the question of norms. For as Herbert Fingarette has eloquently reminded us: "We must not ignore the fact that, in the last analysis, commitment to a specific orientation outweighs the catholicity of imagery. One may be a sensitive and seasoned traveler, at ease in many places, but one must have a home. We can be intimate with those we visit--but we remain only travelers and guests, it is our hosts who are truly at home. Home is always home for someone--but there is no Absolute Home in general."⁹ The same, mutatis mutandis, for religion. And thus, it would seem, the pendulum has swung back. The "descriptive" has yielded a fascinating heap, but it is to the "normative" that we must return if progress is to be made in sorting and evaluating the pile.

Although space does not permit the elaboration of this theme, it ought to be taken for granted that the theological enterprise can be carried out within a humanistic,

"secular" setting. That the dynamics of the theological enterprise as it works within its norms can be, when re-described in a mode appropriate to our pluralistic university setting, both a prime datum and a possible procedural model. This requires an emphasis on theological creativity and activity rather than the old burlesque of a passive purveyor of norms. Such a redescription is possible and at hand.¹⁰

Secondly, if there is to be a discipline of the study of religion, normative definitions must be supplied. A definition is doubly normative. It must be constructed according to public rules. The notorious fact that no single definition of religion has won wide acceptance should not be used as evidence by those who would argue for the inscrutable character of religion--if that is so, then we must quit the academy. Rather we should rejoice in the fact of their rejection, for most have been poorly formulated definitions.¹¹ But a definition is also normative in that its purpose is as much, if not more, to exclude as to include, to establish norms and provide the occasion for reflection on their relative adequacy. We must recall that we are defining a word not a "thing" and that, therefore, there is an intellectual but not an existential cost to be paid for exclusion. The penalty of being "liberal" seems to be the price of being able to say very little. I, for one, applaud, as the single most creative statement in

the debate over the definition of religion, Melford Spiro's argument that: "If, indeed, it is the case that Theravada Buddhism is atheistic and that, by a theistic definition of religion, it is not therefore a religion, why can we not face rather than shrink from this consequence?...What loss to science would ensue (if Theravada Buddhism be declared) not a religion? I see only gain...it would have stimulated work in these apparently anomalous Buddhist societies... Does the study of religion become any the less significant or fascinating--if, in terms of a consensual, ostensive definition it was discovered that one or six or seventeen societies did not possess religion?"¹² To say that Buddhism does not accord with our stipulated norms for religion does not, of course, eliminate Buddhism as a human phenomenon, but it does suggest that we ought not to yield the definitional or normative enterprise merely to let it, and Marxism, and almost everything else in. Through the abrasion of our stipulated norms against a phenomenon such as Buddhism, we have located a place where we must get to work. We have isolated an interesting problem. The attempt at totalization, the nostalgia for holism and unity may well be the mark of some forms of religion; modesty and an acute sense of the limits of one's domain is the characteristic of the academic. A religious tradition may understand itself to be weakened when it schisms; in the academy, a discipline is mature when it discriminates, specializes and creates sub-disciplines.

Thirdly, it seems appropriate at this time to suggest a return to the enterprise of Comparative Religions. It is necessary not to be misunderstood. This is not to suggest a recovery of the older style of Comparative Religions in which Christianity (indeed, left-wing Protestant tradition) was uncritically assumed to be the standard by which all other religions might be judged. But it does not seem that our discipline can continue to abstain from questions of truth.¹³ In the past century, we have done amazingly well in collecting and describing the all but limitless variety of religious data, we have made significant progress in the difficult art of interpretation, but we have not yet been willing to publicly and explicitly exercise our critical faculties of judgment--if not of truth, then at least of relative adequacy. What will guard us against the excesses of the previous comparative enterprise is our appreciation of the thickness of the internal exegetical tradition. That is to say, we cannot merely compare slogans, symbols and naked propositions, but must place these within the context of how their adherents worked with them, questioned, doubted and adjusted them to their own judgments of adequacy and truth. Religions make explicit or implicit truth claims about the way things are or ought to be, often quite self-consciously in opposition to, or reformation of, a rival or previous claim. These can be collected, described, classified,

analyzed and compared--but this is all a propaedeutic for their being judged and critized. Precisely because we largely find ourselves within a university context, the descriptive must be the first step to the normative. These are not contradictory impulses (although they may well stand in healthy tension with one another). Each is the necessary presupposition of the other. To be is not merely to be perceived. We do not live in cuckoo-land, despite some of our data. Rather it is our solemn obligation, if we are to remain within the academy, that we search for Dr. Johnson's stone to bruise our feet against. One such stone is the sheer density of the fact, the object and end of our descriptive enterprise; the other is the sharp edge of judgment and critique, the object and end of our normative enterprise.

While not of direct relevance to this essay, compare Walter Capps' call for the attempt to establish a canon of second-order tradition in religious studies.

The notion of "world religion" is a most problematic and utterly political concept. See my remarks in J. S. Smith, Who Is Not Territory: An Inaugural Address (Chicago, 1977).

H. Hart, The Science of Religion & The Sociology of Knowledge (Princeton, 1973), p. 8.

W. C. Smith, "Comparative Religion: Whither--and Why?" in M. Eliade and J. W. Kitagawa, eds., The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology (Chicago, 1959), pp. 11-58.

References, Smith

¹Quoted in E. J. Sharpe, Comparative Religion: A History (London, 1975), p. 122.

²See, among others, P. G. Kauper, "Schempp and Sherbert: Studies in Neutrality and Accommodation," in D. A. Gianella, ed., Religion and the Public Order (Chicago, 1964), pp. 3-40.

³See, for example, D. Tracy, Blessed Rage for Order (New York, 1975) who maintains that theology represents a correlation between the norms of canon and a description of human existence.

⁴W. C. Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion (New York, 1964); H. Penner and E. Yonan, "Is a Science of Religion Possible?," Journal of Religion 52 (1972), 107-133.

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⁷N. Smart, The Science of Religion & The Sociology of Knowledge (Princeton, 1973), p. 8.

⁸W. C. Smith, "Comparative Religion: Whither---and Why?," in M. Eliade and J. M. Kitagawa, eds., The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology (Chicago, 1959), pp. 31-58.

⁹H. Fingarette, The Self in Transformation (New York, 1963), p. 237.

¹⁰See my paper, "On Sacred Persistence: Towards a Redefinition of Canon," presented at the Seminar on the Social Construction of the World through Biblical Rhetoric at the 1976 Annual Meeting of the American Academy for the Study of Religion for one such example.

¹¹Penner and Yonan, op. cit.

¹²M. E. Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," in M. Banton, ed., Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion (London, 1966), pp. 85-126, esp. pp. 88f.

¹³It is perhaps ironic that anthropologists are unabashedly raising questions of truth. See the literature reviewed in J. Z. Smith, "I am a Parrot (Red)," History of Religions 11 (1972), 391-413, to which add, especially, the quite different explorations by R. Needham, Belief, Language and Experience (Chicago, 1972); E. Gellner, The Legitimation of Belief (Cambridge, 1974); M. Sahlins, Culture and Practical Reason (Chicago, 1976).

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