BELIEF VS. COMMITMENT, VALIDITY VS. VALUE: A RESPONSE TO WARD GOODENOUGH

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Abstract. This paper is on Ward Goodenough's recent article (27: 3), suggesting that his points can be clarified by reiterating the distinction between the realms of meaning and relevance. Religion's "truth" is in the form of its *value*; the "proof" which it requires is *vindication*; and the resulting "faith" must be understood as *commitment*.

Keywords: belief; commitment; faith; religion; truth; validity; value.

Goodenough's excellent article, "Belief, Practice, and Religion" (1992), was both enlightening and inspirational: It clarified certain points and stimulated me to attempt to further clarify those points. His distinction between the "believing Christian" and the "observant Jew" should not blur the overriding similarity between the two: They are both *committed* to the central tenets of their religions. The important distinction is not between the believing Christian and the observant Jew, but between these committed adherents of their respective religions and the "nominal" (i.e., insufficiently committed) Jews and Christians. Goodenough himself used the term *commitment* at several key points in his article. He spoke of a "commitment of self to a further construction of self" (p. 289); "commitment to becoming the kinds of persons that, in moments when we are free of inner conflict about ourselves, we feel we truly want to be" (p. 295); and he said that it is the "sharing of this commitment that sustains the community" (p. 294).

Some previous articles in *Zygon* have made a useful distinction about the gap between "is" statements and "ought" statements (Hefner 1980; Pugh 1980). Some authors have hoped to span this gap with evolution or sociobiology, but others have argued that science must remain within the realm of "is" statements, while religion must remain within the realm of "ought" statements: These

two realms "cannot come into direct logical conflict with each other" (Wavel, 1982).

I propose that the realm of "is" statements be referred to as mere *meaning*. These statements are descriptive of empirical reality and logical constructs. They are cognitive rather than affective. With an approach that is sufficiently precise, we can discover the validity of any statement's meaning. The realm of "ought" statements could be referred to as *relevance*, and are prescriptive of ethical and value norms. They are subjective rather than objective. They are relevant to human affect and do not necessarily involve cognition in the sense of being dependent upon empirical or logical cognitions. We can define religion by paraphrasing Tillich: *ultimate relevance*. Table 1 defines various concepts in terms of meaning and relevance.

I propose that we understand *faith*, at least as it pertains to religion and the realm of relevance, as *commitment*. Mere belief in the realm of meaning, without commitment, may be appropriate when it comes to describing our level of acceptance of empirical or rational evidence. For example, "I *believe* that the temperature in this room is about seventy degrees." This statement is entirely within the realm of meaning: We have to define what we "mean" by seventy degrees: Fahrenheit? Celsius? Kelvin? Based upon its meaning, I will determine if I believe the statement.

Goodenough also speaks of the "truth" of a religious proposition, and that a prophecy may be "valid," and that rituals may have some "value." I propose a clarification: *Truth* within the realm of meaning is *validity*, but within the realm of relevance truth is *value*. A statement is valid (true in its meaning) if it corresponds empirically to observable reality or logically to certain established criteria. When I say that my driver's license is valid, I mean that it meets the criteria of

TABLE 1
Concepts Defined in Terms of Meaning and Relevance

	Meaning	Relevance
Truth	validity	value
Proof	verification	vindication
Faith	belief	commitment
Terms	descriptive	prescriptive
Focus	object	subject
Realization	discovery	creation
Capacity	precision	power
Past	history	myth
Representation	sign	symbol
Action	task	ritual

having been issued by the California State Department of Motor Vehicles and it has not yet expired. A ritual is in the sphere of human relevance, and indeed it may not even have any objective meaning. The "truth" of the ritual may not be comparable to the validity of my driver's licence. The truth of a ritual is its capacity to evoke and express *value* (i.e., truth in the realm of relevance). Validity may be *discovered* by inspection or reasoning, but values are *created*. Ultimate values are created by the ultimate Creator, God.

Goodenough also speaks of the "proof" of prophecy. I propose that one kind of proof (*verification*) is appropriate within the realm of meaning, while a different kind of proof (*vindication*) is appropriate within the realm of relevance. I prove my belief that the temperature of this room is seventy degrees by using an empirical instrument, a thermometer, for verification. I can apply logic to verify that a certain mathematical formula can be derived. I cannot verify religious ritual, doctrine, or prophecy through pure logic or precise empirical measures. Vaihinger (1935) used the term *vindication* to explain the kind of proof or justification requisite to the realm of values. Vaihinger (and later Adler 1956, 1964) said that people live their lives, not according to objective facts, but according to guiding "fictions." Such fictions are vindicated (proven) by the values which they help to affirm and maintain. Religious doctrines do not always have a self-justifying internal logic which proves their truth; indeed, doctrines such as the Trinity may defy or transcend traditional constraints of logic. Our faith in such doctrines is not a mere belief in their validity, but a commitment to their value. The proof of a religious prophecy should not be that specific events come to pass, for this strips the prophecy of its claim to ultimate relevance. The proof of prophecy is its vindication, that the prophet has articulated ultimate relevance, and we express our faith not by a cognitive belief in validity, but by a total commitment to the values.

Religions are systems of myths, symbols, and rituals preserved by communities. Myth and history both tell about the past, but myth is not history. Myths are not told because they are valid accounts of the past. Myths are retold because they express the values of a community (or because they justify certain institutional policies). History is to be verified empirically to make sure that it is accurate (valid). Myth is vindicated if it is adequate to express values. A symbol and a sign both represent something else, but a symbol is not a sign. A sign may represent a specific objective meaning, but a religious symbol must convey value or evoke relevance. Rituals and tasks are both human acts, but a ritual is not a task. A task has a clearly defined meaning, and is fulfilled when it has been verified that certain specific

requirements have been met, but a ritual's purpose is to express or evoke relevance.

Goodenough concluded that "theology may not be necessary to religious life" (p. 295). Again, I agree with Goodenough, but I hope that my clarification can take the point further. Theologians further the cause of religion (the pursuit of ultimate relevance) only insofar as they help us escape the hold of mere cognitive meaning. Too many theologians impair our pursuit of ultimate relevance by pulling religion back into the realm of meaning. They try to describe and define God, and prove (i.e., verify) God's existence through logical (e.g., ontological) or empirical (e.g., teleological) proofs. At best, such attempts at verification do not inspire our commitment, but only support a belief which is contingent upon the evidence, and when some atheist or agnostic presents better evidence, the belief may turn to doubt.

Religion may not need the theologian, except as an apologist to combat the atheist and agnostic within the realm of meaning. Religion does need the mystic, who tries to achieve the experience of pure relevance. Many mystics use paradoxes to transcend the limits of logic, and they strip away all pretentions of meaning from religion. The shaman, priest, and prophet are not scientists or logicians, but individuals whom the religious community entrusts with the calling of working within the realm of relevance, preserving myths, reenacting rituals, and focusing our attention on symbols. These religious figures evoke and sustain our commitments so that we may encounter and preserve values.

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