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AAR ARTICLE

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I argue first that 'religion' is either a natural-kind sortal or an artifactual-kind sortal. Second, that whichever view is taken by practitioners of the academic study of religion, some normative understandings are implied. Third, that the constitutive desire of those who practice the academic study of religion—to do not-theology—therefore cannot be realized. And fourth, that the future of the academic study of religion is unlikely to be long or rosy.

EVERY ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE needs a formal object. Such an object draws the gaze of those who work within the discipline: it's what they intend, in the technical sense of that term. It also organizes the sub-disciplines and particular studies that constitute the discipline: it gives them their form. The formal object of theology, for example, is God, that of anthropology the human being, of political science the state, of legal studies the law, of history the human past, of mathematics number, and so on. In the absence of a formal object, there is no discipline. The formal object of religious studies is, presumably, religion.

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"Presumably" because disciplines are ordinarily labeled by sortal terms that pick out their distinctive object, and the "religion" of "religious studies" appears to serve this function. Sortal terms are words (usually nouns) intended to sort things into kinds. All nouns do this by indicating that a particular is a member of a class, and thus sorting or classifying it or by being used as a descriptor of the class in question. A judicious use of the term "dog," for instance, may denote some particular living being as one, or it may provide criteria for distinguishing dogs from non-dogs. Just so for the term "religion."

Sorting things into kinds is unavoidable. But sorting or classifying is itself a complex act, and one of the facts that provides this complexity is that kinds themselves come in kinds, and sortals must be analyzed differently depending upon which kind of kind they sort things into. The two fundamental kinds of kind are natural and artifactual, and in the case of the "religion" in "religious studies" there may be reasonable disagreement about whether it is a natural or an artifactual kind.

A natural kind is generated by the order of things, independently of human effort or intelligence. The individual things that belong to a natural kind belong to it because they have a nature, a set of characteristics conjointly sufficient to provide them membership in the natural kind. This is one sense in which a kind is natural: its members belong to it by nature, in virtue of what they are. A second sense in which a kind is natural is that it belongs to the nature of the cosmos. It is a proper constituent part of the ordered beauty (consider the etymological link between "cosmos" and "cosmetic") of everything there is. The set of prime numbers is a natural kind in this sense (or so I think; you will not think so if you take numbers to exist only as artifacts, objects we have brought into being by an act of the conceptual imagination), whereas the set of trousers is not. It is an artifactual kind because we have created it out of whole cloth: without us and our interests (especially our legs), no trousers.

It is reasonably disputable whether there are any natural kinds. Those who think there are not—who think that all sortals denote artifacts that would not exist without our needs and imaginations—are, in my judgment, wrong, but they are not unreasonable. It is not reasonably disputable whether there are any artifactual kinds, however. Trousers, decaffeinated coffee, political action committees, acts of genocide, sexual identities, Sanskrit works in *anustubh* meter—these are all (at least) artifactual kinds in the sense that the definitions of the sortal terms that label them and the existence of the things that meet their definitions have our own acts of making (our *artes*, whence "artifactual") as conditions necessary for their existence.

May an artifactual kind also be a natural kind? No. If our interests and our makings are necessary for the coming-to-be of a kind, then it is arti-

factual and not natural. We do not discover but rather bring into being artifactual kinds, whereas we can only discover natural ones. But some care is in order here. Among acts that appear to us to be makings, fully dependent for their occurrence upon us and our interests, may be some that are in fact not so. Perhaps, when J. S. Bach wrote the C-major prelude that begins *Das wohltemperierte Klavier*, when Andrew Wiles proved Fermat's Last Theorem, and when Augustine sorted the cosmos into things to be used and things to be enjoyed, they were not making but participatively discovering and then displaying. If so, what they displayed did not have human makings among the conditions necessary for their existence, and, if that is so, it follows that attempts to sort these things into kinds may yield not artifactual but natural kinds. The distinction between natural and artifactual kinds is an ontological one, a distinction in the order of being, whereas the questions of how we engage in acts of sorting and how we come to know (or take ourselves to come to know) whether a particular kind is natural or artifactual belong to the order of knowing: they are epistemic. As is usually the case, there is no easy way (which is not to say that there is no way at all) to move from the one to the other.

"Religion" has many interpretations. It is not logically possible that all of them denote natural kinds, though it is possible that some do. In my judgment (and in the judgment of most Christians, Jews, and Muslims), at least one does: if "religion" is construed to denote human action that springs from desire for closer union (*religare*, to rebind bonds broken or loosed) with the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus, as distinct from any particular being in the cosmos, then it does denote a natural kind for the fact that each of us desires closer union with the God who brought us into being out of nothing is a fact about us that depends solely upon the God who made us and not upon our own interests or makings. This construal of the (Latin) word *religio* was, approximately, that common to premodern Christian thinkers writing in that language (consult, for a good example of this usage, Augustine's treatise *De vera religione*). In this sense *religio* approached *cultus* in meaning and referred to the visible patterns of action by which we respond to God as distinct from the created order, even if not always (or usually) under that description. Taken in this sense "religion" does pick out a natural kind and can rightly be used for constructive intellectual work without having to worry about the justificatory problems belonging to working with artifactual-kind sortals.

This understanding of "religion" is Christian-theological. It can fund work of various kinds, for instance that of ordering human practices according to the degree to which they are explicitly aware of the God to whom these practices in fact always respond or (what is approximately the same) that of an instrument for the criticism of idolatry. And so on.

These are all enterprises proper to Christian theology (and perhaps also to other theologies), and they provide examples of practices that would give a meaningful future to the study of religion. On this view the study of religion would return to the warm embrace of Christian theology, where it properly belongs. Even there, though, it would not prove terribly important, for "religion" is not a *terminus technicus* of more than peripheral significance to Christian theology, and all the work it does in the service of that enterprise can be done in other ways.

You may not agree that "religion," so construed, picks out a natural kind. If you do not, this will be because you have a different understanding of the order of things than the one (or several) implied by so regarding "religion." Because the understanding in question is the truth, you will, to the extent that your understandings contradict or are otherwise incompatible with this one, be in error. It is very unlikely, however, that I or anyone else can provide arguments to convince you that you are in error, which in turn means that your error need not be unreasonable. It will, nonetheless, remain an error. Any affirmation or denial that a particular construal of "religion" picks out a natural kind will necessarily be committed to a particular and disputable (rationally disputable, usually) understanding of the order of things. That this is true both of the affirmation I have made and the denial you make (if you make one) is therefore quite normal. It would be confused to expect anything else. Justifications for and models of the study of religion that depend upon understanding "religion" to denote a natural kind, therefore, will, if they are to be self-reflective and thoughtful, have to bear the burden of depicting the understanding of the order of things with which they are intimate. The extent to which they do this will be the extent to which they find those understandings disputed. On this, as on every other formal ground, there is no meaningful distinction to be drawn between theological and nontheological natural-kind construals of "religion."

Historically, too, attempts to construct nontheological natural-kind construals of "religion" have almost always (perhaps always; I am not aware of any exceptions) proceeded by way of abstraction from explicitly theological (and usually Christian-theological and even more usually Protestant-Christian-theological) such understandings. Such abstraction, it appears to have been thought, would yield construals whose implied understanding of the order of things would be less disputable because more scientific than those implied by explicitly theological accounts. But neither the goal of leaving disputability behind nor that of providing a construal that could order a *Geisteswissenschaft* has been realized. It should not take more than five minutes' thought to see why these goals have not been realized and are unlikely to be so in the future.

But suppose you do not think that there is a natural kind called "religion." Suppose you think, instead, that "religion" picks out an artifactual kind. Most practitioners of nontheological studies of religion probably think this. If you are in this camp, one justification for the term's use in a program of intellectual work is not available to you. You cannot say that you intend to use it because under a certain interpretation it is grounded in the order of things. But there are other justifications. Every term of art is ornamented and burnished for some purpose and at the service of some interest. Depicting and explaining (and, sometimes, defending) those interests and purposes is what is needed if a particular understanding of "religion" as an artifactual kind is to be the subject of analysis rather than a tool to be displayed and deployed. And, in addition, in order for the term of art to show its value, it must be used to prompt and order interesting, fruitful, and beautiful intellectual work—interesting and beautiful at least to those who perform it, that is, and perhaps also to others.

One man's beauty, fruitfulness, and interest, however, is another woman's ugliness, sterility, and conceit. Consider, for example, the (London) Tate Modern's decision, when it opened at the beginning of this new century, to sort its artworks by genre rather than by chronology or artist. There is, for example, a landscape gallery and a portrait gallery in which works of each kind hang without reference to period or artist. There are (at least) two sortals in use here: "artwork" (the Tate Modern displays two- and three-dimensional pieces of visual art) and (to use one of the examples mentioned) "portrait." Let us suppose that nothing about the order of things requires the use of either sortal (there are reasonable disputes to be had about this, especially with respect to the category "artwork," but I will leave them aside); neither is their combination in this relation rooted in the order of things. The decision to order and display artworks by genre rather than by period, then, is artifactual all the way down. What form might objections to or defenses of such a decision take?—for there were plenty of both when the Tate Modern opened. There are only two broad patterns of argument that make sense.

The first is an appeal to tradition, which might press the desirability of continuing to sort things in the way they have been sorted in the past or the desirability of sorting them in new ways. In the former case the weight of the past is taken to constrain contemporary sorting projects. In the latter case the same weight is taken to suggest the desirability of something new. Passions run strong and deep on both sides, and much of the debate about the Tate Modern's classificatory scheme was shot through with tropes of this sort.

The second is an appeal to result or effect. A novel sorting, it might be said, provokes new thoughts, thoughts that would not have been prompted by traditional sortings. And, moreover, these are thoughts we

want to have, thoughts that move us in desirable directions. Perhaps, we want to think about depictions of the human face on canvas in a formal way, without reference to historical location. Our goal might be a typology of techniques of depicting skin texture in oils, or of the range of flesh tones deployed, or . . . well, the possibilities are endless. On the other, historicist, side, it might be argued that ordering and displaying artworks by historical period prompts thoughts about the painterly norms of the period, the relations among painters contemporary with one another, and so on. And, of course, that these are thoughts we want to have. An argument of this sort typically has two moments: a descriptive and a normative one. Descriptively, the likely results of deploying a particular classificatory scheme are presented: these are the thoughts we will likely have if we use our sortals in these ways. Then, normatively, it will be said that these are the thoughts we ought to want.

Exactly the same is true of debates about the proper use of sortals like "religion" or "world religions" or "indigenous religions." It is certainly true that different classificatory schemes prompt different thoughts. There is no difficulty about the first kind of argument in favor of one over another artifactual kind. But the second kind of argument is more problematic. Any argument of that kind will inevitably appeal, in the end, to convictions about the order of things or about the kinds of thoughts that it is proper for human beings to have. Consider the following examples.

In "A Matter of Class: Taxonomies of Religion," an essay first published in 1996 and then republished in a recent (2004) collection of his essays, Smith (2004) discusses the taxonomic difficulties involved in ordering the entries for the 1995 *Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion*. In this essay he claims that a hallmark of a science, a *sine qua non* for its existence, is a fruitful and widely agreed taxonomy of the phenomena embraced by the science. He also claims that no such taxonomy has been arrived at in the study of religion. Then, in discussing particular taxonomic moves—the deployment of particular sortals—he makes particular recommendations, positive and negative, about which sortals (he prefers *taxa*, being dazzled by biology rather than by philosophy) ought to be used in studying religion. Item, "I see little theoretical justification for the continued use of this [world religion] taxon" (Smith 2004: 169); item, "It would be better to classify these other 'fundamentalisms' as instances of 'nativism' or 'revitalization movements'. . ." (Smith 2004: 175)—he is here objecting to what he takes to be a misapplication of the term "fundamentalism." These claims, and many others like them, are on the face of its autobiographical ejaculations. They elicit, from this reader at least, sympathy. Can Smith really find no theoretical justification for deploying the sortal "world religion?" If he cannot, the only explanation is that he

lacks historical learning or intellectual imagination, and because his work shows him to be abundantly equipped with both, this clearly cannot be the explanation. And so the explanation is that when he says he can find no theoretical justification, what he means is that he does not like the ones he finds. The sortal "world religion" was developed and is still often deployed for the properly theoretical purpose of depicting alien practice as a consumable good accommodatable by late-capitalist appetites. That is a theoretical justification for the sortal's use. I have no sympathy whatever for that purpose (I doubt that Smith would have, either), but it certainly is a theoretical justification, and it is not hard to imagine others.

What Smith (2004) should have said, had coyness not prevented him, is that the sortals he does not like are in the service of constructive and theoretical goals he does not share, whereas those he does like, inevitably, are intertwined with theoretical interests he shares. That, after all, is why he likes them. The coyness sometimes evident in Smith's theoretical work (it is not always there: Smith is a sophisticated and stimulating theoretical thinker, among the most so of those doing method and theory in the study of religion, and so he at least sometimes understands what he does; many others do not) is easy enough to explain. It serves as a cloak for disputable (in my view often false) understandings of human beings, human intellectual work, and the cosmos in which human beings do such work. Such understandings must be cloaked, for if they were not, if they were laid before the reader naked, their nature would be too clear for comfort: it would be obvious that they are (or at least that they include) axiomatic assumptions about the topics just mentioned, assumptions shrouded by words like "science" (Smith's chief desideratum) in order that their axiomatic and disputable nature not be put to the question.

It is not, of course, that there is anything wrong in advocating the use of particular sortals and criticizing the use of others in the name of particular intellectual purposes and on the grounds of disputable assumptions. All intellectual work does and must proceed in this way. But it is disingenuous or confused or both to pretend that this is not so by saying, declaratively and grandly, that you can see no theoretical interest in someone else's sortals, purposes, and axioms. And it is very common for theoretical work in and on the study of religion to proceed in just this fashion.

There is an explanation: it is that the study of religion as an academic discipline came into being with theology as its constitutive other, that which it was determined at all costs not to be. The passion to avoid theology is a deep and powerful one, informed in equal measures, usually, by fear and condescension. It is this passion more than anything else which produces coyness about disputable axiomatic understandings. Theologians, after all, have such understandings in spades and will tell you about them

at length if you give them a chance. (I have indulged that desire to some small extent in the early part of this essay.) One way to do not-theology is to veil your disputable axiomatic understandings with the powerful protective charms of words like "science" (*Religionswissenschaft* was once a popular term for this version of not-theology) or "history" (e.g., "history of religions" is a disciplinary term still used at the University of Chicago). Such coy veilings are there not to provoke desire for what might soon be unveiled; they are there to deflect thought, as is very apparent in the work of Bruce Lincoln, whose "Theses on Method," first published in 1996, provides my second and last example.

Lincoln's (1996) theses take the form of an elucidation of what the disciplinary sortal "history of religions" denotes, together with a description of what the discipline opposes. Lincoln is very clear that history of religions is not-theology (thesis 3). It is, instead, a "rigorous critical practice" (2) whose formal object (not his language) is the "temporal, contextual, situated, interested,. . .(&c)" (3) aspects of religious discourse. It—history of religions, that is—asks "destabilizing and irreverent questions" (4) and does so as a matter of conscience (5). It (by the time we reach thesis 9, history of religions has become, without remainder, "critical inquiry") is above all concerned with the *cui bono* question. The theses are a programmatic statement of what historians of religion ought to do and not to do.

The first feature worthy of note about these theses is that they make Smith's (2004) coyness look positively exhibitionist. Lincoln (1996) says nothing at all about why what he describes is good to do. In this his theses are like the rules of baseball, which also do not tell you why baseball is good to play. They simply tell you what you must do if baseball is what you would like to play. But in another respect Lincoln's theses are quite unlike the rules of baseball. The baseball rule book does not keep contrasting its rules with those of cricket, to the latter's detriment. But Lincoln's theses do just this: historians of religion must not insulate their object of study against critical inquiry, they must not treat religion as a *sui generis* object, and so on. So the theses have a characteristic not shared by rule books: they identify the game they advocate by showing how it differs from another.

There is in this feature an anxious normativity. Lincoln (1996) is worried that historians of religion may not get it right. He is concerned that they may fail to be good irreverent destabilizers and may fall instead to being cheerleaders, voyeurs, or retailers of import goods (13). It is as though the compilers of the baseball rule book were to show a concern that the pitcher might forget himself and start bowling. But Lincoln is not only anxious that historians of religion should get it right; he also thinks that history of religions as he construes it is a better thing to do than at least some of the alternatives he canvasses. Sometimes this is quite explicit, as when (13)

he calls some of these alternatives less than respectable. But it is implicit throughout: performing critical inquiry is for Lincoln a matter of conscience, and the performance is deeply articulated with other convictions about what human beings are like, what a just social order would be like, and how intellectual work in general ought be undertaken.

Lincoln (1996) is, however, even more coy than Smith (2004) about the nature, defensibility, and implications of his anxious normativity. He does not, in these theses, show any awareness that the understandings he deploys of all the matters just mentioned are of exactly the same kind, formally speaking, as those implicit (and sometimes explicit) in the practices he despises and insults. I, for example, do my intellectual work within and at the service of a particular theological tradition, that of Catholic Christianity. This, for Lincoln, would be an instance of less-than-respectable cheerleading. But I am prepared, to the extent my ability and knowledge permit (both sadly lacking) to tell Lincoln or Smith what the central commitments of that theological tradition are, and wherein they contradict those of other, opposed or incompatible, intellectual practices. Lincoln's and Smith's coyness about their commitments means that they cannot do this or at least that they do not. Instead, they declare that a certain mode of classification is to be preferred to others or that critical inquiry under a certain construal is what ought to be done, without saying why or in the service of what. This coyness is perhaps inevitable for those whose fundamental intellectual desire is to be not-theologians, and it is emblematic of the state of work being done on the nature and study of religion. It inspires compassion.

If, then, those for whom "religion" is a sortal of central importance to their work (a fast-diminishing tribe, I think, as a glance at the range and kind of intellectual work these days sponsored by the American Academy of Religion will show) hope to make what they do attractive to others, they will have to develop some intellectual virtues which the history of attempts to constitute "religion" as a discipline-ordering term make almost impossible for them. This makes the future of the nontheological academic study of religion just what it should be: bleak.

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