Religion and method in the study of religion: Response

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In what follows I offer a critical reading of the essays by Martin Jaffee, Peter Byrne, and Donald Wiebe. I highlight the important and controversial issues involved and juxtapose some of the views of the authors. The authors will, at least in part, undoubtedly disagree with some of my views. I see no reason, however, for a simple summary of the essays, and my own contentions should provide both a useful way into the essays as well as further grist for the industrial-strength mill that these papers are intended to be.

1. Martin Jaffee: “Fessing up”

In “Fessing up in theory: On professing and confessing in the religious studies classroom”, Martin Jaffee defends “the study of religion as a distinct area of humanistic inquiry – a disciplined interpretation of the historical, social, and symbolic dimensions of religion as a cultural form.” He claims that a separate department or program of religious studies provides an “interdisciplinary ‘clearing-house’ of perspectives” that makes the “richest study of religion possible”. He sees the expertise within such a department or program as a corrective to “traditions much discussed (and often misconstrued) by sociologists, historians, anthropologists, and political scientists”, and he talks about religious studies as placing “empirical and theoretical pressure upon the disciplinary blind spots of models of religion developed by our colleagues in the humanistic and social sciences.” These views are, of course, highly controversial, and the charge of “blind spots” and the bringing to bear of “empirical and theoretical pressure” are all charges that social scientists in particular, but others in the humanities as well, are not only likely to reject but, ironically perhaps, attribute instead to those in religious studies itself. Jaffee also overlooks the fact that those in religious studies departments, including so-called specialists in traditions, usually are these very historians, anthropologists, biblical scholars, etc. Perhaps the only unique religious studies persona is that of the “historian of religions”. But due to
methodological and theoretical neglect and even disdain on the part of historians of religion, it remains unclear just what that persona is. Indeed, the vagaries of “history of religions” approaches are sometimes brazenly flaunted as a strength and virtue.

Jaffee’s main concern, however, is not with defending religious studies, but with “the distinctive pedagogical environment which the departmental or programmatic context fosters (or ought to foster) ... and why theorizing about religion and its study is, in principle, crucial to our pedagogy”. What is important for teaching, according to Jaffee, is not that one’s interpretations be value-free – this is neither desirable nor possible – but that one is aware of one’s “interpretive commitments”. Theorizing “represents the systematic cultivation of intellectual self-consciousness”. Like the ideas of art, history, and literature, “religion” is itself a “cultural construction” – the product of “traditions of theoretical discourse ... [and] categorical frameworks ... that enable certain comparative or constructive intellectual tasks”. Nevertheless, because those who study religion “have a certain amount of negative tradition to overcome, theorizing our subject matter is a pressing concern for us in a way that it has not been for other more traditional humanistic fields”. In short, Jaffee sees the teaching of specific theories of religion in which theory and data are constructively brought together as essential to a religious studies curriculum. Theory is an essential part of the task of enabling students to “adduce cogent grounds for distinguishing ‘academic’ knowledge of religion from the ‘experiential’ knowledge of participants of religious traditions”.

Jaffee claims that many students routinely confuse “interpretation” of religion (“what we do in class”) with the “active pursuit” of religion. What he does not say is that this confusion is fostered by teachers in religious studies, and that some of our courses go so far as to deny that there is any confusion to begin with. Professors see nothing mistaken or confused about pursuing a religious agenda, personal and professional, in the classroom. This is the principal question that must be addressed.

Jaffee defends a broadly Geertzian view of religion – the view most recognizably the standard in religious studies. “My way of teaching about ‘religion’ ... is to focus attention on the complex means by which cultures transmit their fundamental pictures of reality ... comprehensive constructions of the world’s order” and how such conceptions are taken up and reflected in their lives and ethos. He says that he conceives of “the comparative religions classroom as a place to model a theoretically articulate pluralism regarding the cultural definition of Truth”, and that “obedience to the morality of the classroom’s intellectual project ... institutionalizes and privileges ironic distance as the normative standpoint for interpreting the world”. I am unclear as to what is meant by a “cultural definition of Truth”,