

Téma: *Religionistika versus apologetika*

The methodological implications of the motives that underlie the study of religion and, more particularly, the academic study of religion have not, I think, received the attention they deserve. They are of the utmost importance, however, for the differences of motivation between the study of religion legitimated by the modern university and the scholarly study of religion that antedates it, sponsor radically different, if not mutually exclusive, approaches to its study. In asking why the study of religion is undertaken as an *academic* exercise—which is, after all, a comparatively recent development. I shall be attempting to delineate, to some extent, the relation of motive to method in what has come to be called Religious Studies. In clarifying that relation I hope also to show that Religious Studies—that is, the academic study of religion—must be a vocation in very much the same sense that Max Weber speaks of science as avocation ¹ and, therefore, that such study must take as merely preliminary a "religious studies" that is concerned only to "understand" rather than to explain the phenomenon of Religion.

The scholarly study of religion, as is well known, has a very long history. Much, if not all, of that study was religiously motivated; it was and for many still is—a religious exercise: designed for, or directed to, the betterment of the individual concerned and, ultimately, is concerned with "salvation." The ultimate goal of salvation is not, however, the only motivating factor to be found as justification of this enterprise. There were (are) other lesser, but in some sense contributory, goals that have implicitly grounded or been, consciously invoked as justification for such study. Such motivations are not easily discerned, however, for they are not always consciously and explicitly espoused.

Recognition of the psychological, cultural and political roles religion has played in society and of its continuing importance in those respects in our own context seems for many to imply that the study of religion ought to be undertaken as support to religion in its manifold tasks—that is, that it ought to complement religion. Religion has been, and still is, absolutely necessary, it is argued, for personality integration and contributes significantly to human personal development. Not only has religion provided individual identity, it has been the "glue", so to speak, that has provided the cohesiveness necessary to social/societal existence. And a study of religion that fails to recognize these values and the truth of religion upon which they rest, it is then maintained, is obviously misdirected; it is at best but wasted effort if not, in fact, destructive. This implies, of course, that the study of religion is not understood as an exercise undertaken in and for itself but rather that it is to be seen as an instrument for the preservation of religion and its presumed beneficial effects. The purpose for the study, that is, lies outside itself, being found only in "the truth of religion," however that phrase is interpreted. And it should be noted that such aims for the study characterize not only the individual engaged in that work but also the institutional structures that make the scholarly study of religion possible.

Such argument provides an answer to the question "Why the study of religion?" but not, I suggest, to the question why one might, more specifically, undertake the *academic* (or scientific) study of religion as established within the university

curriculum. Neither is it the only answer possible, nor the most persuasive. Indeed, even though it gives some indication of the pragmatic value the study of religion might have, the argument does not really answer the question satisfactorily since it seems to involve a non-sequitur of sorts. It is quite possible, that is, for religion to be of benefit to individual and society without being true; the benefits of religion do not necessarily rest upon the cognitive truth of religion's claims even though they may depend upon the belief by the devotees that those claims are (cognitively) true. It is clear, that is, that the benefits religion has conferred, or now confers, upon individual and/or society may be achieved in other, and possibly better, ways. To assume that the study of religion ought to be the ally of religion is not immediately obvious and therefore hardly the only grounds on which to base the study of religion. It must be recognized that knowledge of the falsity of religion-should that be the case would also make the study of religion of pragmatic value since it would permit its manipulation for the benefit of individual and society, or its replacement for the benefit of individual and society, or its replacement with superior 'social mechanisms' for the fulfillment of such psychological or social needs. It seems that exactly that kind of argument is raised, for example, with regard to the study of magical and astrological systems of belief. The effects of such beliefs on numerous societies have not been invoked as indicative of the truth of the claims made, except by the faithful, nor that a study of those claims ought to be involved in promoting the results achieved through such systems of belief. There is no assumption here, that is, of the *sui generis* character of such systems of experience and belief and consequently no argument for the recognition of, say, *Magiewissenschaft* as a new discipline or call for the establishment of departments of magic or astrology. (As I recall, Brian Magee once raised the question "If departments of religion why not departments of Magic?" on the BBC and, I think, quite rightly so.) The postulation of the - *sui generis* character of religion but not of magic, it appears, rests on the uncritical assumption that religion, in some fundamental sense, is True while magic (astrology, etc.) is not. Indeed, if this is not the assumption that implicitly grounds that postulation, the explicitly acknowledged grounds for establishing departments of religion referred to above', namely religion's profound impact upon individuals and society, constitute adequate grounds for the creation of departments of magic that is, for, academically legitimating what we might analogously refer to as "Magical Studies."

Concern for the practical value of religion, therefore, is not the same as the concern for the truth of religion in any cognitive sense. Indeed, understanding how religion has functioned in various societies constitutes knowledge about religion that is wholly independent of knowledge as to the truth or falsity of religious claims. Moreover, such mundane, objective knowledge is the only ground on which the pragmatic value of Religious Studies could be predicated short of presuming that the discipline can provide one I with the insights of the religious experience itself. Furthermore, its pragmatic value would then be a matter of "political" action based on the knowledge gained and not intrinsic to the study itself. It may motivate the individual to undertake the study of religion but does not constitute the *raison d'être* of the discipline itself. And it is the failure to recognize this that has been the bane of the *academic* study of religion which, like other academic enterprises, sees itself as a scientific and not a "political" vocation. ~

I have in the preceding discussion made reference to Religious Studies as a vocation. I have done so deliberately for it seems to me that much that Max Weber had to say of "science as a vocation" is applicable to the academic study of religion. Even his discussion of vocation in "the material sense of the term"- that is, to put it bluntly, with respect to the job prospects of the scholar-has a direct bearing on the

religion graduate although I do not wish to focus attention on those matters here. What is pertinent, rather, is his discussion of "the inward calling for science" which is inextricably bound up with what Weber refers to as the disenchantment of the world-with a recognition that meaning is the product of human creativity. Weber maintains that discussion of "the *inward* calling for science" is of no assistance in answering the question as to the value or meaning of science within the total life of humanity, nor with ascertaining how one ought to live. Such questions are of a logically different order. Indeed, vocation in the sense of an inward calling for science presumes science is not directed toward answering such questions-that such questions, to rephrase the point, are not scientific questions. Rather, science "presupposes that what is yielded by scientific work is important in the sense that it is 'worth being known'", although Weber admits, that this presupposition itself cannot be proved by scientific means.² It is simply a matter of historical fact that aims such as these have emerged in the development of Western culture. The emergence of the desire for objective knowledge of "the world," that is, constitutes the introduction of a radically new value into human culture. Weber then proceeds to show, moreover, that where personal or societal value judgements are introduced into a scientific endeavour there full understanding of the facts ceases and the inward calling for science is dissipated and science destroyed. Science is a vocation, then, in the exclusive service of, as Weber puts it, self-clarification of ideas and knowledge of interrelated facts. "It is not," he writes, "the gift of grace of seers and prophets dispensing sacred values and revelations, nor does it partake of the contemplation of sages and philosophers about the meaning of the universe."³ It is simply a human activity with a peculiar-recent-intentionality, so to speak. And what he has to say of the natural sciences applies, *mutatis mutandis*) to the social sciences including those focused on religious phenomena The academic or scientific study of religion is, I would argue, simply one of several special areas into which the scientific vocation of which Weber speaks is organized and that, like the others, it seeks self-clarification and knowledge of interrelated facts. What I shall attempt to do in the remainder of this essay, therefore, is to give a precise formulation of the aim of the study of religion *qua* study and to explicate the implications this has for the method of that study and how the subject ought to be taught in the academic/university setting.

To put the matter somewhat tautologically, the academic study of religion must be undertaken for academic-that is, purely intellectual/scientific-reasons and not as instrumental in the achievement of religious, cultural, political or other ends. This means, quite simply, that the academic/scientific study of religion must aim only at "understanding" religion where "understanding" is mediated through an inter-subjectively testable set of statements about religious phenomena and religious traditions. As with any other scientific enterprise, therefore, the academic study of religion aims at public knowledge of public facts; and religions are important public facts. It is subject first and foremost to "the authority of the fact," although not thereby positivistically enslaved, so to speak, to "a cult of the fact" as my comments below on the role of theory in that study will clearly demonstrate. Religion, it must be recognized, is a form of human activity and therefore like any other form of human activity can become the object of human reflection.

This does not, of course, imply that persons who are religiously committed cannot be scientific students of religion or, for that matter that Marxist atheists ought to be excluded from departments of Religious Studies. What it does imply, however, is that the value systems by which such individuals may be personally motivated to undertake the study of religion not be allowed to determine the results of their

research. What is at issue here is the matter of what we might call "the institutional commitment" that characterises the academic study of religion-that is, the commitment to achieve intersubjectively testable knowledge about religions free of the influence of personal idiosyncratic bias or extraneous social/political aims

The goal of the academic study of religion, therefore, to reiterate, is an understanding of the phenomena/phenomenon of religion "contained in" scientifically warrantable claims about religion and religious traditions. Without intersubjectively testable statements about religions both at the level of particular descriptive accounts of the data *and* at the level of generalizations with respect to the data, no scientific understanding can be achieved.

At the simplest logical level the student of religion functions somewhat like the scientific naturalist with a concern "to collect," describe and classify the phenomena observed. (Being aware all the while, of course, that a mere accumulation of data does not in itself constitute a science.)⁴ The range of data, obviously, is enormous, involving rites, rituals, beliefs, practices, art, architecture, music, and so on. Some depth of perspective in the descriptive accounts is provided in relating it to the field of events and structures of which it is a part; in comparing it to similar phenomena in other cultural and social contexts; and in providing at least a narrative account of its emergence and historical development. This work is carried out primarily within the framework of the positive historical and philological disciplines but does not exhaust the task of description.

The work of the phenomenologist, the hermeneut, and the "historian of religions" (in the broad sense of that phrase) in their concern for the *meaning* they think religious behaviour-beliefs, practice, rites, rituals, etc.-has *for the devotee* who participates in the tradition adds something new to the surface description of that tradition. Such "thick description" as it has been called,⁵ increases understanding of overt actions seen without reference to how they are "taken" by the participant; ("seen" from the participant's point of view). The work of such students of religion is, as one might expect, much more of an imaginative activity than that of the positive historian. or philologist. The results of their work is much less exact. The act of interpretation is in some sense the imposition of an external construction and therefore never likely to replicate exactly the participant's understanding of the phenomenon concerned.

It will, consequently, be intrinsically incomplete and open to debate, although not on that account totally without merit, for such "constructions" are not simply arbitrary but rather controlled by the context of information provided by the more positive sciences. That it does not allow the same degree of certitude that is to be found in the surface and depth descriptions of the other disciplines does not imply that that question of meaning can simply be ignored but rather that the student here will have to be satisfied with the more probable and plausible constructions and be willing to entertain alternatives to those constructions without overmuch fuss.

It needs to be emphasized here that this concern with meaning and "thick description" has nothing to do with speculative or intuitive insight as to the "real meaning" or truth of Religion-its ultimate meaning that comes from a knowledge of the ultimate ontological status of the "religious realities" as known by the participant within the tradition. Nor has it any kinship with direct, intuitive insight of the religiously perceptive student of religion. The meaning that holds the interest of the *academic* student of religion, rather, is a psychological matter; it involves overtones and undertones of actions, utterances, and events as well as an attempt to understand the psychological and emotional state or condition of the devotee who claims to know

such ultimate mysteries. This kind of meaning, although not obvious at the surface level of religious phenomena, is not, as I have indicated, wholly beyond the reach of reason and scientific research.

Though knowledge of religion at the descriptive level is richly informative it is not primarily that for which the student of religion strives. Indeed, an increasing flow of such information soon inundates the individual for it is simply not possible for anyone person to know all the particulars of the world's religious traditions. Like the other sciences, the study of religion seeks explanatory frameworks-theories that account for the particulars; frameworks that permit an understanding of the multiplicity of particulars in terms of relatively few axioms and principles that can easily be held in mind. That thrust towards explanation and theory is implicit already in the descriptive and taxonomic levels that reduce "individuals" to classes of things, persons, occurrences and events.

While explanations and theories transcend description they are nevertheless also dependent upon the descriptive level of activity of the student of religion. The data that accumulates as the result of the labours of the historian and phenomenologist are, in a sense, the substance for theoretical reflection in that they are what the theorist tries to provide a coherent account of. Moreover, the theories constructed to account for the data can only be properly adjudicated over against *new* observational data beyond that upon which theoretical reflection has been focused.

If these are the aims of the *academic* study of religion then that study is structurally indistinguishable from other scientific undertakings. The *academic* study of religion is, then, a positive science and not a religious or metaphysical enterprise in that it concerns itself with religion as a public fact and not a divine mystery. This does not mean that such a study must be limited to discussion of only the empirically observable behaviour of religious persons and communities-that it adopt, for example, the positivistic empiricism of a Skinnerian behaviourism. It merely implies that there not be "privileged access" for some to the "data"; that whatever does lie "beyond" the empirically observable whether that be the interior experience of the devotee or the "intentional object" of that experience-be somehow "intersubjectively available" for scrutiny and analysis. And that, it seems to me, presents no problems given that the empirically available religious traditions are considered by the devotees to be *expressions* of their faith, which faith is constituted by their religious experience and the truth of that "encounter" with "the ultimate," however it may be referred to in the various traditions.

Thorough scrutiny of all aspects of the tradition, therefore, cannot but provide us *some* understanding as to the nature of the "faith" although, quite obviously, not with the experiential quality and emotional forcefulness with which the devotee will claim to understand it. Thus, although there is an interior and esoteric aspect to religion, it is not wholly inaccessible to the "outsider" for it can be approached from "the outside in." Moreover, should the devotee claim a superior understanding where a conflict of claims arises and do so on the basis of her/his direct personal experience of "the Ultimate," the claim will be overruled on the grounds that it resorts to the use of "information" to which s/he has "privileged access." To allow such a claim to stand would be to place all understanding of religion in jeopardy (and not merely the scientific understanding of religion) since such grounds would then also be acceptable for the settling of intra-religious (and even intratraditional) conflict of claims as well. It is obvious; therefore, that the settlement of disputes would be achieved on highly idiosyncratic personal grounds that is, on the basis of private religious experience-in which each and every disputant would be wholly successful. It would, in the final

analysis, then, commit us to a radical relativism that precludes all possibility of transpersonal truth-claims and with it, all possibility of a scientific (i.e., academic) study of religion. What one could then know of religion would be that which one could know of "faith" and that is only known *by* faith and the direct encounter of "the Ultimate." To know that the essence of religion is "faith" would be to know that it cannot be scientifically understood.

This, unfortunately, is too seldom noticed by students of religion. They fail to see that such reasoning makes the study of religion possible only from within the circle of the devotee/participant and therefore a religious rather than a scientific enterprise. The study of religion that appropriately finds its place within the university curriculum is rather that which I have sketched above. It is a critical study of a human cultural phenomenon and not a quest for some ultimate meaning or truth. It seeks "objective" knowledge of a particular aspect of human culture. It is, therefore, essentially a positive, (*not* positivistic) social scientific endeavour that, although not necessarily behaviouristic is nevertheless behaviouralist in its approach to religion in that it attempts to provide a public rather than a private knowledge.⁶ ...

To propagate one's faith is not the analysis of religious phenomena. The lecture-rooms of the university are wholly inappropriate for the propagation of either one's political or religious agendas. It is simply outrageous as Weber points out, to use the power of the lecture-room with its captive audience for such purposes.... Similarly, the student entering upon the academic study of religion ought not to seek from the professors what the professors ought not to give. They should not, that is, crave leaders, but rather teachers.

1. Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation" in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946, pp. 129-156). It was originally published in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen, 1922, pp. 524-555). I use the notion of "vocation" not, obviously, in its religious sense but rather to emphasize the stark contrast in aims and intentions between a "religious calling" and a "scientific career."

2. *Ibid.*, 143.

3. *Ibid.*, 152.

4. See, for example, D. Sperber, *On Anthropological Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 11).

5. This notion is borrowed from C. Geertz's "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973, pp. 3-30).

6. For possibilities of developing the argument in this direction see W. Richard Comstock, "A Behavioral Approach to the Sacred: Category Formation in Religious Studies," *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XLIX (1981), 625-643 ..