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Religio. 2009, vol. 17, iss. 2, pp. [125]-140

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/125290>

Access Date: 27. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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Religious Biases in Funding Religious Studies Research?

DONALD WIEBE*

This paper is a revised version of my plenary address (September, 2008) to the eighth meeting of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) held in Brno, Czech Republic. I am grateful to the Organizing Committee of that meeting for the invitation to address the Association on the topic of the “decline of” and “hope for” the field of Religious Studies. Although I acknowledged that since the 1960s there has been incredible growth in the institutional and structural strength of the field, and that important methodological developments have moved the field beyond its early and mid-twentieth century fixation on descriptive studies of religions towards explanatory and theoretical accounts of religious thought and behaviour, I nevertheless focused primary attention in the oral address on what I consider a serious problem that may well undermine those signs of hope. The resurgence of (the practice of) religion, particularly on the campuses of our modern research universities, as I pointed out, poses a serious threat to the field in the pressure it places on departments for the study of religion to blur the distinction between religion (as well as theology) and the study of religion. My concerns in this respect include the increasing expression of religious commitments of scholars in the classroom and the pressure on others to accommodate the religious interests of their students and colleagues (if not society at large).¹ The problem I considered of greatest importance in this regard was that of

* I wish to thank Ms. Kilby MacPherson and Dr. Jeff Rabin for a critical reading of an early draft of this paper and providing helpful suggestions for revision. I also wish to express my thanks to Professors Harvey Whitehouse and Robert McCauley, and Dr. Justin Barrett for their forceful criticism of my views on the general issues regarding funding of religious studies research projects and on the two case studies presented here. Although I have changed little in this version of my assessment of the Templeton Foundation’s influence on “religious studies” research, I am grateful for their comments. Finally, I express my deep appreciation to Professor Luther H. Martin for his critical scrutiny of the argument in this and earlier drafts of the address, and for his careful attention to its mode of presentation.

1 These general concerns are now taken up in my essay “An Encroaching Spirituality: What Hope Remains for a Science of Religion?”, in: Christian Hackbarth-Johnson – Eva-Maria Glasbrenner (eds.), *Denkende Mystik: Festschrift für Michael von Brück zum 60 Geburtstag*, München: Manya Verlag (forthcoming).

the influence of what I will refer to here as “religious funding”; that is, funding of research in this field by religious institutions seeking to shape not only the study of religion but the overall “agenda” of the modern research university.

I was motivated to take up this topic largely on hearing of relatively recent Templeton grants awarded to the Institute for Cognition and Culture at Queen’s University, Belfast and, jointly, to the Centre for Anthropology and Mind (in the Institute of Cognition and Evolutionary Anthropology) and the Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion at Oxford University. The first was entitled “The Adaptive Logic of Religious Belief and Behaviour Project” and the second, “The Cognition, Religion, and Theology Project.” A cursory review of these projects suggested to me that the religious (perhaps, speaking liberally, Christian) objectives of the Templeton Foundation were sufficiently problematic to warrant critical public scrutiny of their support for Religious Studies research. It seems to me that obtaining a grant from the Foundation involves constraints that impose a religious bias on the research they fund. As I see it, the Foundation seeks, whether directly or indirectly, to transform genuinely scientific research agendas into religious ones, or to demand of such projects a component that requires “dialogue” with religion and theology, or, at the very least, requires scholars to “dress up” their scientific projects in collaborationist garb. Consequently, I provided an analysis and critique of these projects to stimulate discussion and debate on the problems and perils in our quest for financial support of research in Religious Studies. Response to the address at the conference encourages me to publish these analyses here as “case studies” in order to broaden that critical discussion.

I am aware of two important factors as I prepare this address for publication: (1) that funding for research projects in the field of religious studies is severely limited and that this may seduce scholars into accepting support from what some might consider “tainted” or “dangerous” sources, and (2) that writing about this particular source of funding may jeopardize future funding (especially from the Templeton Foundation) in the field. It has been suggested to me, in no uncertain terms, that recognizing this, I should not “expose” my concerns to a broader public for fear of undermining the current health of the “discipline.” I disagree with that suggestion, however, and hope that the analyses that follow will show why the field may be damaged more than assisted by the constraints attached to such funding and therefore stimulate thought on how such constraints can be suitably modified and/or how alternative sources of funds can be cultivated.

The Queen’s University Project: “The Adaptive Logic of Religious Belief and Behaviour”

I first heard of this project in late 2006 while attending a conference at the Institute for Cognition and Culture at Queen’s University, Belfast. A number of junior fellows at the Institute had reservations about the funding for the project and discussed the matter with me. Subsequently I was provided a copy of the project proposal and was able to review it in detail.

The investigators involved in the “Adaptive Logic of Religious Belief and Behaviour” project set out to demonstrate that “there are powerful selective advantages of religious beliefs and practices”.² They claim that their work will not only be of benefit to evolutionary biologists, game theorists, and neuroscientists but also to theologians³ because, they tell us, the project will also explore “various meta-level philosophical implications of a distinctly human cognitive system”.⁴ As they put it, because “the human mind cannot seem to easily accommodate itself to a godless, evolutionary canon when it comes to the self’s existence”, and because “human brains are psychologically predisposed towards religious styles of thought ...”, we must recognize that a scientific approach to understanding moral and religious behaviour on its own is incomplete – that a “complete science,” paradoxically, will involve going beyond the bounds of what some call “pure science.” “In our view,” they write, “the religious and secular approaches in moral philosophy are inseparable”.⁵ According to them this is particularly so with respect to our study of human beings. There is something unique about human persons, they insist, that radically distinguishes them from other animals, and understanding them, therefore, requires moving beyond a simple set of scientific explanations. Thus, amazingly in light of the general drift of the cognitive science approaches to explaining religion, they write: “*We suggest that, by virtue of our unique social cognitive abilities, the evolution of cooperation may have been influenced more than [is] currently appreciated by the hand of God at work in the mind of man*”.⁶

One could, in the spirit of generosity, read this statement as referring only to the “idea” of gods or God rather than indicating a belief that a form

2 *Belfast Proposal*, 2007, 5.

3 *Ibid.*, 7. I presume those interested in seeing the details can obtain a copy of this proposal from the Institute for Cognition and Culture at Queen’s University, Belfast.

4 *Ibid.*, 18.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, 19 (emphasis added).

of theological theorizing is essential to a proper understanding of human behaviour – that is, that human behaviour can only be understood in light of the will of an actually existing god who interacts with human persons. Such an interpretation might well be indicated in the pitch they then made to the Templeton Foundation to support their grant proposal:

This view resonates with the Templeton Foundation’s vision that “scientific principles of evolution and *the idea of God* as creator are compatible” (Templeton Website). In the sense of the argument set out here, *the idea of God* is indeed inextricably linked with the biological evolution of the human mind. As E. O. Wilson once suggested, “the human mind evolved to believe in the gods. It did not evolve to believe in biology ...” We believe that our proposal fits solidly within the Templeton donor’s mandate. We offer a set of novel linkages between science and religion, each of which impacts heavily on the other and together transforms our understanding of the origins of cooperation, ethics, and religious beliefs and behavior.⁷

However, I think such a “generous” interpretation unwarranted despite the ambiguity of some of the language in the passage quoted (and elsewhere in the proposal) given their insistence that the proposal “fits solidly within the Templeton donor’s mandate” which is essentially religious. But if this is the case, it seems to me that they have compromised their concept of science in order to accommodate religious belief(s). They have, that is, placed religion beyond the possibility of scientific explanation. Indeed, they have included “the divine” in their resources for such an explanatory account which makes sense of their intention to share this material not only with scholars of religion but also with clergy.⁸

In this regard, it is important to note that the authors of the grant proposal see it as a distinct advantage that they are not theologians. This suggests to me that they believe, (or at least wish the Templeton Foundation to believe), that the “Templeton mandate” will be carried into respectable academic settings by virtue of the fact that they are “pure scientists”.⁹ Their thinking here is somewhat convoluted to say the least. Although they imply that they are engaged in this project as scientists, they nevertheless note that it is “hard to fund [this kind of research] in scientific departments,” and “hard to justify research on religion in science departments.”¹⁰ If their research has a religious objective one can well understand why such research would not be justified in a science department and why they seek Templeton Foundation support. However,

7 *Ibid.*, 19 (emphases added).

8 *Ibid.*, 23.

9 *Ibid.*, 33.

10 *Ibid.*, 24-26.

they also clearly believe their work to have the kind of scientific credibility to warrant support from science departments and believe that science departments have not been forthcoming in this regard because they think the subject matter is not, for whatever reason, worthy of such funding. Nevertheless, they also seem to think that should they complete this research project they would establish the research-worthiness of this subject to science departments. And given that they have pitched the project to fit Templeton parameters, it appears that they also think this an enticement to the Foundation since they would be able to find university support for future research of relevance to the Templeton mandate. If that is the import of their proposal, however, that would in some sense involve deceiving the university (though that is not likely to go undetected if this Templeton proposal were made available together with the research results reported from this project).

On my reading of this rather strange document I will say this. We have here a very shrewd project proposal: it is either a clever ruse to obtain funds from Templeton for a project that is structured so as to appear to fit the Templeton mandate but in fact does not (in which case they ought not to be seeking funds from Templeton at all), or it is a genuine plea for help from the Templeton foundation in order to co-opt them into a joint venture in ultimately obtaining support from scientific funding agencies for further Templeton-type religious projects (something neither they nor Templeton should really be interested in doing). So shrewd is this document that I am not altogether sure that this ambiguity is accidental.

It is, perhaps, important here to point out that the Templeton Foundation claims that it is not a religious organization and that they do not engage in religious advocacy. Moreover, they pride themselves, as their website¹¹ puts it, on having funded and employed “non-believers,” and they claim that their “grantmaking history clearly demonstrates that [they] strive to fund scholars and researchers who are dedicated to open-minded inquiry and rigorous scientific research.”¹² Given these protestations, one might well wonder what all the fuss is about in accepting Templeton funding. The concern, however, is that such funding from Templeton nevertheless places subtle pressures on grantees to tailor their research to fit the religious aims that are implicit in the “core themes” of the Foundation. One of those themes is the search for “new concepts of God”¹³ which

11 <<http://www.templeton.org>>.

12 “About Us FAQ”, <http://templeton.org/about_us/about_us_faq/> [25 September 2009].

13 See “New Concepts of God”, <http://templeton.org/funding_areas/core_themes/new_concepts_of_god/> [25 September 2009].

clearly indicates theistic assumptions. Even though the Foundation may not, as they claim, “consider a principal investigator’s personal beliefs whatsoever when reviewing the merits of a proposal” they nevertheless do not support research that does not contribute to life’s “big questions” and the “spiritual quest” which they, quite clearly, see as related to the existence of God.¹⁴ The Foundation, of course, has every right to distribute their funds as they see fit. The problem here lies not with the Templeton Foundation, but rather with those who seek its support in the name of pure scientific research, whether that is the individual scholar or the sponsoring university. Given the difficulty in finding sufficient funds for serious research on religion, appearing to conform to the research parameters set by Templeton may seem a small price to pay. In my judgment, however, it is too steep a price to pay, for in appearing to pursue a spiritual or religious rather than a purely scientific agenda, they compromise the prospects for establishing a genuinely scientific study of religion. Moreover, if it is claimed that the project as it will actually be carried out is nothing more than a scientific exercise, the proposal in effect is hypocritical, and in the long run, will be detrimental to the reputation of the scholars involved and to the university that sponsors the work.

Accepting the Templeton framework in good faith, on the other hand, is not a problem for those who espouse the same “religio-spiritual” agenda as the Foundation, but its affect on the field and the sponsoring university is no less detrimental, for there is the same problem of the confusion of the religious with the scientific agenda, and the deception that may be perpetrated in this case is against the sponsoring university in that the grantees claim that they are engaged in purely scientific rather than religious research. The next Templeton research proposal to be discussed is, I think, of that type.

The Oxford University Project: “Cognition, Religion, and Theology”

The second Templeton Foundation grant proposal concerning religion that came to my attention, as I noted above, was awarded jointly to the Centre for Anthropology and Mind (in the Institute of Cognition and Evolutionary Anthropology) and the Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion at Oxford University. My account of this project derives from the information provided on the websites of both institutions and on an e-mail notice from Emma Cohen informing members on the COG-SCI-REL list

14 “About Us FAQ...”.

of a cognitive science of religion small grant competition (dated 18 March 2008).¹⁵

Given the project's title – "Cognition, Religion, and Theology" – there is no mistaking the character of the project as one that attempts to integrate religious and theological concerns into the scientific enterprise. Indeed, the title suggests that religion and theology are not simply objects of study for science but rather partners in an altogether larger program. Moreover, given the theistic positions publicly espoused by the scholars overseeing this project – Justin Barrett of the Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology and Roger Trigg of the Ian Ramsey Centre – the suspicion that this larger program is an essentially religious one is hard to suppress. As I have pointed out elsewhere,¹⁶ Barrett maintains that a full understanding of the import of the Cognitive Science of Religion will support and confirm religious belief in a transcendent reality and that such studies are entirely (both methodologically and substantively) consistent with espousing Intelligent Design theory. Trigg espouses similar, if not identical, views. I do not have space here to review his overall philosophical position and so refer only briefly to his "Christians-in-Science/St Edmunds" public lecture (Cambridge, May 8, 2003): "Do Science and Religion Need Each Other?"¹⁷ In this lecture, sponsored by the Templeton Foundation, Trigg questions whether scientists need always look for natural explanations. He maintains that believing this to be so would indicate a naive acceptance of a naturalistic *metaphysics* that fails to see that "there is always the possibility that science can learn from religion",¹⁸ from Intelligent Design theory, for example. In his defence of Intelligent Design as scientific (that is, as not repudiating any scientific knowledge), Trigg argues that Intelligent Design theorists are justified in "suggesting that a science closed to the possibility of non-natural explanations is itself deficient".¹⁹ The "suspicion" that this Templeton-Funded project is a religious one is confirmed in an analysis of the objectives of the proposal itself.

15 Cf. „Small Grant Competition“, <<http://www.cam.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/CAM/Small-GrantAd.pdf>> [25 September 2009] and “Small Grant Competition”, <<http://www.cam.ox.ac.uk/research/cognition-religion-and-theology/research-funding/small-grant-competition/>> [25 September 2009].

16 D. Wiebe, “An Encroaching Spirituality...”, forthcoming.

17 A copy of this paper can be found on-line: Roger Trigg, “Do Science and Religion Need Each Other?”, <http://www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/CIS/trigg/pdf/trigg_lecture_hires.pdf> [September 25, 2009] (HTML version: <<http://www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/CIS/trigg/index.html>>).

18 R. Trigg, “Do Science and Religion...”, 12.

19 R. Trigg, “Do Science and Religion...”, 13.

In a summary statement of the program announcing a “small grant competition” (2008) – which overlaps to a considerable degree with the statement found on the Ian Ramsey Centre site²⁰ and will be discussed at greater length below – Barrett is primarily concerned to solicit research that will justify a negative answer to the question: “Does the naturalness of religious beliefs mean that they’ve been explained away and you shouldn’t believe in God?”²¹ His main concern here is not to find a scientifically credible explanation of religion so much as it is to justify religion and to protect it. Hence he puts religion beyond all possibility of scientific explanation in the same way that phenomenologists of religion used to put the question of the “truth of religion” beyond the pale of the comparativists and historians of religions. He writes: “If scientists can explain why people tend to believe in gods and also why other people tend to believe there are no gods, then surely the presence of a scientific explanation cannot mean that you should not believe one way or the other just on the presence or possibility of such an explanation.”²² And that, it seems, is sufficient ground for Barrett to move beyond science (that is, what he would call scientism) to a philosophical and theological exploration of “findings from the evolutionary and cognitive sciences as applied to religion.” Barrett asks: “Does scientific evidence support or challenge specific theological propositions or worldviews?”²³ That, however, is not a scientific question; rather, it invites theological and philosophical reflection.

According to Emma Cohen’s e-mail to the COG-SCI-REL list regarding the small grant competition, an element of this research project includes, without explanation as to why, “the need for enhancing the field’s [that is, cognitive science of religion’s] theological engagement.” Indeed, it is not clear why anyone should think that the cognitive science of religion was ever engaged with theology. Nevertheless, the project directors call for “proposals for theoretical projects that explore philosophical and theological implications of assumptions and findings in the evolutionary and cognitive sciences as applied to religion.” Questions to which they seek answers include: “What aspects of religion can CSR [Cognitive

20 Justin Barrett, “Cognition, Religion and Theology Project: Summary”, <<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~theo0038/Anthropology%20and%20Theology%20Barrett%20summary.htm>> [25 September 2009].

21 “Cognition, Religion and Theology Project: Discussion Points”, <<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~theo0038/Anthropology%20and%20Theology%20Barrett%20summary%20discussion%20points.htm>> [25 September 2009].

22 *Ibid.*

23 J. Barrett, “Cognition, Religion and Theology Project: Summary...”.

Science of Religion] theories hope to explain?” and Is the cognitive science of religion “compatible” with Christian doctrine and Christian discourse about God, including that of the compatibility of “the findings of CSR with biological fine-tuning arguments in favour of theism...?” It is clear, therefore, that the project not only assumes a methodological compatibility between science and religion in general, but a compatibility between cognitive science theorizing and Intelligent Design theorizing, which amounts to a subordination of science to supernatural revelation and therefore, effectively, to a rejection of the essential character of the scientific enterprise. I find this simply astounding. There is no other scientific undertaking in the context of the modern research university that would question its most basic methodological assumptions and its place within an integrated causal model for explaining human behaviour and culture.

The material on the Ian Ramsey Centre website relevant to this project, as one might expect of a theologically oriented institution, presents a similar viewpoint expressing concern as to whether the cognitive science of religion is of any benefit to philosophers and theologians. The central issue, however, seems to be whether the cognitive science of religion will undercut religious belief. Under the obligatory “FAQs” it is acknowledged that critics of religion like Richard Dawkins, Dan Dennett and Paul Bloom have espoused a reductionistic understanding of the cognitive science of religion that has done much “to bridge the gap between strictly evolutionary or biological treatments of religion and strictly social approaches.”²⁴ But the only “cognitive science of religion” acceptable to the Templeton project participants will require serious modification; that is, it will have to draw on resources rejected by the reductionists. As they put it: they wish not only to undertake the kind of research these critics undertake, but also “to engage theological and philosophical perspectives in a potentially mutually productive, instead of antagonistic, manner.”²⁵ The directors of this project, therefore, express optimism that it will maximize the scientific potential of the cognitive science approach that Dawkins, Dennett, and Bloom champion. Clearly, however, this points to the necessity for an accommodation (if not subordination) of science to religion.

In response to the ambiguously phrased question “Is this project driven by a *particular* religious agenda” (emphasis added) they respond, equally

24 “Frequently Asked Questions”, <<http://www.cam.ox.ac.uk/research/cognition-religion-and-theology/about-us/faq/>> [25 September 2009].

25 *Ibid.*

ambiguously, by saying that they “will develop and support a scientific programme of investigation into the cognitive and evolutionary foundations of religious thinking and behaviour.”²⁶ Unfortunately, however, their answers to other questions suggest that their overriding concerns relate to whether the cognitive science of religion constitutes a threat to religious belief or to the practical value of religion.

In response to the question about the potential threat of the cognitive science of religion to religious beliefs, they claim that “[e]xplaining religion is not the same as explaining it away.”²⁷ But in taking this tack, it seems to me that they give up the claim that science (and the cognitive science of religion in particular) can fully account for religion. They confuse explaining intersubjectively available empirical data about religions with the question of the ontological existence of the agents, powers, and processes predicated by religions, which is an altogether different matter. On this score they may be entirely justified to “write off” the criticisms of the likes of Dawkins and Dennett since their atheism appears to be an espousal of an apologetic metaphysical position with respect to the question of the existence of postulated transcendent religious beings, powers, or states. But it is crass sleight-of-hand to deny that the scientific study of religion holds no implications for the validity of religious belief. If we find that we can provide an explanation of religion without invoking the supernatural in doing so, there is no scientific reason or ground for believing that such a metaphysical reality actually exists, or that science even suggests something to that effect. And asserting that they will provide a similar cognitive account of the spread of atheism as of religion does little to change this and appears, therefore, to be nothing more than an attempt to placate religious devotees. It is entirely disingenuous therefore to say, as Justin Barrett does, that:

*It is not yet clear whether findings from CSR are generally supportive, contradictory, or neutral with regards to particular theological commitments. Nonbelievers might find satisfaction in a sound scientific explanation of why people tend to believe in God because they can now account for why people persist in believing in a fictitious being. The believer might find satisfaction in the scientific documentation of how human nature predisposes people to believe in God because it would reinforce the idea that people were divinely designed to know God. What we can more modestly say is that both believers and non-believers can agree on the scientific findings.*²⁸

26 “In the Media”, <<http://www.cam.ox.ac.uk/research/cognition-religion-and-theology/publications/in-the-media/>> [25 September 2009].

27 *Ibid.*

28 “Cognition, Religion, and Theology Project: Frequently Asked Questions”, <<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~theo0038/pdf%20files/Anthropology%20FAQs.pdf>> [25 September 2009], 2 (emphasis added).

Providing an argument showing that the supernatural doesn't exist is not an objective of the scientific study of religion, but neither should proving the existence of God be incorporated into a scientific project. The objective of the sciences is to explain phenomena in the world – including social phenomena like religion – in terms of causes that are wholly in the natural world. The burden of proof of such religio-theological claims as are raised in this Templeton project rests on “the believers,” and that problem can only be resolved in forms of argument that operate beyond the range of the sciences. Thus, in order to bring the matter to mind within the framework of an allegedly scientific project, the best one can do is to try to obscure the issues by claiming to show that the sciences cannot distinguish between (ultimate metaphysical) reality and illusion. As Barrett puts it:

If we could offer a social, cognitive, evolutionary, physiological, pharmacological, and neuroscientific account of your belief that your partner exists – indeed, that your partner loves you – would that undermine the truth-value of that belief? Would it support it. Where there is no incontrovertible means of independent verification, Cognitive Science of Religion is simply not equipped to distinguish whether the objects of our beliefs are real or illusory.²⁹

Unlike the first Templeton project discussed above, the grantees here openly embrace the Templeton mandate. And even though they acknowledge that “[t]he CSR field is not an ideological platform [but rather] ... a scientific enterprise,”³⁰ they bracket the methodological implications of that enterprise and enter into an ideological framework which they think allows them to transcend those implications while still laying claim to being cognitive scientists of religion. Consequently, their overall project is not a scientific but rather a religio-metaphysical undertaking, for it expropriates, so to speak, the cognitive science of religion for religious and theological purposes and therefore places it beyond the integrated causal framework that governs all the other sciences within the research university. Their theorizing here, therefore, is an apologetic exercise that is but a short step away (if that) from proselytizing.

Conclusion

I must bring these comments on the present state of affairs in the academic study of religion as I see them to a close. As I noted above, there

29 “In the Media...”

30 “Frequently Asked Questions...”

is good reason to rejoice in the growth of the field of Religious Studies over the last three decades in that we, collectively, have moved beyond mere fact-gathering, and hermeneutical and comparative study of the data; our theorizing, that is, has transformed our view of the data into evidence with which to test explanations and theories. There have been many new developments in the field that have been heuristically valuable in the generation of progressive research programs, and they are indicative of the possibility that we may soon find it possible to provide testable natural accounts of religion as a wholly human phenomenon. But I have also argued that this field of study is under severe strain given the resurgence of religious agendas, the continuing failure of nerve with respect to scientific methodology in the study of religious phenomena, and the apparent corruption of the modern research university by those who wish to accommodate what cannot be scientifically accommodated and include what cannot (and does not need to be) included, namely, metaphysical theism. Methodological atheism (naturalism) is sufficient for our purposes; to admit metaphysical and theological assumptions into our research projects is, frankly, to undermine the study of religion as a legitimate enterprise in the framework of the modern research university.

Given the place of religion in society at large, the scientific study of religion has little or no visibility or respectability outside the context of the modern university. And because of the “association” of religiosity with the study of religion by many of our colleagues in the field, it has also, understandably, received little respect or attention compared to the other scientific disciplines. With the resurgence of religious influence on university campuses today – and especially so with religiously-biased foundations underwriting our research projects – what little respect the study of religion has had there will surely be lost. The integrity of our teaching in the classroom and the quality of our research, that is, could well be undermined and discredited. We must therefore be vigilant with respect to the increasing demands for greater religious influence on campus life and in the curriculum.

There is not much that can be done with respect to the failure of nerve on the part of individual scholars regarding scientific methodology in this field. We can at best point out to them that claims of access to, and the “scientific” value of, a special body of knowledge simply on the basis that it is something that cannot be disproved on naturalistic grounds is logically incoherent and methodologically problematic. Opposing the implicit supernaturalism underlying that position with a simplistic atheistic stance, however, will be of little help. I am in agreement, therefore, with the critiques of Dennett’s (and possibly Dawkins’s) atheism. Dennett,

unfortunately, espouses a metaphysical rather than simply a methodological atheism, and then appears to advocate its use as a basis for making policy recommendations regarding religion for society at large (this, despite arguing that what is needed is a strictly scientific approach to understanding religion).³¹ Where students of religion do take up such a stance it simply embroils the field in futile theological and metaphysical disputes, which is precisely what the nineteenth-century founders of the scientific study of religion set out to avoid. The only point being made in the adoption of *methodological atheism*, on the other hand, is that, as with every other science, we seek a study of religion that does not need to postulate the existence of anything supernatural. This, in turn, implies, (1) that, as an object of scientific interest, religion is comprised only of elements that are intersubjectively available to all researchers, religious or not and, (2) that causes of religion can only be found within the framework of the natural world. Whether or not this also implies anything about the truth or “Truth” of religion (that is, about the existence of religious agents, powers, or events, or about the post-mortem value of religion) is *not* a part of the scientific study of religion. Consequently, so far as the academic study of religion *per se* is concerned, there is neither ground nor need for hostility toward religion, nor, I must add, is there any obligation for accommodating it. What I think is called for then, is vigorous public criticism of those within the field who take up an apologetic stance (whether implicitly or explicitly or in a religious or an atheistic mode) or engage in other moral or socio-political agendas that divert our attention from our scientific research objectives and our pedagogical role of introducing students to an important area of knowledge and training them in the techniques by which such knowledge is obtained.

We can do little more regarding the problems that currently beset our institutions than to make known our criticisms and concerns about the influence religiously oriented funding agencies have on the reputations of our field, our universities, and the integrity of our research. The Templeton Foundation is well known for its religious orientation; that is, for its focus on supporting research that seeks to confirm religious belief and have a positive spiritual influence on society. The Foundation, that is, presupposes the existence of a transcendent world and appears only to support research consistent with such a worldview. As their website puts it, they are interested in what scientific research can “tell us about God, about the nature of divine action in the world [and] about meaning and

31 On this score see my “Science, Scholarship, and the Domestication of Religion: On Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell*”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 20/1, 2008, 54-60.

purpose?” Consequently, acceptance of a Templeton award – with a proposal that seems tailor-made not to conflict in any obvious way with its assumptions and goals – can only indicate either (1) a commitment to Templeton assumptions even though they clash with theoretical assumptions and methodological procedures of normal academic and scientific practice or (2) cast aspersion on the integrity of the scholars and institutions submitting grant proposals to the Foundation. Either way, the repercussions on our field are serious. This is particularly problematic with respect to the work being done in the Centre for Anthropology and Mind described above, and especially so with respect to the major “Explaining Religion Project” (funded by the European Commission) which shares space and administrative and research personnel with the “Cognition, Religion, and Theology Project.” Such institutional and programmatic overlap raises serious question for the broader scientific community as to the intellectual integrity of that project, as might the fact that Professor Harvey Whitehouse, who oversees the work of the Centre for Anthropology and Mind, actually sits on the Board of the Templeton Foundation. This is a shame. The “Explaining Religion Project” is an important scientific research project wholly free of religious and/or metaphysical concerns and ought in no way to be associated with the “Cognition, Religion, and Theology Project.”

As I noted above, I am aware that bringing these criticisms into open discussion in the academic and public realm will be considered by some as harmful to our field, and could be regarded as inhibiting access to funding. On the other hand, it seems to me that criticism is the essence of the scientific enterprise, and, furthermore, that to withhold critical comment on such projects – that is, to say nothing about them – may “cause” even greater harm in that the biases attached to them may well contribute in the long run to our scientific work being subverted by religious and theological agendas, which in my opinion is far worse. If my assessment of the Templeton influence is even partially on the mark, then, not only ought such distorting influences be rejected, even the appearance of such influence should be avoided.

**SUMMARY****Religious Biases in Funding Religious Studies Research?**

Although the scientific study of religion has found a place in the context of the modern university it has seldom found full emancipation from religious and theological agendas. This in large measure accounts for the limited financial resources available for research in the field of “religious studies.” Furthermore, the scientific study of religion has little or no visibility outside the context of the modern university and is “off the radar screen” of most science funding agencies. Students of religion, therefore, are often tempted to seek funding for their projects wherever it can be found, including those with clearly stated religious agendas. I argue here that, in the long run, this will have a detrimental effect on the scientific study of religion and, possibly, on the overall agenda of the modern university.



RÉSUMÉ

Religionistické výzkumy pod vlivem náboženství? Problém financování

Ačkoli si religionistika na současných univerzitách vydobyla své místo, jen zřídka se jí podařilo dosáhnout plného osamostatnění od náboženských a teologických snah. To platí zejména v případě omezených finančních prostředků na poli „studia náboženství“. Navíc je religionistika jen málo viditelná – pokud vůbec – mimo univerzitní prostředí a „radary“ většiny grantových agentur ji obvykle neregistrují. Religionisté jsou proto často v pokušení hledat prostředky k financování svých výzkumů, kdekoli je to jen možné, a to včetně organizací nepokrytě náboženské povahy. Zastávám zde stanovisko, podle kterého tento přístup v dlouhodobém horizontu religionistice uškodí a bude mít možná neblahý dopad dokonce i na obraz současného univerzitního prostředí jako celku.

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