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A Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion?

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In their academic “confession” “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion”,¹ Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe offer this pithy, provocative statement: “[R]eligiousness will continue to constrain the academic study of religion even as it will continue to dominate the concerns of *Homo sapiens* generally” (p. 14). While the first part of Martin and Wiebe’s argument, concerning the history of our discipline, is empirically testable (some state of affairs has or has not occurred), the question of actual possibility (if not logical possibility) of a scientific study of religion is mostly philosophical. In this response, I argue that Martin and Wiebe’s claim would, in fact, interfere with all existing sciences.

Considering the first part of the statement, presented in “The Historical Argument” section of Martin and Wiebe’s paper (p. 10-13), I could not agree more. When judging the overall state of our field of study² from a broader perspective,³ taking into account its history as well as its current state, I share the very same view and think that it is valid not only on a global scale or for North American Religious Studies (as they have their specifics), but also within the European or Czech context. That said, my response is not to second or applaud Martin and Wiebe’s view, but rather express my reservations about the authors’ conclusions, even though I share all their assumptions (p. 9-10). This brings me to the second part of Martin and Wiebe’s statement (“The Scientific Argument”, p. 13-17), as well as the second part of my response.

Though I see nothing wrong with the logic of the argument presented in “The Scientific Argument” part of Martin and Wiebe’s paper, or with the evidence from the cognitive sciences used to support the argument; the trouble lies within the *extension/reach* of this argument. For if everything

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

2 I am using the term *field of study* deliberately as opposed to *discipline* or *science*.

3 I intentionally omit those rare centers and departments that are dedicated to scientific approach as they are too exceptional.

falls into predefined category,⁴ that category becomes redundant and can be put aside to make room for something more specific that would enrich our knowledge. And this is exactly what befalls Martin and Wiebe's argument in "The Scientific Argument" section. Can unconscious mechanisms really play such a dominant role in processes so conscious, so explicit and unnatural as is a scientific endeavor? Coming from cognitive science of religion's background myself, I do not tend to underestimate the power of unconscious processes. However, from the very same background I also know that the human mind is able to operate on different levels⁵ and that given time and effort one might be able to consciously process knowledge about how unconscious levels operate, trace those mechanisms, make them (or their results) explicit and, in a manner of speaking, "throw them away" on a formal conscious level.⁶ If not, logic would not be possible and we would be forever doomed to make all judgments on account of our heuristics alone. We would have no way of knowing that optical illusions are illusions. We would all have to be openly racist and tribalist, as we would have no ground on which to correct our natural inclinations. In fact, we would not be able to understand Martin and Wiebe's argument as they are indeed using the same conscious reasoning when trying to unmask unconscious mechanisms that cause our inability to study religion scientifically. Most of all, and here comes the main point of my response, we would have no science at all, as it would not be possible to achieve one in the real world. For example, the same would have to be true about the consequences of our natural inclination to tribalism on theory as well as methods of mathematics, and we would therefore favor certain numbers. Another example can be taken from physics: astrophysicists should be biased against galaxies that differ in shape from our own galaxy. For brevity, the authors name just one of these unconscious mechanisms, the "proclivity for explaining our world in terms of agent causality" (p. 15). Is physics therefore forever doomed to fall back on agent causality, as are humans when trying to make everyday sense of the world? It is obviously not, or at least not in the authors' view, as they clearly state: "Despite advances in scientific knowledge, which are characterized by the replacement of agent causality with natural causality ..." (p. 16). It is this incoherence that I want to point out; that even though both types of scientists fall back on unconscious mechanisms in their everyday online reasoning,

4 In this context authors created a *category* that denotes simply any *scientific endeavor affected by unconscious mechanisms*.

5 Cf. Dual-Processing Accounts of Reasoning. (I am using this term simplistically, as all my other examples and analogies, for the sake of argument.)

6 I do not argue that we can switch them off entirely, just that we can be aware of them on formal conscious level and not to let them interfere there.

when it comes to scientific endeavors, scientists-physicists are not under the same spell as scientists-scholars of religion. This part of my argument is of course relevant if (and only if) the authors do not want to argue that when it comes to religion these unconscious mechanisms (their setup and special mixture) constrain us more strongly or more effectively than in any other context.⁷ In other words, their argument would have to be pointed at all sciences or at science in general for it to be sound. If that were so, I would rest my case, as I see no other flaw in it. But it is not pointed at science in general, as they clearly state: “[O]n scientific grounds” (p. 9) thus assuming science possible.⁸

In summary, there is no special reason why scientists-religious scholars should tend to do bad science more than any other scientists, and if they do, they have only themselves to blame. Yes, science is unnatural, it is hard to cultivate,⁹ and it takes highly trained minds not to make any methodological oversteps. But as mathematicians cannot let other mathematicians to get away with mistakes in sophisticated formulas, so we cannot let our fellow scholars of religion to get away with appreciation (p. 12) or depreciation of religion while an unbiased *explanation* of the phenomenon is needed. For the very same reason, the authors themselves should have avoided using evaluating terms like “otherwise very intelligent people” (p. 16), when talking about fellow scientists who express their religiosity, or “rather naïve” (p. 16), when addressing any religious belief, and they should have stuck to pointing out methodological mistakes scientists might be making when they let their metaphysical stances meddle with their scientific work.

From within a broader perspective, I would suggest not to turn our lenses on our lenses yet. There will always be time to reflect upon our reflection with our reflection after conversion to postmodern tactics and goals. Let’s still work on the cognitive science of religion before turning to the cognitive science of cognitive science of religion, which would once again stir us into an infinite regress heading nowhere.

7 Which is not an inherent part of Martin and Wiebe’s argument, and my assumption is that it is not even something they would want to hold (given the implications of *ganz andere* or *sui generis* of religion, that would secretly crawl its way back into the scientific study of religion just under different guise).

8 Their own scientific grounds would have to be affected by the same doubts of no full emancipation from unconscious mechanisms (generalization from unconscious mechanisms constraining/shaping “religious concerns”).

9 Robert McCauley, “The Naturalness of Religion and the Unnaturalness of Science”, in: Frank C. Keil – Robert A. Wilson (eds.), *Explanation and Cognition*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2000, 61-85.



SUMMARY

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In my response to Martin and Wiebe's academic "confession", I try to show that there is a major inconsistency in their argument. This inconsistency resides within their partial and therefore biased application of universal unconscious mechanisms that constrain the human mind, where the application should have been complete. Their argument should have been directed at all sciences or at science in general in order for it to be sound, and not particularly at Religious Studies. This would result in the argument that any scientific discipline is a delusion, which is an outcome Martin and Wiebe do not hold, as they make science a *sine qua non* for their own argument.

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