

Editorial

Description, Prescription, and Value in the Study of Religion

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Abstract: The study of religion is commonly divided into two sides. On the one side is the descriptive approach, including social scientific and historical scholars who seek to account for religion as it has been practiced. On the other side is the prescriptive approach, including religious ethicists, philosophers of religion, and theologians who seek to evaluate and prescribe religious practices and beliefs. But is this divide desirable or even tenable? Some scholars believe so, holding that the proper aim of religious studies ought to be delimited to the analysis and description of religious phenomena. Such a view, however, excludes those who pursue prescriptive inquiry. The contributors to this focus issue are trained primarily in either descriptive or prescriptive methodologies. Through their respective contributions, they highlight how they understand and may offer ways past the seemingly ossified division within religious studies, focusing especially on the nature and place of value in the study of religion.

Keywords: comparison; description; history of religion; method; normativity; philosophy of religion; prescription

The essays in this special issue were originally presented on a panel in the Philosophy of Religion Section during the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in November 2015. The panel brought together several junior scholars in order to reflect on and offer proposals about the intellectual and methodological divisions that continue to permeate religious studies. How might the intellectual scene in religious studies, with which the contributors are concerned, be characterized?

Despite sharing a common object of study, the academic study of religion is commonly divided into two (purportedly incompatible) sides. On the one side is the *descriptive* approach, which includes (among others) social-scientific, textual, and historical scholars, who seek to account for religion as it has been practiced. For these scholars, the study of religion ought to be “neutral” or “scientific” in its approach to religious data.¹ On the other side is the *prescriptive* approach, which includes (among others) philosophers of religion, religious ethicists, and theologians, whose scholarship is confessional and/or evaluative. For these scholars, the study of religion is enriched through the examination, evaluation, and prescription of religious beliefs and norms.²

¹ For example, Donald Wiebe (Wiebe 2012b) calls for a “science of religion” that is to be distinguished from theology, where the latter “symbolizes religious mentation whether in the narrative pattern of thought of the naive devotee or of the discursive structure of the reflective and systematic thought of the intellectually more sophisticated devotee” (Wiebe 2012a, p. 7, n. 2). According to Wiebe, “the study of religion gained a political identity within the academic community (i.e., the scholarly-scientific community), precisely by distinguishing itself from theology” (Wiebe 2012a, p. 7). Compare Wiebe with Russell McCutcheon: “In the academic study of religion much work has been done to distance our methods and language from the ways of the religious devotee, especially the Christian theologian, since our field is highly influenced by the legacy of European Christianity” (McCutcheon 2014, pp. 38–39). See also (McCutcheon 2001).

² “The religious studies subfields of South Asian religions and Buddhist studies,” Parimal Patil comments, “are currently suffering what may be called a tyranny of social and cultural history, and a closely related distrust of philosophy. The idea

Emerging scholars are routinely informed that the academic study of religion is concerned with researching and teaching about religion and not with the researching and teaching of religion. This division within religious studies is nothing new—it has confronted the field at least since the separation of “religious studies” and “theology” faculties within Dutch universities—and does not seem like it will soon disappear.³ But is this divide desirable or even tenable? Some scholars believe so, holding that the academic study of religion, properly understood, ought to be delimited to the analysis and description of religion. But such a view is generally understood to exclude those who pursue evaluative and prescriptive scholarship, which is problematic at least insofar as such scholars believe that they are properly at home within religious studies.

The contributors to this focus issue are trained primarily in either descriptive or prescriptive methodologies. Through their respective contributions, they highlight how they understand and may offer ways past the seemingly ossified division within religious studies, focusing especially on the nature and place of value in the study of religion. Why is such an intervention necessary? The division sustains (at the very least) intellectual separation among religious studies scholars—scholars are more often than not trained only in the language and methodology of their respective subfields and thus cannot host conversations across (sub)disciplinary lines.⁴ The divide between competing approaches also fosters animosity within the study of religion, with religionists engaging in internecine debates about what is and isn't the properly scholarly posture.⁵ Given these divisions, there isn't consensus about what religious studies, as a discipline, uniquely offers to the study of religious data. That is, it is difficult to distinguish religious studies from the other academic disciplines with which religionists are already in conversation.

Anil Mundra begins with a diagnosis of the intellectual and methodological divisions in religious studies. In “Naturalism, Normativity, and the Study of Religion,” Mundra articulates the division as a dilemma between an insistence on a certain kind of naturalism versus the allowance of normativity, and argues that this dilemma turns on an untenable ambivalence about religion. How might this ambivalence be characterized? According to Mundra, naturalistic religionists, on the one side, demand that we conceive religion as naturally or historically determined, leaving it open to analytic and descriptive analyses. On the other side, religion must be conceived as a free activity, such that is subject to the interventions of constructive and prescriptive inquiries. To respond to this dilemma, Mundra draws upon a wide array of disciplinary assessments, philosophical anthropologies, and interpretive methodologies to argue that insofar as religious studies is concerned with human

that it is only the social, cultural, and political ‘outsides’ of texts that are of real relevance to the study of religions has resulted in a decades-long shift away from the study of intellectual practices and/or their histories. While this may have been a necessary corrective to previous scholarship, the pendulum has swung too far in this direction and there has been a systematic neglect of Buddhist, Hindu, and Jaina thought.” He adds that projects such as his, which tethers religious studies, philosophy, and South Asian studies, “are often dismissed as being irrelevant to a field which has ‘rightly’ committed itself to the lived outsides of texts and text traditions” (Patil 2009, p. 6). Patil’s characterization of these subfields, I think, is generalizable to the study of religion more broadly.

³ For a brief history about the formation of the academic study of religion, see (Smith 1982, pp. 102–4).

⁴ Compare the intellectual scene in religious studies departments to that in philosophy departments in the Anglophone world. Commenting on fundamental benchmarks, that is, classic texts and thinkers, in a field of inquiry, Stanley Hauerwas writes: “Departments of Philosophy seem to me to be one of the most coherent disciplines in the modern university. All I mean by ‘coherent’ is that no matter how specialized philosophers may become, they can still talk to one another. There may be a number of explanations for their ability to do so, but I suspect the reason they are able to have some understanding of what they are each doing is because they all have read at one time or another Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Descartes, and Kant. So they always share something in common” (Hauerwas 2003, p. 407, n. 16).

⁵ For example, Richard B. Miller (Miller 1996) takes issue with Wiebe’s position that religionists ought to develop a science of religion, arguing that religious studies is “conspicuously unscientific” and should instead be viewed as a “series of overlapping and mutually reinforcing conversations that constitute the fibers of the enterprise” (Miller 1996, pp. 204, 207; see also (Miller 2005, pp. 413–22), wherein he explores the idea of “value free” humanistic inquiry). In response to Miller (1996), see (Wiebe 2012a), who claims that “Miller simply fails to see not only that it is possible, but that some scholars have actually been able to separate the search for ‘knowledge about’ religion as a human phenomenon from the hope to produce an ‘understanding of’ religion that will transform students into religiously literate persons committed to structuring a meaningful and socially responsible existence in light of a transcendent ultimate reality” (Wiebe 2012a, p. 180).

beliefs and behaviors, it is an inevitably humanistic enterprise from which normativity is ineliminable. This follows from the necessity of translation and interpretation in the study of human agents, and he probes the philosophy of language of W.V.O. Quine and Donald Davidson to argue that translation always presumes a normative stance. Mundra's proposal to bridge the disciplinary divide ultimately relies on recognizing that, in his own words, "human subjects are (just as the scholars that study them) at once naturally or historically conditioned—such that they admit of objective description—and also free agents, such that they are susceptible to normative intervention" (p. 1) a balance for which Mundra enlists the help of a non-traditional reading of Hegel.

In "Taxonomy Construction and the Normative Turn in Religious Studies," Travis Cooper further implicates the religionist. Tracing the study of religion from Emile Durkheim and Marcell Mauss to Claude Lévi-Strauss and finally to J.Z. Smith, Cooper highlights three ways in which historical and social-scientific scholarship—modes of inquiry that are often considered to fall on the *proper* side of religious studies—are involved in creating and imputing value. First, value informs the scholarly apparatuses used to study religious data. When reading Durkheim and Mauss, for example, one may ask: why use one category rather than another? Why does one analytic category persist while another is abandoned? Second, value is imputed (rightly or wrongly) to the religious data themselves. Reading Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind* (Lévi-Strauss 1973), Cooper notes that, on Lévi-Strauss's view, "Neolithic, or early historical, man was . . . the heir of a long scientific tradition," engaging in the "science of the concrete" whereby "everything must be taken account of" (p. 4). But who creates the value-laden scholarly apparatuses that impute value to religious data? Thus, third, Cooper turns to Smith, who claims, "religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study" (1982, p. xi). Smith's "introspective" or "reflexive" turn toward method, theory, and the construction of value, Cooper argues, emphasizes the extent to which analytic-descriptive religionists have obscured the value-laden apparatuses employed in their study. Cooper also describes the "normative turn" in religious studies, as formulated by recent scholarship in the philosophy of religion, and suggests that even here Smith's attention to taxonomy construction may be of service.

Building on Cooper's implication of religionists, Gary Slater, in "The Implicit as a Resource for Engaging Normativity in Religious Studies," mines ideas from thinkers associated with pragmatism—Peter Ochs and Robert Brandom, especially—to call on scholars within the study of religion to attend to the *implicit* in their inquiries. More specifically, through canvassing scholars whose work is either critical or supportive of the normative turn in religious studies, Slater calls on scholars to make explicit their implicit commitments. Through reading Brandom alongside Ochs, Slater aims to augment the descriptive/prescriptive distinction with an implicit/explicit one. This augmentation, Slater holds, presents religionists with both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge arises, he says, because thinking about the implicit and explicit distinction undermines the way in which religionists claim to separate facts from values when they investigate religious data. But there's also an opportunity because "values are no longer locked within one's subjective experience, and are potentially open to logical investigation in a way that would not be possible according to a strict descriptive/prescriptive distinction."

Against the disciplinary backdrop in which descriptive and prescriptive approaches are opposed, I develop, in "Intelligibility and Normativity in the Study of Religion," a constructive proposal. I start with J.Z. Smith's call, issued at the conclusion of "The Devil in Mr. Jones": "if we do not persist in the quest for intelligibility, there can be no human sciences, let alone, any place for the study of religion within them." I am concerned with developing a response to Smith's call, one that is not only humanistic but also distinctively religionist. Claiming that Smith's call blurs the line between descriptive and prescriptive methodologies, I relate Smith's call with John P. Reeder Jr.'s reflections about religious ethics, wherein Reeder argues that those engaged in prescriptive work ought to attend to ethnographic and historical studies of religion. On the proposal that I develop, religionists should conceive their task as twofold. First, they should comparatively describe religious phenomena. Second,

they should evaluate these phenomena. Only if these practices—i.e., description and prescription—are tethered, I argue, will religious studies succeed in its quest for intelligibility.

Each contributor attempts to think through issues confronting not only the academic study of religion but also how one or another sub-discipline ought to relate to such study. On the whole, each contributor's aims are not only intellectual—e.g., which questions ought we to ask? How should we attempt to answer them?—but also professional—e.g., why do we privilege one approach and disparage another? If we privilege one or the other approach, should other approaches not be considered religious studies proper? The modest aim, then, is to ask religionists to reflect on their own disciplinary commitments, thinking through both what the academic study of religion currently *is* as well as what it ought to be.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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