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Editorial

Description, Prescription, and Value in the Study of Religion

Bharat Ranganathan

Center for Theology, Science and Human Flourishing, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA; Bharat.Ranganathan.2@nd.edu

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Abstract: The study of religion is commonly divided into two sides. On the one side is the descriptive approach, including social scientific and historical scholars who seek to account for religion as it has been practiced. On the other side is the prescriptive approach, including religious ethicists, philosophers of religion, and theologians who seek to evaluate and prescribe religious practices and beliefs. But is this divide desirable or even tenable? Some scholars believe so, holding that the proper aim of religious studies ought to be delimited to the analysis and description of religious phenomena. Such a view, however, excludes those who pursue prescriptive inquiry. The contributors to this focus issue are trained primarily in either descriptive or prescriptive methodologies. Through their respective contributions, they highlight how they understand and may offer ways past the seemingly ossified division within religious studies, focusing especially on the nature and place of value in the study of religion.

Keywords: comparison; description; history of religion; method; normativity; philosophy of religion; prescription

The essays in this special issue were originally presented on a panel in the Philosophy of Religion Section during the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in November 2015. The panel brought together several junior scholars in order to reflect on and offer proposals about the intellectual and methodological divisions that continue to permeate religious studies. How might the intellectual scene in religious studies, with which the contributors are concerned, be characterized?

Despite sharing a common object of study, the academic study of religion is commonly divided into two (purportedly incompatible) sides. On the one side is the *descriptive* approach, which includes (among others) social-scientific, textual, and historical scholars, who seek to account for religion as it has been practiced. For these scholars, the study of religion ought to be “neutral” or “scientific” in its approach to religious data.¹ On the other side is the *prescriptive* approach, which includes (among others) philosophers of religion, religious ethicists, and theologians, whose scholarship is confessional and/or evaluative. For these scholars, the study of religion is enriched through the examination, evaluation, and prescription of religious beliefs and norms.²

¹ For example, Donald Wiebe (Wiebe 2012b) calls for a “science of religion” that is to be distinguished from theology, where the latter “symbolizes religious mentation whether in the narrative pattern of thought of the naive devotee or of the discursive structure of the reflective and systematic thought of the intellectually more sophisticated devotee” (Wiebe 2012a, p. 7, n. 2). According to Wiebe, “the study of religion gained a political identity within the academic community (i.e., the scholarly-scientific community), precisely by distinguishing itself from theology” (Wiebe 2012a, p. 7). Compare Wiebe with Russell McCutcheon: “In the academic study of religion much work has been done to distance our methods and language from the ways of the religious devotee, especially the Christian theologian, since our field is highly influenced by the legacy of European Christianity” (McCutcheon 2014, pp. 38–39). See also (McCutcheon 2001).

² “The religious studies subfields of South Asian religions and Buddhist studies,” Parimal Patil comments, “are currently suffering what may be called a tyranny of social and cultural history, and a closely related distrust of philosophy. The idea