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Is an Unbiased Science of Religion Impossible?

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My response to the essay "Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion" by Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe[1] is divided into seven paragraphs. Paragraph 1 and 2 give an outline of the argument Martin and Wiebe have brought forth and a short description of what the focus of my critical remarks will be. In paragraph 3-5, I discuss the main assumptions that the line of thought of the article under consideration rests upon. Paragraph 6 sums up the questions raised. In paragraph 7, I add some further reflections with respect to the broader framework of Religious Studies. My critical comment is not intended to be a fully-fledged analysis of the essay in question, but rather aims at pointing to some relevant topics that could be taken into consideration by the authors in order to further develop their argument.

(1) The authors claim that the establishment of an unbiased, scientific Study of Religions will inevitably face great difficulties, because the religious worldview is rather more than less a standard feature of human nature. If they are right, they have found a scientific explanation for the persistence of "theologically" informed studies of religions within the academic field and outside "theology proper". There is irony of history (of our academic field) to it, since the two authors explain religion as a standard feature of human beings in a rather different way than the propagators of a "science" of religion based upon the standard *sui generis* definition of religion did.

(2) To discuss their paper means either to discuss the assumptions their reasoning rests on or the soundness of their reasoning. I will concentrate on the first task. As it is not possible here to examine in detail the five assumptions the authors name at the beginning of the paper (p. 9-10) and some further definitions they use, I will mainly restrict myself to some hints concerning what an in-depth analysis of these assumptions should take into consideration.

(3) Assumption 1 and 4 seem to define the nature of "science" as an undertaking to accumulate knowledge about the world, both the natural

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. All references in the text, unless otherwise noted, are to this article.

and the social. The authors are convinced that, theoretically, scientific research can be undertaken in an unbiased way. The first assumption gives a "minimal definition" of the objective of scientific research that hardly anyone will reject: gaining intersubjectively accessible knowledge of intersubjectively accessible facts.[2] Disagreement will probably emerge when an attempt is made to define both the adjective "intersubjective" and the concept of "fact" To make their point clear, in their fourth assumption the authors reject what they call "the anti-science posturings of postmodernism" (p. 10). To use a phrase coined by Hans H. Penner and Edward A. Yonan, this strikes me as sort of "Fabian tactics of winning a methodological battle by avoiding it".[3] One does not have to be a "postmodernist" – whatever that may be – to understand that in science there are no bare facts outside their construction by the methodological approach. In science it is always a certain – and therefore defined – sector of reality[4] that is researched by using at least one specified method. The establishing of a study subject therefore involves a construction of "facts". This construction rests on a theory (at least, an implicit one). This way, there are no facts outside the theory.[5] Accordingly, the minimal requirement for intersubjectivity means that definitions, sources, hypotheses, assumptions and so on, on which the theory rests, as well as the methodological steps taken to arrive at the conclusion(s) ("knowledge about facts"), are laid open. Given that, everyone is able to check the way that a given researcher has arrived at certain conclusions, at least theoretically. Therefore, "facts" constructed by means *theoretically* not open to be checked by everyone – for example, intuition, inner experience, channelling and the like – cannot, by definition, be counted as valuable sources of scientific theories.[6] Nevertheless, the named alleged ways of gaining knowledge, like channelling, can be made subjects of scientific inquiry. This distinction has been the nerve of critical arguments against theories in the field that claim a *sui generis* status for religion, in as far as those recur to religious experience.

2 With my reservations to the concept of a "bare fact" in mind, I would prefer to substitute "knowledge" by "theory".

3 Hans H. Penner – Edward A. Yonan, "Is a Science of Religion Possible?", *The Journal of Religion* 52/2, 1972, 107-133: 133.

4 Sure enough, this can also be the interaction between defined sectors of reality.

5 For the field of "Study of Religions" this point has been paradigmatically formulated in the famous introduction of Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press 1988, XI-XIII.

6 In contrast to facts established by the archetype of scientific inquiry in the modern sense, the experiment: to change one variable of a setting and to record the reaction caused thereby.

(4) While I fully agree with the authors that scientific inquiry *in itself* is – ideally – an unbiased undertaking, I neither share their description of possible biases, nor the idea they seem to hold, that scientific inquiry is set within an unbiased framework. Certainly, Clifford Geertz is right in calling "disinterested observation" a central characteristic of the scientific attitude towards the world and a possible source of conflict between "science" as a cultural system and other, more biased cultural systems like "ideology".[7] Nevertheless, "ideology" cannot solely be reduced to the religious point of view, and history provides more examples of science being utilised by various ideologies than we can name here.[8] As the authors put it, university is "a purpose-designed institution" and the purpose of it is "knowledge" (p. 9). But there are manifold interests (of the society as a whole or of special groups within the society) behind the scientific project. The cognitive interest very rarely is but cognitive.[9] Natural and technical sciences, for example, are mostly undertaken with the interest of generating more effective ways of controlling the environment. What could the interest behind a "science of religion" possibly be?

(5) The authors define religion as "human behaviors that are engaged in because of, or somehow related to, a belief in agents that are beyond identification by way of the senses or scientific metric" (p. 9-10)[10] and derive the human being's inclination to explain the world by "agent causality" from phylogeny. This approach raises two questions: a) Although there is hardly a religion to be found, in which superhuman agents play no role at all, can we really reduce religion to a system of explaining the world by recurring to those agents and systems of interacting with them? b) Even if so, does our proclivity to explain the world by agent causality hinder us to study these phenomena?

Ad a): This is not the place to discuss the many ways in which religion has been defined. Almost all of the definitions proposed have their strong points and their shortcomings. There are essentialist and social functional-

7 See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books 1973, 111, 330-333.

8 For example, see Werner Dostal, "Silence in the Darkness: German Ethnology in the National Socialist Period", *Social Anthropology* 2, 1994, 251-262.

9 This has been reflected by Nietzsche in his "philosophy of science"; see Babette Babich, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Science: Reflecting Science on the Ground of Art and Life*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1994.

10 This is very close to the current definition in Cognitive Science of Religion: religion being looked at as essentially the belief in superhuman agents, see, for example, Jesper Sørensen, "Religion in Mind: A Review Article of the Cognitive Science of Religion", *Numen* 52, 2005, 465-494: 466-467, 470.

ist definitions (that stress the role religion plays for society),[11] those that centre on the role of religion as cognitive systems,[12] descriptive definitions – as brought forth by Kurt Rudolph[13] – and the dimensional models. A widely known of the latter type is Ninian Smart's seven dimensional model, as put forth in the introduction to the second edition of *The World's Religions*.[14] In a way, dimensional models are a sub-genre of descriptive definitions, as they rather attempt to define religion by delineating the phenomenon than to give one central feature. Their best use is, in my opinion, heuristic, but they leave us with the question: what is it, then, that makes all these features religious ones? By looking at one dimension in detail, we are only left with the question: "What exactly is it that makes ritual activity, narratives about the origin of the world, doctrines, ethical systems and so on *religious* ones?" Martin and Wiebe propose that it is the role that "agent causality" plays in the field so described, whilst Rudolph prefers a more general wording, naming "superhuman or supernatural forces of various kinds".[15] Rudolph's answers seems more apt to me than the definition by Wiebe and Martin: the dimension of "ritual" is a kind of umbrella term for various kinds of activity, which can, but do not have to, refer to "superhuman beings", take for example initiation rites or calendrical rites.[16] Creation myths do not in every case involve "superhuman be-

11 Prevalent in sociology and anthropology, more or less in the tradition of Durkheim, Malinowski or Radcliffe-Brown. Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion and Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993, 19, has described this approach as looking at religion as "a class of metaphorical statements and actions obliquely denoting social relationships and claims to social status".

12 In the tradition of Tylor's minimal definition, "belief in spiritual beings". Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West…*, 31-32, gives an interesting definition that somewhat combines Tylor's approach with a central aspect of the social functionalist view: "… an extension of the field of people's social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society … in which the human beings involved see themselves in a dependent position *vis-à-vis* their non-human alters".

13 „Der von einer Tradition bestimmte Glaube einer Gemeinschaft oder eines Individuums an den Einfluß übermenschlicher oder überirdischer wirksamer Mächte unterschiedlicher Art auf das natürliche und gesellschaftliche Geschehen und die daraus resultierende Verehrung derselben durch bestimmte Handlungen, die von der Gemeinschaft in festen Formen überliefert werden (Tradition), und um die sich ein Bestand von lehrhaften, schriftlich oder mündlich tradierten Vorstellungen gruppiert" (Kurt Rudolph, *Geschichte und Probleme der Religionswissenschaft*, Leiden – New York – Köln: E. J. Brill 1992, 44).

14 Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press ^{2}1998, 19-28.

15 „übermenschliche[r] oder überirdische[r] wirksame[r] Mächte unterschiedlicher Art" (K. Rudolph, *Geschichte und Probleme der Religionswissenschaft…*, 44).

16 For types of ritual, one good overview still is Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press 1997, 93-137.

ings", unless one wants to include ants, spiders, the sun and archetypical human beings within that category (see the Navajo creation myth),[17] or women that have been killed with the outcome that their bodily parts have been transformed to the basic crops of a given economy.[18] It seems more plausible to me to interpret these myths not with reference to "agent causality", but to analogies – metaphors and metonymies – to parts of the human body or the environment, used to construct the classifications that order the world.[19] In other words, I do not think that semiotics should be discharged of in the analysis of religious thought for the sake of cognitive science.

Ad b): Take, for example, the definition given by Melford Spiro in the same vein as the one by the authors, according to which religion is "a cultural system consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated super-human beings".[20] This definition uses a clearly defined meta-language to religious language, and in much of the writings of researchers in the field we can find this sort of meta-language. None of the words used stems directly from a religious framework, as it is the case in much of the writings of those authors that are rightly dismissed as being the propagators of a religious world-view in the disguise of being academic (in the Martin and Wiebe's sense of the word) scholars of religion. Some of the definitions rendered above also meet that requirement. To return to semiotics once more, a minimal requirement of scientific language, when it comes to theory, is that there is a clear demarcation line between object language and meta-language. One of the shortcomings of religiously biased "study of religions" is that it has blurred this demarcation line, to say the least. There have been critics to that attitude. There

17 Trudy Griffin-Pierce, *Earth is My Mother, Sky is My Father: Space, Time, and Astronomy in Navajo Sandpaintings*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press 1992, 30-35; Charles H. Long, *Alpha: The Myths of Creation*, New York: George Braziller 1963, 53-57.

18 As for example in the Hainuwele myth from Ceram (Seram), as recorded by the Frobenius expedition and interpreted by Adolf E. Jensen, *Hainuwele: Volkserzählungen von der Molukkeninsel Ceram*, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann 1939, 39-43; id., *Das religiöse Weltbild einer frühen Kultur*, Stuttgart: Schröder 1948. An interpretation of that myth regarding it as a later adaptation of an old creation myth in order to cope with a "cargo situation" is given by Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press ^{2}1993, 302-308, taking up a line of thought also developed in id., *Imagining Religion*…, 96-101.

19 For the use of religious rituals, taboos and the like to construct and sustain the basic classifications in any society, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, New York: Praeger 1966. There is also a reference to Lévi-Strauss in this remark.

20 Melford E. Spiro, "Religion and the Irrational", in: June Helm (ed.), *Proceedings of the 1964 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society*, Seattle: University of Washington Press 1964, 102-115: 103.

have been definitions of religion – like the ones by Spiro and Rudolph quoted above – that do not fall into that trap. This is, for me, a proof that human beings are capable of making the very distinction between speaking about religion and religious speech. So where is the alleged impossibility to leave the religious point of view when talking about religion?

(6) Conclusion: Questions to be examined in more detail in order to prove or disprove the authors' proposition as outlined in (1): a) If the delusion the authors talk about was a necessary one in the strict sense of the word – that means: human beings had to fall into because of their biological organisation acquired in phylogeny, determining their outlook to the world – how could they ever find out this was a delusion, even if they think it is inevitable (see 5 b)? b) Is it true, that religion is in its essence a belief in and interaction with superhuman beings of the kind that is postulated in the term "agent causality" (see 5 a)? c) Is there something like an unbiased science in the strict sense of the word? What other biases than the religious one, as conceived of by the authors, could there be (see 4)? d) What is the nature of scientific inquiry (see 3)?

(7) There are some other questions I could have brought forth, but for the sake of brevity have left out. There is also an "answer" I have come to, with respect to the nature of religion. Important as the belief in superhuman beings and agent causality may be for the religious world-view, I do not think that we will have done away with the main questions that religions (purport to) give an answer to by simply leaving superhuman beings out. Very often, religion is defined with reference to transcendence. This need not to be an essentialist definition, as the example of Luckmann shows. This also holds for the definition of religion as brought forth by Clifford Geertz,[21] whatever its shortcomings might be.[22] Human beings live in a world of meaning. Science *in itself* (the disinterested positivist search for knowledge) cannot provide meaning; it is but a tool. Religion seems to be a cultural system among others (like art) that provide meaning in a more general sense than, for example, personal relationships. There are some questions that, as far as we know, among the living creatures on our planet, only human beings put, because they are the only ones conscious of death and able to construe the concept of an "absolute".[23] Religions give an answer to that questions, and as long as human beings

21 C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*…, 87-125.

22 See the critical discussion by Nancy K. Frankenberry – Hans H. Penner, "Clifford Geertz's Long-Lasting Moods, Motivations, and Metaphysical Conceptions", *The Journal of Religion* 79, 1999, 617-640.

23 And it would be imprecise to simply subsume the idea of the absolute under the category of "superhuman being", although the absolute can be conceived in an anthropomorphic way.

will ask that questions, an unbiased study of religions seems impossible, not because of a religious determination of human beings based in the structure of their brains, but, because of the simple "fact" that answers to these questions cannot be given by science *in itself*.[24] However these questions will be answered, whether the religious way or not, there will be a "bias" that is based in an attitude distinct from that of the "disinterested scientist". In case that the authors are right with their definition of religion as being built upon the assumption of "agent causality", I would say, the religious state of humanity is to be described as the state in which human beings have given an answer to these questions by use of the metaphor of human agents.[25]

24 This is a Kantian argument that I cannot develop in the framework of this short reply.
25 Most superhuman agents are anthropomorphic in nature.

SUMMARY

Is an Unbiased Science of Religion Impossible?

In this paper I present a critical discussion of the essay "Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion" by Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe (*Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, 9-18). The focus of the argumentation lies on the assumptions the authors adopt. The authors' understanding of the nature of science, concerning both methodology and the theory of science, is taken into consideration, and their definition of religion is discussed on the background of other definitions available. As an outcome, four questions are formulated that should be taken into account in further discussions of the topic. Finally, some remarks concerning the nature of religions are added. I think that the "Tylorian" definition of religion used by the authors is too narrow and I opt for an understanding of religion as based on the central questions facing human beings about the meaning of life that religions purport to give answers to. The persistence of religion is better explained by the ability of the human being to ask such questions than by the evolutionarily acquired proclivity towards "agent causality". I try to show that this can be achieved at the level of meta-language that is clearly delineated from religious object language.

Keywords: definition of religion; nature of scientific inquiry; agent causality; religion and meaning.

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