RELIGION CONFRONTS THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Review article


Very few recent books in the academic study of religion encompass the incisive terrain of scholarship and the methodological intersections of religion and the social sciences than Robert A. Segal's, Religion and the Social Sciences: Essays on the Confrontation. Segal brings together thirteen previously published articles (between 1976-87) that are connected, revamped, and defended to support his argumentative thesis that the confrontation referred to in the title is not between religion and the social sciences. The real confrontation exists between religious studies and the social sciences.

Religionists pursue and defend religious studies, according to Segal, and hence the chief logical objection argued for in the book is the problematic identification of religion with religious studies. Once that problematic identification is exposed, religionists defending religious studies against the challenges of the social sciences (1) deny that the social sciences deal at all with religion by (2) further denying the social sciences can explain religion. Since (3) the truth of religion is beyond social scientific explanation, (4) religion can only be interpreted and understood in irreducibly religious ways. Therefore, (5) only religionists can affirm and account for the religiosity, irreducibility, and autonomy of religion. Claims (1) to (5) are construed by Segal to provide the (not always consistent) religionist rejoinder to the social scientific challenge.

The thirteen essays in the book deal explicitly and in some cases implicitly with claims (1) to (5). Segal presents the social scientific side of the confrontation with religious studies through (1) paradigm case analyses of the social scientific approach, (2) methodological oppositions of that approach to religionist ones, and (3) arguments he develops for the cogency of the social scientific approach to religion. This context of the confrontation provides Segal with an analytical framework for focusing on
several major theoretical, methodological, and empirical issues as "reductionism", "explanation", "understanding", "interpretation", "theory", "myth-ritual", "belief", "sacred-secular", "origin-function-meaning-truth", "relativism", etc., that generate and invite terminological and substantive discussions and clarifications in virtually all of the essays in the book. This same context of confrontation is enlarged to include scholars who have engaged Segal in published discussions and clarifications that are included in the addendum to his essays, for example, "In Defense of Reductionism" and "Interpreting and Explaining Religion". Almost without exception, these discussions and extended clarifications give a reader a clearer sense of Segal's conceptual style of developing arguments and counter-arguments, affirmations and negations, confrontations and resolutions that are advanced in dealing with the spectrum of topics considered in and through these essays that present his position in clear, incisive, and reasonably complete form. For precisely these reasons, the remainder of this review will be devoted entirely to the first article since the others that follow are shaped and influenced (in so many ways) by it.

The first essay, "In Defense of Reductionism," presents Segal's first confrontation (in a sequence of several) between religious studies and the social sciences over the problem of reductionism. Religionists who follow the paradigm example of Mircea Eliade argue against and reject the reductive explanations of the social sciences. The religionists' defense of nonreductionism, Segal argues, rests on their claims that (1) religion is understood and enforced from the believer's irreducible point of view rooted in the sacred, that (2) religion is a sui generis and autonomous domain of study, and (3) the truth of religion is beyond explanation. The comparative method, the process of Verstehen, and the phenomenological approach are described by Segal as three other possible (and in some ways questionable) defenses of nonreductionism. The nonreductionism that is ostensibly justified by these claims is positioned over against the reductionism entailed by some explanations of religion in the social sciences.

The reductionism of some (especially classical) social scientists, according to Segal, does not (1) remain content with the privileged access understanding of the believer's point of view, assume (2) that religion is just a sui generis and autonomous phenomenon, claim (3) that religion is only expressed through surface and manifest levels, declare (4) that reductive analyses are (theoretically) superior to nonreductive analyses of religion, and conclude (5) that the nonbeliever is excluded from interpreting and explaining religion on a-priori grounds. The reductionism that is empirically justified by these claims is defined, according to Segal, as an