

# Responses

## EXPLANATION, SOCIAL SCIENCE, AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION: A RESPONSE TO SEGAL WITH COMMENT ON THE ZYGMON EXCHANGE

by Daniel L. Pals

*Abstract.* In the issue of *Zygon* devoted to methodological reflection on the boundaries between natural science, social science, and theology (September 1990), Edward O. Wilson pointed to the hierarchical tension between disciplines and antidisciplines. Working within this framework, Robert Segal outlined several “misconceptions of social science” held by religionists who fear it reduces, or “explains away” their subject. Philip Gorski, Nancey Murphy, and Kenneth Vaux suggested greater harmony but left Segal’s challenge largely unaddressed. Religionists, says Segal, distrust social science because they think it ignores “the believer’s point of view,” denies the “irreducibility” of religion, prefers materialist and mechanical explanations, and denies religious truth.

Do religionists really claim all, or just some of these things? Are some perhaps *not* misconceptions, but accurate understandings of a real conflict?

This article contends that distinctions need to be made; that at most, the humanistic assumptions of religionists compete with only one form of social science—reductionism; and further, that where conflict does arise, it is scientifically beneficial. Religionists differ from theologians, who argue from confessional premises, but the two are allied in opposing reductionism. Precisely because it is genuine, the debate with reductionist social science promises to advance understanding.

*Keywords:* agent-intentional premise; competitive explanation; discipline and antidiscipline; genetic fallacy; humanistic discipline; irreducible religion; reductionism; religionist.

---

Among the essays assembled by *Zygon* (September 1990) for its instructive, multisided exchange on the relationships between the

Daniel L. Pals is Associate Professor and Chair of Religious Studies at the University of Miami, P.O. Box 248264, Coral Gables, FL 33124-4672.

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

© 1992 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385

disciplines, none is more provocative than Robert Segal's "Misconceptions of the Social Sciences" (Segal 1990, 263–78). In addition (and despite its title), none is directed more specifically at the place and presuppositions of the study of religion in the modern academy. In Segal's view, those who practice religious studies habitually misunderstand the nature of the social sciences, which they perceive as a threat to the aims and methods of their inquiries. Among other things, they think that social-scientific analysis ignores the point of view of the religious believer and denies the irreducible nature of religious faith. They find the social sciences too easily allied with hostile accounts of religious behavior and too readily committed to explanations that are purely functional and reductive, or inescapably materialist and mechanical. Further, despite the facts, religionists—as Segal refers to those engaged in the discipline—persist in the notion that social science is a form of inquiry bent on denying that religious claims could actually be true.

In light of these deeply alien impressions, it is hardly surprising that many religionists harbor suspicions of the entire social-scientific enterprise. Yet the truth of the matter, says Segal, is that all of these suspicions are misguided. Religionists have been misled by their own misconceptions.

Needless to say, an array of complicated issues lies behind this general indictment. One cannot appraise Segal's charges without first disentangling them from some of the judgments on various large interpretive questions to which they are tied: questions about the nature of explanation, about the assumptions made by various sciences, and about the relations between these sciences; questions, also, about the nature of both the humanistic science practiced by most religionists and the "mechanistic" social sciences, which for Segal are the source of religionists' confusions. It will be instructive in this regard to draw testimony from others who have contributed or responded to the *Zygon* symposium. It will be equally instructive to focus on the matter of competition between sciences and theories.

*Contra* Segal, this article contends that religionists' perceptions have in fact been largely correct. Although they distinguish among different forms of social science, the misgivings they express about classic reductionist approaches are legitimate. They reflect a genuine disagreement that should be neither dismissed as an illusion nor deplored as a misfortune. On the contrary, such explanatory competition is a sign of theoretical health on both sides. Rather than deplore such rivalries as may arise between the theories of religionists and those of social science, interpreters ought to welcome them. As

E. O. Wilson perceptively observes in the essay that opens the *Zygon* symposium (Wilson 1990), explanatory competition builds the path to scientific progress.

To be considered fairly, Segal's case needs a context, and Wilson's comments on the hierarchical nature of disciplines can be of help in providing it.

#### EXPLANATIONS AND THE DISCIPLINES

Academic disciplines, as almost all would agree, exist to seek understanding—to provide explanation—of the subjects they address. Most would also agree that, in certain obvious ways, different disciplines are disposed to look for different kinds of explanation. A discipline, as Kenneth Vaux puts it in his response to the essayists, is understood to extend over a suitable “zone of competence” (Vaux 1990, 319). One does not normally ask a military historian for a molecular account of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, still less a marine biologist for a sociopolitical analysis of the growth of salt-water mangroves. Neither exercise makes much sense. But what happens when the form of explanation characteristic of one scientific discipline (or subdiscipline) *does* seem to “make sense” of subject matter that apparently belongs to another? What happens to disciplines when their differing forms of explanation center upon the same subject and begin to compete? That root question determines the nature of relationships between the disciplines.

Consider that, for any phenomenon, when two apparently competing explanations are offered, interpreters essentially face three options.<sup>1</sup> They can argue for *partial* explanation, contending that each account is valid but insufficient, whereas the two together are valid and complete. In ordinary life, partial explanations are routine. Second, they can argue for *concurrent* explanation, claiming that each account is in itself both valid and complete. From the standpoint of common sense, this position is difficult to grasp, but it has long been maintained, most notably in philosophical analyses of human action which insist that the will can be both free and fully determined at the same time (Ayer 1954; Foot 1957). Finally, and significantly, an interpreter can argue for *displacement* of one explanation by the other. One account, that is, makes the other unnecessary. It should be evident that only in the third case does competitive explanation present a real conflict between disciplines. In the first two instances multiple forms of explanation are, quite simply, compatible with each other.

In the modern era, this third option—the strategy of displacement

—has drawn most attention in the natural sciences, where a hierarchy of explanatory systems is presumed and where much discussion has centered upon the issues of theoretical and ontological “reduction” (Ayala and Dobzhansky 1974; Peacocke 1976). As Wilson (1990) notes in his essay, any higher discipline that explains things by recourse to complex conceptual structures may face a challenge from the “antidiscipline” beneath it, to whose more basic concepts and theory it can potentially be reduced. He presents the conflict between biology and chemistry as a paradigmatic instance. Initially, some chemists expected to reduce all of cell biology to biochemistry, not by “disproving” the former, but by rendering it redundant—by so fully accounting for all of its phenomena through biochemical concepts and formulas that cellular ones would become unnecessary. Biologists, understandably, resisted this reduction, and over the course of time a synthesis of the two has arisen. But the synthesis arose—and this is important for our discussion—only because the threat of reduction was real; both parties recognized, and fought, a genuine theoretical struggle.

In the same way (and presuming the same hierarchy), Wilson concludes that the sociobiological research he has pioneered now furnishes biology with the conceptual equipment to become the adversarial “antidiscipline” of the social sciences and humanities. However, an important difference is that the chemical challenge to biology is a precisely defined microdispute between subdisciplines of the natural sciences, whereas the sociobiological challenge portends a macrodebate between a specific natural science and the entire complex of social-scientific and humanistic disciplines.<sup>2</sup> Understandably, Wilson is extremely cautious in adducing the implications of a confrontation as large and complicated as this. Although he is optimistic about the creativity of the tension, he recognizes real limits to the sociobiological challenge (Wilson 1990, 253, 259–60).

Placed against this backdrop, certain features of Segal’s commentary on religionists and social science appear in a somewhat clearer light. Although he works, like Wilson, from the premise of a general hierarchy in the intellectual disciplines, he steps on the ladder at a rung above the natural sciences and shows a somewhat different concern. Religious studies, with its traditional appeals to human motives and intentions, forms the “higher” discipline, and social science forms its adversarial antidiscipline. Yet where Wilson sees a real but creative explanatory conflict, Segal sees mainly misunderstanding and—understandably—an unproductive result.

Segal cites seven misconceptions, but these include a number of

repetitions and restatements. His seven variations can be distilled into what is basically a threefold complaint: Religionists (1) misconstrue the nature of social science (misconceptions 4 and 5); (2) mistakenly assume that social science is their adversary (misconceptions 1, 2, and 3); and (3) misunderstand the issue of the social sciences and their challenge to the truth of religious beliefs (misconceptions 6 and 7).

#### MISUNDERSTANDING SOCIAL SCIENCE

The thesis that religionists are confused about the nature of social science can be taken up first, since in some ways it is the least troublesome of the set. It is a misconception, says Segal, to think of social science, in monolithic fashion, as an unvaryingly functional, reductive enterprise, interested only in materialist, mechanical explanation rather than interpretive accounts of human intention. In social science, none of these adjectives is inseparably bound to the discipline, and none is irretrievably tied to the others. The social scientist can define religion substantively (as belief in gods) or functionally (as satisfaction of psychic need) without being thereby compelled to take positions that are reductive, materialist, mechanical, or opposed to human intention. He can define religion functionally, as does Paul Tillich, without being reductive in explaining it. Or he can define it substantively but, in explaining, try nonetheless to reduce it, as did Marx and Freud. Both of the latter presumed quite traditional understandings of religion (as belief in God, or gods), but went on to explain it by discounting human reasons for belief and tracing religion's rise to subconscious psychic drives or hidden social realities.

Again, one can define religion just as substantively as Marx and Freud, yet differ from both—as does James Frazer, whose “intellectualist” theory is the bole connecting the many branches of the great *Golden Bough* (Frazer 1950 [1890–1915]). Frazer too thought of religion conventionally (as belief in supernatural beings), but unlike Marx, he refused to dismiss human ideas and intents as mere “false consciousness.” However erroneous, human ideas offered real explanations of the rise of primitive religion. Although his distaste for belief was as strong as that of Marx or Freud, Frazer's “humanistic” social science took quite a different shape. Clearly, within social science a real variety of explanatory options is available.<sup>3</sup>

There can be no quarrel, of course, with distinctions such as these, which are both valid and useful. Social science clearly is not

a monolith. But in all candor, what religionist really thinks that it is? The only one Segal cites is Steven Kepnes. Yet from the limited extract provided (Segal 1990, 269), it is difficult to tell whether Kepnes (1986) really holds such a view. And even if Kepnes does, almost *all* other religionists plainly do not. As we shall see, the religionist, like other discriminating interpreters, makes a distinction between *some* social science, which is reductive, and *other* social science, which plainly is not. She freely and enthusiastically integrates into her accounts findings from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and other such fields wherever they complement or confirm her own research; she expresses reservation, or withholds assent, where she thinks these findings do not.

To the extent that religionists have harbored misgivings, we can trace them not to all of social science but, naturally enough, to those early theories that *were* materialist, mechanical, and purely functional—we can trace them, that is, to the early *reductionist* views Segal himself acknowledges of Freud, Durkheim, and Marx. We cannot forget that, as one symposium contributor, Philip S. Gorski, reminds us, “ever since its birth social science has had a tense relationship with religion” (Gorski 1990, 280).<sup>4</sup> To the extent that this has been so, it would have been a very curious misconception had religionists—scholars committed to grasping “the believer’s point of view”—*not* registered their doubts about social scientists’ initial explanatory designs. Nor is it surprising that, to the extent newer social science has escaped the shadows of its reductionist patriarchs—to the extent that social science now wishes to credit the conscious ideas and intents of its subjects—those very misgivings have begun to subside.<sup>5</sup> Two of the most-well-known American social scientists, Robert Bellah (1970, 253) and Peter Berger (1974, 129), have observed this change and actually participated in it. Indeed, their testimony and experience suggest that the closer we get to the varieties of social science, and the more clearly we observe its internal development, the more discriminating and defensible religionist perceptions seem to become. The more accurate our account of the discipline, it would appear, the less accurate the charge that religionists misread it.

#### MISUNDERSTANDING THE CONFLICT

Whatever the changes social science has undergone, it is beyond dispute that certain very prominent religionists have found at least some social-scientific theories sharply opposed to their own. Segal’s second thesis addresses this conflict and seeks to dismiss it, too, as

born of misperception. His strategy here, however, is considerably more problematical—and something of a paradox besides. He begins by informing us that the second thoughts about social science voiced by such thinkers as Peter Berger and Mircea Eliade are simply misguided, for “social-scientific analysis is more akin and germane to the believer’s point of view than religionists assume” (Segal 1990, 263). This seems reassuring—but Segal immediately begins to develop the point in ways that are not reassuring at all. He does not say that Berger and Eliade have brought unnecessary arguments to a dispute that does not really exist; their problem is that they have presented unpersuasive arguments in a real dispute that they have apparently lost! Berger, he says, offers an account of theism that is not only inadequate, but barely an explanation at all. Eliade, he adds, offers only dogmatic pronouncements.

It is important here to grasp the ambivalence of Segal’s remarks, which go to the heart of his complaint. He is of two minds about the stance of social science toward an admittedly elusive notion: what religionists call “the believer’s point of view.” When a religionist insists that religion is “irreducible,” she does not mean to claim, obviously, that whatever a Muslim or Hindu says about his religion is true. Some of the things that Muslims and Hindus affirm contradict each other, and therefore could not all be true. Nor does she mean that, as an outsider, she can somehow present an alien religion *entirely* as a believer would. Sharma, in his thoughtful response to Segal (Sharma 1991, 542), cites the laudable aim of Klostermaier to “portray Hinduism in such a way that contemporary Hindus will be able to recognize themselves in it” (Klostermaier 1989, 5). But this is virtually impossible, since Hindus differ among themselves over which gods, or rites, or “paths” offer the best “release.” The religionist, in claiming to see things from the believer’s point of view, means that whether one regards religions as true or false, we have not properly explained them—we have not fully accounted for the origin or function of their doctrines, or rites, or values—until we have adduced as *real causes* the consciously religious ideas and intentions of the people who affirm them. A theorist who proceeds in this way explains religion irreducibly. A theorist such as Marx, who recognizes these ideas as purported causes only to reject them as real ones—only, that is, to “explain them away”—denies the irreducibility of religion. His competing theory is reductionist.

The benefits of this theoretical competition would seem to be apparent across the disciplines. Consider, for instance, the interpretive disputes that have swirled about such an event as the

Protestant Reformation. In modern times, Marxist historians, following Engels, have sought to reduce this ostensibly religious upheaval to the category of economic class struggle. Much has been learned from their determined efforts to see religious disputes as the outbreak or reflection of underlying material realities: the revolt of the oppressed against Europe's old order. Similarly, political historians sometimes contend that the real dynamic of the age was furnished by the rising nation-states and new monarchs, such as Henry VIII in England and Sweden's Gustavus Vasa, who found in religion the ideal pretext for their realpolitik and confiscations of the church's wealth. Alternatively, recent technological-cultural interpreters read the event and its sequels as the triumph of new populist, literary forms over an older hierarchical and visual culture.

In the face of these rival interpretive stances, what should we expect of the religionist? We should hope that she will engage in this discussion by bringing her own perspectives to it. But she can only do so by contending, rightfully, for the real effect of *religious* ideas, motives, and practices upon these events. We should expect her to argue—in sympathy with the standpoint of the believer—that however illuminating other views may be as partial accounts, they are at the very least insufficient and in extreme cases perhaps even mistaken. For her the Reformation was not exclusively, or even predominantly, about class struggle, or political intrigue, or technological change; rather, it was chiefly about religion—a social convulsion that was agitated by quarrels over interpretations of a sacred text and by a clash of theological visions. To be sure, the thoughtful religionist may want to integrate other approaches into her view, but she need not—indeed, *ought* not—capitulate to them. Ultimately, the evidence will decide. But until then, it is precisely by *contesting* other views—not by conceding to them—that the religionist makes her contribution to understanding. Here, as in all sciences, quarrels enrich.

In contrast to all this, Segal seeks to dispel the idea of a clash between the disciplines:

No social scientist ignores the believer's point of view. Most social-scientists do ignore the believer's explanation as the ultimate explanation of the believer's religiosity, but none ignores it as the *direct* explanation. Any social scientist who did would have little left to explain. The social scientist wants to know why the believer is religious. . . . To refuse to accept the believer's reason for being religious as the ultimate account of the believer's religiosity is not to disregard it. (Segal 1990, 264)

Again:



No social scientist denies . . . that the *manifest* nature of religion is religious. None denies that believers themselves explain religion religiously. . . . The issue is whether the *true* nature of religion is religious. (Segal 1990, 265)

And again:

A sociological account shows that religion originates and especially functions for a social end—not that it does not originate and function for a religious end as well. . . . The social sciences “expose” the religious explanation as other than the exclusive or main one but not as an explanation at all. (Segal 1990, 268)

This sequence is interesting. One is reminded of a slate repeatedly wiped clean; yet persistently, the old marks bleed through the erasures. Each time the conflict is dismissed, the dismissal is largely retracted. In social science, believers’ explanations are reckoned with, but not as “ultimate” explanations. Believers can account for the “manifest” nature of religion, but its *true* nature is another matter. Believers can provide *an* explanation, but of course not “the exclusive or main one” (Segal 1990, 268 [*italics mine*]).<sup>6</sup> Now what we must ask here is: Why the ambivalence? Why tell us, “Yes, religious explanations matter”; and then add, “But not really, or not very much”? The answer would seem to be: Because, try as one might to show otherwise, the quarrel between religious studies and social science is not illusory after all. The closer we look at Segal’s reassurances, the more transparent it becomes that some religionist suspicions are *not* based on misconceptions. They reflect a genuine explanatory conflict between a reductionist social science and the approach to religion espoused by religionists.

Peter Berger and Mircea Eliade have seen conflict between their accounts and those of reductionist social science, but it is not because they misunderstand reductionist reasoning. It is because they understand it very well and object to where it leads. When they claim that social science “ignores” the believer’s view and “blocks proper study of it” (Segal 1990, 264), they are *not* making the obviously false charge that social scientists act as if religious reasons do not exist. They are claiming that reductionist social science recognizes religious reasons only in order to discount or diminish them. The religionist, however, thinks they should not be discounted, or even diminished; rather, they should be credited. For her, religious reasons are not secondary to another ultimate account; they *are* ultimate, or at least indispensable to the account. She does not think that they merely describe the “manifest nature” of a religion whose “true nature” is something else; religious reasons describe the “true nature”—which, to be sure, might very well manifest itself secondarily in other connections as well, whether social or economic, or otherwise.

Strangely, whenever Segal is confronted with religionists' objections to a reductionist thesis, he concludes that they are merely "dogmatic." But why? If, as he says, "the ultimate nature of religion is an open question," why is it dogmatic for the religionist to insist on her hypothesis and try to prove it, while it is simply sound method for the social scientist to insist on his hypothesis and do the same?

When the phenomenologist Jouco Bleeker explains Egyptian religion, he rejects reductionism with an appeal to the behavior of the pharaohs:

The most powerful of these rulers were undoubtedly hard-headed politicians and at times cynical imperialists. Nevertheless, they conformed to the dictates of their religion, for example by celebrating, and obviously with dedication, the archaic rituals of the *s'd*-festival. Thus they acknowledged the independent value of their religion. (Bleeker 1973, 9)<sup>7</sup>

When historian David Carrasco seeks to explain Mesoamerican culture, he points directly to religion as the shaping force in social, military, and economic affairs:

Each of the ceremonial centers was a pivot of the universe, a magnet drawing all manner of goods, peoples, and powers into its space. . . . By giving precious offerings to the *axis mundi*, the center of the world of the community, their [the Aztecs'] world got made and remade in terms of agriculture and war. (Carrasco 1990, 20)

Clearly, although both of the foregoing are religionist interpretations, they are neither dogmatic nor arbitrary, but natural. Precisely because they choose not to dismiss religion as mere effect, these historians are able to adduce it as agent and shaping cause of other effects. Because they hold religion to be irreducible, they can generate from it a kind of explanation that, admittedly, may challenge others, but by that very process compels rival interpreters—including reductionists—to reconsider and respond, and thereby advance the inquiry toward further understanding.

Elsewhere (Pals 1987) I have tried to make the point that this religionist assumption about the explanatory role of the ideas and intents of believers has the same status as the similar explanatory commitments of humanistic disciplines that interpret literature, philosophy, history, and politics. Religionists exercise the right to begin with the axiom that certain phenomena are irreducibly religious, just as, say, economic science starts from the premise that certain ideas and behaviors are irreducibly economic, or the study of literature starts from the premise that certain texts are irreducibly "literary." Segal makes his routine objection to this view as

dogmatic and then attacks the analogy, contending that “contemporary literary criticism is more historical, sociological, and political than ever before” (Segal 1990, 266). But these challenges only confirm the analogy. The extraordinary fury of the disputes emanating at this very moment from departments of English and comparative literature is traceable to the frontal challenge made by deconstructionists and others to the fundamental axiom of the field, namely, that there is something irreducibly “literary” about literature.

In quarrels about the so-called canon, Shakespeare is challenged by Schwarzenegger precisely because some theorists think literature is not really about anything literary at all; it is only, or “ultimately” (to use Segal’s term), about sociocultural politics. Such a view is politically reductionist about literature in the same way that social science has sometimes been reductionist about religion. If we were to draw any lesson from attacks and counterattacks now coursing through literary periodicals, it would be the opposite of Segal’s. Advocates of classically irreducible literature refuse to concede their subject to its reductionist insurgents. Religionists, if they think their research has merit, do their subject a similar service by asserting the same.<sup>8</sup> As Sharma observes, “The point is that the existence of 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” (Sharma 1991, 543).

In this connection, we need also to recognize that resisting reductionism is not, or rather, is not necessarily, an argument between any of several forms of confessional *theology* and social science. It is a common mistake among theorists of both religion and social science to suppose that if an interpreter opposes reductionism, she must be expressing some personal a priori religious conviction. Among religionists’ opponents, Segal himself has misconstrued this point at times (Segal 1983, 25), and it creates problems as well in the otherwise persuasive analyses of Canadian theorist Donald Wiebe (Wiebe 1988). From the side of religionist sympathizers, symposium contributor Nancey Murphy sees things similarly. She perceives the nature of the social-scientific challenge with clarity, then suggests that “the real issue is whether sociology or theology (with its assumption of the existence of God) gives a better account of religious phenomena” (Murphy 1990, 312).

Confessional theology will doubtless have its own quarrel with reductionism, but there is no need to suppose all opposition to reduction must be essentially theological. Some religionists are not theists, whereas others know that their differing confessional

commitments must be kept out of analyses that hope to persuade from common ground. None of this, however, puts either kind of religionist at peace with reductionism. The real quarrel of religionist with reductionist is rooted in the humanist, agent-intentional premises of the one and the attempt to discount them by the other. Believers will oppose reductionist theories on theological grounds; religionists, with their humanistic premise, will oppose them on scientific grounds—not because such theories undermine belief, but because they are mistaken, or incomplete, explanations. Believers who are also religionists have double grounds for their opposition, even if within their academic discipline only the latter can hope to persuade.<sup>9</sup>

With regard to intention, this is perhaps an appropriate place to address the ambitious schematic essay on the disciplines contributed to the *Zygon* symposium by Philip S. Gorski. His analysis has the great merit of seeing, and strongly affirming, the key element in religionist explanations that marks them off from reductionist ones: the premise that social phenomena “are composed of human actions that are inherently meaningful by virtue of the intentions behind them” (Gorski 1990, 281). He also sees clearly the unique, hybrid character of social science, which lies in its application of methods drawn from the natural sciences to subjects—human individuals and communities—where they offer real, but undeniably limited, explanatory benefit. Unfortunately, these constructive insights are combined with an underlying distrust of both natural and social science that is unnecessary and largely unmerited.<sup>10</sup>

There is really no ground to oppose the sociologist *on principle* because he pays exclusive attention to human communal patterns and probabilities for the sake of better sociology. We do not distrust physicians because they restrict their concerns exclusively to the biological aspect of human nature for the sake of better medicine. Problems occur only when physicians or sociologists become pseudo-philosophers and elevate their method-induced partial perspectives into full-scale, exclusivist visions of humanity—that is, only when they become reductionists, insisting that *only* “sociological man” or *only* “biological woman” exists. There are neurophysiologists who do virtually maintain the latter, but social scientists, as Segal himself notes, seem less inclined than ever to say the former.

#### SOCIAL SCIENCE AND RELIGIOUS TRUTH

Segal’s third thesis addresses the apparently misconceived notion that social-scientific analysis can (or even wishes to) deny the truth

of religious beliefs. He points out that most contemporary social scientists simply pass over determinations of truth since they are beyond the scope of the discipline. Others (such as Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, and the more recent Robert Bellah), who do try to assess religious truth seem mainly inclined to return positive rather than negative verdicts. They think the science should, if anything, “assume the *truth*, not the falsity of religion” (Segal 1990, 273). Further, even among classical theorists—such as Tylor, Frazer, Marx, and Freud—who declared religion false, it is clear that their views were not reached as a consequence of their social science. They came to their positions on philosophical grounds, which were conceptually prior to the conclusions of their social-scientific analyses.

We need not dispute Segal’s classifications here, though there are grounds to ask for more detail in each. Among the social scientists who assume the truth of religion, some, such as Bellah, do so by holding nonstandard definitions of truth (Bellah 1970, 253). Among those who think religion false, it is not clear that Marx’s philosophical atheism can be separated from his materialistic explanation of the origin of belief as easily as Segal suggests. Even so, the real question is: To the extent that Segal’s are generally appropriate distinctions, what thinking religionist disputes them? Only Robert C. Fuller is named. Yet even with help from Segal’s interpolation, Fuller’s commonplace observations on the sociology of knowledge can scarcely be taken as a serious dissent (Fuller 1987, 499; Segal 1990, 274). Segal’s observations on this issue are generally accurate, but they are indistinguishable from the careful skepticism that religionists themselves bring to the question of truth and social-scientific explanation.

Contemporary theorists express reserve on the entire matter of explanation and truth because they are well aware that any social-scientific challenge to theological beliefs must clear the formidable hurdle of the genetic fallacy. Explanations, whether addressed to the origin or function of a belief, have no inherent bearing on the truth or falsity of its claims. Showing that my Roman history was learned entirely by rote and on the authority of a teacher from the sixth grade does nothing to impugn the truth of my belief that Julius Caesar ruled before Octavius Caesar. To count for or against the truth of a belief, explanations must be *shown* to affect the issue, and showing that they affect the issue is very difficult.

Briefly, then, Segal’s claims do not contradict those of most religionists. Indeed, the main theorist whose views they challenge is—strangely enough—Robert Segal himself! Not only that, but Segal

takes the occasion to remind us of the point. In an admirably candid, if puzzling, passage, he cites his own social-scientific argument against the truth of religion at the very place where he is reporting that social science has no capacity to adjudicate the issue.

Summarizing an argument he has made on two occasions elsewhere, Segal writes as follows:

[The fact that] the origin of religion is not only a wish but also projection lessens the probability of its truth. . . . While the object of a projection can still exist on its own, projection itself nevertheless constitutes error. Whoever projects God onto the world does not discover God in the world but rather imposes God on it. Should God exist after all, the projection . . . would represent mere coincidence. The extraordinariness that such a coincidence would represent challenges the truth of religion. . . . [A] belief originating in projection is statistically unlikely to be true. (Segal 1990, 275)

In an oddly inverted way, this argument, intending the opposite, proves Segal's original point. Projection, he tells us, is an error because it does not "discover God in the world," but "imposes God on it," and this is so even if it happens that "God [should] exist after all." But clearly, Segal is wrong. If God should in fact exist, then of course any projection of God by human thought would not be error. It would be truth, regardless of its origin and whatever the coincidence of its congruence with fact. Moreover, since all of our beliefs—from the multiplication tables to the theory of evolution—are mental projections onto a physical world, we can hardly say that the mere fact of projection alone makes any belief "statistically unlikely to be true." Interestingly enough, this argument does not discredit belief. It does almost the opposite. It exhibits the relevance of the genetic fallacy—the very fallacy it was designed to challenge.<sup>11</sup>

We can cheerfully pass over this argument, then, and keep to the wisdom of Segal's better moments. Social-scientific explanations do not have any necessary bearing on the question of religious truth. It is a misconception to think otherwise. But it is equally a misconception to think that that is how religionists think.

## CONCLUSION

Clearly, the appropriate way of conceiving the real relationship between two fields such as religious studies and social science is to envision it just as we do the healthy competition between other disciplines in the academy. We should recognize it as very much like the very real competition Wilson notices between cellular biology and biochemistry. Both are appropriate disciplines, but within one lies a subdiscipline (call it reductionist social science) whose approach

clashes directly with the religionist's approach to religion. Their equally plausible but sharply differing research axioms bring the two systems into real conflict. Far from being dismissed, however, this conflict ought to be vigorously pursued, for it belongs to the very essence of science. As Wilson so perceptively observes, determined commitment to differing theories furnishes the very mechanism of intellectual advance (Wilson 1990, 247–48). In the end, religionists may be wrong and reductionists right, or vice versa. Or, as Wilson also notes, some creative, higher synthesis may emerge. However that may be, one thing is certain: At the root of the matter lies not a misconception, but a real and potentially fruitful dispute.

## NOTES

1. *Compete* is a key word here. It is always possible to have multiple explanations of phenomena that in terms of category are so distant from each other as not even to appear to come into conflict. To the request, Can you explain what Dante's *Divine Comedy* is? one can answer that it is a sublime poetic account of the late-medieval Christian vision of human destiny, or that it is a collection of linguistic markings made in the fourteenth century on a set of writing materials produced from animal skin. Both are explanations, but they do not compete.

2. In his *Zygon* essay, which is reprinted from *Daedalus* (1977), Wilson does not use the word *sociobiology*, but it has become the term commonly applied to the new field of inquiry that he here describes (250) as arising from the union of population genetics and population ecology.

3. It is not clear, however, that *all* of the combinations Segal suggests are really possible. He writes, "Because 'functional,' 'reductive,' and 'explanatory' refer to separate issues, so that a functional approach can be nonreductive, a reductive approach interpretive, and an explanatory approach nonreductive, a social-scientific approach can be substantive, nonreductive, and interpretive, and so is far broader than religionists usually assume" (Segal 1990, 270). It would divert this discussion too far to analyze each combination closely, but without further elucidation, some of these options, such as an explanatory approach (as Segal conceives it) which is not reductive, seem problematic.

4. Gorski's comments here echo those of British sociologist Bryan Wilson (Wilson 1982).

5. It is one of several ironies in Segal's essay that in another article (Segal 1986, reprinted 1989), he chronicled this very convergence, concluding that contemporary sociological accounts "are undeniably closer to the believer's presumed own than those of their predecessors," and tracing this development to a newer assumption, namely, "that sociology cannot explain all or even much of religion" (Segal 1989, 132).

6. Curiously, this last version, in which the religious explanation is not "the exclusive or main one," seems to open the door even to partial explanation, about which no misconception needs to be dispelled because its legitimacy has never been disputed.

7. I have explored Bleeker's premises and practice at greater length in Pals 1990a (8–10).

8. The current struggle over "the canon" in the university curriculum has of course expanded from the field of literature through the humanities, to embrace religious studies as well. Note that here I am not taking a position on that dispute, although there are some obvious connections. I am saying only that the position of religionists vis-à-vis social-scientific reductionism is *analogous* to that of literary traditionalists over against the exclusively "political" theory of literature directed against them.

9. I have tried to explicate these matters at greater length in Pals 1990a and 1990b.

10. This is most evident in Gorski's distaste for what he calls social scientists'

"worship" of natural science (Gorski 1990, 280) and for the "scientism" of both fields. He speaks of the "sediment of scientific pretensions" (282), which needs to be swept away from social science, and, in a rather astonishing note, insists that "the very quest for objective, instrumental knowledge of human behavior is a despicable sort of hubris, rooted in the social pathologies of modernity" (306). He concludes that "it is only by purging itself of scientism that social science can clear the ground for a reassessment of its relation to religion" (303). But for Gorski, "scientism" is so closely associated with the natural sciences' commitment to objectivity, testing, and falsifiable hypotheses that one could almost forgive a social scientist for asking what, after this purging, could possibly be left.

11. Elsewhere (Pals 1989, 226-27) I have tried to explain the problems with this sort of argument in greater detail.

## REFERENCES

- Ayer, A. J. 1954. "Freedom and Necessity." In *Philosophical Essays*, 271-84. London: Macmillan & Co.
- Ayala, Francisco Jose, and Theodosius Dobzhansky, eds. 1974. *Studies in the Philosophy of Biology: Reduction and Related Problems*. New York: Macmillan.
- Bellah, Robert. 1970. *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-traditional World*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Berger, Peter. 1974. "Some Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions of Religion." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13 (June): 125-33.
- Bleeker, C. Jouco. 1973. *Hathor and Thoth: Two Key Figures of the Ancient Egyptian Religion*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Carrasco, David. 1990. *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmology and Ceremonial Centers*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Foot, Philippa. 1957. "Free Will as Involving Determinism." *Philosophical Review* 46 (October): 439-50.
- Frazer, James George. [1922] 1950. *The Golden Bough*. Abridged ed. New York: Macmillan.
- Fuller, Robert C. 1987. "Religion and Empiricism in the Works of Peter Berger." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 22 (December): 497-510.
- Gorski, Philip S. 1990. "Scientism, Interpretation, and Criticism." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 25 (September): 279-307.
- Kepnes, Steven D. 1986. "Bridging the Gap between Understanding and Explanation Approaches to the Study of Religion." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 25 (December): 504-12.
- Klostermaier, Klaus K. 1989. *A Survey of Hinduism*. Albany: State Univ. of New York Press.
- Murphy, Nancey. 1990. "Theology and the Social Sciences—Discipline and Anti-discipline." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 25 (September): 309-16.
- Pals, Daniel L. 1987. "Is Religion a *Sui Generis* Phenomenon?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55 (Summer): 259-82.
- . 1989. Review of *Religion and the Social Sciences*, by Robert Segal. In *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 1 (Fall): 221-31.
- . 1990a. "Autonomy, Legitimacy, and the Study of Religion." *Religion* 20:1-16.
- . 1990b. "Autonomy Revisited: A Rejoinder to Its Critics." *Religion* 20:30-37.
- Peacocke, A. R. 1976. "Reductionism: A Review of the Epistemological Issues and Their Relevance to Biology and the Problem of Consciousness." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 11 (December): 307-34.
- Segal, Robert A. 1983. "In Defense of Reductionism." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51 (March): 97-124. (Reprinted in *Religion and the Social Sciences* by Robert A. Segal, 5-36. Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1989.)
- . 1986. "The 'De-Sociologizing' of the Sociology of Religion." *Scottish Journal*



- of *Religious Studies* 7 (Spring): 5-28. (Reprinted in *Religion and the Social Sciences* by Robert A. Segal, 109-35. Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1989.)
- . 1989. *Religion and the Social Sciences: Essays on the Confrontation*. Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press.
- . 1990. "Misconceptions of the Social Sciences." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 25 (September): 263-78.
- Sharma, Arvind. 1991. "Humanistic versus Social Scientific Approaches to Religion." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 26 (December): 541-46.
- Vaux, Kenneth. 1990. "Theology as Queen (Bee) of the Disciplines?" *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 25 (September): 317-22.
- Wiebe, Donald. 1988. "Postulations for Safeguarding Preconceptions: The Case of the Scientific Religionist." *Religion* 18:11-19.
- Wilson, Bryan. 1982. "The Academic Position of the Sociology of Religion in Modern Science." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 9 (March): 9-18.
- Wilson, Edward O. 1990. "Biology and the Social Sciences." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 25 (September): 245-62. (First published in *Daedalus* 106 [Fall 1977]: 127-40.)