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Normativity and Social Criticism in the Study of Religion

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In this paper I'll be asking whether scholars can express normative judgments in the study of religion, or whether we should be value-neutral and detached from our subject matter. I want to argue on behalf of normativity, and against value-neutrality. In my view, normativity functions in a bedrock way in the study of religion. I will thus be arguing that normativity is not an outlier in Religious Studies; it is fundamental to our work. This means that I'll be arguing on behalf of normativity in a certain way. I will not argue that being normative is inescapable or unavoidable in the study of religion.¹ That position would have us say that all ideas are value-laden, that no one can adopt an impartial perspective or point of view. My claim is not perspectival or epistemological. It is, rather, phenomenological. On my argument, normativity is the groundwork out of which detached, impartial thinking arises. It provides the pragmatic, transcendental conditions for the possibility of thinking impartially. My argument is not that normative commitments are unavoidable in the study of religion, but that they provide the a priori conditions for the possibility of being detached and objective when studying human behavior.

My foil is the idea that studying religion should try to match Max Weber's description of modern science as a rational, value-neutral endeavor in his classic essay,



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¹ See, e.g., Thomas A. Lewis, *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion—and Vice*

“Science as a Vocation.”² Like the sciences that Weber was observing at the turn of the last century, Religious Studies aims to extend rational inquiry into the frontiers of culture, thought, and society. Weber would urge today’s scholars of religion to be value-neutral so as to ensure objective results of their research.

But adhering to value-neutrality, Weber goes on to say, is not without costs. Modern science, he writes, is now largely instrumental and utilitarian. It enables us to acquire greater mastery of the natural world, improves our methods and tools for the training of thought, and adds clarity about how best to achieve our ends. Beyond those discoveries, Weber argues, science is unable to proceed. Notably, science as a value-neutral enterprise cannot speak to individuals who are considering whether to become scientists. Deciding to embark upon a profession is a value question to which science as a value-neutral enterprise provides no answer. As a result, Weber concludes, modern science lacks reasons to motivate scholars to make it their vocation. Whatever reasons one might have for joining the academy would be subjective and idiosyncratic, not public and shared. Not surprisingly, Weber viewed such circumstances as ironic if not tragic.

Indeed, the expectation of value-neutrality is what Weber, following Nietzsche, would describe as an ascetic ideal—the aspiration to attain an impartial, scientific point of view, detached from feeling, context, and desire. Value-neutrality urges upon us a kind of abstinence. I want to argue that this spiritual ideal has imposed an overbearing conscience on scholarship in Religious Studies, and it distorts how we actually interpret human practices and cultural life. Ascetic detachment prevents us from introducing value-laden considerations into our work, and it has widespread ramifications. As one result, scholars of religion are often inarticulate about the merits of their guild when they are asked to defend it to other scholars, administrators, and the public at large. Religious Studies has been constrained by ideas that have prevented it from championing its value. Value-neutrality is one obstacle to offering a justification for the study of religion and to providing reasons for taking it up as a profession. I hope that my argument enables us to see what is wrong with that ascetic ideal and its effects on human understanding.

I’ll proceed by examining the work of an influential scholar in the study of religion, Jonathan Z. Smith, as a specific foil or test case for my argument. I turn to Smith to explore one way in which the ideal of value-neutrality manifests itself and what is silenced by the adherence to the ascetic conscience. I’ll do so by offering a brief account of Smith’s approach to the study of religion and will then describe how he mobilizes his method in his treatment of the mass suicide in Jonestown, Guyana in 1978. I then want to show what a normative assessment of Jonestown would look like and what kind of theory of interpretation would inform it. Smith’s account aims to overcome *incomprehension* in response to the murder-suicide at Jonestown. He

² Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans., ed., and with an introduction by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 129-56.

addresses Jonestown's weirdness, and he does so by appealing to a theory of interpretive and comparative reason. My account aims to overcome *indignation* at the tragic loss of life at Jonestown. It addresses Jonestown's possible injustice, and it does so by appealing a theory of the moral emotions. I want to propose that moral emotions, no less than interpretive and comparative reason, provide resources for the scholarly study of religion. That will be the main step toward making a case for normativity as an a priori condition for thinking about religion in value-neutral terms.

On the view that I will defend, Smith and his fellow travelers have the study of religion backwards. The mainstream account has us try to know other cultures and then permit religious ethicists, philosophers, or cultural critics to evaluate them.³ On that view, epistemology is prior to ethics: we are first required to get to know something objectively before evaluations are allowed. On the view I'll defend, ethics is prior to epistemology. Our desire to understand others grows out of moral reactive feelings that we have in response to actions that meet, or depart from, everyday moral expectations in social life. The need to provide an objective explanation grows out of a prior moral incongruity. I'll show what kinds of questions and intellectual opportunities my line of analysis opens up and how my view of things would reverse widespread assumptions in the study of religion today.

So: first, to the work of Jonathan Z. Smith. I classify Smith's approach as carrying out an "Interpretive-Comparative Method" for studying religion. This method selects a particular set of facts—an event, person, text, or myth, for example—and seeks to make sense of it, to overcome incomprehension about it. The method does so by contextualizing data, identifying some of their distinctive features, and shedding light on a broader concept or theory along the way. Practitioners of this method typically address the experience of cognitive dissonance, and they do so by using general concepts that render seemingly odd facts intelligible. We are to identify similarities between what is strange, on the one hand, with ideas, events, or patterns that are more familiar to the scholar and her implied readership, on the other. The Interpretive-Comparative Method thus relies heavily on analogy to develop comparisons and contrasts in the study of the other.

Over the course his career, Smith has outlined and refined the main features of the Interpretive-Comparative Method as he conceives it. I would summarize his program around three themes:

- (1) making plain that the concept of religion is a second-order, non-native category;
- (2) identifying the problems that the Interpretive-Comparative Method should address; and
- (3) methodologically, specifying the steps along which interpretation and comparison should proceed.

³ See, e.g., Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

I want to sketch these three points and show how Smith practices this method to address the events at Jonestown. Manifesting as it does a value-neutral approach, Smith's program blocks productive pathways for examining religion and reinforces the field's ongoing silence about its purposes and benefits.

First, about the concept of religion: Smith avows that the concept of religion is a second-order category. He embraces the neo-Kantian idea that the scholar's "preinterpretative decisions and operations" occur prior to any reckoning with empirical data.⁴ On this view, the mind is not a blank slate recording sense data in an unmediated fashion. Rather, the mind relies upon a priori concepts and categories. This means, among other things, that no religious data exist "out there," waiting to be found prior to the implementation of a scholar's intellectual apparatus. Clarifying this point, Smith writes:

While there is a staggering amount of data . . . of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized . . . as religious—*there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.⁵

On this view, the concept of religion is an imaginative construct that serves to organize information. It both illuminates and distorts the material that it brings to the scholar's attention insofar as it works taxonomically to classify material as a *religious* experience, practice, myth, person, and so forth, and not something else. "Religion' is not a native term," Smith writes, "it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays that same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as 'language' plays in linguistics or 'culture' plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon."⁶ Smith's core point about the concept of religion is epistemological, not substantive. *Whatever* a definition of religion might be, it is the product of the imagination that works to coordinate data and advance scholarly understanding.

In addition to making this claim, Smith distinguishes between two types of symbol systems—what he calls "locative" and "utopian" types of religion.⁷ These types help us describe how religious groups relate to their cultural surroundings, especially with regard to matters of *place*. In Smith's mind "the question of the character of the place on which one stands is the fundamental symbolic and social question. Once an

⁴ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 66, emphasis in the original.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁶ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 193-94.

⁷ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the Histories of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993 [1978]), 100-3; 134-142; 160-66; 169-71; 185-89; 291-94; 308-9; Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 110; 121-42.

individual or culture has expressed its vision of its place, the whole language of symbols and social structures will follow.”⁸ A locative vision is centripetal, static, and relatively closed. Conservative and preservative, it is concerned “primarily with the cosmic and social issues of keeping one’s place and reinforcing boundaries.” In early Christianity, for example, locative symbols emphasized “victory, peace, and security in the face of adversity,” not otherworldly immortality. Its basic soteriology was confidence in the face of death.⁹

A utopian outlook is, in contrast, a place of “no place.” It is idealistic and disruptive of the status quo. Utopian symbolism emphasizes possibilities that may seem anarchic to those who adopt a locative worldview. A utopian vision is centrifugal, dynamic, and relatively open to social change. The hero of a utopian society seeks to transcend surrounding conventions, typically on the idea that he or she currently lives in exile and must return to his or her true home. Whereas confidence is the key soteriological concept for locative traditions, salvation through acts of rebellion and transcendence is the key concept in utopian ones.¹⁰

Deploying the concepts of locative and utopian outlooks should not suggest, however, that we should juxtapose them in order to compare, or that juxtaposing different symbolic patterns is a good way to go about comparison. Comparing is not simply a matter of putting two different items in proximity to one another. To grasp this fact, we must turn to Smith’s second set of claims—focusing on the art or science of comparison. “Comparison,” he writes, “requires the postulation of difference as the grounds of being interesting . . . and a methodical manipulation of difference, a playing across the ‘gap’ in the service of some useful end.”¹¹ Comparison should be a self-conscious, rigorous, and sophisticated practice. Thus for Smith, not all forms of comparison are adequate to the study of religion. Previous versions, dating back to Greco-Roman writers, suffer from being one-dimensional, impressionistic, atemporal, or naively tied to evolutionary schemes. These problems are linked to an ongoing inattention to the aims and procedures of comparison itself.

Smith identifies four comparative methods in the history of religion, noting their deficiencies as well as their potential for future development: the ethnographic, the encyclopedic, the morphological, and the evolutionary. Against all of these methods, Smith’s organizing complaint is that they don’t incorporate a robust understanding of history; they fail to attend to particularity and specificity in the study of religion. They are too far removed from their data to help us see what is concrete and different about their objects of study, or they impose an artificial template on their data, or both.

Herein lies the basis for the third signature feature of Smith’s project, focusing on what he avows as the correct method of comparison. Properly carried out, comparison,

⁸ Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 141.

⁹ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 129-34; cf. Graydon F. Synder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1985), 29.

¹⁰ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 130.

¹¹ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 35.

Smith contends, is an act of “reduction” that provides “that first glimpse of familiarity that is the prerequisite of intelligibility.”¹² He thus aims to produce a model for comparison that enables us to re-describe unfamiliar data and yet preserve their contextual specificity.

A systematic approach to comparison for Smith moves along four methodical steps: description, comparison, redescription, and rectification. He writes:

Description is a double process which comprises the historical or anthropological dimensions of the work: First, the requirement that we locate a given example within the rich texture of its social, historical, and cultural environments that invest it with its local significance. The second task of description is that of reception-history, a careful account of how *our* second-order scholarly tradition has intersected with the exemplum. That is to say, we need to describe how the datum has become accepted as significant for the purpose of the argument. Only when such a double contextualization is completed does one move on to the description of a second example undertaken in the same double fashion. With at least two exempla in view, we are prepared to undertake their comparison both in terms of aspects and relations held to be significant, and with respect to some category, question, theory, or model of interest to us. The aim of such a comparison is the redescription of the exempla (each in light of the other) and a rectification of the academic categories in relation to which they have been imagined.¹³

The “end’ of comparison,” Smith goes on to argue, “cannot be the act of comparison itself.” There is nothing obvious about items that are selected to compare; comparison is contingent upon, and in the service of, solving scholarly problems or puzzles. According to Smith, “Comparison provides the means by which *we* ‘re-vision’ phenomena as *our* data in order to solve *our* theoretical problems.”¹⁴ For those committed to comparison, “the task . . . becomes one of clarifying our assumptions, rectifying our procedures, and justifying our goals.”¹⁵

Given this understanding of comparison, one obvious question is: What should comparison’s goals be? Reflecting the guild’s ascetic ideal of value-neutrality, Smith is reticent about this teleological question. His most explicit answer is to say that “one goal of the study of religion is the proposal of comparative generalizations based on a careful description of data that, nevertheless, remain firmly situated: generalizations that are advanced in the service of some stated intellectual task.” Yet this reply only pushes

¹² Ibid., 112.

¹³ Smith, “The ‘End’ of Comparison: Redescription and Rectification,” in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 239.

¹⁴ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 52, emphasis in the original.

¹⁵ Smith, *Relating Religion*, 30.

the answer back one step—requiring us to determine how to assess the merits of “some stated intellectual task,” without suggesting how that might be done, or what such a task ought to be. And this silence mirrors Smith’s indeterminate position about defining religion: there, his point is to insist that it is a human construction and to leave things at that, not to offer us a definition to work or argue with. This reticence about such teleological and substantive matters leaves the field open to a considerable amount of arbitrariness. Scholars of religion may pick and choose their definitions, problems, and models of comparison as they please, carrying out work that is “the result of mental operations undertaken by scholars in the interest of their intellectual goals.” But if comparativists have the task of justifying their goals, then on what criteria are such efforts at justification to be carried out? Without criteria of this justificatory sort, the academic study of religion has little on which to rely for sorting out good work from bad.

Yet there exists a larger difficulty in Smith’s program, namely, that what is presented in the name of seeking intelligibility is not adequate for what I judge to be a genuinely humanistic approach to the study of religion. And it is on this point that I wish to focus. As I said at the outset, I want to ask whether the academic study of religion can have us reckon not merely with the problem of incomprehension, but also with experiences like that of indignation. Indignation is provoked by another’s wrongdoing; it is a reactive feeling we have in response to another’s actions and attitudes. As the British philosopher Peter Strawson argues, we typically feel resentment or indignation in response to wrongdoing done to ourselves or to others.¹⁶ Given the importance we place on good will and benevolence in human interactions, we often react with resentment or indignation when people disregard the welfare and dignity of others. If the academic study of religion cannot explore territory opened up by reactive feelings that are aroused by religiously authorized occurrences and experiences, it seems deficient in its effort to advance a genuinely human understanding of the phenomena under its scrutiny.

To sharpen this contrast between Smith’s way of thinking and mine, consider how he argues in the chapter, “The Devil in Mr. Jones,” perhaps one of his most widely read pieces. Here he addresses the question of incomprehensibility and shows how the Interpretive-Comparative Method, as he conceives it, works in practice. “The Devil in Mr. Jones” examines the “White Night” when the Rev. Jim Jones ordered the suicide of over 900 members of the People’s Temple Christian Church along with the killing of a U.S. Congressman Leo Ryan of California, former members of the Temple, and news reporters who came to the church in Jonestown Guyana on an investigative mission in 1978. Commenting on a *New York Times* Op-ed piece written by Billy Graham published right after the event, Smith notes that Graham disparagingly calls the People’s Temple a “cult” and describes Jones as “a slave of a diabolical supernatural power from which he refused to be set free.”¹⁷ Such a reading of Jonestown, Smith claims, is to “give way to the forces of unreason.” Other interpreters cited Jones’s Marxist commitments to conclude that he was not actually religious and that no

¹⁶ Peter Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” in *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 59-80.

¹⁷ *New York Times*, December 5, 1978, cited in Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 110.

professional obligation to interpret him existed. But to view Marxism and religion as incompatible, Smith observes, is to ignore the combination of revolutionary Marxism and Roman Catholicism in Latin America or Marxism and Buddhism in southeast Asia. Yet other commentators declined to interpret Jonestown at all, viewing religion as aligned with liberalism, one outcome of which was to equate religion with civility, and uncivil religion with “cult.”

These theological, Marxist, and liberal frameworks, Smith claims, all conspired to view Jonestown as a scandal to human reason and left it beyond the pale of analysis. None of them helps us get our heads around Jonestown in a way that is appropriate to the history of religions. In his mind, that fact stands as an embarrassment to the guild. Indeed, Smith states that “one might claim that Jonestown was the most important single event in the history of religions, for if we continue, as a profession, to leave it ununderstandable, then we will have surrendered our rights to the academy.”¹⁸

To help us get past Jonestown’s potential incomprehensibility, Smith uses two analogies: Euripides’s tragedy *Bacchae*, and the tale of a cargo cult from Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides. With the first example, Smith identifies parallels between how Dionysus and the Dionysian cult were dramatized by Euripides in the 5th century B.C.E., on the one hand, and the relationship between Jones, the People’s Temple, and civil authorities, on the other. Smith notes that in *Bacchae* we can’t overlook the preoccupation with space—especially how civil space was threatened by Bacchic counterspace and what civil authorities perceived as antinomian excesses in the Dionysian band. Like Jim Jones, Dionysus was seen as a fraud and a seducer of women, and the People’s Temple, like Dionysus and his band, withdrew from public space to secure a utopian alternative. In the case of *Bacchae*, the band’s retreat to a paradisaical space prompts the movement of messengers to and from the city. They represent the city’s view of the band as unruly and manipulative while nonetheless describe the band as peaceful, free, and spontaneous. But the messengers do not only offer field reports back to their authorities, Smith observes; they are seen as invading and thus endangering the Bacchic space. They thereby prompt a violent revolt in which the Bacchics seek to obliterate distinctions by entirely destroying homes and villages with their wild, supernatural powers.

The People’s Temple also tried to obliterate differences—especially those of race—and inhabited a subversive space with its own political modes of leadership, laws, and criteria for citizenship. It created a “counterpolis” during its early years in Indianapolis and the Bay Area. After reports said that Jones was a fraud and described the People’s Temple as a danger to the Oakland community, Jones moved the group to a utopian space in Guyana. *Bacchae* helps us see that the invasion of that space during the visit by Congressman Ryan and company would prompt a violent response by church members. Smith writes:

¹⁸ *Imagining Religion*, 104. Subsequent citations of this source are referenced parenthetically in the text.

Into this utopian space, figures from the city came to invade and to spy. Congressman Ryan and the press disordered paradise and the result could have been predicted by *Bacchae*—the rapid shift from peace to terror and the furious murder of the intruders. In the *Bacchae*, the Maenads, after routing the invaders, go on to attack the border villages. At Jonestown, the violence was directed inwards, the White Night, the total destruction of themselves. In part, this was a measure of realism. There was no possible military solution for Jonestown against those they perceived as the aggressors. The Temple lacked the Maenads' supernatural weapons. But, in part, this was as well a spatial reaction. Utopia had been invaded and it was time for another exodus. (116-17).

Understanding the utopian spatial logic of Jonestown, we can grasp that the Temple's "failure to secure subversive space was predictable, as was the violent conflict when representatives from civil space invaded utopia." On this interpretation, Smith adds, "the most proximate responsibility for the events of the White Night was [Congressman] Ryan's" (117).

The model of the cargo cult from Espiritu Santo, Smith's second analogy, sheds light on the Temple's utopian vision of equality, the protest nature of the collective suicide, and the wholesale destruction of everyone found dead together. The cargo cult assumed two iterations. In the first, a prophet named Ronovuro announced in 1923 that the island's ancestral dead would return on a cargo ship bearing food. The food would be distributed to those members of the cult who were fully paid up to him. Ronovuro also prophesied that Europeans would try to prevent the ship's arrival and so must be killed. One European named Clapcott was singled out as a surrogate and was murdered by the cult members. The cult was suppressed by the local military; six members were killed and others were imprisoned.

In 1944 a new prophet, Tsek, emerged and established another cargo cult. He reportedly instructed his followers to destroy everything they had received from Whites, burn their houses, build sex-segregated dormitories in villages, and slaughter all domestic animals. In addition, Tsek's followers went nude, spoke a common language despite coming from different linguistic groups, and built a road several miles long to the sea, terminating at the site of Clapcott's murder where a cargo ship would land and distribute the goods.

In Smith's mind, Ronovuro, Tsek, and Jones should be seen in the context of messianic, nativistic, cargo cults. In all three cases "the central, moral idea was one of achieving exchange reciprocity between the Whites and the natives." Various strategies were employed, including the destruction of everything the natives owed as if "to awaken the White man's sense of obligation to exchange, in order to shame him into a recognition of his responsibilities" (119). In the last audio tape recovered from Jonestown, Jim Jones expresses these sentiments: "I'm sure they they'll—they'll pay for it. This is revolutionary suicide. This is not a self-destructive suicide. So they'll pay for this. They brought it upon us. And they'll pay for that. I leave that destiny to them" (119). Who will pay?, one might ask. The cargo model suggests Whites, according to

Smith—not only Whites who invaded the church but also those who defected. In addition to awakening shame and calling forth reciprocal action, the collective suicide brings to mind a vision in which differences were obliterated. Recalling the image of the dead “with their arms around each other, men and women, white and black, young and old,” Smith writes: “In death, they would achieve a corporate picture of peace and harmony” (120).

Although Smith’s analogies aim to decrease the White Night’s alterity, it is not obvious that they perform the work that he intends. One problem is that Smith’s use of *Bacchae* and the cargo cults at Epiritu Santo raises questions about how we are to gauge the rationality of these examples. Using *Bacchae* and two cargo cults as comparative reference points only pushes the question of intelligibility back onto these analogical parallels. Smith’s account of rationality asks us to think horizontally by way of examining similarities and differences, but not substantively by way of asking whether his sources of comparison are *themselves rational*. Using analogies will not resolve problems of incomprehension if the analogies test the limits of reason. Indeed, Smith begs the question by smuggling the presumption of rationality into the analogies on which his case for intelligibility rests.

I want to offer a reading that avoids such question-begging by insisting on an obvious point, namely, that Smith eschews the topic of moral horror and, equally important, moral umbrage in response to the catastrophic loss of life on the White Night. Despite the title of Smith’s chapter—“The Devil in Mr. Jones”—he is loath to raise questions about religion’s demonstrable capacity for injustice and its power to express the demonic as a sacred duty. He entirely omits the fact that over a quarter of those who died at Jonestown were children whose lives were taken by parents and gun-toting authorities at the Temple. That omission is telling: it leaves Jonestown immune to and autonomous from the critical potential of other norms and values. I want to propose, in the spirit of critics such as Hume, Nietzsche, and Freud, that when thinking about religious beliefs and practices we ask, among other things, whether and on what terms religion is good for its adherents.

Consider what Smith excludes in his account of the White Night. One wonders why he did not draw on examples of mass psychology, collective hysteria, and the psychic powers of megalomaniacal leadership to shed light on Jones’s leadership. Charles Manson or the Rev. Sung Myung Moon (and we can think of many others) would serve as obvious examples for thinking about the erotics of authority, mass psychology, totalitarian ideology, and the manipulation of people as a step toward imagining Jim Jones’s control over the People’s Temple. These analogies can sharpen our thinking about the capacity of those in authority to take advantage of others in vulnerable, dependent relationships. Placing the responsibility on Congressman Ryan for Jonestown and focusing on the utopian logic of space stops short of delving more fully into matters of Jones’s moral agency, paranoia, and potential culpability. Indeed, focusing on the idea of space prevents us from attending to matters of agency and power. As a result, we gain no understanding of the human cost imposed by the White Night on the families, friends, and loved ones of those who died at Jonestown. We

have no sense of how the White Night might arouse resentment and indignation, and not only among those who were directly affected by the loss.

To be clear: I am not saying that concerns about intelligibility are unimportant, only that Smith's quest is truncated and incomplete. My previous reference to Strawson aims to suggest how this is so and how we might reimagine the quest for intelligibility, namely, as arising out of prior reactive feelings and thus as dependent on a realm of experience that Smith's method brackets. As Strawson notes, our efforts to objectify and explain human behavior rely on a certain perspective on or attitude toward others, an outlook that presupposes a prior aberration in social interactions. Strawson argues, suggestively in my mind, that our ordinary, lived expectations in social life include expectations of good will and human regard. We thus have what he calls "participant reactive attitudes" by which he means feelings that we undergo when expectations of good will are met or, alternatively, when we are hurt or offended. "Participant reactive attitudes" are those "natural human reactions to the good or ill will or indifference of others toward us, as displayed in *their* attitudes and actions."¹⁹ They include gratitude and love when we are beneficiaries of good will, and resentment when our expectations are frustrated by others' indifference or ill will. Such attitudes include, moreover, vicarious or sympathetic analogues in the form of reactions "to the qualities of others' wills, not toward ourselves, but toward others."²⁰ Resentment is a response to disregard of oneself; indignation is resentment's analogue in response to someone's disregard of others. In all of these instances, reactive attitudes presuppose the expectation of goodwill or other-regard on the part of people in our various interactions.

On this view, we shift our perspective *from* participatory attitudes *to* detached, impersonal attitudes when prompted by some kind of incongruity. We do so in order to make sense of an offending party's behavior. Our experience of resentment or indignation leads us to offer an explanation for another person's untoward actions. Our elementary, everyday interactions are interpersonal; only secondarily and in response to the experience of ill will do we turn to ways of classifying behavior to understand it. When we do so, we view behavior as we would other phenomena that we describe as conditioned by social or natural forces. We might say that he's under the weather, or that she's been under a considerable stress—these being explanations that can excuse untoward behavior. More radically, we might have to view the character, and not the action, as conditioned by factors beyond one's reasonable control, e.g., he's a sociopath; she's a pathological liar. In any event, the idea is that we inhibit our participant reactive attitudes in order to take up an outlook that is detached and impersonal. On Strawson's account, the act of classification—using taxa to organize our perceptions of human behavior—relies on attitudes other than those that we adopt at an ordinary, first order level in everyday life. We do so not to be judgmental and moralistic; quite the contrary. We seek to explain an action that departs from everyday expectations.

¹⁹ Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," 67.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

Viewing our attitudes as fundamentally interpersonal and secondarily as objective and impersonal, we can see how a quest for intelligibility can be tethered to the experience of indignation or other participant reactive attitudes. Indeed, Strawson helps us see that the two attitudes—the interpersonal, and the impersonal—are connected and how we ought to reverse the standard view about which is prior in the order of experience. Strawson shows how our quest for a detached attitude relies on one that is normative and critical. On the view I'm describing, we don't begin by trying to understand human practices and then evaluate them. Rather, our effort to understand such practices presupposes a prior, elementary, rudimentary assessment. Normativity and social criticism, rather than being alien to the academic study of religion, are fundamental to it. That is to say: ethics precedes epistemology. Far from merely supplementing an interpretation of events such as the White Night, the feeling of indignation lies at the very heart of why we seek to render such an event intelligible. A fully humanistic account of Jonestown would thus have us work to interpret it in a holistic way to answer questions that arise from feelings of indignation and the desire to explain human behavior that would prompt such feelings. And it would not have us avoid rendering a judgment about what went wrong in Jonestown; it would rely on an initial, rudimentary intuition that something seriously went awry that cries out for an account.

With these thoughts in mind I want to conclude by drawing out three ideas, more or less arranged in ascending order of abstraction, for thinking about normativity in the study of religion.

First, my comments suggest something about the relationship between religious ethics and the academic study of religion. Typically religious ethics is viewed as a subspecialty in Religious Studies and, as I've said elsewhere, its place and power in the field is uneven and perhaps precarious.²¹ Its presence in the guild is somewhat anomalous and its existence is typically contingent on matters of institutional history or tradition. My argument, viewing ethics as prior to epistemology, aims to show why the anomalous, contingent status of religious ethics is odd, and why religious ethicists themselves might want to reimagine their role and place in the guild. Religious ethicists take what is implicit in humanistic inquiry and put it to open, explicit, critical scrutiny. Far from being marginal to the guild, they recruit tools from moral and political philosophy, among other disciplines, to make sense of bedrock ideas and commitments that serve as the basis for detached, objective and descriptive work in the study of religion. Avowing a value-neutral ideal in the study of religion *covers over* the normative commitments on which interpretive and comparative work relies. What I propose here, in contrast, would enable us to better grasp why we classify and objectify human behavior in the effort to understand it. Our desire to address incomprehension is not distinct from and immune to our moral feelings, but arises from them.

Second, my comments indicate that protecting religious beliefs and practices from normative scrutiny presupposes some metaphysical ideas about religion itself. By that I mean that ensuring a value-neutral approach to studying religion views religion as

autonomous, as enjoying a kind of authority that protects it from the authority of other critical norms and values. However much scholars of religion wish to argue that religion is not *sui generis*—about which I can elaborate in our discussion—the ascetic conscience of Religious Studies nonetheless protects religion from social critique. My alternative rendering would have us ask, among other things, Is religion good or bad for people? That *very question* presupposes the non-autonomy of religion. It profanizes religion. The question has us think about religion as accountable to norms and values that it may not authorize. On this view, it then falls to the critic of religion to make a case for the terms and tools she deploys to advance her normative judgments—to defend her claims and criteria in intersubjective, public terms. In so doing, she's engaged an important exercise of profanation: she's taking religion down from a pedestal and submitting it to the authority of other norms and values.

Third, and finally: thinking about normativity as foundational, as a bedrock premise for studying religion, should free up scholars to think about justifying the academic study of religion. It may well help the guild overcome what I observe as ongoing inarticulacy about the fruits of its work. It would lift the overbearing conscience of the ascetic ideal and invite scholars to think normatively and ask about the goods toward which their intellectual practices aim. Such goods motivate scholars' intellectual desires and explain why they are desirable. That is to say, thinking about normativity as a bedrock matter would help us view the academic study of religion as having a set of goals that help to define the excellences of its practice. On this account, the study of religion, far from being value-neutral, should see itself as exhibiting a set of intellectual virtues that aspire to provide a full, critical, humanistic understanding of how and why human beings engage in religious practices.

On those terms we might well be able to overcome the irony to which Weber directed our attention over a century ago. We would be able to speak in a full-throated way about the study of religion as a vocation that is tied to purposes that can be openly argued about and defended, rather than muted by the spiritual desire to wrench ourselves from our feelings, relationships, and normative understandings.