

# Response

## HUMANISTIC VERSUS SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC APPROACHES TO RELIGION

by Arvind Sharma

*Abstract.* Whereas Robert Segal (1990) identified seven misconceptions of the social sciences that he thinks scholars in religious studies make, this response argues that each of the alleged misconceptions involves the “oversight” of key distinctions that radically alter the complexion of Segal’s case.

*Keywords:* belief; faith; falsification and verification; phenomenology of religion.

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Robert A. Segal identifies seven misconceptions of the social sciences prevalent among scholars of religion, or “religionists.” In what follows I point out that confusion regarding each of these points arises from a failure to draw certain vital distinctions in the case of each of the seven misconceptions identified by Segal. I offer my comments in each case after citing the misconception as stated by Segal.

1. “A social-scientific account of religion ignores the believer’s point of view and is therefore irrelevant to the proper study of religion.” In this case the difficulty arises from the failure to distinguish between use of the phenomenological method for the *collection* or for the *interpretation* of data. It is quite clear that the participant-observer method in the social sciences is now standard procedure (Wulff 1985, 58–61; Hill 1985, 67). Indeed, it goes back to A. Malinowski (Sharpe 1986, 86), who is credited with establishing the “cult” of fieldwork as opposed to armchair anthropology.

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The point at which the social scientist and the religionist part company is whether or not the interpretation of data violates the self-understanding of the believers. Phenomenologists of religion feel that they may not violate such understanding *qua* phenomenologist of religion (Sharma 1976), and humanistic comparative religionists share this view (Smith 1959, 42).

Thus the social-scientific account of religion does *not* necessarily ignore the believer's point of view; indeed, it builds on it at the level of data collection. However, it ignores it at the level of interpretation. Thus, although a social-scientific study of religion does not ignore the believer's point of view, it is irrelevant to that dimension in the study of religion that strives to draw conclusions or generalizations that are acceptable to the followers of the religion. For instance, a scholar has recently published a book on Hinduism with this stated aim: "to portray Hinduism in such a way that contemporary Hindus will be able to recognize themselves in it" (Klostermaier 1989, 5).

2. "*A social-scientific analysis of religion denies the irreducibly religious nature of religion and therefore blocks the proper study of religion.*" Confusion arises here from the failure to distinguish between the *ultimate* nature of reality and the nature of *ultimate* reality. The ultimate nature of religious reality could well turn out to be sociological or otherwise; it may even be that there is no ultimate nature of reality even in a philosophical sense, as suggested by William James (1909). The practitioners of a religion, however, typically believe in the existence of *an ultimate reality*, although they may differ among themselves about its nature.

Further confusion arises from the failure to distinguish between the concepts of the *ultimate nature of religion* and the *ultimate nature of reality*. Here again, one could explore the *ultimate* nature of religion or the nature of religion *as ultimate*. I believe Segal is right in asserting that

it is a misconception of the social sciences to say that in explaining or interpreting religion nonreligiously they are *denying* the ultimate nature of religion, . . . the ultimate nature of religion might prove to be nonreligiously. (1990, 265)

But I believe he is wrong, in maintaining that the analogy of literature does not apply to religion, when he says:

Despite the proclamation by the New Critics of the forties and fifties that literature is irreducibly literary, the ultimate nature of literature remains as open a question as the ultimate nature of religion. Literature continues to be analyzed historically, sociologically, politically, and psychologically as well as literarily—and by literary critics themselves. Indeed, contemporary literary criticism is more historical, sociological, and political than ever before. If there

still seems to be less of a challenge to an irreducibly literary dimension to literature than to an irreducibly religious dimension to religion, it is because that literary dimension has been demonstrated, not because it has been dogmatically decreed. To declare that literary critics who study literature nonliterarily are historians, sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists rather than literary critics would be dogmatism at its most severe. (Segal 1990, 266)

The point is that the religious dimension is as clearly demonstrable as the literary dimension: there are people who regard their religion as *ultimate* and who lead their lives accordingly. What are scholars to do who wish to study such people in the latter's ultimate condition? Hence the development of the phenomenology of religion. The ultimate nature of religion may prove to be nonreligious—but likewise, the ultimate nature of both society and politics may prove non-sociological and nonpolitical. The question is: How is its ultimate nature perceived by a member of a religion, a society, or a polity?

The humanist claim is that religion also has a right to be studied in terms of what believers in it say, just as sociology and politics *at one level* have a right to be studied in terms of what a member of society or a citizen believes himself or herself to be engaged in. The question here is: Whom are we studying? Kristensen is very clear on this point:

Let us never forget that there exists no other religious reality than the faith of the believer. If we really want to understand religion, we must believe, from our point of view, about the nature or value of other religions, is a reliable testimony to our own faith, or to our own understanding of religious faith; but if our opinion about another religion differs from the opinion and evaluation of the believers, then we are no longer talking about their religion. We have turned aside from historical reality, and are concerned only with ourselves. (quoted in Sharpe 1986, 228)

I also believe Segal is incorrect in suggesting that students of religion do *not* regard social scientists as participating in the study of religion. In every course of *Religionswissenschaft* I have attended during my career as both a student and a teacher, the social-scientific approach to religion has been included.

3. “A social-scientific analysis of religion precluded an irreducibly religious analysis and is therefore incompatible with the proper study of religion.” This problem arises from a failure to distinguish between two approaches to the study of the subject, the *classificatory* and the *aspectual*. According to the former, the activities performed by a human being are classified in a mutually exclusive way, such as economic, political, religious. According to the latter, a single activity

may possess all these different aspects. When one decides to vote, for instance, this apparently political activity may possess economic and social aspects as well. Segal seems to accept only the aspectual approach. (cf. 1990, pp. 268, 272)

On the basis of this distinction, social-scientific studies could represent one aspect of the study of religion, just as phenomenological studies may represent another. Social-scientific studies are incompatible with the study of religion only if they consider themselves the only proper study of religion. Moreover, social-scientific analysis of religion does not preclude an irreducible religious analysis based on the analogy of water: "Fluidity and heat are perceived in water. Fluidity is its quality. But heat is the quality of fire" (Sinha 1956, 254). This analogy may now be applied to the following statement of Segal: "A sociological account shows that religion originates and functions for a social end—not that it does not originate and function for a religious end as well" (1990, 268). Water is fluid *and* warm. It is for us to figure out which is the natural and which the adventitious quality of water—and religion. Or could it be that the sociological and the "religious" are like hydrogen and oxygen, both of which are equally implicated in religion? No possibility is precluded or excluded.

4. "*A social-scientific analysis of religion is functional, reductive, and explanatory: these terms are interchangeable. A humanistic analysis of religion is substantive, nonreductive, and interpretive: these terms also are interchangeable.*" Segal, who is admirably lucid on this point, notes that "'functional' and 'substantive' refer to *definitions* of religion. 'Reductive' and 'nonreductive' refer to either *explanations* or *interpretations* of religion. 'Explanation' and 'interpretation' refer to *methods* of studying religion" (1990, 269), and he warns us, rightly, against committing category errors. A key distinction, however, has been overlooked—namely, that between *belief* and *faith*.

It is worth noting that even phenomenologists of religion are aware that belief statements by believers may involve rationalizations. W. Brede Kristensen writes:

We may, however, not forget in this connection that in all religions, not excepting Christianity, the believers often give rationalistic explanations of their own religious ideas and rites. This happens especially when they are questioned about them or themselves begin to reflect on them. The explanations which they give then do not correspond in the least to their real religious attitude, because that cannot be grasped by any interpretation. The believer can then say and also believe that he is precisely describing his attitude—but it is nevertheless true that the religious reality is always inexpressible. He is a rationalist in good faith, but we deceive ourselves if we think that this religion is rational. (1960, 460)

The distinction between the social-scientific study and the humanistic study of religion, when the distinction is made, could and perhaps should be made on the basis that while the former concerns itself with beliefs, practices, rites, and so on, the latter *also* concerns itself with faith (Smith 1963a, 114; 1963b, chap. 7).

5. “*A social-scientific analysis of religion is materialist and mechanical. A humanistic analysis is mentalist and intentional.*” In explaining this point, Segal points out that it is “not easy to characterize much of human behavior as purely material. Culinary taste, for example, is as much mental as material, as much the expression of ideas about food as the venting of cravings” (1990, 272), and thus suggests that the above distinction is artificial.

Confusion arises here from failure to distinguish the *indistinguishable* from the *identical*. According to psychologists, when two people, say, look at a blue pencil they do not see it exactly the same way on account of minute individual optical differences. Yet these differences are so fine that science as yet cannot calibrate them. In other words, their views of the blue pencil are not identical but indistinguishable.

It is thus not the humanistic critique of social-scientific study of religion that it is materialist and not mentalist. Rather, the point at issue is that although religion may be indistinguishable from materialist or even mentalist phenomenon, it may not be identical with it, and therefore an exclusively social-scientific approach may not provide an adequate explanation or interpretation of it.

6. “*A social-scientific account of religion denies the truth of religion.*” The distinction that needs to be drawn here is between *reality* and *truth* (which is a statement about reality). A social-scientific account of religion may deny the truth of religion, but can it deny the reality of religion? It should be noted that we are talking here of the reality of *religion*, not of God or the ultimate. Can a social-scientific account of religion really deny the fact that through much of human history religion has molded the lives of millions of human beings? As students of religion, we wish to study this stupendous fact. The social-scientific account of religion denies not the truth of religion but religious truth, a subject with which the philosophy of religion is deeply concerned (Hick 1983, chap. 3). The question is: Can *religions* really be true or false? (See Smith 1967, iii; emphasis added.) Moreover, from a humanistic point of view it may “not be

appropriate to speak of a religion as being true or false, any more than it is to speak of a civilization as being true or false" (Hick 1983, 113).

7. "The failure of a social-scientific account of religion confirms an irreducibly religious one." I think the humanist critique is again misrepresented by the failure to distinguish between *falsifiability* and *verifiability*. As Hick said,

It is possible for a proposition to be in principle verifiable but not in principle falsifiable. Consider, for example, the proposition that "there are three successive sevens in the decimal determination of  $\pi$ ": So far as the value of  $\pi$  has been worked out, it does not contain a series of three sevens; but since the operation can proceed *ad infinitum* it will always be true that a triple seven may occur at a point not yet reached in anyone's calculations. Accordingly, the proposition may one day be verified if it is true but can never be falsified if it is false. (Hick 1983, 100)

The social scientist is demanding that religion be verified; the humanist is asking that it be falsified.

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