Religious discourse and Sommers’ theory of truth: A response to Hans H. Penner

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1. Penner and Davidson

Theorists of religion who turn to contemporary analytic philosophy for insights and guidance would do well to do so with care and caution. Fashion can often be mistaken for substance, especially by non-natives. Still, one welcomes visitors who come with curiosity and respect and are willing to share what they take away with others back home. Recently Hans H. Penner (1995) has used the influential ideas of the philosopher Donald Davidson to show why (and to some extent, how) philosophical semantics matters to the study of religion. Davidson’s theses concerning truth, meaning, holism, conceptual scheme, and mind are invoked to show, for example, that “religion is not sui generis” (Penner 1995: 242), that religious beliefs and practices are “holistically structured … [and] related to a wider web of beliefs and practices which, if Davidson is correct, we cannot correctly believe we are mistaken about in any massive way” (Penner 1995: 242-243), that religious propositional attitudes and beliefs are holistically related to religious acts, rituals, rites, etc. (Penner 1995: 243), that “if Davidson’s total theory about rationality, truth and language is correct then there is no need for a special theory of semantics for religion” (Penner 1995: 244), that there are no “primitive” religions, no religions constituting alternative, nonnatural conceptual schemes, no cryptic “religious” languages to be decoded (Penner 1995: 244-248).

Now, as it happens, all of these conclusions can be drawn from Davidson’s “total theory”. Penner has a clear picture of that theory and is right to draw out its consequences for religious theory. Moreover, the conclusions he draws are, to my mind at least, true. Religion is indeed a natural, holistically structured human phenomenon, amenable to explanation in terms of (inter alia) the semantics of natural language. But many philosophers and theo-

1. Penner offers a more extensive discussion of holism as it applies in religious studies in Penner (1994).
ists of religion could arrive at these same conclusions without following Davidson. Such conclusions are necessary but not sufficient conditions for Davidson’s semantic theory. And I am certain that Penner would not want to say otherwise. So what? Well, to begin with, there are other philosophical theories of semantics (especially truth theories) that could provide a foundation for the understanding of religious language, belief and practice equally attractive to the student of religion. I wish to offer below a summary of just such a theory. My recommendation of it over Davidson’s is based on its providing a far more natural, intuitively plausible account of truth. Davidson’s own theory of truth is the consolation he drew after wrangling long and hard with coherence and correspondence theories. The theory I offer here, by contrast, is the result of an attempt to account for our ordinary ways with “true”. It is a version of correspondence. And even Davidson and other modern critics of correspondence (and realism in general) are willing to admit that a view of truth as some kind of correspondence with reality is our natural, default theory.

2. A new correspondence theory

While early analytic philosophers like Russell, Moore, and Austin were ready to accept and even defend some version of the correspondence theory of truth, most contemporary analysts (especially Strawson, Quine, Dummett, and Davidson) reject any such theory. Schematically, a correspondence theory simply states that the truth of what is true is a matter of its correspondence with something that makes it true (facts, states of affairs, circumstances, situations, etc.). Such a theory is vulnerable in at least three places. First, there is the problem of determining just what are the “truth bearers”. Are they sentences (either types or tokens thereof), propositions, or what? And, if they are not sentences, how are they related to sentences? Second, and more critically, what exactly is the nature of the relation of correspondence appealed to here? Finally, and most crucially, what are “truth makers”?

In a now famous debate in 1950 Strawson was seen to have bested Austin’s attempt to build a correspondence theory of truth simply by raising serious doubts concerning the ontological status of Austin’s proffered truth makers. Strawson was willing to concede that there had to be a cat and a mat and the cat had to be on the mat for it to be true that the cat was on the mat. But he saw no reason to posit, in addition, something like a fact or circum-