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PART I

Pragmatics

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Introduction

The following chapters by Terry Godlove, Jeffrey Stout, Richard Rorty, and Wayne Proudfoot draw their inspiration from three variations on the theme of holism: Donald Davidson's radical interpretation, Robert Brandom's semantic inferentialism, and the pragmatism of Richard Rorty and William James. Godlove argues that there are good Davidsonian reasons for scholars of religion to keep the category of "belief" even though it has come under suspicion. Stout replies that, when interpreting belief, as well as "meaning," "intention," and "truth," the Sellarsian model developed by Brandom, rather than the Davidsonian model, is a better alternative for pragmatists. Making further explicit use of Brandom, Rorty complements Stout's account by showing why the unavailability of norms to regulate discussion of topics such as "the existence of God" throws it open to cultural politics, and invites the privatization of religious beliefs along the lines of William James's "right to believe." Taking up where Rorty leaves off, Proudfoot contends that beliefs about non-natural, superhuman religious objects, as supposed in William James's "right to believe" argument, cannot qualify for the private sphere where Rortyan pragmatism locates religious beliefs.

Readers will find each of these chapters significant for interpreting believers. Readers not familiar with Davidson's philosophy will gain from Terry Godlove a deft introduction to his most important ideas. Godlove pioneered with the publication in 1989 of the first book-length study of the relevance of Donald Davidson's work to interpretation in religion. Much-cited, his *Religion, Interpretation and Diversity of Belief* situated Davidson in relation to the work of Kant, Durkheim, and advocates of what he criticized as the "framework theory" in religious studies. If divergence of belief in general must be relatively limited, and this carries over into religion, then divergence over religious matters will also be comparatively limited, concerning highly theoretical discourse. Thus religious beliefs may have what Godlove calls an "interpretive priority"

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for believers, in the sense that their religious beliefs can come to bear on their interpretation of all (or most) of the objects and events in their lives. But religious beliefs should not be thought of as having an epistemic priority, in the sense that they limn the structure of objectivity for their adherents or provide a framework or conceptual scheme through which a believer's "world" or "experience" is organized. Godlove concluded that the Davidsonian arguments against conceptual schemes find a ready target in the flawed framework model of religious belief employed by a wide variety of theorists, including Durkheim, Geertz, Mitchell, Winch, Kaufman, and Horton.

In his chapter here, Godlove introduces the three most useful features of Davidsonian radical interpretation for scholars of religion: "content holism;" the argument from "natural history" or causation; and the argument from an agent's overall rationality. Distilling the methodological import of these principles, he shows how the effort of "saving belief" as an analytic category in the study of religion can benefit from these principles. Is belief in danger of disappearing from scholarly agendas? Godlove finds recent evidence of neglect of this category in the widespread shift of interpretive attention to the materiality of "the body," particularly in ritual studies (compare the chapters by Bell and Penner, this volume.) The current trend tends to decouple bodily movement from the agent's beliefs. This produces an emphasis that Godlove regards, on the one hand, as compatible with the argument from causation that looks to the material circumstances of action and speech, but, on the other hand, as in tension with the principle of holism that weaves together action and belief. If anything is to be understood as "religious," he suggests, the interpreter must see the action through the agent's religious beliefs and desires, that is, "by taking the agent herself to be taking herself to be pursuing religious ends." What exactly is "religious" about religious practices? Godlove's frank, pithy answer to this question delivers a clear and powerful punchline in conclusion.

Jeffrey Stout's chapter provides the first major introduction for a religious studies audience to Robert Brandon's achievement in *Making It Explicit* (1994), a work that philosopher John McDowell rightly hailed as "huge, cohesive, quirky, and brilliant."[1] Stout has been a leading interpreter of Davidson's and Rorty's work, and an astute social critic of the standpoints of Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas, and others. He has been at the forefront of connecting religious ethics and moral

[1] John McDowell, "Brandom on Representation and Inference," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57:1 (March 1997): 157.

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philosophy with social and political criticism. In this chapter, Stout interprets Brandom's work within the ongoing debates about the notion of truth and pragmatism. He performs a Herculean labor of expository analysis that will be helpful to all readers interested in the conversation enjoined by Davidson, Rorty, and Brandom. Arguing for Brandom's approach, Stout calls it "ideally suited for application in religious studies" because, with religion and ethics as our subject matter, "what we are examining . . . is precisely what Brandom's . . . theory directs us to: the inferences being made by the people we are studying, the transitions they make into discourse when they perceive something, and the discursive exits they execute by acting intentionally in the world."

Brandom's work continues a line of thought that derives from Wittgenstein and Wilfrid Sellars and shares much with Davidson. Because Stout's chapter, and the one by Rorty that follows, together offer masterly treatments of Brandom's method, I will not attempt a summary here. Some background may be helpful, however, for readers not acquainted with the new directions in post-analytic philosophy. To put it simply, Brandom has engineered a conceptual sea change by arguing that what distinguishes knowers and agents – that is, creatures that can apply concepts, and have minds – from merely natural beings, is not their possession of some special mental stuff, but rather their capacity to take responsibility for what they do, to undertake commitments, and to have entitlements. Judgments and actions are, in the first instance, things we are in a distinctive sense responsible for. They express commitments we have as participants in the essentially social and linguistic game of giving and asking for reasons. This is not an ontological matter, but a deontological, or normative one. The issues are not descriptive, but prescriptive. Normative statuses (such as being responsible or authoritative, committed or entitled) are, according to Brandom, social statuses. At the bottom of everything we talk about are our social practices, all the way down. Social practices are not the same as conventions, however, and here Stout's work has been most valuable in refuting the parody of pragmatism as appealing only to utility and consensus, as though social practices amount to the same thing as group consensus. Rather, contemporary pragmatists like Stout in the field of religion and ethics seek ideals of objectivity and justification that make explicit those norms that are implicit in practices of inquiry and reason-exchange.

This cluster of fundamental insights has obvious relevance to Stout's ongoing interest in what he has called "the languages of morals and their discontents." In previous work, especially *The Flight From Authority* (1981)

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and *Ethics After Babel* (1988, 2001), Stout has richly elaborated his own pragmatist accounts of justification as a social practice and of religious ethics without foundations. In his forthcoming work, from which his chapter here is excerpted, he explores the intertwining of democracy and tradition.

The extent to which Richard Rorty's radical interpretations of the history of philosophy are bound up with an original reading of the place of religion in culture has only lately become apparent. His philosophy of religion emerges in such papers as "Religion as Conversation-stopper" (1994), "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance" (1997), and "Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism" (1998). But it also forms the deep background for a larger narrative about the de-divinization of the world and the hope for completing the Enlightenment project of liberation and freedom from authority. As language has replaced God as the *locus* of rationality, the language–world relation has taken over many of the roles formerly played by the God–world relation. In the anti-authoritarian spirit of all Rorty's writing, he presents pragmatism as opposing a whole slew of religious and quasi-religious authorities, including "representations," "reality," and the "way things are." Any non-human altar at which humans are supposed to bow down, worship, and obey only blocks the road to full maturity.

In this account, Donald Davidson's philosophy has often provided an important point of departure for Rorty's critique of the transcending ambitions of epistemology in underwriting word–world relations. Indeed, much of Rorty's vision for a post-metaphysical, post-epistemological, thoroughly naturalistic culture makes vivid applications of Davidson's repudiation of the appearance–reality distinction, the "third dogma of empiricism." He has welcomed Davidson's project especially for showing how we can understand belief, justification, and truth without appeal to representations, and, as an ultimate gesture of respect, he has positioned Davidson within the pragmatist tradition.

Here, in his chapter for this volume, Rorty links Robert Brandom's inferentialism to his own project for the transformation of human culture and extols Brandom's treatment of the "priority of the social" as it bears on the question "does God exist?" This chapter not only amplifies our understanding of Brandom's inferentialism, but also advances Rorty's own agenda of depicting parallels between theism's dependence on an all-powerful god and epistemological realism's dependence on "external" reality. "Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God" thus forms another absorbing chapter in Rorty's

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philosophy of religion. One effect of both Davidson's and Brandom's philosophies is to dispel the dubious philosophical quests to "get in touch with" reality that replaced earlier religious quests to get in tune with a God.

"Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God" should also dispel any impression that Rorty thinks there is no objective standard against which to measure the correctness of a view except its acceptance. For here he makes plain his view, in agreement with Brandom, that norms can be derived inferentially without being imposed transcendentally, that solidarity based on shared social practices can be shown to be rational, and that we can talk about getting it right with the Trinity, or with numbers, or with a host of other things about which we have discursive practices. What we cannot possibly "get it right" about, however, is "the world" or capital-R Reality, according to Rorty. This is because, whereas there are norms for engaging in snow-talk and Zeus-talk, and even Trinity-talk, there are none at all for engaging in Reality-talk. And that is because, as Brandom explains, there are no "background canonical designators" to such discourse. Davidson's way of making basically the same point has been to say, "A community of minds . . . provides the measure of all things. It makes no sense to question the adequacy of this measure, or to seek a more ultimate standard."[2] In the formulation Rorty gives here, ingeniously comparing the God of monotheists and "consciousness" as used by Cartesians, "the coherence of talk about X does not guarantee the discussability of the existence of X." Rorty concludes by invoking a distinction between private matters, where individuals have a Jamesian "right to believe," and public matters, where individuals have responsibilities to their fellow-citizens.

Wayne Proudfoot's chapter picks up where Richard Rorty leaves off with an analysis of the pragmatist William James and the "right-to-believe" argument. But Proudfoot and Rorty offer two different views of what that argument comes to for interpreting believers today. The juxtaposition of Rorty's and Proudfoot's chapters should alert readers to some of the unresolved questions in the pragmatics of religious belief. What does holism's principle that beliefs have content only by virtue of inferential relations to other beliefs entail? Removing anomalous and idiosyncratic beliefs from the web of justifying reasons while keeping the attribution of intentional states to explain believers' actions (Rorty)? Or

[2] Donald Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," in A. Phillips Griffiths (ed.), *A. J. Ayer: Memorial Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 164.

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accepting holism as involved in understanding both the attribution of beliefs and their justifications (Proudfoot)?

Proudfoot's chapter pinpoints these questions with the compelling clarity and analytic rigor he has brought to the interpretation of religious experience. His landmark work *Religious Experience* (1985) remains state of the art today. Distinguishing between "descriptive reduction" and "explanatory reduction," Proudfoot has proposed that religious studies scholarship avoid the first and practice the second. In place of descriptive reduction, which fails to identify an emotion, practice, or experience under the description used by the subject, the scholar offers a phenomenological interpretation, which is an empathetic description that can be endorsed by the subject. The scholar's second step is explanatory description, which augments the description with comparative or contextual information and selected theoretical perspectives. It turns description into data, and subjects the data to interpretive translation and recontextualization. According to Proudfoot, "failure to distinguish between these two kinds of reduction leads to the claim that any account of religious emotions, practices, or experience must be restricted to the perspective of the subject," a move that precludes legitimate explanatory reduction and becomes an illegitimate protective strategy.[3]

What sort of explanation of religious experience is best? In "Religious Belief and Naturalism," Proudfoot endorses a naturalistic explanation that is congruent with the holism favored by other authors in this volume. His chapter also relates to what others in this volume refer to as "superhuman agents" and regard as the defining characteristic of "religion." Advancing an overall interpretation of William James's philosophy of religion, he shows that the belief James takes as paradigmatically religious has to do with the conviction that there is a moral order in the universe, one that is shaped to human thought and action, but is not put there by humans. The *more* that James thinks is continuous with the higher part of the self is therefore also independent of human thought and action, operating in the cosmos outside of, and in addition to, human life. But this belief in a *more*, Proudfoot says forthrightly, is no longer plausible. Therefore, such a descriptive characterization makes trouble for Richard Rorty's original reading of James's religious belief as a private option, and complicates Rorty's own attempt to redescribe the place of religion in culture as a free and personal preference for beliefs that stand

[3] Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 196–97.

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in no justification to others, because they are private and not public.[4] For what could be more pertinent to the public realm than naturalistic accounts that seek to explain an "unseen moral order" as a product of human thought and action, that is, of the very "social practices" whose normative force Rorty highlights in his chapter on Brandom?

To avoid descriptive reduction in the study of religion, scholars need to employ a *definition* of the religious hypothesis that makes reference to something superhuman. At the same time, if they believe that anything shaped to the moral life of humans is something that we humans have put there ourselves, the *explanatory* account of religion will inquire into entirely natural causes. The radical feature of "Religious Belief and Naturalism" is Proudfoot's compelling way of making these two interpretive strategies consistent. Readers should also attend to his carefully formulated reflections on the nature of holism, of explanation, and of religion's origin in imagination.

[4] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1979); *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge University Press, 1991); *Objectivity, Relativism, And Truth: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge University Press, 1991); "Religion as Conversation-stopper," in *Common Knowledge* 3:1 (Spring 1994): 1–6, reprint, Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*; "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance," in Ruth Ann Putnam (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to William James* (Cambridge, 1997), 84–102; "Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism," in Morris Dickstein (ed.), *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 21–36.

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Saving belief: on the new materialism in religious studies

Terry F. Godlove Jr.

One of my enduring memories from graduate school has me shuffling back and forth between the classrooms of Mircea Eliade and Donald Davidson, trying to shake a persistent headache. Though at the time I did not see it in such antiseptic terms, it now strikes me that the general problem was the status of attributions of intentionality – in particular, how to respect the dizzying variety of religious belief and practice while recognizing that all of us share pretty much the same set of concepts. I was impressed early on with the principle of charity – roughly, the claim that broad agreement is a condition of linguistic interpretation, a claim defended, of course, by Davidson, but also endorsed in one form or another by Baker, Bennett, Brandom, Dennett, Putnam, Rorty, and Stich, to name only a few. While it is not a miracle cure, I have continued to urge its application to several of the outstanding methodological problems that arise in the study of religion, including reductionism, rationality, and relativism.

In the present chapter I turn from application to defense. I would like to address an important doubt about just how relevant this literature is to religious studies, after all. When the above-named philosophers discuss action and interpretation, they typically give pride of place to the notion of belief.[1] Indeed, belief seems to lie at the heart of many other propositional attitudes, and at the heart of our ordinary notion of intentional action – action undertaken on the basis of what we believe. But it seems clear that belief, as an analytical category, is now

[1] For example, in Davidson's work the primacy of belief is already clear in the 1974 essay, "Thought and Talk" (in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* [New York and Oxford, 1984], 156–57): "Belief is central to all kinds of thought. If someone is glad that, or notices that, or remembers that, the gun is loaded, then he must believe that the gun is loaded. Even to wonder whether the gun is loaded, or to speculate on the possibility that the gun is loaded, requires the belief, for example, that a gun is a weapon, that it is a more or less enduring physical object, and so on."

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coming under unprecedented criticism from scholars of religion. Not that religious belief itself is in decline – there seems no immediate danger on that score – but the concept of belief itself does appear to be in some difficulty; conversely, materiality and embodiment seem everywhere to be in ascension. The view seems to be – to paraphrase Putnam on linguistic meaning – religion just ain't in the head.

As symptoms of this decline, consider two recent, much cited works in theory and method: Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, and Mark Taylor's *Critical Terms for Religious Studies.* Asad argues against the belief-oriented conception of religion, tracing it to "the triumphant rise of modern science, modern production, and the modern state."[2] Fully half of the essays in Taylor's collection take explicit aim at belief and urge its subordination, and even, as we will see, its elimination. Donald Lopez's contribution to the Taylor anthology is representative. Admonishing the stragglers, Lopez writes that, "even though we may no longer believe in God, we still believe in belief."[3]

Again, here is the doubt: the approach to interpretation I favor emphasizes the centrality of belief in understanding human speech and action. At the same time, an increasing number of scholars of religion are apparently finding the notion of belief of decreasing analytical value. The invited conclusion is that any point of view that puts so much weight on belief may not be so helpful after all. My response will come in three steps. First, I give an informal account of Davidson's work on interpretation, and say where I think its value lies for the study of religion. Second, I examine the apparent decline of belief in the recent literature. And, third, I suggest why it is important for scholars of religion to clarify the role of belief in their inquiries. I am confining myself to Davidson for reasons of space. Even so, my portrayals of his positions will be skeletal; for those already familiar with his work, they will serve as reminders of his arguments; for those new to the literature, they may serve as an impetus for further inquiry. While I do want to recommend a broadly Davidsonian picture of interpretation, I have reserved detailed treatment for my main interests, namely, the decline of belief and its associated costs.

2 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 39.
3 Donald S. Lopez, Jr., "Belief," in Mark Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 34.

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