

NORMATIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

INTRODUCTION: PROBLEM AND CONTEXT

Are discussions on methodology in the study of religion so 'old hat' as to be unbearably tedious? Such is the claim frequently made and yet it is reasonable to wonder if the facts justify this contempt. Witness the meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion in Fredericton, New Brunswick (May 31—June 3, 1977) where basic methodological issues surfaced on numerous occasions. The tension between normative and descriptive approaches was particularly evident in the proposals that the Society undertook a systematic programme of research whose purpose it would be to formulate a normative concept of man. This norm could then be offered for guidance to those engaged in radical research particularly in the bio-medical field where genetic engineering is a present fact. The normative concept of man would set moral limits to what is acceptable both in the directions of scientific research and in the social application of technologies thus developed.

This proposal provoked a discussion on what is the proper end of religious scholars and their academic societies. Are normative investigations the concerns of religionists *qua* humans and not in their professional capacity?

A colleague turned to me and made a remark—I think disapprovingly—to the effect that methodology like the poor seemed to be with us always. I replied that in methodology as in salvation we are all, in Kierkegaard's epigram, equidistant from eternity. There are no final conquests that render all subsequent enquiry unnecessary; rather the questions of what we study and how we study it need to be confronted over and over, not only from generation to generation, but also within the career of the same enquirer. This essay is intended as a contribution to this ongoing discussion.

The thesis of this paper is that the scholarly study of religion should include the normative challenge to assess truth or reality claims. To some, this may appear a betrayal of the hard-won emancipation of *Religionswissenschaft* from the tyranny of theological, i.e., confessional, strictures. It will be my attempt, nevertheless, to show that the study of religion need not choose between the polar extremes of presumptive objectivity on the one hand, and confessional hegemony on the other. I shall argue that it is both desirable and possible for the academic study of religion to espouse a normative or evaluative enterprise which, while accepting the challenge to assault the question of truth, does not capitulate to the proprietary exclusiveness of any particular theology.

What does it mean to characterize a study as descriptive or normative? In the most general sense, a study is descriptive if it seeks to apprehend and represent the environment without the interposition of subjective and variable elements from the side of the investigator. The watchword of descriptive studies, it may be said, is objectivity. This trait is considered characteristic of the scientific attitude, and studies conducted with this outlook may be viewed as scientific studies of religion. A normative study, conversely, is one in which the investigator consciously contributes certain intellectual elements to the understanding of the data. Whereas the descriptive study attempts to view the data in themselves unaffected (though not, necessarily, unassisted) by the observer's subjectivity, the normative study applies an *a priori* set of judgements to the phenomena in question.

In a more specific sense, the normative enterprise is regarded as exercising judgements upon the data with a view to establishing their truth. The *a priori* categories which the enquirer brings to his data are in this case understood as norms or criteria for distinguishing true claims concerning reality and value from false ones.

As I shall attempt to show below, this fundamental distinction between a normative study that operates with *a priori* elements and therefore entails the subjectivity of the scholar, and one that is presuppositionless and is, therefore, regarded as objective or descriptive, does not stand up to closer scrutiny. For it is evident that even allegedly descriptive studies have an ineluctable subjective element. On the definitional grounds mentioned above it is, therefore, necessary to conclude that even such descriptive studies contain a normative element.

This is not to say that the distinction between descriptive and normative must be abandoned, but it is, at the very least, to point out the superficiality of many judgements about religious studies that are made using these categories. The distinction is still a useful one if it is kept in mind that descriptive studies are motivated by the methodological intention of seeing the data in themselves in detachment from the needs and wishes of the observer, whereas the normative study consciously and deliberately imposes upon the observed data a judgement as to their reality and value.

I

THE NORMATIVE IN THE DESCRIPTIVE

i. True Second-Order Statements

Some of the reservations about normative judgements in the study of religion may be allayed if we acknowledge that in a certain sense all scholarly statements about religious phenomena contain and even aspire to contain a normative element. In the manner of certain linguistic analysis, it may be useful to distinguish between first-order statements and second-order statements. First-order statements are those propositions that refer directly to empirical data. Second-order statements refer to such propositions about that data; in other words, second-order statements are statements about statements. The second occurrence of the word 'statements' extends, however, beyond verbal propositions; it includes all external expressions of religious faith and not simply creedal or theological expressions. Along with theology, such things as sacred dances, liturgies and institutional forms are, in this usage, 'statements' which in their different ways refer to some transcendent object or ground of which they are a symbol or response. In characterizing the descriptive task of the scholar of religion as framing true second-order statements I mean that he should understand his responsibility as formulating descriptions which accurately depict what religious persons say and do, without pressing the further question as to whether these expressions do in fact correspond to some sacred or transcendent reality as their authors claim or imply. This is essentially the phenomenological outlook wherein ontological questions are bracketed.

When I contend that all academic statements intend to include a normative element, I have in mind in the first place just such second-order statements—those descriptive formulations that are, in effect, statements about 'statements'. It should, for example, be the aim of scholarship to describe correctly and understand the Muslim claim that there is no God but God and that Muhammad is his messenger. The execution of this intention entails all the necessary philological and historical tools that are available to the scholar of religion. He seeks to describe this Islamic statement about the nature of the universe with absolute precision. Describing truly the existential meaning which Muslims attach to this statement is, of course, a far more complex and difficult assignment, but one that still lies within the intention of the scholar whose aim is only to describe accurately putative descriptions of reality.

ii. *The Normative in the Definition of Religion*

Perhaps the most obvious expression of a normative element in the descriptive study of religion is in the very definition of religion. To study religion entails a preliminary delimitation of the field of enquiry—even if this circumscription is alleged to be rough or intuitive. There appears no way of avoiding a preliminary assessment of what, among the vast range of cultural and psychic phenomena accessible to man, shall constitute religious data to be studied by certain professionals. As any cursory survey of the various definitions of religion amply illustrates, there is significant diversity of judgement regarding the essential nature of religious phenomena and hence of the field of study. To attempt to evade this definitional conundrum by stating that one will supply a definition of religion only at the end of one's empirical researches and not in advance of them, really begs the question. For, in fact, the researcher is obliged to function with some implicit judgement as to the generic character of the material he undertakes to examine and understand.

This may rightly be called a normative element in two respects: (1) it involves an *a priori* element in the investigator which is brought to the empirical researches. One is even obliged to call it a subjective *a priori*, (in contrast to a universal Kantian, *a priori*) inasmuch as the definition of religion clearly differs from scholar to scholar; (2) it is a normative concern inasmuch as it entails a truth judgement in the sense that an evaluation is made of the conformity of certain phenomena to a standard taken to be the test of what constitutes religion.

iii. *Inevitable Subjectivity in Descriptive Studies*

But there remains a more persistent problem which is evident to all who reflect upon the nature of research and, particularly, historical studies. I refer to the latent normative element in all allegedly objective descriptive statements. This hardly needs to be laboured in this day. I simply issue the reminder that objective descriptive study remains more a methodological ideal than an actually implemented programme. Determination of what data are to be focussed upon as significant and worthy of investigation; the subsequent attempts to collate and classify this data; the interpretations of the meaning of this data for adherents of the religion in question—all these processes are crucially influenced by the investigator's subjecthood. By this I mean the investigator's philosophical commitments, reality perceptions, and value judgements, all of which are the result both of his historical and cultural conditioning and of his personal engagements. This subjecthood or existential selfhood of the investigator already functions in an *a priori*, normative manner even in the descriptive, or allegedly descriptive phase of the task of understanding religion.

iv. *Moral Precondition of Research*

It will be recalled that Henry Newman distinguished between intellectual and moral functions and argued that the proper role of the university was to exercise only the intellectual function.¹ Although there is some ambivalence on this question, this remains today the generally held view of the university. The university's task is to understand, not to exhort, preach or convert. And yet there is an obvious sense in which the intellectual task entails certain moral attitudes and conduct. One cannot be a good intellectual if he is not honest, open to evidence, humble, and prepared to co-operate with others in the common pursuit of truth.

Once men dedicate their energy to the discovery of truth about the world whether they are physicists, or economists, or religionists, they have—as a precondition of their undertaking—entered the realm of the normative.

1. "It [the university] contemplates neither moral impression nor mechanical production; it professes to exercise the mind neither in art nor in duty; its function is intellectual culture." (John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University*, Discourse VI).

II

NORMATIVE EVALUATION OF RELIGIOUS
TRUTH-CLAIMSi. *Assessing Historical Claims*

The question of normative studies acquires a much greater degree of pertinence and complexity, however, when we pass to the examination of the first-order aspect of religion studies and consider the relation between traditions and cosmic reality. To return to the example of the Muslim *shahadda*, this entails the question of the truth of the Muslim claim that there is no God but God and that Muhammad is his messenger. This is the normative question as it is customarily understood in discussions of fact and truth in the study of religion.

It will be noted that the difficulty of giving a satisfactory answer to the truth or falsehood a religious claim about reality increases in proportion to the increase in what we may loosely term the 'metaphysical' quality of the statement. Most religious traditions contain both historical and metaphysical assertions. Claims may be made, for example, that Jesus was crucified in the year 30 during the reign of Tiberius Caesar, or that the Buddha died of a banquet of poisonous mushrooms, or that Muhammad purged the *Ka'ba* of its idols. These claims are simultaneously personal religious claims and academic, historical claims. They are religious in the sense that they are elements of an enduring tradition, belief which inspires the faith of its adherents. At the same time, they are historical claims of an ordinary sort which are subject to the same tests of historical accuracy as are other statements about the past.

ii. *Evaluating Metaphysical Claims*

When, however, we raise questions such as the existence of a supreme will and wisdom or of a universal spiritual essence behind all sensory phenomena, we are in a different and obviously much more difficult area of enquiry. So difficult, in fact, that many scholars at this point abandon the quest, concluding that a position on the truth or falsehood of such metaphysical claims is in no way determined by scholarly methods which are publicly verifiable,

but depends instead on the faith, or the will to believe, or the mental idiosyncrasies of the believers. It is as a result of this line of argument that we have among scholars the prevalent view that the business of religious studies is to ascertain, as far as is humanly possible by the methods of research, what it is that religious people say or do or build, but that it is no part of their task to enter upon the risky and contentious path of evaluating their truth, that is to say, the correspondence of their expressions to the actual state of affairs in the universe. If a religionist insists on making an evaluative judgement about the existence and character of Allah, or the ineffable monistic spiritual essence of the universe, or the normative conception of man, he does so not as a scholar of religion but as a human being like others who, on the basis of certain experiences or influences interpreted as authoritative and revelatory, makes such judgements about contending truth claims regarding reality.

On the surface, this strikes us as a disarmingly simple and laudable division of labour. The academic scholar restricts himself to the description of phenomena; it falls to others to evaluate the relation of these phenomena to the actual structure of reality and pass a judgement of truth or falsehood upon them. That I regard this as an unsatisfactory solution to the problem will become evident below.

It may be objected that I am naive in taking religious thought and actions literally as referring to a transcendent order. For, it may be argued, it is evident now that many theological statements are in fact my theological, which—when properly decoded—are to be understood as anthropological affirmations about man's existential plight and deliverance. Religious beliefs and practices when properly interpreted disclose the devotee's existential selfhood and ethical commitments, but say nothing of an order of being transcending the present spatio-temporal one.

But this view does not abrogate normative responsibility; it only shifts it from the metaphysical to the anthropological and ethical level. Instead of asking whether the religions are true as expressions of a sacred realm, the question is whether the way of life implied in the tradition corresponds with the given nature of man and the highest values that man ought to pursue. Though the focus is changed from a metaphysical to an anthropological and ethical one, the normative question still remains.

It is important to note further that to interpret theological assertions as anthropological ones is to have adopted a particular position on the normative question of metaphysical realities alleged or implied in religious traditions. The normative question has not been short-circuited; it has been answered—in this case negatively. The religious scholar who makes such a judgement has abandoned the purely descriptive phase of religion study and has entered a constructive stage. He has passed a judgement that the claim made or implied in many religious traditions for a supernatural or transcendent realm of being may function as complex parabolic statements on the nature of man and his destiny, but not as the ordinary factual statements they appear to be. This may be truly the case about the world, but it is to study religious data normatively and not simply descriptively. Though some scholars who engage in this kind of existential interpretation (functional anthropologists, for example) regard themselves as functioning purely descriptively, they have in fact moved into the normative activity of evaluating religious claims. It is obvious that I do not blame them for this; in fact, I congratulate them on it, for some religionists, at least, ought consciously to embrace a constructive role in the study of religion. All I require is that this move be, in fact recognized for what it is.

III

THE ACADEMIC EVASION OF THE NORMATIVE TASK

i. *The Neutrality of the University*

The academic study of religion, generally speaking eschews the normative task for at least two reasons. First of all, it sees itself as an institution dedicated to the detached and neutral investigation of data. Applied to religious studies, this position has generally meant that while the religionist may legitimately investigate religious phenomena of all sorts, he betrays his mandate when he seeks to move beyond this description of human religious culture and history to a consideration of the truth, or otherwise, of the claims that are made or implied for realities which underlie and animate those observable phenomena.

This line of reasoning does not apply to other fields of research. For example, the physicist does not feel duty-bound to

restrict himself to the scholastic enumeration of views of the physical universe from Heraclitus through Newton, Rutherford to Einstein and beyond. Instead he may seek to fathom, as far as human capacities permit, what is the actual structure of the universe that underlies the tentative formulations that have emerged in the history of physics as explanations of the causal operation of the physical universe. Religious studies, on the other hand, seem to content themselves with a restricted survey of what various spokesmen, from traditional founder to contemporary expositor, claim to be the inherent structure of total reality—including alleged spiritual and sacred dimensions—without pressing on to consider the objective truth of these reality claims. The data of religion study are mainly historical and social not cosmological.

There is a certain ironical paradox in that whereas the hard natural scientist may (although not all do) without embarrassment declare his intention to discover the inherent physical structure of the universe, there is a tendency on the part of the religionist to restrict his enquiry to what men have said is the case about the universe, and to judge out of court enquiry into the truth about the nature of man, the world and God. The symbols are amply catalogued, the referent of the symbols is ignored. Admittedly, it may be easier in the long run to ascertain the nature of the physical world than it is to determine the inmost nature of man and the character of ultimate reality. But the increased difficulties of the task ought not to be constructed as a warrant for abandoning it altogether.

ii. *Plurality of Truth Norms*

A second major difficulty that stands in the way of the religionist's assumption of the normative role is the apparent insuperability of the task. It soon becomes evident that decisions concerning the truth of religious claims about ultimate reality and human destiny entail certain subjective faith positions. These claims derive not (or not principally) from public data, neutral criteria and universally acceptable rational inferences. Rather such judgements are the result of commitment to certain events or experiences interpreted as revelatory and authoritative.

The matter is complicated by the fact that there is a plurality of revelations and, accordingly, (or so it appears) diverse and competing claims about the nature of the world. On the one hand,

for example, reality is personal, and possesses attributes; on the other hand, reality is impersonal and ineffable. On the one hand, the universe is fundamentally disposed towards mankind; on the other, the universe is detached and unconcerned, or explicitly hostile. On the one hand, God is stern legislator and wrathful judge, on the other, he is compassionate and merciful saviour of the sinner. The fact that these contradictions exist within the same tradition in no way affects the force of the argument.

The quest for neutral and objective criteria for revelation (usually this means rational and hence universal) which would enable the assessment of contending truth claims has either been ignored, regarded as sacrilegious, rejected as logically contradictory, or else simply abandoned as humanly unfulfillable. In the face of such difficulty, it seems to some the advocacy of wisdom (and perhaps of vengeance) to abandon the normative task to other institutions, perhaps explicitly religious ones, or else to concede the human impossibility of arriving at something approaching universal recognition of religious truth.

Owing to the multiplicity of competing revelational claims, and the absence of neutral criteria, objectivity in the realm of first-order statements about the intrinsic nature of the world seems unobtainable. The scholar must, accordingly, restrict his investigations to an area where objectivity in the sense of that which is, in principle, universally observable is possible, that is, to second-order statements. He must limit his enquiries to what the various religious traditions say and do, regardless of whether these have any inherent connection with the universe. Unable to speak both normatively and objectively about the truth of religious beliefs and practices, he abandons truth claims and occupies the ground where he judges objective, descriptive statements to be possible, that is, historical human expressions, disregarding the question whether these truly commensurate with the world as it is.

IV

THE ACADEMY'S ASSUMPTION OF THE
NORMATIVE OR EVALUATIVE TASKi. *Challenge to the Academy*

We have noted the inclination of some scholars to leave the normative question of truth and value in religion to others. Certain reservations about this division of labour, however, present themselves.

Who is it that will assume responsibility for the evaluative task? If not the scholar who presumably knows most about the actual content of individual religious traditions as they have manifested themselves throughout history with all their continuity and change, then who? It may be suggested that this is a role appropriate to the professional guardians of religious traditions—the priests and pastors, rabbis and sages, scribes and pandits. These persons who have an explicitly committed relationship to their religious tradition are the ones who in dialogue with other similarly placed must reflect upon the question of the truth about the ultimate, and arrive at conclusions on the matter.

But there are certain practical objections to this division of labour. First, the engaged custodians of a tradition are not necessarily equipped in a scholarly way to understand the detailed content and development of their own tradition, let alone that of others. Secondly, with a few exceptions we see little evidence of this kind of sustained inter-confessional dialogue actually taking place. Thirdly, does it not make sense that the scholar whose privileged training has given him access to the detailed historical data of a number of traditions should also participate in the human quest for the truth of this data, i.e., the connection between these forms and the actual character of reality?

Though there can be no doubt that the description and understanding of the discrete religious traditions as they have appeared and developed in history, is the precondition of any other enquiry into religious data, this should not be regarded as the only task of the scholar of religion. At some point in their study, some scholars of religion must devote themselves to the constructive or theological task, that is, to the effort to assess the truth of religion as an expression of the reality and value of exist-

tence. The study of religion is the study, in the last analysis, of what men in different times and places have discovered to be significant and worthy. Descriptive activities throw one into contact with man's explorations of reality, truth and value, and of ways of life commensurate with these. The challenge to religionists is to have the courage to move from description of what men have thought and said to be the nature of man's life and the cosmos, to the constructive task of winnowing the whole harvest of man's religious exploration in the hope of discarding the false, or less adequate, in favour of that which, at least for our time, conveys the nature of man, the world, and the good life that issues from such understanding of reality.²

It should be noted, further, that the constructive normative role of the academic study of religion has already been assumed by our students. In fact, one may assert that the true motivation for many studying in the Departments of Religion is a spiritual intention to discover truth and live it. The Department of Religion is seen as offering a non-coercive milieu where various traditions may be studied in relative tranquillity and individuality in order to arrive at a personal and perhaps eclectic grasp of the truth of reality.

What our students are already doing implicitly, should be done explicitly, comprehensively, and critically by scholars of religion.

ii. *Dialogue as the Context for Truth*

We noted earlier that reluctance to engage in the normative labours of discovering and formulating the ultimate nature of

2. The prospectus of a new journal in the study of religion published in Australia, *Religious Traditions* provides a welcome confirmation of my thesis about normative goals:

"The title is indicative of a certain stress—the desire of the editors to provide a venue for a wider *understanding of Religious knowledge* of, that is, the "truth" or "wisdom" Religions seek to convey....Our hope is, whilst sacrificing nothing of substance in scholarship, nonetheless to produce, indeed, promote something more—writings which, in being read, effectively stimulate insight... We are concerned, in other words, not merely with *knowledge of religion*, but as much with *religious knowledge*."

man and reality derive from (1) the failure to discover publicly coercive empirical evidence and criteria and (2) the competitive claims for revelation.

But though reason operating on public data is not able to provide universally incontestable conclusions about ultimate reality and value, and though there may not be any immediately obvious universal religious experience which could be interpreted as underlying all particular historical manifestations of religion, there is, nevertheless, a way that must be at least attempted in the struggle to arrive at ultimate cosmic truth. This is the way of candid and earnest colloquy among men of diverse faiths. Carried out in sincere empathy and human sensitivity, such colloquy may allow the existential meaning of traditions other than one's own and their revelational quality to be perceived and appreciated. It is a reasonable hope that through this mutual self-disclosure, fecundation, and exploration would emerge a common pressure on the mind that would convince the participants of the truth of certain perceptions and understandings of the sort of ultimate and sacred realities with which religious traditions are concerned.³

I stress that this normative study is carried out in an attitude of hope. This methodological hope is in no way intended to minimize the historical particularity of diverse religions, nor does it discredit the hard and weary labours of those who sought by philology, archaeology, and field-work to amass concrete information about the various historical traditions. It is instead to adopt an intellectual framework of sensitivity and expectancy which will facilitate the discernment of the personal meanings of a tradition, the meanings that are held and lived by those who participate in those traditions, and which afford them insight into the nature of reality. This does not at all preclude the possibility that this hope may be doomed to frustration; but it does permit the

3. It should be stressed that the programme visualized here is not a new natural theology or rational philosophical theology. My own assumptions, as revealed in my disclaimer of publicly coercive empirical evidence or universally incontestable rational inferences, point in a different existential or fideistic direction—though, in the spirit demanded by the colloquy, that discursive possibility should be left open. It is my hope that truth which cannot be reached conclusively by logical argument may, nevertheless, be grasped in human encounter and shared exploration. This is what is implied in my recourse to F.R. Tennant's phrase "pressure on the mind."

assumption of an intellectual perspective enabling the discernment of such meanings and their implicit reality and value claims.

On the basis of this kind of mutual quest into the meaning of life as it has found expression in the diverse religious traditions we may yet come to an agreed judgement on the true character of reality. It is obvious that mere unanimity does not, in itself, mean truth; we all know that the majority can be wrong in particular instances. But I know no way of overcoming the epistemological points that in the long run our convictions about what is really the case in the world depends on a sustained consensus. We distinguish our illusions from reality on the basis of publicity of the latter and the privacy of the former. This same sort of reasoning should be applied to the normative pursuit of the nature of man and the divine.