

10-25-2017

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Article

Intelligibility and Normativity in the Study of Religion

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Received: 23 August 2017; Accepted: 13 October 2017; Published: 25 October 2017

Abstract: In his essay “The Devil in Mr. Jones,” J. Z. Smith issues a call. If religionists do not, he writes, “persist in the quest for intelligibility, there can be no human sciences, let alone, any place for the study of religion within them.” How should Smith’s call be construed? In other words, what constitutes the “quest for intelligibility”? And what (if anything) differentiates the religionist’s quest for intelligibility from that of other humanistic scholars? Taking as my starting point Smith’s call, I will mount a constructive proposal. On my proposal, religionists should conceive their task as twofold. First, religionists should comparatively describe religious phenomena. Second, they should evaluate these phenomena. Only if the practices of description and prescription are tethered will religious studies succeed in its quest for intelligibility.

Keywords: comparison; description; normativity; prescription; John P. Reeder Jr.; J. Z. Smith

1. Introduction

In his essay “The Devil in Mr. Jones,” J. Z. Smith examines Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and the events of “White Night.” He concludes his essay with a call. He writes:

I have by no means supplied a final answer to Jonestown’s awesome final solution. But this preliminary attempt has kept faith with the responsibilities attendant on being a member of the academy. It is now for others to continue the task, with Jonestown, or wherever the question of understanding human activities and expressions is raised. For if we do not persist in the quest for intelligibility, there can be no human sciences, let alone, any place for the study of religion within them. (Smith 1982, p. 120)

Smith’s call is intuitively appealing. On his view, religionists should *understand*, that is, render intelligible, human activities, however repulsive or ugly such activities may initially seem. But how exactly should religionists construe Smith’s call? In other words, what constitutes the “quest for intelligibility”? And what (if anything) differentiates the religionist’s quest for intelligibility from that of other humanistic scholars?

I ask these questions because of the following concerns. I am concerned with (i) what it is that *we*—that is, religionists—*do* when we study religion; (ii) how we do or do not relate to other scholars who are also concerned with the study of religious phenomena; and (iii) how we identify to and distinguish from others, whether in the humanities or social sciences, what it is that we do. Each of these concerns continues to present itself to the academic study of religion and traces to omnipresent debates about what the proper scholarly posture for religionists is. More specifically, these concerns and debates emerge from a disciplinary division within religious studies between descriptive methodologies (e.g., history and social-science) and prescriptive ones (e.g., ethics, philosophy, and theology).

Despite its intuitive appeal, Smith’s call raises questions about the relationship between and the role of descriptive and prescriptive methodologies in understanding human practices, a binary

that permeates Smith's text and continues to divide scholars within the study of religion.¹ In his own attempts to render intelligibility, perhaps Smith (like students of religion more generally) is caught in what Nancy Levene calls the "knot of the Enlightenment": "the passion for the neutral and scientific waging war with the embodiment of judgment and value in the reasoning mind" (Levene 2012, p. 1022).²

Taking as my starting point Smith's call, I will mount a constructive proposal. On my proposal, religionists should conceive their task as twofold. First, religionists should comparatively describe religious phenomena, whether events, sets of practices, or bundles of beliefs. Second, they should also evaluate these phenomena, reconstructing the motivations of the relevant actors and judging whether they were (or are) warranted in believing something to be the case or acting in a certain way. Only through the practices of description *and* prescription, I will argue, will religious studies succeed in its quest for intelligibility; moreover, through these practices, the religionist's quest

¹ What is problematic is not that we *should* study religious phenomena—religionists study religious phenomena, mathematicians study mathematical objects, ecologists study the relations among living organisms and their environment, and so on. What remains problematic, rather, is *how* these religious phenomena *ought* to be studied. That is, there is heated (and seemingly intractable) debate about what methodological commitments ought to constitute religious studies. On how one's commitments link to the community in which one is a member, consider Paul Griffiths's (Griffiths 1991, pp. 4–9) view regarding a "normative definition of a community." "A normative definition of a community," he writes, "is one that sets up norms, either of doctrine or practice, to which persons must adhere in order to be considered members of that community. Its purpose is to exclude some and include others, to set up conditions that must be met in order for membership in the community to occur and be maintained" (Griffiths 1991, pp. 4–5; Korsgaard 1996, pp. 8–9, who writes that normative standards "do not merely *describe* a way in which we in fact regulate our conduct. They make *claims* on us; they command, oblige, recommend or guide. [...] Concepts like knowledge, beauty, and meaning, as well as virtue and justice, all have a normative dimension, for they tell us what to think, what to like, what to do, and what to be"). Compare Griffiths's definition to the mission statements of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), and the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR). Each scholarly organization proffers its own distinct mission statement, making normative claims on its members for what is and is not the proper scholarly posture toward the study of religious phenomena. On the proper scholarly posture, consider the normative undercurrent in Donald Wiebe's "The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion" (Wiebe 2012). He writes: "it seems to me that raising the question of theology's relationship to the academic study of religion on the methodological level jeopardizes the very existence of such an academic study for it opens to debate once again who or what it is that ought to set the agenda for, and therefore control, such a study; is it the scholar-scientist or the scholar-devotee, the church or the academy, the procedure of science or the (supposed) transcendent subject-matter of that science, etc.?" (Wiebe 2012, pp. 6–7; Lincoln 2005, who distinguishes between the "history of religion" and "religion").

² In juxtaposing neutrality and science, on the one side, and judgment and value, on the other, Levene enters the debate in religious studies concerning descriptive and prescriptive methodologies. "[T]his debate," Thomas A. Lewis writes, turns on the view that "whereas theologians make normative claims, religious studies scholars should refrain from doing so. Rather, scholars of religion should distinguish themselves from theologians precisely by striving for some type of distance, neutrality, or objectivity in relation to their subject matter, where this is to be understood to entail analysis regarding what is rather than claims about what ought to be" (Lewis 2015, p. 44). For Lewis, normative judgements aren't found only among religious ethicists, philosophers of religion, and theologians; rather, normativity pervades each and every form of humanistic inquiry: "[i]t is in play any time judgments of value are made, whether implicitly or explicitly" (p. 46). See (Lewis 2015, pp. 47–53) wherein he highlights the pervasiveness of normativity in a variety of modes of humanistic inquiry. Tyler Roberts (Roberts 2013) also presses the tenability of the distinction between religious studies and theology, holding that "many of the scholars who seem most invested in demarcating clear, impermeable boundaries between religion or theology and the study of religion are descriptively reductive" (Roberts 2013, p. 62). On Roberts's telling, scholars who espouse this distinction are variously committed to historicism (e.g., Willi Braun, Burton Mack, and Russell McCutcheon) and positivism (e.g., Donald Wiebe). Drawing from Smith's distinction (Smith 1993) between *locative* and *utopian* methods, Robert terms the scholars committed to the distinction "locativists." According to Roberts, these scholars are locativists in two senses: "[f]irst, they conceive of religion as a kind of social formation deeply invested in stability and congruence. As such, it is particularly resistant, even opposed, to critical thought, only working as a social formation by making the human reality of its own standpoint and mystifying its sources of authority. Second, these scholars claim academic legitimacy by drawing a sharp contrast between the inherent obscurantism of religion and the self-consciousness, playfulness, and critical awareness of scholars of religion" (Roberts 2013, pp. 37–38). Moreover, "locativists ... locate themselves securely in the academy and locate the academy securely in the contemporary world by opposing their 'thinking' to religion" (Roberts 2013, p. 38). For Lewis, the distinction at play here is the "pervasive assumption that religion cannot be argued about—that it is, in essence, 'reason's other.' In this view of religion, normative claims related to religion cannot be argued about but are fundamentally matters of 'faith'" (Lewis 2015, p. 45). See also (Schilbrack 2014, pp. 147–48) for another characterization of the religious studies versus theology divide.

may be distinguished from that of other humanistic scholars.³ Through employing both practices, the religionist's task is both generally humanist and particularly religionist.

To develop this proposal, I will move in three parts. I will first reconstruct Smith's arguments about the quest for intelligibility, focusing on his comparative and interpretive methodologies and how he brings these methodologies to bear in his discussion of Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and the events of "White Night." Second, I will briefly and constructively read John P. Reeder Jr.'s arguments,⁴ wherein he argues that prescriptive work (i.e., the work undertaken by theologians, religious ethicists, and philosophers of religion) ought to be informed (to some extent) by the socio-historical study of religion. Here, I will also draw from Tyler Roberts's (Roberts 2013) distinction between naturalistic and humanistic inquiry. Third, I will bring together Smith's and Reeder's respective views, arguing that the religionist's quest for intelligibility, if it is to succeed, must include both description and prescription.

2. Smith's Quest for Intelligibility

I begin with Smith's approach to the study of religion and the events of Jonestown, Guyana, which illustrates the way in which he attempts to render intelligibility. Smith starts with a narrative about the formation of the academic study of religion and how scholars locate themselves within such study. For example, Smith has been referred to as a "historian of religions." But he is also described as working in "religion and human sciences" and "religion and the humanities." For Smith, these varied descriptions suggest two things. First, "religion," however one construes it, is "human" and "historical." He explicates this view elsewhere, offering a fourfold conception of religion, writing:

(1) "Religion" is not a native category. It is not a first person term of self-characterization. It is a category imposed from the outside on some aspect of native culture. It is the other, in these instances colonialists, who are solely responsible for the content of the term. (2) Even in these early formulations, there is an implicit universality. "Religion" is thought to be a ubiquitous human phenomenon . . . (3) In constructing the second-order, generic category "religion," its characteristics are those that appear natural to the other . . . (4) "Religion" is an anthropological not a theological category . . . It describes human thought and action, most frequently in terms of belief and norms of behavior.⁵ (Smith 1998, p. 269)

³ Whether description and prescription can actually be parsed is the subject of lively debate. For some scholars, descriptive endeavors are intrinsically value-laden. For example, commenting on Stanley Hauerwas's theology, Sean Larsen brings their inseparability into sharp refine: "[w]e cannot distinguish description from evaluation as fact from value. Values cannot be accidental qualities of acts, added to the material components. It is nonsense to claim that two acts were identical except that one was good and the other was not, for a human act is never a merely physical event that can be described apart from the agent's interpretation of the event (we would not call 'growing hair' a human act or hold someone accountable for it)" (Larsen 2016, p. 30; Gregory 2011, chp. 4). I will nonetheless use *descriptive* and *prescriptive* as shorthand to identify scholars who belong to the various subfields that constitute religious studies.

⁴ Specifically, I will mine ideas from Reeder 1978 and 1998. In "constructively" reading his work, I mean two things. First, I will only draw upon certain elements of his arguments so far as they help me develop my own proposal. Second, I will use these elements in ways that he did not originally intend and may not presently endorse.

⁵ On the claim that religion is a second-order, non-native category, Smith writes: "while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, 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" (Smith 1982, p. xi). Despite making this claim, Smith does later offer a substantive definition of religion. According to him, "[r]eligion is the quest, within the bounds of the human, historical condition, for the power to manipulate and negotiate one's 'situation' so as to have 'space' in which to meaningfully dwell. It is the power to relate one's domain to the plurality of environmental and social spheres in such a way as to guarantee the conviction that one's existence 'matters.' Religion is a distinctive mode of human creativity, a creativity which both discovers limits and creates limits for humane existence. What we study when we study religion is the variety of attempts to map, construct and inhabit such positions of power through the use of myths, rituals and experiences of transformation" (Smith 1993, p. 291). In "In Comparison a Magic Dwells" (Smith 1982), Smith identifies four forms of comparison that may be used in examining religion: the ethnographic; the encyclopedic; the morphological; and the evolutionary. For Smith, these methods aren't equally useful. He characterizes the ethnographic method, for example, as "frequently idiosyncratic" and ultimately "uninteresting, petty, and unrevealing" (Smith 1982, p. 23).

Second, anthropology, history, and the humanities more generally are natural conversation partners for the academic study of religion.⁶ These conversation partners, Smith claims, “locate the study of religion. Religion, to the degree that it is usefully conceived as an historical, human endeavor, is to be set within the larger academic frameworks” provided by these partners (Smith 1982, p. 102).

In order to identify religion as a historical, human endeavor and to put religionists into conversation with their natural partners, Smith glosses Pailan (1994) distinction between two senses of “natural religion.” On the one side, some natural religionists are concerned with the examination of religious beliefs and practices, holding that they “are based on rational understanding that all people allegedly can discover for themselves and can warrant by rational reflection.” For Smith, this natural religion project “largely grew out of intra-Christian sectarian disputation and relied primarily on the processes of introspection.” On the other side, some other natural religionists are concerned with “that which is held to be common to the different actual faiths that have been and are present in the world.” According to Smith, this latter project is “essentially anthropological,” where “the explanation of difference was chiefly historical, whether it emphasized progressive or degenerative processes” (Smith 1998, p. 272). Demarcating between these two senses of natural religion, he holds, moves the study of religion from a “supernatural to a natural history, from a theological to an anthropological category,” which was “complete[d] only when the distinctions between questions of truth and questions of origins were firmly established” (Smith 1998, p. 273).⁷ What marks this shift?

On Smith’s narrative, the move to distinguish the academic study of religion, on the one side, from theology, on the other, first occurred in Dutch universities in the 1800s, when the faculties of theology were separated from the Dutch Reformed Church. With this separation, two modes of inquiry were made possible: “a humanistic mode within the secular academy and a theological course of study within the denominational seminary,” and, with the removal and replacement of dogmatics and practical theology with the history of religions, the former mode was “assumed to be more ‘neutral and scientific’” (Smith 1982, p. 103). Similar divisions soon followed in France, England, and, in the twentieth century, in the United States, with the 1963 *Abington School District v. Schempp* decision (Smith 1982, pp. 103–4).⁸

What is the putative intellectual upshot of the separation between the academic study of religion and theology? The oft-repeated distinction, made famous by Justice Arthur Goldberg in the *Schempp* decision, is between the “teaching of religion” versus the “teaching about religion” (Smith 1982, pp. 103–4). For Smith, theology is, on the one side, concerned with the teaching of religion. Theology is truth tracking: it is a confessional and value-laden endeavor, the sites for which are “historical, believing communities” (Smith 1982, p. 104). The academic study of religion, on the other hand, is concerned with teaching about religion, purporting to be neutral and scientific⁹ (Smith 1982, p. 104) and according to which nothing human is foreign.¹⁰ The Enlightenment sentiment that nothing human is foreign includes something even as uncivil as religion. For the study of religion to enter the academy, Smith cautions, it must always be accompanied by an attempt to

⁶ In his “bio-bibliographical” essay “When the Chips Are Down” (Smith 2004, pp. 1–2), Smith notes his own influences, namely, natural history (specifically botany) and the study of history and philosophy. But when he describes, in “The Devil in Mr. Jones,” the natural conversation partners for the study religion, philosophy is saliently absent. Perhaps one’s influences and one’s conversation partners are separable.

⁷ In making the distinction between the theological and anthropological study of religion, Smith cites David Hume’s *The Natural History of Religion* (Hume 1998).

⁸ For a recent reflection on the *Schempp* decision and its relation to the academic study of religion, see (Imhoff 2016).

⁹ For Smith’s effort to import biological taxonomies to the study of religion, see, e.g., “Fences and Neighbors: Some Contours of Early Judaism” and “In Comparison a Magic Dwells.” For example, in “In Comparison a Magic Dwells,” he says, “[i]n both theory and practice, taxonomies are determined by monothetic procedures and presuppositions, the quest for a single item of discrimination, the *sine qua non*—the *that without which* a taxon would not be itself but some other” (Smith 1982, p. 2).

¹⁰ In J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Elizabeth Costello* (Coetzee 2003), John, in conversation with his mother, Elizabeth, mirrors this sentiment: “[b]ut you surely must concede that at a certain level we speak, and therefore write, like everyone else. Otherwise we would all be speaking and writing private languages. It is not absurd—is it?—to concern oneself with what people have in common rather than what sets them apart” (Coetzee 2003, p. 8).

render it intelligible. On this point, he says, “[w]e must accept the burden of the long, hard road of understanding. To do less is to forfeit our license to practice in the academy, to leave the study of religion open to the charge of incivility and intolerance” (Smith 1982, p. 104).

Taking up his own charge to religionists to render intelligibility, Smith examines Jim Jones’s Peoples Temple and the mass suicide that took place in Jonestown. On these data, Smith says:

One might claim that Jonestown was the most important single event in the history of religion, for if we continue, as a profession, to leave it ununderstandable, then we will have surrendered our right to the academy. The daring and difficult experiment in parallel courses of religious studies begun in Holland a century ago will have concluded in failure. (Smith 1982, p. 104)

For Smith, if the academic study of religion in particular and the humanities more generally should leave nothing beyond understanding, then examining and attempting to render intelligible events like White Night are of the utmost importance. Rendering White Night intelligible requires understanding the event’s agents, especially Jim Jones.

Who was Jones, and what did he do? Here is a compressed history. Jones was a pastor in Indianapolis. Over time, his congregation grew and diversified. He practiced faith healing and claimed to resurrect people from the dead. Fearing the nuclear destruction of society at large, Jones wanted to find a safe haven for his congregation. He moved some number, in 1965, to Ukiah, California. In the following decade, Jones and the Peoples Temple came under increasing scrutiny, including investigations about whether his church ought to be afforded religious tax exemptions and allegations by former church members about emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. To escape further scrutiny, Jones and several hundred congregants left for and settled in Jonestown, Guyana. Temple members, however, publicly voiced concerns that Jones was planning a mass suicide. This mass suicide, “White Night,” took place in 1978, when roughly 900 members, including nearly 300 children, killed themselves by consuming a poisoned fruit drink. But in the wake of these events, Smith notes, “[f]or the press, the event was all too quickly overshadowed by other new horrors. For the academy, it was as if Jonestown never happened” (Smith 1982, pp. 105–9).¹¹

For Smith, White Night reflects the incivility of religion: “Religion is not nice; it has been responsible for more death and suffering than any other human activity” (Smith 1982, p. 110).¹² To leave the events of Jonestown unexamined, Smith avers, is a travesty. The motivation for understanding events like White Night, he says, comes from the Enlightenment credo that nothing is (or ought to be left) beyond human understanding. Such understanding, Smith notes, may be costly and difficult. But for humanistic inquiry to continue to exist, and, more importantly, to matter, the search for understanding is paramount. How should events like White Night be made intelligible? And in which way might the study of religion contribute to intelligibility?

In the search for intelligibility, Smith proposes a method involving description, comparison, re-description, and finally rectification. On this method, he writes,

Description is a double process which comprises the historical and 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

¹¹ For further reflection on Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and White Night, see (Chidester 2003).

¹² On religion’s incivility, Michael Walzer writes, “[f]or the modern reader, the conquest of Canaan, with all its attendant slaughter, is the most problematic moment in the history of ancient Israel” (Walzer 1992, p. 215). In a similar vein, Peter Singer says, “Genocide is not a new phenomenon. Anyone who has read the Bible knows that” (Singer 2004, p. 106). For a view about a non-Abrahamic tradition’s incivility, see (Sen 2009, pp. 208–21), who discusses the Kurukshetra War.

of 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. (Smith 2000, p. 239)

Smith brings this method to bear on Jonestown. Specifically, he suggests two points of comparison—“one quite old” and “one relatively new”—that are more or less productive in their explanatory force. Both turn on making familiar (and thus intelligible) the horrific and seemingly different events of White Night. Motivating these strategies, Smith says, is the belief that White Night is “an instance of something known” (Smith 1982, p. 112). On the first model, Smith says:

The prime purpose of academic inquiry, most especially in the humanities, is to provide *exempli gratia*, an arsenal of classic instances which are held to be exemplary, to provide paradigmatic events and expressions as resources from which to reason, from which to extend the possibility of intelligibility to that which first appears novel. To have discussed Euripides’ *Bacchae* is, to some degree, already to have discussed Jonestown.¹³ (Smith 1982, p. 113)

To be sure, there are differences between Euripides’ play and events of Jonestown. But there are also notable similarities, chief among them being Jones’s failure to prevent encroachment by a member of “civil space” into his utopia (Smith 1982, pp. 112–17).¹⁴ On Smith’s view, these similarities not only help make familiar recent events but also illustrate the ways in which Jonestown is not unique in human history.

The second model is narrower than the first but also highlights that Jonestown and White Night are not exceptional. On this model, Smith suggests comparing Jonestown and White Night to “cargo cults.”¹⁵ Why? He suggests this comparative model upon learning that, on top of the deaths of the 900 plus church members in Jonestown, the animals that lived there were also killed. Like the cargo cult example, Smith notes, church members were bound together via collectivity and cultic solidarity. Most similar, though, is the cargo cult’s “total destruction of everything the native’s own” (Smith 1982, p. 119). But this model is not intended for comparison with Jim Jones or the Peoples Temple on the whole; rather, it is only useful for thinking about the destructive totality of White Night. The comparison with cargo cults, then, is another strategy by which religionists may think through Jones’s logic and the horror that was White Night. For Smith, these two models of comparison may be used in the search for intelligibility, making the human sciences at large, and the study of religion within them, possible.

¹³ On the promising and problematic elements in Smith’s comparative method, see (Levene 2012). Cf. (Roberts 2013, pp. 67–68).

¹⁴ On 14 November 1978, Congressman Leo Ryan visited Jonestown, following up on reports of human rights violations and mistreatment. Four days later, while waiting to board their chartered flight, Ryan and four other members of his party were shot to death by members of the Jonestown community. One hour after Ryan’s assassination, Jones initiated the previously rehearsed mass suicide of White Night (Smith 1982, p. 108).

¹⁵ In “A Pearl of Great Price and a Cargo of Yams: A Study in Situational Incongruity,” Smith discusses “cargo situations” and “cargo cults.” In a cargo situation, Smith writes, one finds a “discrepancy between the world of the European and the world of the native; it is a witness to the confrontation between native and European economic systems,” with the cargo situation “reflect[ing] a native strategy for dealing with an incongruous situation, a strategy that draws upon indigenous elements.” In native economic systems compared to European ones, “[f]oodstuffs and goods are stored, not as capital assets, but in order to be given away in ceremonies that restore equilibrium.” Moreover, compared to European economic views, “wealth and prestige are not measured by either resourceful thrift or conspicuous consumption, but by one’s skill in achieving reciprocity” (Smith 1982, p. 98). In a desperate cargo cult situation, “the natives have destroyed everything that they own, as if, by this dramatic gesture, to awaken the white man’s moral sense of reciprocity. ‘See, we have now given away everything. What will you give in return?’” (Smith 1982, p. 99).

3. Smith and Reeder, Intelligibility and Normativity

Given his commitments to the Enlightenment's rule of reason, Smith aims to explore and render intelligible events like White Night. To do so, Smith says, the religionist ought to compare and interpret more or less expansive examples, illustrating their familiarity and commonness rather than their strangeness and uniqueness. But Smith's prescription about and practice of the quest for intelligibility in the study of religion raises three questions. First, is this quest limited solely to those scholars whose work is analytic and descriptive? That is to ask, do socio-historical methods render completely intelligible events like Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and White Night? Second, by illustrating that events like White Night are not exceptional in human history, what exactly do socio-historical methods achieve, especially since such events purportedly present themselves repeatedly, with no end in sight?¹⁶ And third, what (if anything) distinguishes the socio-historical religionist's examination of such examples from the inquiries undertaken by prescriptive religionists and, more generally, other humanistic scholars?¹⁷

In a series of successive, compressed passages, Smith denies D. Z. Phillips's and affirms Michel de Montaigne's respective approaches toward examining others. In offering his denial, Smith quotes a passage from Phillips's *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*:

If I hear that one of my neighbors has killed another neighbor's child, given that he is sane, my condemnation is immediate. But if I hear that some remote tribe practices child sacrifice, what then? I do not know what sacrifice means for the tribe in question. What would it mean to say that I condemned it when the "it" refers to something I know nothing about? I would be condemning murder. But murder is not child sacrifice. (Smith 1982, p. 105)

And in offering his affirmation, Smith quotes a passage from Montaigne's "Of Cannibals":

Everyone terms barbarity, whatever is not of his own custom; in truth it seems that we have no view of what is true and reasonable, except the example and idea of the customs and practices of the country in which we live. We may call them barbarians, then, if we are judging by the rules of reason, but not if we are judging by comparison with ourselves, who surpass them in every sort of barbarity. (Smith 1982, p. 105)

Montaigne explicitly defended toleration. But he also, Smith quickly adds, made "a normative claim: we cannot judge another culture by reference to ourselves; we may judge (both another and ourselves), if our criteria are universal 'rules of reason'" (Smith 1982, p. 105). According to Smith, religionists ought to follow Montaigne on the road toward understanding (and tolerating) another and not Phillips, whose view tends toward cultural relativism. Failing to side with Montaigne's universalism over and against Phillips's relativism, "the academy, the enterprise of understanding, the human sciences themselves" become, Smith writes, "impossible in principle since they are fundamentally translation enterprises" (Smith 1982, p. 105), where such translation is only possible vis-à-vis universal rules of reason.¹⁸

¹⁶ To be sure, this characterization of historical methods is delimited to certain uncritical practices, which aim simply to gather data. But this characterization is not intended to be generalizable to all historians: history is a site of debate, with historians engaged in ongoing conversations about the normative implications of their own historiographical methods.

¹⁷ For Smith, nothing necessarily distinguishes what the religionist does in comparison to his or her natural conversation partners—i.e., historical and social-scientific scholars. So far as I can tell, Smith finds nothing problematic about this lack of distinctiveness. Other religionists, e.g., Lewis (2015), Roberts (2013), and Schilbrack (2014), offer strong proposals about what should distinguish the study of religion as undertaken by religionists versus the study of religion undertaken by other humanistic and social-scientific scholars. Later in this section, I will propose my own methodological commitments for the study of religion.

¹⁸ Even though he commends Montaigne, Smith remains unclear about what sorts of judgments and what kind of toleration he himself endorses. This unclarity remains despite his claim that his comparative and interpretive method requires "playing across the 'gap' in the service of some useful end" (Smith 1982, p. 35). Given that we live in an increasingly interconnected and pluralistic world, Brad Gregory presses on the costs of such unclarity. For Gregory, "[i]nstead of seeking to advance

Building on Smith's reading of Montaigne and Phillips, I want to make two proposals. First, in order for understanding and toleration not to collapse into relativism, religionists must also evaluate the religious phenomena under investigation. This proposal is not inimical to Smith's approach; rather, it is consonant with it inasmuch as Smith is committed to the universal rules of reason. Moreover, while prescriptive work may not be as comprehensive as socio-historical description,¹⁹ it nonetheless, following Smith's discussion of cargo cults, may *partially* help. Second, in order for the religionist's quest for intelligibility to be distinguished from that of other humanistic scholars who also study religious phenomena, religionists should both describe *and* prescribe.²⁰ If religionists do not employ both descriptive and prescriptive methodologies, then religious studies, as a discipline, will offer nothing that the fields with which religionists, in their various sub-disciplines, are already allied do not.

To suggest how descriptive methods might be linked to prescriptive ones, I will now constructively read some of John P. Reeder Jr.'s work. In an early essay, "Religious Ethics as a Field and Discipline" (Reeder 1978), Reeder attempts to locate religious ethics—an evaluative and prescriptive sub-discipline—within the broader academic study of religion. Instead of viewing religious ethics as a sub-discipline within religious studies, he suggests understanding it instead as a sub-discipline of either the history of religions or the philosophy of religions. That is to say, religious ethics should be considered, within religious studies, as a sub-sub-discipline instead of a sub-discipline. Including religious ethics under the history of religions, Reeder believes, does not reduce it to either history or social science. In other words, historical study provides data with which religionists may think more thickly about something, providing greater insight into how one or another cultural or religious group creates and employs meaning. Likewise, the social sciences also do not subsume or entirely overlap with religious ethics. Instead, they too provide data upon which religious ethicists may reflect.

Building on this suggestion, Reeder comments on the relationship between religious ethics and the history of religions. "Unlike the historian of religion," he writes, "[religious ethicists] are not concerned with the interrelated aspects of a tradition; we focus on religious beliefs. Moreover . . . we are obviously concerned in particular with moral beliefs and their relation to a wider religious framework" (Reeder 1978, p. 34). The religious ethicist reflects on a tradition's epistemological, metaphysical, and normative elements, attending to how these shape character and guide conduct and ultimately relate to the tradition's broader web of beliefs. The religious ethicist attempts "to analyze specific themes, patterns, or systems of thought" and also "extends to the analysis of moral positions on particular issues" (Reeder 1978, p. 39). Such work can draw upon existing theories in order to explicate elements within a tradition or can proceed cross-culturally. On cross-cultural comparison,

exclusive and divisive truth claims, it is said, we should (note the normative imperative) promote toleration and diversity. But not all diversity. Racism, sexism, and violence, for example, are bad, and so are not to be tolerated. But 'bad' is a moral category. So we need a criterion to distinguish good diversity and toleration from bad diversity and toleration" (Gregory 2011, p. 19). Given the ways in which morality has been relativized and subjectivized, however, Gregory believes moral claims are arbitrary. Therefore, "[d]enials of truth and of nonsubjective moral norms in the names of toleration and diversity are self-defeating and self-contradictory—unless one is prepared to go the whole way, and grant that genocide, rape, slavery, and torture are acceptable. Thankfully, only the pathological would claim as much . . . Yet how to ground truth claims about morality and values amid swarms of incompatible, shifting assertions about them remains a genuine and pressing problem. We *must* make moral arguments if the condemnation of such evils is not to be a matter of mere individual choice or lucky-for-us majoritarian preference—if we are to articulate *why*, for example, exploitive, abusive human relationships are always and everywhere *wrong*" (Gregory 2011, p. 20).

¹⁹ Through my constructive reading of Reeder's views about religious ethics, I briefly will explain why this is the case.

²⁰ The starting point for rendering White Night intelligible, Smith believes, lies in recognizing the humanity of its participants. But "[o]ur task is not to reach closure . . . for we lack the majority of the necessary data . . . we do not know its mythology, its ideology, its soteriology, its sociology—we do not know almost everything we would need to know in order to venture a secure argument" (Smith 1982, p. 111). Smith's comment brings to mind two things. The first thing is empirical: it may be the case that, in time, religionists and other humanistic scholars will have the data necessary to further understand Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and White Night. The second thing is a question: even if, in the future, further data are available, would socio-historical methods render all these data intelligible? Or would precluding ethical, philosophical, and theological inquiry simultaneously preclude the ability to understand Jones's theology, the categorical demands his theology made upon members of the Peoples Temple, and (more fully) the normative vision that led to White Night?

Reeder writes: “students of religious ethics, who can make a major contribution in the formulation of issues and interpretive categories, could collaborate with historians of religion in interdisciplinary efforts” (Reeder 1978, p. 41). Although it is important to attend to socio-historical data, Reeder notes, such attention must enable the religious ethicist “to do normative ethics” (Reeder 1978, p. 48).

Reeder’s early essay suggests a way in which religious ethics may be (a) informed by socio-historical scholarship and (b) located within the broader academic study of religion. In a more recent essay, “What is a Religious Ethic?” (Reeder 1998), he thinks through what sort of work the modifier “religious” does in “religious ethics.” But for Reeder, in thinking about how “religious” modifies “ethics,” there is an antecedent concern: how does one define “religion”? On Reeder’s definition, “[r]eligions search for the good in light of the limits and possibilities of the real” (Reeder 1998, p. 160). His definition has two parts: the good and the real. He offers this broad definition because he wishes to rethink and re-categorize systems of belief that are not commonly understood as religions.²¹ Some system has a vision of the good, he says, “so long as some things are ranked over others” (Reeder 1998, p. 161). The real informs and delimits how one or another religion’s adherent pursues the good: “We have to grasp the limits and possibilities inherent in reality in order to pursue the good. We do not simply adjust our view of the real to fit our vision of the good . . . [O]ur view of the real may even limit what we can imagine as good; it certainly provides the parameters within which we believe the good can be realized” (Reeder 1998, pp. 162–63).²²

In his later essay, Reeder underscores one further point. Following Clifford Geertz (Geertz 1973), Reeder holds that a *religious* worldview is one that answers basic metaphysical questions about the nature of reality. But Reeder also adds that religions provide action-guides on how adherents might, in light of the real, pursue the good. “On this view of religion,” Reeder says, “Albert Camus is apparently a religious thinker. He formulates a view of the good (roughly, happiness, justice, and love), and he relates it to a vision of the possibilities reality affords. He finds no hope for ultimate amelioration or moral purposes in any transhuman force or mode of being, but he has asked and answered religious questions” (Reeder 1998, p. 164). Conceiving religion in a broad sense incorporates traditions or systems of belief that are not ordinarily considered as such. Moreover, Reeder’s broad definition of religion also grants the religionist broader heuristic purchase, “allowing us to see the unexpected and to focus our attention on what we might not otherwise grasp. It points to a deep similarity that unites not only various traditions usually called religious, but those traditions and others often excluded from the religious camp” (Reeder 1998, p. 168).

How might Smith’s comparative and interpretive quest for intelligibility be related to Reeder’s concerns with religious ethics? In other words, how might intelligibility be related to normativity, description to prescription? Before returning to Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and White Night, consider the following admittedly artificial examples.²³

ABCs for Cake. The ABCs are an extinct religious community for whom cake occupied a central role in their ritual eating practices. The ABCs would begin *and* end each of their meals with slices of cake, honoring the cake god, Red Velvet. Owing to the amount of cake the ABCs consumed, diabetes and obesity were not only prevalent but also

²¹ To my mind, there is heuristic value to this broad definition as well. When teaching an undergraduate course on methods and theories, for example, one may be confronted (and confront one’s students) with the challenge of not only defining religion but also (and concomitantly) differentiating religion from other cultural and social systems. For one strategy on differentiating between what is and is not a religion, see (Schilbrack 2014, chp. 5).

²² Compare Reeder’s view about the good and the real to Schilbrack’s definition of “normative realism.” On Schilbrack’s view, “religious communities make recommendations for how one should act in order to solve problems in one’s life, with the understanding that those recommendations accord with the nature of things.” He adds: “people have beliefs insofar as they take something to be true, and they take something as true as soon as they act in any purposive way” (Schilbrack 2014, p. 128).

²³ An anonymous reviewer challenged me with an example involving cake. To clarify my own thinking, I will think through modified versions of that example.

rampant; the number of adherents continued to dwindle, with the community eventually going extinct.

And:

XYZs for Cake. The XYZs are an extant religious community for whom cake occupies a central role in their ritual eating practices. The XYZs begin *and* end a meal each of their meals during leap years with slices of cake, honoring the cake god, Red Velvet. Owing to the amount of cake XYZs consume during leap years, risk of diabetes and obesity spike; however, given that cake consumption is delimited to leap years, the number of adherents continues to remain relatively constant, with the community continuing to exist.

When the religionist comes across these two examples, how might he or she examine them? Following the academic programs set forward by historical and social-scientific scholars, he or she may *describe* the practices of cake-eating found respectively among the ABCs and the XYZs. Attending to the historical, political, and social contexts in which the ABCs and XYZs find themselves, the religionist might focus on the practices according to which meaning is created and maintained. But such descriptive methodologies, which presuppose certain things about human activity, only tell us so much.

Following Tyler Roberts, rendering intelligibility beyond brute description—where “human behavior is an ‘artifact’ of social and historical forces” (Roberts 2013, p. 90)—requires attending to and describing more than the historical, political, and social contexts in which humans are formed. Why is this the case? Roberts importantly distinguishes between humanistic and naturalistic description. On his distinction, humanistic description, on the one side, “puts intentional ideas and actions of human agents at the center of inquiry.” Naturalistic descriptions, on the other side, “treat such intentions and purposes as epiphenomena to be explained in terms of social processes or deep psychological structures of which human subjects are largely unaware” (Roberts 2013, p. 90).

To be sure, Roberts believes that both humanistic and naturalistic inquiries contribute to our understanding of the world and ourselves. Naturalistic inquiry, for example, can explain how individuals relate to groups or how groups maintain power over individuals. In addition to describing *what* humans do, Roberts believes centralizing human activity and intentionality concomitantly requires asking *why* humans do something and *what* such activity means for the human. Thus, “humanistic inquiry becomes a normative endeavor”:

the site in the academy where not only do we try to understand the immense diversity of ways that human beings have in the past and continue in the present to reflect on and represent themselves to themselves and others, but also we take up, inherit, and *respond* to these processes of reflection and representation and the processes of self-formation and social formation that they are bound to but that they also effect and enable. (Roberts 2013, p. 91; emphasis original)

Following Roberts’s comments about humanistic and naturalistic inquiry, then, return to the ABCs and XYZs. The religionist can begin with descriptions of each of their practices—that members of each of these communities consume cake to honor the cake god, Red Velvet. Comparatively, the religionist can also describe that each of these communities consumed cakes according to different religiously inflected schedules—with every meal for the ABCs and with every meal during leap years for the XYZs. In doing so, the religionist provides an account of the practices the ABCs and XYZs respectively pursue to honor the cake god.

But given that each community aims to honor the cake god, doing so through their respective practices of consuming cake, there are distinctions between the two. Why do the ABCs consume cake on one schedule whereas the XYZs consume cake on another? To *understand* why the ABCs consume cake on one schedule whereas the XYZs consume cake on another, requires asking “irreducibly ‘first-personal’ questions” (Pippin 2009, p. 38R; Roberts 2013, p. 90). Asking first-personal questions to

the members of each of the communities informs the religionist about the “reasons people use to explain or justify their behavior to themselves or to those with whom they are engaged in social relations”; they also inform the religionist “about how those reasons, and the sensibilities and dispositions that are bound up with them, move people to do what they do” (Roberts 2013, p. 90). To ask what moves an individual or collectivity to do something—for example, to eat cake according for certain reasons and thus on certain schedules—requires more than describing what that individual or collectivity is doing; it requires asking *why* an individual or collectivity does something and judging *whether* the reasons given for doing that are well-founded, *whether* the practices are good or bad.

If one accepts Roberts’s distinction between the naturalistic and humanistic study of religious agents, humanistic inquiry has the following consequences. Humanistic inquiry, he writes, is both imaginative *and* normative:

the ultimate goal of which is to work from the knowledge of the past and the insightful interpretations it produces to reflect on what it means to be human in the present and what it might mean in the future. In other words, humanistic criticism . . . finds its ultimate goal not in the accurate representation of the human but in the edification or education of human beings. (Roberts 2013, p. 92)

If one deems the continued existence of human communities important, for example, then the continued existence of the XYZs might serve an important lesson. Comparing the eating practices of the ABCs and the XYZs and noting the prevalence of diabetes and obesity in the former, one must make a normative judgement. But this judgment cannot only be a causal-scientific one: that the ABCs ate so much cake that diabetes and obesity were prevalent. But it also needs to be humanistic: that is, it needs to ask for the reasons why the ABCs ate so much cake. Given that both the ABCs and XYZs aim to honor the cake god, Red Velvet, the religionist can further ask why the XYZs contrasted in their practices. And such inquiry can help illuminate what it is to be human, both for the XYZs in particular and (learning from them and their practices) in general.

Following this clarification about humanistic and naturalistic methodologies, how might Smith’s quest for intelligibility be related to Reeder’s concerns with religious ethics? In other words, how might intelligibility be related to normativity, description to prescription? Returning to Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and White Night, let me propose some questions through which the religionist might think together analysis and evaluation, description and prescription, intelligibility and normativity. The religionist should start, first, with socio-historical reconstruction, asking, e.g., who was Jim Jones? What was the Peoples Temple? And what led to the events of White Night? Such reconstruction situates the object of study within its social and historical context. Second, the religionist should add (to whatever extent possible) philosophical elucidation and evaluation.²⁴ What was Jones’s theology? What was the view of the good endorsed by the members of the Peoples Temple? In which way did the real (e.g., the fear of the nuclear destruction of society) delimit their ability to pursue the good (racial equality, etc.)? Such philosophical elucidation and evaluation is important for two reasons: (i) by thinking through Jones’s theology, including his views of the good and the real, the religionist may begin to distill the ways in which this theology was belief-forming

²⁴ On philosophical elucidation and evaluation, consider Lewis’s (Lewis 2015) reconceptualization of the philosophy of religion. According to Lewis, “*philosophy of religion should be conceived less in terms of a fixed set of questions than in terms of philosophical modes of analysis of a range of questions and topics generated both by the study of particular religions and by the process of studying religion itself.* Philosophy of religion so understood is not only attentive to a range of questions generated by diverse religious traditions but also self-conscious about the category of religion itself—including its history—and the way that this and other categories frame our questions and studies in the first place” (Lewis 2015, p. 7). On reconceptualizing the philosophy of religion, see also Schilbrack (2014), who suspects “that most social scientists recognize that their work is shaped by their agreements or disagreements with philosophical positions such as Kant’s account of the limit of knowledge, Popper’s account of explanations, Marx’s account of ideology, and innumerable other philosophical contributions to the scientific study of human life. But philosophers of religion rarely see these philosophical aspects of explanation as a topic to which they can contribute” (Schilbrack 2014, p. 201). He therefore hopes “that the future of the academic study of religions is increasingly informed by the contributions of philosophy” (Schilbrack 2014, p. 203).

and judgment-guiding; and (ii) the religionist should evaluate, inasmuch as Jones and the members of the Peoples Temple are held accountable to the universal rules of reason, the actors promoting White Night. Third, the religionist can move to comparative and normative analysis. What examples, other than Euripides and the cargo cults, might the religionist compare with Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and White Night? In which way did the actors in these other cases react to infringements upon their community and good? If they acted differently than those involved with White Night, the religionist should assess whether the members of the Peoples Temple acted rightly or wrongly and perhaps recommend another course of action.²⁵

Proceeding along these lines accomplishes two things. First, given that these questions include description and prescription, intelligibility and normativity, the study of religious phenomena becomes more holistic. That is to say, the religionist is no longer limited to thinking about whether certain religious phenomena are comparable to others in human history. Nor are they limited to evaluating whether, in some anachronistic register, the religious actors under examination were warranted in believing something to be the case or in acting in a certain way. Second, the religionist's methodology, inasmuch as he or she employs descriptive and prescriptive methods, is differentiated from that of other humanistic scholars, with whom the religionist may already be in dialogue. Failing to employ both description and prescription, there's nothing unique that religious studies *as a discipline* offers to the study of religious phenomena in particular and to the humanities more generally. While the right to study religion may be warranted, inasmuch as various humanistic disciplines aim to render intelligible religious data, religionists must emphasize and license their own right to approach them.²⁶

4. Conclusions

In the quest for intelligibility, Smith calls on religionists to examine religion's uncivil moments. Leaving such events unmentioned and unexamined, he says, is to fail to fulfill one's obligations as a member of the academy. To render intelligibility, he suggests comparison with other events, highlighting that even events like White Night are not unique in human history. If religionists don't attempt to render intelligibility, he emphasizes, they forfeit their right to work in humanities. Underwriting Smith's view is the Enlightenment belief that nothing human is foreign.

After giving an account of Jones, the Peoples Temple, and White Night, I asked three questions. First, does the socio-historical religionist's methods exhaust the quest for intelligibility? Second, through using socio-historical methods, what does illustrating that events like White Night are not exceptional in human history achieve, especially because such events keep reoccurring? And, third, what (if anything) distinguishes the religionist's quest for intelligibility from that of other humanistic scholars? In an attempt to answer these questions, I claimed that (a) in order to render intelligibility and (b) to distinguish the religionist's task from that of other humanistic scholars the religionist should employ description and prescription, intelligibility and normativity.

To develop the second half of this proposal, I constructively read some of Reeder's work. For Reeder, the religious ethicist's task is to examine the moral elements of a tradition, either on

²⁵ This last question is inspired partly by Gregory (2011) genealogical historical methodology. See also (Lewis 2015), "Conclusion: Hegel or Nietzsche?"

²⁶ Other religionists have offered different proposals. For example, while holding that normative claims are ineliminable in the study of religion, Lewis proposes that religionists shift their attention "to the justification offered for particular norms. The moves that exclude one from the discipline are appeals to an authority that is claimed not to require justification, appeals to an authority conceived as unquestionable, and appeals to private forms of justification for which, in principle, no argument can be given" (Lewis 2015, pp. 45–46). Schilbrack (2014, chp. 7) conceives religious studies as a tripartite discipline, with religionists committing to description (i.e., "describ[ing] religious beliefs, practices, experiences, and institutions accurately, which is to say, to identify them in a way that captures how they are understood by the practitioners themselves" (Schilbrack 2014, p. 180)), explanation (i.e., "offering an account that answers the questions of what causes religious communities to subscribe to their religious beliefs, what generates their experiences, why their practices are performed, and what functions institutions have" (Schilbrack 2014, p. 182)), and evaluation (i.e., "evaluat[ing] religious beliefs, experiences, practices, and institutions normatively, which is to say, to make an assessment of their value" (Schilbrack 2014, p. 185)).

its own or in comparison with another, and offer normative proposals. By considering socio-historical data, he also suggested that the ethicist's task might be fruitfully complemented. Reeder's definition of religion is also useful in this regard because it gives religionists two linchpins—i.e., the good and the real—by which to situate, compare, and evaluate (to lesser or greater degrees) religious phenomena, focusing on the reasons the religious actors involved give in support of their beliefs and/or behaviors. In order to link descriptive and prescriptive methodologies, I also drew from Tyler Roberts's distinction between humanistic and naturalistic inquiries. This distinction demands attending not only to *what* particular humans do but also *why* they do something and *what* that means for them in particular and for humans more generally.

Synthesizing the methodological commitments propounded respectively by Smith and Reeder amplifies the extent to which religionists may seek to render intelligibility, combining comparison and interpretation with evaluation and prescription. Moreover, by synthesizing these methodologies, the religionist's task is distinguished from that of other humanistic scholars who also study religion. The proposal that I have offered takes as basic the responsibility to bring intelligibility, suggesting that the religionist draw upon the resources available within the field as a whole instead of segregating ourselves according to our sub-disciplinary location. This activity is not only attendant on being a member of the academy; it is more basically, I believe, a fundamental *human* activity. Those of us in the academy, though, are in a privileged and responsibility-conferring place that requires us to bring sustained critical reflection to all spheres of human activity, especially those like Jonestown that are repulsive.

Acknowledgments: I presented an earlier version of this essay on a panel in the Philosophy of Religion Section at the American Academy of Religion (2015), and I am grateful to audience members for their comments and questions. I discussed a revised version with the fellows at the NEH Institute on "Problems in the Study of Religion" (2016), where I benefited from conversation and feedback from the other fellows. For comments and encouragement, special thanks to Neilesh Bose, Natalie Carnes, Travis Cooper, Dallas Gingles, Sam Hopkins, Peter Kaufman, Matt Kaul, Sam Kessler, Sean Larsen, Tal Lewis, C.M. Libby, Will Love, Josh Lupo, Chuck Mathewes, Charlie McCrary, Anil Mundra, Jock Reeder, Kurtis Schaeffer, Gary Slater, Corey Sparks, Victor Thasiah, Matthew Whelan, Alex Winder, and three anonymous reviewers. I have also benefited from reading Chuck Mathewes's and Parimal Patil's respective unpublished work on re-envisioning method and theory in the study of religion.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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