

Straw Men and Scientific Nostalgia: A Response to Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe

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Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe have considerably enriched the theoretical discussion about religion during the past decades. When two distinguished scholars of religion proclaim in fatalistic words that evolution results in an inevitable contamination of the study of religion with religious beliefs, we may expect to learn some important lesson from such a provocative thesis. And when their article on “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion”¹ comes in the format of a classical philosophical argumentation, with ‘conclusions’ that follow logically from ‘assumptions’ that are claimed “to have an initial plausibility” (p. 9), the reader may expect an important contribution to a rigorous scientific debate about religion. Unfortunately, their article does not fulfill such expectations, and much of the scientific rhetoric that steers Martin and Wiebe’s plot turns out to be problematic.

Let me begin with an observation. Often when I read articles or listen to presentations by scholars who advocate the cognitive study of religion (proudly called the ‘cognitive science of religion’) I am struck by the religious connotations that regularly underlie these narratives. In many cases, scholars who were trained in theology decades ago, present their ‘turn’ to cognitive study of religion in words that resemble conversion stories, marking a completely new (scholarly) identity. In their role as adepts of a new cult they have the tendency to preach the gospel and to distinguish clearly between in-group and out-group. The same connotation is apparent in Martin and Wiebe’s text. What is more, to frame their biographical narrative in a genre of “confession” (p. 9) is indicative of the mixture of religious and academic language that, interestingly enough, often characterizes programmatic publications in the field of cognitive study of religion.

This may be accounted for by a certain nostalgia when it comes to the topic of science (and now I turn from mere observation to arguments). Throughout their article, Martin and Wiebe refer to a scientific study of

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.

religion as something that would use the empirical methods of the natural sciences. That is why they can present the simple claim: “The historical record, we maintain, shows that no undergraduate departments of Religious Studies have fully implemented a *scientific* program of study and research since such an approach was first advocated in the late nineteenth century” (p. 9, italics original). This claim is surprising given the fact that in Europe already at the beginning of the twentieth century *Religionswissenschaft* was established as an academic discipline in philosophical – and not theological – faculties, and practiced as a non-confessional study of religion. The study programs typically distinguished between a historical and a systematic (comparative) approach to the study of religion. Martin and Wiebe briefly refer to Müller and Tiele as the initial conceivers of this academic proposition but do not describe the historical development of the discipline that has characterized *Religionswissenschaft* as an independent academic field. It is too simple to state that by the middle of the twentieth century this ‘scientific’ initiative had been compromised by a “crypto-religious trend” and sabotaged by theological interests (p. 12-13). Their straw man is ‘religious studies’, which indeed is a problematic concept; but that the more accurate translation of *Religionswissenschaft* is ‘academic study of religion’, thus referring to a study that is not itself ‘religious’, does not seem to fit the authors’ overall polemical interest.

From the beginning, the academic study of religion has had to face the same challenges as other disciplines within the humanities, particularly historiography, anthropology, psychology, and (later on) cultural studies. The most important challenge of these disciplines is not to meet the empirical standards of the natural sciences, but to make scholarly research academically accountable, based on historical and logical argumentation. This is exactly what critical scholarship has been doing even before the cognitive ‘science’ of religion entered the scene. Today, the academic study of religion is mainly defined through its object of study, i.e. an historically identifiable – and I would argue discursively constructed² – object called ‘religion’, and it applies methods and theories that are well established in neighboring disciplines (this becomes clear when we look at the collection of research methods in Engler and Stausberg).³ There is nothing *intrinsically* ‘religious’ in the study of religion, even though there are many departments of religion in Europe and particularly the United States where religious interests intersect with academic research – the

2 Kocku von Stuckrad, “Discursive Study of Religion: Approaches, Definitions, Implications”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 25/1, forthcoming 2013.

3 Steven Engler – Michael Stausberg (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, London: Routledge 2011.

reason for this, however, is not evolution or brain functions but politics, power, and discourse.

Hence, Martin and Wiebe underestimate (the potential of) the academic rigor of a critical study of religion. Their first assumption that the primary objective of “the modern western research university” is “scientific, that is, to gain public (intersubjectively available) knowledge of public (intersubjectively available) facts” (p. 9) perfectly fits the understanding of scholars who work in the context of cultural studies, historiography, and self-reflective critical humanities. Claiming that this scholarly endeavor has failed (and is evolutionarily doomed to fail!) is a gross simplification.

In Martin and Wiebe’s text, this underestimation of the study of religion goes along with an overestimation of the scholarly rigor of the natural sciences. To be sure, it is a recurring problem in the academic study of religion that we have to deal with “the actual reality of continuing infiltrations of extra-scientific agendas into the field” (p. 13). However, with this problem we are in good company! Other disciplines within the humanities have to confront this challenge, as well; but more importantly, the natural sciences themselves have been redefined and criticized in the wake of the philosophical, cultural, and discursive turns of the twentieth century. The historicity of knowledge in the natural sciences was already famously discussed by Ludwik Fleck.⁴ Edmund Husserl, Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem, and others have contributed to this debate and helped us to understand that it is not ‘nature’ that formulates natural laws but that ‘facts’ are produced in communicative and social processes.⁵ Martin and Wiebe do not seem to take notice of this critical scholarship and stick to a naïve image of the natural sciences that most historians of science would deconstruct today. They run into the trap that Russell T. McCutcheon aptly summarized recently as follows:

Since we can trace the history of “religion” and “religious experience” as items of discourse – and by this I mean a genealogical study of the invention of religious experience as an agreed upon subset of the broader range of interior dispositions known as experiences – it is indeed odd to find naturalistic scholars so confident that they will find where this discursive construct resides in the brain of all human beings.⁶

4 Ludwik Fleck, *Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache: Einführung in die Lehre vom Denkstil und Denkkollektiv*, Basel: Benno Schwabe 1935.

5 Overview in Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *An Epistemology of the Concrete: Twentieth-Century Histories of Life*, Durham: Duke University Press 2010. See also Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, Durham – London: Duke University Press 2010.

6 Russell T. McCutcheon, “Will Your Cognitive Anchor Hold in the Storms of Culture?”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78/4, 2010, 1182-1193: 1188.

Given their unreflective belief in science, it is not surprising that Martin and Wiebe construct another straw man, this time ‘postmodernism’: “Our *fourth assumption* is 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). Unfortunately, the authors do not explain what they mean by ‘postmodernism’, and there is no single reference to authors who would fit the taxonomy of “anti-theoretical and anti-science posturings”. As a matter of fact, critical responses to realism in the theory and philosophy of science are not at all directed against theory or science, quite the contrary: contributions from the field of sociology of knowledge and discursive approaches to the study of science are highly theorized reflections on the conditions of knowledge and the attribution of meaning to the world – including what is regarded as scientific object and fact.

Against the authors’ prejudices it seems necessary to point out once more that discursive approaches – and related theories deemed ‘postmodern’ by Martin and Wiebe – argue that our knowledge is not about ‘the world out there’ (even if the existence of ‘*a world out there*’ is not denied) and that we should adopt a relativist, rather than a realist position in the philosophical debate that is linked to these epistemological and ontological issues. The relativist position has led to many, often highly polemical objections. Derek Edwards, Malcolm Ashmore, and Jonathan Potter call the most prominent rejection the “Death and Furniture” response:

‘Death’ and ‘Furniture’ are emblems for two very common (predictable, even) objections to relativism. When relativists talk about the social construction of reality, truth, cognition, scientific knowledge, technical capacity, social structure and so on, their realist opponents sooner or later start hitting the furniture, invoking the Holocaust, talking about rocks, guns, killings, human misery, tables and chairs. The force of these objections is to introduce a bottom line, a bedrock of reality that places limits on what may be treated as epistemologically constructed or deconstructible. There are two related kinds of moves: Furniture (tables, rocks, stones, etc. – the reality that *cannot* be denied) and Death (misery, genocide, poverty, power – the reality that *should not* be denied).⁷

Martin and Wiebe contribute to this anti-relativist polemic. But their argument is itself under-theorized, which turns their critique of ‘postmod-

7 Derek Edwards – Malcolm Ashmore – Jonathan Potter, “Death and Furniture: The Rhetoric, Politics and Theology of Bottom Line Arguments against Relativism”, *History of the Human Sciences* 8, 1995, 25-49: 26 (italics original); see also Pirjo Nikander, “Constructionism and Discourse Analysis”, in: James A. Holstein – Jaber F. Gubrium (eds.), *Handbook of Constructionist Research*, New York: The Guilford Press 2008, 413-428: 413.

ernism' against themselves. For instance, when their fifth assumption refers to the possibility of "scientific research on religious thought and behavior" (p. 10), a critical discursive response would point out that before we can have a scientific (rigorous and empirical) study of religion we have to define what this "religious thought and behavior" actually is.⁸ And this act is not at all empirical, but hermeneutical. The scholarly attribution of meaning to certain human thought and behavior is based on social communication and decisions that scholars have to make to enter into a meaningful conversation with their colleagues. That is why Martin and Wiebe have to introduce what actually boils down to a definition of religion, in their case "a belief in agents that are beyond identification by way of the senses or scientific metric" (their second assumption, p. 9-10). The reasons for this assumption are beyond scientific argumentation, and Martin and Wiebe do not explain why this definition of 'religion' makes more sense than others. Don't get me wrong: I am not arguing against the use of definitions and demarcations in scholarly argumentation. But all definitions and assumptions have a *discursive history* that critical scholarship should reflect and analyze (this is especially true for the highly problematic concept of 'belief' in definitions of religion, but that is another story); what I argue is that *generic* definitions of religion, such as applied by Martin and Wiebe, should be abandoned⁹ and we as scholars should be careful not to generalize and reify findings that are based on discursively constructed knowledge. Otherwise we would shun "questions concerned with the apparent ease of moving from part to whole, from contingent to necessary, from history to ahistory, from local to universal, and from culture to nature".¹⁰

As a final point of criticism it is important to note that Martin and Wiebe's argumentation appears to be self-contradictory. When the authors claim that "[o]ur species' anti-science proclivity is as true of professional scholars of religion as of other intellectuals, perhaps especially so, given their subject of study" (p. 16), one wonders why the authors assume that scholars who engage in cognitive research are an exception to that rule, as they apparently resist the anti-science proclivity. This is linked to another inconsistency: When the authors claim that "religiousness will continue to

8 See also 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: 32, 33.

9 See Kocku von Stuckrad, "Discursive Study of Religion: From States of the Mind to Communication and Action", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 15, 2003, 255-271; id., "Discursive Study of Religion: Approaches...".

10 R. T. McCutcheon, "Will Your Cognitive Anchor Hold in the Storms of Culture?...", 1185.



constrain the academic study of religion even as it will continue to dominate the concerns of *Homo sapiens* generally” (p. 14), one wonders why ‘science’ – which the authors, with McCauley, regard as ‘unnatural’ (p. 14-15) – became possible in the first place. I cannot escape the impression that if we really would accept the premises of this article, the propositions concluded from them would be meaningless and logically flawed. The narrative would simply be another example of the prolongation of the delusion that the authors lament.

Reading Martin and Wiebe’s meditations about the “persistence of a delusion” is somewhat disappointing. Many of the assumptions are unwarranted, and the argumentation that is built on these assumptions is problematic, as it mainly reflects an uncritical belief in the success of scientific methods, as well as polemical misrepresentations of scholarship that the authors deem ‘postmodern’.



SUMMARY

Straw Men and Scientific Nostalgia: A Response to Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe

This article argues that Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe present a position that is based on many unwarranted and romantic assumptions. To begin with, the authors underestimate (the potential of) the academic rigor of a critical study of religion. This underestimation of the study of religion goes along with an overestimation of the scholarly rigor of the natural sciences. Martin and Wiebe do not seem to take notice of critical scholarship in the historiography and epistemology of science and stick to a naïve image of the natural sciences that most historians of science would deconstruct today. The authors have written a polemic against relativist positions in the humanities, but their argument is itself under-theorized, which turns their critique of ‘postmodernism’ against themselves. Finally, it is noted that Martin and Wiebe’s argumentation appears to be self-contradictory. For instance, when the authors claim that the human species’ anti-science proclivity is as true of professional scholars of religion as of other intellectuals, one wonders why the authors assume that scholars who engage in cognitive research are an exception to that rule, as they apparently resist the anti-science proclivity.

Keywords: Luther H. Martin; Donald Wiebe; method and theory in the study of religion; definitions of religion; cognitive study of religion; discursive study of religion; natural sciences; relativism.

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