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# *Introduction to the Discussion*

## *“Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: A Delusion?”*

DAVID ZBÍRAL

The paper “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion” by Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe<sup>1</sup> was originally presented at the tenth annual conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) held in Budapest, Hungary, from 18 to 22 September 2011. I am very happy that *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* can now publish a revised version of this paper, and wish to thank the editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* whose permission made this possible.

The paper by Martin and Wiebe makes the claim that a truly scientific study of religion “is not ever likely to occur”.<sup>2</sup> Unlike various scholars discussing the “ideologization” of the study of religions, however, the authors do not seek the explanation of bias in individual or collective interests, but in evolutionary mechanisms. “[R]eligiousness,” they assert, “will continue to constrain the academic study of religion even as it will continue to dominate the concerns of *Homo sapiens* generally.”<sup>3</sup> If some hope still remains,<sup>4</sup> it is to be sought, according to the authors, in the cognitive science of religion.<sup>5</sup>

*Religio* publishes five responses to this paper, as varied as the respective backgrounds of the different authors.

Hans Gerald Hödl (University of Vienna) deliberately focuses more on Martin and Wiebe’s assumptions than on their reasoning.<sup>6</sup> Primarily, he discusses their view of science and the definition of religion they use, and argues that there are good reasons to prefer wider definitions of religion to those based on the concept of superhuman agency. Moreover, for Hödl,

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1 Luther H. Martin – Donald Wiebe, “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, 9-18.

2 *Ibid.*, 9.

3 *Ibid.*, 14.

4 *Ibid.*, 13.

5 *Ibid.*, 14, 16.

6 Hans Gerald Hödl, “Is an Unbiased Science of Religion Impossible?”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, 19-26: 19.

religious bias is only one among others in the study of religion,<sup>7</sup> and a “clear demarcation line between object language and meta-language”<sup>8</sup> is much more helpful in avoiding such bias than the realistic epistemology adopted by Martin and Wiebe.

Hubert Seiwert (University of Leipzig) develops an insightful reflection on the status of the academic study of religion and on its history. Even if he is not overly optimistic about the historical development of the discipline, the image he gives is somewhat different from Martin and Wiebe’s.<sup>9</sup> Seiwert also argues that the problems facing the study of religion are un-specific, shared with other disciplines from the humanities,<sup>10</sup> and that ontological naturalism does not offer a plausible solution to these problems.<sup>11</sup>

Radek Kundt (Masaryk University) shares the main assumptions of Martin and Wiebe, their background in the cognitive science of religion, as well as their critical view of the discipline’s history and of constructivist epistemology. However, he questions the extension of their argument, and highlights the possibilities of conscious reasoning, which is capable of reducing the impact of unconscious evolutionary mechanisms.<sup>12</sup>

Tomáš Bubík (University of Pardubice) frames his response by a brief review of the study of religions in central and eastern Europe, its relationship to theology, and the problem of the social relevance of the humanities. Like Hödl and Seiwert, Bubík points out yet other biases than the religious one, including for example anti-religious propaganda.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, he stresses that good work has been done in the study of religions by theologians and/or at theological faculties.<sup>14</sup>

According to Kocku von Stuckrad (University of Groningen), Martin and Wiebe underestimate the academic rigor of many undertakings in the study of religions, and, at the same time, overestimate the rigor of naturalistic approaches, including the cognitive “science” of religion.<sup>15</sup> In the

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7 *Ibid.*, 24.

8 *Ibid.*, 23.

9 Hubert Seiwert, “The Study of Religion as a Scientific Discipline: A Comment on Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe’s Paper”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, 27-38: 28-30.

10 *Ibid.*, 30.

11 *Ibid.*, 34.

12 Radek Kundt, “A Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, 39-42: 40.

13 Tomáš Bubík, “Rethinking the Relationship between the Study of Religions, Theology and Religious Concerns: A Response to Some Aspects of Wiebe and Martin’s Paper”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, 43-53: 44-45.

14 *Ibid.*, 45-46.

15 Kocku von Stuckrad, “Straw Men and Scientific Nostalgia: A Response to Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, 55-61: 57.

author's words, Martin and Wiebe adopt "unreflective belief in science",<sup>16</sup> and they simplify the critique of realistic epistemology in 20<sup>th</sup>-century thought by reducing it to a merely "postmodernist" and anti-scientific stance.

Should the EASR conference in Budapest, where the paper by Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe was originally given, be indicative of the state of the discipline, we might assume that the philosophy of religion and a quasi-theological kind of phenomenology of religion are again making their way into the European study of religions. I still hope this is not the case, but a more active attitude will most likely be necessary if this development is to be halted. At the same time, a relatively new player, the cognitive science of religion, is more and more visible in the field, and engages in fierce conflicts with the humanistic tradition of the study of religions in its "evolutionary" struggle for life space and recognition. Therefore I believe that discussion about the standards which should be followed in the study of religions – if it is to be considered academic, or even scientific – has become highly topical once again.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.



## SUMMARY

**Introduction to the Discussion “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: A Delusion?”**

In this text, I introduce the special feature of *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: A Delusion?”. I briefly summarize the main argument of the original article “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion” by Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe, and those of the five responses by Hans Gerald Hödl, Hubert Seiwert, Radek Kundt, Tomáš Bubík, and Kocku von Stuckrad. At the end, I return to the EASR conference 2011 in Budapest, Hungary, where Martin and Wiebe’s paper was originally presented, and comment on this event.

**Keywords:** study of religions; religious studies; science; humanities; EASR conference 2011 in Budapest.

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