Seiwert, Hubert

The study of religion as a scientific discipline : a comment on Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe's paper

Religio. 2012, vol. 20, iss. 1, pp. [27]-38

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

Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/125394
Access Date: 28. 11. 2024
Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

MUNI ARTS Masarykova univerzita Filozofická fakulta

Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University
digilib.phil.muni.cz

The Study of Religion as a Scientific Discipline: A Comment on Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe's Paper

HUBERT SEIWERT

Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe characterize their paper[1] as a reflective comment on their aspirations for the field of Religious Studies they have committed their careers to (p. 9). As it turns out, these aspirations have been frustrated by developments in the field in recent decades. The main reason for this is the supposed influence of theological and religious agendas in Religious Studies (p. 12-13). However, the authors go further than complaining. They argue that a *scientific* programme of Religious Studies "is not ever likely to occur" (p. 9) and that to entertain the hope for it "is to be in the grip of a false and unshakeable delusion" (p. 9).

To support this central thesis, the authors develop two lines of argument: The "historical argument" tries to show that the study of religion actually was a scientific enterprise in the nineteenth century, although it later became compromised by non-scientific agendas. The "scientific argument" relies on theories proposed by the Cognitive Science of Religion to explain why they believe that Religious Studies will never succeed in establishing a truly scientific programme. At the same time, and somewhat in contradiction, they recommend the cognitive sciences as the most promising means of developing a theoretically coherent scientific study of religion.

Before I comment on this paper I should make clear in the first place that I believe it is a polemic pamphlet aimed at provoking and criticising but not at elaborating sophisticated arguments demanding detailed discussion. But as the editors of *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* consider this provocative paper an opportunity to launch a debate on the disciplinary status of Religious Studies, I am happy to participate.

As things stand, Martin and Wiebe's paper is the point of reference. I shall therefore roughly follow its outline and first consider the historical argument brought forward to substantiate the thesis that Religious Studies are not a scientific discipline, nor are they ever likely to become one.

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.

Although I share many of their views, I disagree with the idea that religion is a subject *sui generis* and the Study of Religion is therefore substantially different from other scientific disciplines. The second point deals with their "scientific argument", which relies on insights from the cognitive science of religion to support their thesis. Finally I will make some remarks on the pitfall of ontological naturalism as theoretical approach to the Study of Religion, which is about to substitute one ideological agenda in Religious Studies by another.

Religious Studies as an Academic Discipline: Historical and Institutional Aspects

The authors start with the observation that no undergraduate department of Religious Studies has fully implemented a *scientific* programme of study and research (p. 9). They explain the objective of *scientific* research as being "to gain public (intersubjectively available) knowledge of public (intersubjectively available) facts" (p. 9). Given this explanation, it appears strange to maintain that Religious Studies hitherto have not been engaged in a scientific research programme. Unless we regard historical research as fiction writing, we should think that it is dealing with intersubjectively available facts to gain intersubjectively available knowledge. History of Religions has for decades been a common designation for the discipline from which the Study of Religion emerged, as can be seen from the name still being used by the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR). Historical studies are not a science, but I would not agree that the history of religions generally has been or is in the service of ideological, theological or religious agendas; and it is hard to imagine that Luther Martin, whose works include many fine pieces of historical and comparative studies, would consider the history of religions a futile enterprise.

Their "historical argument" suggests that in the nineteenth century there emerged a scientific programme to study religion, which has been compromised by more recent developments (p. 12). Although their view of the mythic ancestors of the discipline such as Friedrich Max Müller may be idealized, I concede that much which nowadays runs under the name of "Religious Studies" in North America includes teaching and research with ideological, theological, religious and political agendas. "Religious Studies" is not an academic discipline but a catch-all term for dealing with religion in all kind of academic fashions. Thus, part of the problem is terminological. Religious Studies is not the heir of the academic ancestors the authors refer to, but a conglomeration of – well – religious studies. "*Religionswissenschaft*" to some extent is better off as a discipline, al-

though its history in Germany and other north European countries has been heavily influenced by liberal Protestant theology. Still, it is easier to argue for the autonomy and integrity of *Religionswissenschaft* as an adademic discipline than to define the boundaries of Religious Studies. It is intriguing that the term "science of religion", which was coined by the German-born Oxford professor Friedrich Max Müller, did not gain currency in the English-speaking world.

As can be seen in Germany, to have an unambiguous name is helpful for establishing the Study of Religion as an academic discipline distinct from other religious studies, although it is not sufficient. A number of chairs for *Religionswissenschaft* at German universities belong to faculties of theology and it is an on-going problem that the chair holders must be members of Christian churches. Even if this situation is slightly different from North American universities where Religious Studies are linked to pre-existing departments of theology, it is obvious that disciplinary identity demands institutionalisation as an autonomous discipline. On the international level, the International Association for the History of Religions was a rather successful attempt at institutionalising a field of religious research without a theological or religious agenda. Despite its former domination by liberal theologians and unavoidable internal differences, it used to give the Study of Religion an institutionalised identity distinct from religiously engaged religious studies.

In North America attempts at institutionalising the discipline seem to have suffered a setback. In 1985 the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR) was founded with a similar agenda as the IAHR and became one of its member associations. As Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe, two of its founders, explained twenty years later, NAASR had been established out of frustration with the American Academy of Religion's (AAR) inability to encourage the development of a genuine scientific approach to the study of religion, free from religious influence.[2] Thus, thirty years ago the situation was more or less similar to what the authors complain about in their paper today. Possibly because hopes for betterment had proven futile, the NAASR capitulated when in 2008 its representatives – including Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe – strongly advocated affiliating the AAR with the IAHR, which was accomplished at the XXth World Congress of the IAHR in Toronto in 2010. History goes on and we cannot but wait to see how the IAHR will change under the influence of the AAR. It could well be that the North American understanding of Religious Studies, which according to Wiebe and Martin has been "seri-

2 Luther H. Martin – Donald Wiebe, "Establishing a Beachhead: NAASR, Twenty Years Later", <http://www.naasr.com/Establishingabeachhead.pdf> [11 February 2012], 2.

ously compromised by extra-scientific and non-epistemic agendas" (p. 12), and the sheer number of AAR professionals following such agendas will finally drive the IAHR in the same direction.

Nevertheless, I do not think that historical considerations are sufficient to support the pessimistic thesis that the Study of Religion cannot develop as a scientific discipline. If history teaches us anything then it is that things change. The academic study of religion and religions was for decades the field of theologians and a very small number of historians of religion. Nowadays religion has moved closer to the centre of academic interest and we find that sociologists, political scientists, economists, historians, psychologists and cognitive scientists have unexpectedly discovered religion as an important area of research. Are we supposed to believe that they all have the same agenda; that they all ask the same questions and use the same methodology? Obviously there are people interested in religion because they believe that religion is something good or that it is something bad. We cannot and probably should not stop them doing so even if they pursue their interest in academia. But this does not prevent us from pursuing other agendas such as studying religion scientifically.

To declare it a delusion to expect that religion could be studied scientifically because humans are naturally religious and their "religiousness will continue to constrain the academic study of religion" (p. 14) is to revert to the argument that religion is a subject *sui generis*. It implies that we can scientifically study politics, economics, art or gender, but not religion. However, such subjects present exactly the same problems for scientific research as religion does. Political science is no less prone to ideological or political agendas than religious studies are prone to ideological or religious ones. It is a common issue that only a limited number of scholars in humanities and social sciences submit to scientific principles. This is because their subjects usually are not enclosed in laboratories but are involved in everyday life. It would be surprising if most people should be able or willing to abandon their personal interests in political or religious matters in order to deal with politics or religion as if they were unconcerned. I do not think that this situation has changed very much during the past few hundred years. The ancestors of the science of religion mentioned by Martin and Wiebe probably were even more an academic minority than are the scholars engaged in scientific research in religion today.

The Cognitive Science of Religion

Not only the historical argument is unconvincing but also the "scientific argument", which relies on theories of the cognitive sciences to show that the Study of Religion can never be established as a scientific discpline.

To understand the argument, let us accept the idea that believing in the existence of agents that are beyond identification by way of the senses or scientific metric has something to do with religion (p. 9-10). Let us further suppose that the authors are right in assuming that evolutionary and cognitive defaults of the human brain make it natural to look for agent causality and to infer the presence of agents even when there are none (p. 15); and let us finally accept the assumption that this offers "an explanation for the large number of otherwise very intelligent people – including leading scientists – who persist in retaining and expressing rather naïve religious beliefs even while successfully cultivating their own circumscribed craft" (p. 16). What would that mean for the possibility of studying religion scientifically? Nothing in particular! It would just explain why presumably most people are more inclined to understand the world religiously instead of scientifically. But this would be the case not only when they are studying religion but under all circumstances. There is no reason to believe that it is easier for scientists to desist from their religious beliefs when they study the physical aspects of the world than when they study its social aspects. Religion is not a subject *sui generis* and to study it scientifically demands methodological training and discipline no less than the scientific study of any other subject. The fact that not many people have this training and discipline shows that practicing science is a special craft, but not that a science of religion is impossible.

The two authors make a case for the cognitive sciences, which they believe offer "the most promising contemporary opportunity for developing a theoretically coherent scientific study of religion" (p. 14). They contrast the cognitive science of religion with humanistic and social scientific studies, which cling to versions of agent causality and therefore are declared not to be truly scientific. This is because humanities and social sciences invoke "intentionality, a primary attribute of agency, to explain and understand textual productions or behavioral motivation" (p. 15). They are therefore blamed for ignoring "advances in scientific knowledge, which are characterized by the replacement of agent causality with natural causality" (p. 16). If I grasp this correctly, it means that historical studies of religion that usually try to understand the meaning that texts had or have for their authors or readers do not produce scientific knowledge because they refer to intentions instead of natural causes. And conversely, the cognitive science of religion offers a scientifically sound theoretical programme because it resorts to natural causality.

What the authors are advocating is a science of religion that not only tries to gain intersubjectively available knowledge of intersubjectively available facts, but also reduces human behaviour to its "natural" causes. They thus subscribe to the methodological and ontological naturalism of

the natural sciences. Unfortunately, they are not explicit in stating that their use of the term "scientific" refers to the natural sciences (and excludes the social sciences). Had they done so, there would be no reason to doubt their thesis that a "scientific" study of religion is impossible. It is in fact impossible to study religion with methods of the natural sciences because these methods cannot identify religious behaviour. According to the authors, the study of religion is "the study of 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). However, whether human beings maintain such a belief cannot be discovered by methods of the natural sciences without relying on hermeneutics. We have to understand the meaning of what people say, write or express in some other way, and we have to assume they have intentions. Without understanding meanings and intentions, there is no way of discerning religious behaviour. We cannot know if depositing flowers in front of an inscribed stone is somehow related to beliefs in supernatural agents or not, when we ignore meanings and purposes. Only after we have identified religious behaviour hermeneutically can we start trying to explain it by natural causes.

Even if we granted cognitive scientists the privilege of making use of naïve hermeneutics, which simply take linguistic expressions at face value, they would not be in a position to study religion without the humanistic and social sciences. At least they need the concept of religion; they have to import it from somewhere unless they use the term "religion" in a completely different sense than humanities and social sciences. In this case, however, it would be gratuitous for Religious Studies to take notice of the cognitive science of religion because both were dealing with different subjects.

Ironically, it appears that the cognitive science of religion has been influenced by a tradition of Religious Studies that considers religion a phenomenon *sui generis*. Why else should one pay much attention to cognitions that from a "scientific" (ontologically naturalist) point of view are simply incorrect conceptions of the world? To believe in agents that do not really exist is a mistaken belief, but there are numberless false ideas about the world that have been expressed in human history and in our present time. Many ideas processed in human brains are incorrect, possibly including the idea that we can explain human behaviour without taking into account the intentions and purposes of agents.[3] There could be a cognitive

3 I adhere to the conventional theory that authors have some intentions when writing a text and that these intentions can be understood or misunderstood. Admittedly I hesitated to respond to Wiebe and Martin's paper after understanding that trying to comprehend its meaning and purpose was a thoroughly unscientific relapse to the idea of

science of false beliefs (provided the cognitive sciences had methods to discern which ideas are wrong or right), but why single out beliefs that are considered religious? From a purely cognitive scientific point of view, religious beliefs deserve no more attention than other mistaken ideas unless it was supposed that they are in some way different. Although most cognitive scientists of religion insist on denying that in the cognitive system there is any difference between religious and other ideas, they invest energy in doing research into cognitions that cannot be identified by their scientific methods. Hence, their interest in religious beliefs must be based on theories other than those of the cognitive sciences. These appear to be theories that suppose that religion is something special, if not *sui generis*, thus at the least deserving the particular attention of scientists.

If there should be an interface between the cognitive science of false beliefs and the Study of Religion then it is the supposition that beliefs considered religious are indeed different from ordinary "false beliefs" in that they can influence human behaviour to an astonishing extent. They induce humans to invest considerable material and intellectual resources to engage in behaviour that from a "scientific" point of view is completely useless because it relies on misconceptions of the world. But to explain such wasteful behaviour, the cognitive sciences first need the humanistic studies of religion telling them that building a cathedral or sacrificing a pig counts as religious behaviour while building a palace or butchering an ox does not.[4] When we exclude considering intentions and meanings, there is not much left for the scientific study of religious behaviour.

Science and Ideology

It will be clear by now that I am not convinced by the proposal of securing the scientific character of the Study of Religion by making the cognitive science of religion its theoretical paradigm. Cognitive studies add a new perspective and theoretical approach to the study of religion but for methodological and epistemological reasons cannot replace humanistic and social scientific studies. A similarly basic objection to Wiebe and Martin's paper concerns their understanding of science and the axiomatic assumptions on which they base their argument. They assume "that the

agent causality. The dilemma can be resolved by realising that this discussion on Religious Studies is not a scientific enterprise but part of humanistic studies, and that in this context the idea of agent causality is unavoidable if we are not to refrain from any discussions including on scientific issues.

4 See also 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: 59.

modern western research university is a purpose-designed institution for obtaining knowledge about the world" (p. 9). This obviously is not an empirical statement, for otherwise there would be no reason to deplore the state of the modern western research university. It is a normative statement expressing the belief of the two authors that the university should be an institution such as this – possibly on historical grounds. They further believe that it is possible to gain scientific knowledge of intersubjectively available facts. And they assume "that the current anti-theoretical and anti-science posturings of postmodernism have not undermined the credibility of modern science as a peculiarly successful instrument of inquiry into the character of the world, either natural or social" (p. 10).

I share these assumptions in principle. But I think that the authors are using arguments that undermine their own comprehension of science and university. They blame modern universities for "inculcating values to undergraduates and providing them with structures of meaning" (p. 12). This cannot be meant as a serious argument; what else can teachers do when they try to convey to their students a scientific ethos and explain them the meaning and purpose of science and the university? It appears that the authors are falling victim to their belief that doing science is to subscribe to a fundamentalist version of naturalism, for which meanings and intentions are anathema. Thus they ignore that their own understanding of what the scientific study of religion should be rests on the assumption of purposes ("purpose-designed institution") and historical contingencies that cannot be explained by naïve naturalism.

I designate this version of naturalism "naïve" because it undermines critical scientific thinking with folk epistemology believing that our "senses or scientific metric" (p. 9) provide us with knowledge about the world. All they provide us with is some input into our neuronal systems where it is processed by algorithms shaped by phylogenetic evolution and ontogenetic learning. To take the outcome of this process as knowledge about the world may be acceptable as a common convention, but to regard it as true knowledge is naïve. The human brain is prone to producing all kind of wrong interpretations of sensations. Thus, we needed a bit more than our "senses and scientific metric" to know what exists and what doesn't. If we ignore this, we are running the risk of transforming science into a metaphysical ideology that is unaware of its own epistemological limitations.

I agree that Religious Studies are particularly susceptible to ideological interests and prejudices. It seems to be difficult do deal with religion without feeling obliged to take a position for or against it. In one camp we find the defenders of religion with an "approbation bias" criticised by Donald Wiebe and Luther Martin (p. 17), who instead join the other camp of those

who feel compelled to point to the erroneous beliefs maintained in religions. Both positions are justified as expressions of personal beliefs and convictions; but none of them is helpful for studying religion scientifically because they bring in value judgments, which add nothing to our knowledge about religion but distort unbiased scientific reasoning.

In the case at hand, the value judgements of the authors make them blind to the limitations of scientific knowledge and turn scientific arguments into ideological statements. At the same time they jeopardise their own cognitive scientific approach. Subscribing to an ideology of ontological naturalism, they believe that science can produce unquestionable knowledge about the world, which can be taken as a gauge to measure the truth of religious beliefs. While they see clearly that the functioning of the human brain is conditioned by phylogenetically evolved neuronal algorithms that for instance induce humans to infer the presence of agents even where there are none (p. 15), they ignore the fact that there are other algorithms conditioning its functioning as well. One of them is to conjecture that things have causes in the first place. When according to the cognitive science of religion the proclivity to assume the presence of agents is considered the natural, i.e., biological basis of "religious" beliefs, we can take the human penchant for supposing causes in general as elementary form of "scientific" thinking. Hence, "religion" probably is no more natural than "science" if we reduce them in a simplistic way to basic functions of the brain.

Evolution has not equipped humans with a cognitive apparatus for obtaining knowledge about the world. The functioning of the human brain is shaped by algorithms, which have evolved to adapt human behaviour to the environments of our stone-age ancestors. Humans are not the pride of creation that has been endowed with reason to gain "knowledge". Without doubt, the ability to think logically is based on neuronal hardwiring that has evolved naturally – a basis it shares with the ability to maintain religious beliefs. Thus, "science" is as much a by-product of the biological evolution of the brain as is "religion". And in the form of the "modern western research university" it quite obviously also is the by-product of rather contingent cultural developments.

On what grounds can we be sure that this form of knowledge, which happens to be our own, gives a more accurate picture of the world than others; that religious beliefs are rather naïve (p. 16) whereas scientific beliefs are enlightened? Cognitive scientific research could probably show that there are cognitive algorithms making humans inclined to think that their own perception of the world is true and others are false. But we do not need the cognitive sciences for that; it suffices to study the history of religions and the history of science.

What arguments can the cognitive science of religion offer to substantiate the belief that of all things it is modern science that gives us a true understanding of reality? Not many, I guess. What we can say is that we prefer scientific knowledge to religious beliefs, but this is not a scientific argument but a normative decision. We could justify our preference with the consideration that scientific knowledge often proves to be quite useful – though occasionally disastrous –, but the same can be said of religious beliefs. There is no way out of the dilemma that advocating science or a particular understanding of it cannot be grounded on scientific arguments but necessarily refers to normative positions and subjective preferences. This is not upsetting as long as we are aware of it.

If however we believe or make others believe that science delivers somehow objective or unquestionable knowledge about the world, we are deceiving others or ourselves. In this event we make science an ideology. To be sure, the cognitive mechanisms that prompt us to believe in our own convictions are stronger than those enabling us to critically reflect on them, which makes it more "natural" to think ideologically than critically. And perhaps scholars of religion are especially susceptible to ideological thinking, given the subject of their study. For religion is a disputed concept that in everyday life is loaded with value judgments, be they positive or negative; it is unnatural to cultivate a discipline that demands leaving behind one's everyday convictions. We cannot reasonably expect many people to submit to such a discipline. After all, why should they?

Conclusion

Is the Study of Religion possible as a scientific discipline? I believe that Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe are right in stating that it would be a delusion to think that Religious Studies as they are understood and practiced in North America are a scientific discipline. I also agree that Religious Studies in general are prone to ideological agendas. Although this makes it difficult to practice the academic study of religion, I do not subscribe to their argument that it is impossible to conceive and develop such a discipline.

In particular, I contest the claim that the difficulties in studying religion scientifically are due to the peculiarities of the subject and to cognitive proclivities towards interpreting the world religiously. It is no less possible to scientifically study religion than to scientifically study any other aspect of human culture; and it faces similar methodological and theoretical challenges.

Overcoming these challenges calls for discipline. As the authors put it, "having the mind of a scientist requires a reflective resolve to do so – and

considerable effort explicitly to cultivate the cognitive, social, and material conditions necessary to actively maintain that resolve" (p. 17). It is true that practicing this discipline is difficult, but it is not impossible.

As any academic discipline or science, the Study of Religion is a historically contingent cultural product. It does not have any unchangeable essence, but its boundaries are negotiated and defined by human agents. To opt for a particular understanding of "scientific" is a normative decision that cannot be justified scientifically so that it must be explained by other reasons.

Provided that the Study of Religion is considered an empirical science, it demands rational methodology and empirical arguments to maintain a theory. The theory that religion can be studied scientifically without taking into account the meaning that humans attribute to their behaviour is methodologically wrong because it precludes distinguishing between religious and non-religious behaviour. Thus, the Study of Religion as a scientific discipline necessarily includes "humanistic" approaches, which cannot be replaced by methods of the natural sciences.

Religion is "natural" in that it can be reduced to the behaviour of humans within the limits of their biological nature. Although the Study of Religion aims at explaining the universal conditions of religious behaviour, explaining the particular conditions of historical developments and empirical findings is likewise part of the academic discipline. This calls for considering factors that are external to the individuals exhibiting certain behaviour, which amounts to studying cultures and societies.

I therefore conclude that the Study of Religion as an academic discipline is possible as a combination of various methodological and theoretical approaches. It do not believe that the cognitive science of religion can be a solution to the main issue that prevents Religious Studies from being a scientific enterprise, which is the proclivity towards judging the value of religious behaviour and the truth of religious beliefs. In the form advocated by Donald Wiebe and Luther Martin, the cognitive science of religion appears instead to only replace one normative position – appreciating religion – by another – depreciating religion.

SUMMARY

The Study of Religion as a Scientific Discipline: A Comment on Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe's Paper

The article discusses Donald Wiebe and Luther Martin's paper "Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion". The central thesis of the two authors is that Religious Studies are not and probably can never be a "scientific" discipline. It is argued that the reasons given by the two authors to support their thesis are unconvincing and contradictory. Their suggestion that the study of religion should subscribe to an understanding of science that abandons the concept of agency and reduces human behaviour to "natural" causes is criticised on theoretical and methodological grounds. In fact, it is not possible to completely forsake hermeneutics and to study religion using the methods of the natural sciences because these methods do not allow us to identify religious behaviour. Therefore, the Study of Religion, of course, cannot be a discipline of the natural sciences. However, as a social science, the Study of Religion is no less possible than the social scientific study of any other subject.

Keywords: Religious Studies; study of religion; cognitive science of religion; methodology; theory; ideology.

Religionswissenschaftliches Institut
Universität Leipzig
Schillerstraße 6
04109 Leipzig
Germany

HUBERT SEIWERT

seiwert@uni-leipzig.de