

# RELIGIONISTS' MISCONCEPTIONS: REPLIES TO SHARMA AND PALS

*by Robert A. Segal*

*Keywords:* believer's point of view; irreducibly religious; misconception; reductive; religionist; social-scientific.

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I appreciate the spirited replies of Arvind Sharma (1991) and Daniel Pals (1992) to my "Misconceptions of the Social Sciences" (Segal 1990).

## REPLY TO SHARMA

1. Sharma agrees with me that the social-scientific account of religion does not ignore the believer's point of view and in fact "builds on it at the level of data collection" (1991, 542). But he then argues that the social-scientific account is "irrelevant" to a humanistic or phenomenological approach, which "strives to draw conclusions or generalizations that are acceptable to the followers of the religion" (1991, 542). My response: Sharma's assumption that a social-scientific account *must* be unacceptable to the believer is itself one of the misconceptions I noted. At the same time a humanistic or phenomenological approach is *no more* than "data collection"—the data being the believer's point of view. Far from transcending a social-scientific account, a humanistic or phenomenological analysis is merely part of a social-scientific account, which is an explanation, not just a recapitulation, of the believer's point of view. To confine oneself *to* the believer's point of view is to treat the believer as the subject not of study but of worship. Believers are so engaging a subject of *study* exactly because they may have no idea what makes them tick.

2. Sharma agrees with me here, too, that a social-scientific analysis of religion does not necessarily deny the irreducibly religious nature of religion. But he then argues that there actually *is* an

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[*Zygon*, vol. 27, no. 1 (March 1992).]

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ultimately religious dimension to religion. Why? Because believers think there is. My response: The true nature of religion is, again, not for believers to determine.

I do not reject the analogy between religion and literature, only the consequences of it drawn by religionists. To say that just as there is literature, so there is religion is to beg the central question: What *is* the nature of “literature” or of “religion”? Sharma’s appeal to believers to determine the nature of their religion is analogous to an appeal to writers to determine the nature of their works. Would any literary critic make an author the sole or even prime interpreter of a work? Any critic who did would be limited to interviewing. Would any biographer stay confined to the subject’s autobiography? When Sharma quotes approvingly W. Brede Kristensen’s declaration that “if our opinion about another religion differs from the opinion and evaluation of the believers, then we are no longer talking about their religion” (1991, 543), he and Kristensen confuse the subject of study with the student of the subject. Study becomes hagiography, believers omniscient gods.

3. Sharma claims that a social-scientific analysis of religion does not preclude a religionist one. My response: Saying otherwise *is* the misconception I identified. Sharma is agreeing, not disagreeing, with me.

4. Sharma apparently agrees with me that a social-scientific analysis of religion can be substantive, nonreductive, and interpretive. But he then argues that only a religionist analysis deals with “faith” as well as “belief.” My response: Despite his seeming concession that the social sciences are not so one-sided as the misconceptions assume, Sharma still seeks a domain free from the social sciences, which he fears because he still buys the misconceptions. Why the social sciences are barred from tackling “faith” Sharma must show.

5. Sharma similarly grants that a social-scientific analysis of religion can be mentalist and intentional as well as materialist and mechanical but then seeks a further domain that “an exclusively social-scientific approach” (1991, 545) cannot grasp. My response: The same as to point 4.

6. Sharma ignores the misconception at hand—that the social sciences deny the truth of religion—and instead asserts that religion is real to believers themselves. My response: The implication that social scientists assume otherwise constitutes my first misconception.

7. Sharma ignores the misconception at hand—that the failure of a social-scientific account of religion would confirm the religionist

one—and instead says that religionists insist that religious belief itself be falsified rather than verified. My response: The assumption that social scientists commonly even deal with the truth of religion evinces my sixth misconception.

#### REPLY TO PALS

Pals groups my seven misconceptions into three categories.

1. Pals contends that religionists recognize that social-science is no monolith and grant that a social-scientific analysis of religion can be substantive, interpretive, mentalist, intentional, and even non-reductive. Who, he asks, thinks otherwise? My response: The one religionist I named, Steven Kepnes, does not write in a void but appeals instead to Paul Ricoeur, a favorite of religionists because he reconciles explanation with interpretation by subordinating explanation to interpretation and thereby making explanation safe for religionists. Ricoeur's reconciliation presupposes the confinement of explanation to materialist and mechanical causes—my fifth misconception (see Segal 1988, 641–42).

When Sharma says, as quoted, that a social-scientific analysis of religion 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” (1991, 542), he is assuming that a social-scientific account is necessarily reductive. Mircea Eliade's condemnation of “most western” anthropologists for their preoccupation with “material cultures and the analysis of family structure, social organization, tribal law, and so on” rather than with “the meaning of a particular culture, as it was understood and assumed by its own members” (1967, 502–3) grants only a few exceptions.

The best evidence that I am attacking no straw man comes from Pals himself. Citing essays of mine (1989, chaps. 4, 10) in which I argue that contemporary social-scientific analyses of religion are closer to those of religionists than classical ones were, Pals disregards my conclusion that the twain have not yet met and speaks of “convergence” (1992, 103). That the social sciences could “credit the conscious ideas and intents of its subjects” (1991, 94) without converging with religious studies is inconceivable to Pals precisely because for him the social sciences in their own right treat their subjects otherwise.

Conversely, Pals, in numerous articles (e.g., 1987), argues on behalf of the “science of religion,” a whole discipline dedicated to promulgating the religionist point of view. As the creed of the discipline, Pals (1987, 260) cites Eliade's denunciation of the study of

religion by other disciplines. Those disciplines include “physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art” (Eliade 1963, xiii). If religionists are as aware as Pals contends of the breadth and direction of the social sciences, why does Eliade’s unqualified dismissal of the social sciences voice the religionist platform? Why does the religionist discipline that Pals defends even need to exist? If all religionists know that the social sciences are converging with religious studies, why do they continue to demand a room of their own?

2. Pals denies that the conflict between religionists and social scientists is an illusion based on religionists’ misconceptions. My response: Since I deny any imminent convergence, and since the subtitle of my book on the social-scientific study of religion is *Essays on the Confrontation* (1989), I am hardly denying a conflict. I claim only that social scientists take seriously the believer’s point of view—even in the process of venturing beyond it. Pals assumes that conflict remains because “reductionist social science recognizes religious reasons only in order to discount or diminish them” (1992, 97). But to refuse to “credit” religious reasons as “the ultimate (or at least an essential) account” of religion is scarcely to reject them. Archreductionists like Freud and Marx resort to latent, unconscious origins, functions, and meanings not to bypass conscious intentions but to make sense of them. Pals’s failure to see how seriously reductionists take the believer’s point of view manifests the misconceptions that he denies are misconceptions.

It is not the religionist *analysis* of religion that I consider dogmatic. It is the religionist *defense* of that analysis. When Eliade, as quoted by Pals, decrees that the true nature of religion is religious, he is not appealing to any sifting of the evidence. He is appealing to some purportedly self-evident certainty. In a more modest way Sharma does the same. When Pals argues that religionists have the same right to defend their discipline against “reductionist insurgents” as “advocates of classically irreducible literature” (1992, 99) have to defend their turf against antiliterary rebels, he is seemingly waxing open-minded rather than dogmatic. But when, like Sharma and Eliade, he explains that, just as the literary critic has the right “not for a moment [to] relinquish the primacy of literary models, forms, and motives” in the study of literature, so the religionist “merely insists on the same right” in the study of religion (1987, 276). Here he is waxing egregiously dogmatic. The eternal primacy that he is bestowing on the religionist rests on dogmatic certitude, not evidence.

3. Pals faults me anew for erecting a straw man. Religionists, he

contents, recognize that the social sciences do not uniformly deny the truth of religion. Again, Pals dismisses the exemplar of the misconception that I cite—but offers no counterexample. For lack of space may I cite just one case that may pass Pals's muster? Sharma, whom Pals praises for “a thoughtful response to Segal” (1992, 95), says that “a social scientific account of religion may deny the truth of religion, but can it deny the reality of religion?” (1991, 545). By “may deny” Sharma clearly means “tends to deny.”

Pals's claim that I again contradict myself stems from a misreading. I deny that the social sciences *always*, let alone *must*, deem religion false. But I grant that the social sciences *can* deem religion false—and without committing the touted genetic fallacy. Pals's refutation of my argument rests on both a misunderstanding of the psychological meaning of “projection” and a blithe appeal to the very fallacy that I am trying to circumvent.

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