

It's Never Been Better: Comments on the Current State of the Science of Religion

DONALD WIEBE

This paper was prepared for a conference on the theme “Past, Present, and Future in the Scientific Study of Religion,” and my assigned task for this occasion was to provide a sketch of the present status of the discipline, and “to present a summary and analysis of the constant issues in keeping Religious Studies scientific.” But the assignment came with a codicil attached that presented some difficulty for me since Professor Luther H. Martin and I had only recently presented a paper in which we strongly intimated that establishing the scientific study of religion as the dominant approach in university departments for the study of religion was not likely ever to occur.¹ As the organizers of the conference put it in the invitation: “[W]e would like you to be critical, *but also to advance a positive way forward*” (emphasis added).

Those who know my work are aware of the fact that even though I seem to have held out hope for the establishment of a genuinely scientific study of religious phenomena in departments for the study of religion in our modern universities, I have spent a large proportion of my time and energy over the years in criticisms of those departments, and of the associations and societies supposedly committed to a science of religion. I have complained about ‘a failure of nerve’ among students of religion in their attempt to follow a scientific agenda² and about the widespread espousal of an anti-science attitude in the field;³ of there being a mere pretence to scientific respectability rather than a genuine intent to naturalize Religious

1 Luther H. Martin – Donald Wiebe, “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80/3, 2012, 587-597; and iid., “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, 9-18 (in the following, it is the version in *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* that is cited).

2 Donald Wiebe, “The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion”, *Studies in Religion* 13/4, 1984, 401-422.

3 Donald Wiebe, “Dissolving Rationality: The Anti-Science Phenomenon and Its Implications for the Study of Religion”, in: Jeppe S. Jensen – Luther H. Martin (eds.), *Rationality and the Study of Religion*, Aarhus: University of Aarhus Press 1997, 167-183.

Studies;⁴ of engagement in mythistory rather than a critical historical study of religions;⁵ of a continued theological resistance to the scientific study of religion⁶ and a persistent entanglement of religious concerns and theological discourse with the discipline.⁷ It is also true that I have been critical of my own department at the University of Toronto suggesting that it is at “death’s door,” so to speak, and of my university for its over-sensitivity to the re-emergence of religion in society morphing into an encroaching spirituality on campus;⁸ of the American Academy of Religion as being one long enduring religious conversation;⁹ of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion supporting more a learned practice of religion than a scientific study of it;¹⁰ of the temptation and practice of accepting financial support for the study of religion from somewhat dubious sources;¹¹ and of the desire on the part of some to be more important to society than is pos-

4 Donald Wiebe, “The ‘Academic Naturalization’ of Religious Studies: Intent or Pretence?”, *Studies in Religion* 15/2, 1986, 197-203.

5 Donald Wiebe, “History of Mythistory in the Study of Religion”, in: Michael Pye (ed.), *Marburg Revisited: Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religion*, Marburg: Diagonal Verlag 1989, 31-46.

6 Donald Wiebe, “Theology and the Academic Study of Religion in the United States”, in: Dick van der Meij (ed.), *India and Beyond: Aspects of Literature, Meaning, Ritual and Thought: Essays in Honour of Fritz Staal*, Leiden: Kegan Paul International 1997, 93-115.

7 Donald Wiebe, “Transcending Religious Language: Towards the Recovery of an Academic Agenda”, in: Ugo Bianchi (ed.), *The Notion of ‘Religion’ in Comparative Research: Proceedings of the XVIth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions*, Rome: L’Erma Di Bretschneider 1994, 905-912; id., “On Religious Studies and the Rhetoric of *Religious Reading*”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 14, 2001, 265-278; id., “Promise and Disappointment: Recent Developments in the Academic Study of Religion in the USA”, in: Gerard A. Wieggers (ed.), *Modern Society and the Science of Religions*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 2002, 185-222; id., “Against Science in the Academic Study of Religion: On the Emergence and Development of the AAR”, in: Thomas Ryba – George D. Bond – Herman Tull (eds.), *The Comity and Grace of Method: Essays in Honor of Edmund Perry*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2004, 58-83.

8 Donald Wiebe, “An Encroaching Spirituality: What Hope Remains for a Science of Religion?”, in: Eva-Maria Glasbrenner – Christian Hackbarth-Johnson (eds.), *Einheit der Wirklichkeiten: Festschrift anlässlich des 60. Geburtstag von Michael von Brück*, Munich: Manya Verlag 2009, 302-318.

9 Donald Wiebe, “An Eternal Return All Over Again: The Religious Conversation Endures”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74/3, 2006, 674-696.

10 Donald Wiebe, “The Learned Practice of Religion: A Review of the History of Religious Studies in Canada and Its Portent for the Future”, *Studies in Religion* 35/3-4, 2006, 475-501.

11 Donald Wiebe, “Religious Biases in Funding Religious Studies Research?”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 17/2, 2009, 125-140.

sible or reasonable for a simple scientific student of religion.¹² But most problematic with respect to the assignment given me, is my recent claim in the joint paper with Martin¹³ that to entertain a hope for the success of a genuinely scientific study of religion “is to be in the grip of a false and unshakeable delusion”¹⁴ and our “confession” that we have been so deluded for much of our academic careers. Given all of this, you might well think that a more honest title for my comments about the state of the field of religious studies today – described in my complaints just mentioned – should echo the title of the Jack Nicholson movie “As Good as it Gets” and that all I need do is repeat the Martin/Wiebe confession in Budapest and sit down.

But I am not going to do that, despite my continuing belief that few, if any, undergraduate departments of religious studies, as Martin and I put it, “have fully implemented a *scientific* program of study and research since such an approach was first advocated in the late nineteenth century”.¹⁵ Despite our pessimism that such departments are likely ever to emerge, we did acknowledge that a scientifically respectable knowledge of religion and religions is logically possible, even if, speaking pragmatically, it seems that it will be very difficult for it ever to gain ascendancy in our western academic contexts, let alone elsewhere in the world. Nevertheless, on taking time to review the history of the field of religious studies since my entry into it forty years ago, I must now also confess that there have been significant developments – methodological and institutional – that have moved the discipline closer to the ideal than ever before. Indeed, suspending my usual timidity (or, dare I say, humility), I even think that I may have played some small part in those developments. Thus my temerity in suggesting that the state of affairs in the field of religious studies has never been better than it is today. Clearly, then, I do not mean the title of this paper to be wholly ironic, but lest any of you think that I believe our state of affairs as students of religion is particularly rosy, I should like now to add a supplement to the title and have it read: “It’s Never Been Better, But There’s Considerable Room for Improvement.” So, having made my confessions, retractions, and modifications, I will present here what I think about the current state of the field and what, in my judgment, can be done to provide it greater respect than it sometimes seems to have had, and what it will take to move it forward.

12 Donald Wiebe, “The Politics of Wishful Thinking: Disentangling the Role of the Scholar-Scientist from that of the Public Intellectual in the Modern Academic Study of Religion”, *Temenos* 41/1, 2005, 7-38.

13 L. H. Martin – D. Wiebe, “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline...”.

14 *Ibid.*, 9.

15 *Ibid.*

Reminiscence

When I entered the field of Religious Studies forty years ago as a graduate student, the enterprise was an “academic” undertaking clearly differentiated from confessional theological concerns – that is, from what I have called a capital-C confessional agenda of disseminating some particular denominational set of religious beliefs or a more broadly liberal religious or theistic set of intellectual commitments.¹⁶ But the study of religion in these new departments was “scholarly” rather than scientific. The scholarship involved, moreover, was not simply concerned with philological and historical matters but rather, in an Emersonian manner, with the discernment of *meaning* and the *formation* of students. That is, it was engaged in the pursuit of “truth” relevant to what some have called “Life Realities” or “Life Questions” rather than simply with seeking objective knowledge of the determinants of human religious behaviours. The so-called scholarly study of religion, therefore, was, in effect, what I have called a small-c confessional theology in that it assumed the existence of some vaguely-defined Ultimate Reality that undergirds the otherwise ephemeral character of human existence with meaning, and sets out to ascertain that meaning, thereby limiting the field to hermeneutical and phenomenological analyses. And the influence of such research on “teaching religion” in the university, it was hoped, would create a moral and religious literacy that would have a positive effect on individuals and society.

Whether all scholarly approaches in the field of religious studies that maintain science is incapable of providing an exhaustive account of human behaviour wholly within a materialist framework are necessarily crypto-theological (i.e., engaged in small-c confessional accounts of religion), it must be admitted, is open to question. I don’t, however, think that this in itself justifies a claim, such as we find in Clifford Geertz’s work, that we can have a wholly exhaustive hermeneutical account of religion or any other cultural phenomenon. According to Geertz, for example, seeking “thick descriptions” of cultural phenomena can provide us with “more” than can be found in reductionist scientific accounts of systems of human behaviour without assuming “the more” to be of a transcendent character. Nevertheless, “the more” that interests Geertz, and others in the field, it is still supposed, is not reducible to the material substrate with which it co-exists, and in that sense makes of culture a kind of *sui generis* reality, *explicable/understandable* only by way of what he calls “thick description” of all its elements. This, however, is to conflate description with explanation, and makes of the understanding sought, a kind of interior *gnostic*

16 D. Wiebe, “The Failure of Nerve...”.

capacity to *discern/intuit* the hidden *essence* of cultural phenomena. This, of course, makes the cultural reality *discerned* a mystery in that it can only be *understood*, not *explained*. But without explanation and theory we have mere discourse – not science.¹⁷

I should note that I entered the field of religious studies as a philosopher with a quasi-religious agenda – first at McMaster University in Canada and then under the supervision of Professor Ninian Smart at the University of Lancaster, England. My discomfort with the dominant phenomenological ethos in the field emerged only gradually and, to some degree, in concert with new winds of change that were, so to speak, blowing through the discipline since about 1970. In 1973 I had been asked by Smart to teach an undergraduate course on theory of religion which woke me up to the rather chaotic (not, as Smart would have it, a positively-valenced polymethodological) state of affairs in the field. It also brought to my attention the existence and mission of the International Association for the History of Religions – which was clearly an institutional structure providing support for non-theological study of religions even if, at that time, largely limited to philological and historical analyses of religious texts and institutions – and its concern with the apparently unruly nature of the field which moved them to sponsor the first self-conscious conference on methods and methodology in the field. Hans Penner and Edward Yonan's paper entitled "Is a Science of Religion Possible?" had come out in 1972¹⁸ and pushed the boundaries of the field's self-understanding in looking for theoretical developments not yet championed by the IAHR. In 1975 I raised a similar set of questions in an early paper on explanation in the study of religion and in my first international paper presented to the twelfth international congress of the IAHR in Lancaster, England.¹⁹ And by 1984 it seemed to me that a sufficiently radical change had taken place in the self-understanding of the field itself, and not just my perception of it, that I felt comfortable in writing about the "failure of nerve" on the part of many who claimed Religious Studies as their discipline but feared following through on those epistemic and methodological commitments. And with the for-

17 Donald Wiebe, "'Understanding' in Religious Studies: A Gnostic Aberration in the Modern Study of Religion", *Fu Jen Religious Studies* 6, 2002, 15-56; id., "Beyond Thick Description and Interpretive Sciences: Explaining Religious Meaning", in: René Gothóni (ed.), *How to do Comparative Religion: Three Ways, Many Goals*, Berlin: Walter DeGruyter 2005, 65-82; id., "Religious Studies: Many Methods, One Overriding Goal", in: René Gothóni (ed.), *How to do Comparative Religion: Three Ways, Many Goals*, Berlin: Walter DeGruyter 2005, 127-140.

18 Hans Penner – Edward Yonan, "Is a Science of Religion Possible?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52/2, 1972, 107-133.

19 Donald Wiebe, "Explanation and the Scientific Study of Religion", *Religion* 5, 1975, 33-52; id., "Is a Science of Religion Possible?", *Studies in Religion* 7, 1978, 5-17.

mation of the North American Association for the Study of Religion in 1985, which gave structural and institutional support for moving the field beyond merely descriptive, comparative, phenomenological and hermeneutical studies of religions, it seemed to me that one could reasonably talk about the field as having achieved, *notionally but not institutionally*, the status of a genuinely scientific discipline. And it still seems to me to be so now although one might complain that I have the obligation of providing a generally acceptable understanding of the nature of science and the sciences and showing how the Religious Studies of which I have been speaking conforms to that picture. That is what I shall attempt now to do.

On Science and Purity

In an essay “On Not Keeping Religious Studies Pure” written fifteen years ago, Richard B. Miller draws on Stephen Toulmin’s conception of a scientific discipline²⁰ to argue that Religious Studies is “conspicuously unscientific,” and is best understood as “a series of overlapping and mutually reinforcing conversations that constitute the fibres of the enterprise”.²¹ In arguing this claim Miller is critical not only of my position on this matter but also that of scholars like Hans Penner, Edward Yonan, and Samuel Preus among others.²² But to see just what force his argument has, it will be helpful to review briefly Toulmin’s take on scientific disciplines even though his account of them is not altogether coherent and perspicuous.

To begin with, Toulmin contrasts fully-disciplined enterprises like physics with what he calls non-disciplinable fields like literary studies, ethics, fine arts, and philosophy. In such “quasi-disciplines” as he also calls these non-disciplined (and apparently non-disciplinable) enterprises, intellectual activities cannot be separated from other values; in everyday life, that is, “actions and choices are meshed together” which requires a form of reasoning much broader than that required in the disciplines.²³ The scientist, on the other hand, “pursues the goals of her or his discipline in isolation from extra-professional goals ...”.²⁴ Within the disciplinable

20 Stephen Toulmin, *Human Understanding: The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1972.

21 Richard B. Miller, “On Not Keeping Religious Studies Pure”, in: id., *Casistry and Modern Ethics: A Poetics of Practical Reasoning*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996, 204, 207.

22 H. Penner – E. Yonan, “Is a Science of Religion Possible?...”; Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1987.

23 S. Toulmin, *Human Understanding...*, 402.

24 *Ibid.*, 402; see also Stephen Toulmin, *Return to Reason*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2003.

fields he distinguishes *compact disciplines* (with physics as the best model here) from what he calls *diffuse disciplines* (for which, unfortunately, he provides no examples) and *would-be disciplines* (with the behavioural sciences being his chief exemplars).

A compact discipline for Toulmin is one that, despite showing some striking changes of direction in its historical development, has achieved “agreed goals and strategies around which the cumulative development of a well-structured science can proceed ...”.²⁵ Such disciplines will also have a common set of assumptions and presuppositions, as well as overlapping sets of concepts, methods, and techniques of research. Moreover, they will also have structural and institutional supports including university recognition, professional forums, associations, and societies, formal methods of disseminating the results of their research, and so on.

To all intents and purposes Toulmin lumps the categories of “diffuse” and “would-be” disciplines together. As Miller points out, one problem with these kinds of sciences is that they appear not to have “a sufficiently agreed-upon goal in terms of which common problems can be identified and tackled”.²⁶ One reason for that, according to Toulmin, may be that such sciences are “immature,” and they may remain immature because they do not have adequate institutional support. But that, according to Toulmin, need have no lasting negative import with respect to the character of such sciences. As he notes: “If I have argued here that, at the level of general theory, psychology and sociology remain today ‘would-be disciplines,’ I am not claiming any absolute or permanent contrast between the social and the physical sciences. On the contrary: I have merely been trying to diagnose certain special difficulties which face the theoretical sciences of human behaviour at the present time. In earlier centuries, physical theory too had the same inconclusive character; indeed, many of the methodological difficulties afflicting sociology and psychology today had counterparts in earlier physical sciences.”²⁷ And further on in his discussion he notes that we “*have discovered that it is both functionally possible and humanly desirable to isolate certain classes of issues, and make them the concern of specialized bodies of enquiries; while with issues of other kinds this turns out to be either impossible or undesirable, or both at once*”.²⁸

25 S. Toulmin, *Human Understanding...*, 382, 384.

26 R. B. Miller, “On Not Keeping...”, 204.

27 S. Toulmin, *Human Understanding...*, 386.

28 *Ibid.*, 405 (emphasis added).

In an earlier criticism of Miller's critique of those who champion a science of religion²⁹ I did not point out clearly enough that the study of religions and religion as carried on (and taught) in many, if not most, of our university departments, in the past and now, is diffuse in character largely because the scholars involved refuse to countenance the possibility of the study of religion as a single-valued pursuit and to distinguish and isolate these intellectual concerns from activities of other kinds. Miller simply fails to see not only that it is possible, but that some scholars have actually been able to separate the search for "knowledge *about*" religion as a human phenomenon from the hope to produce an "understanding of" religion that will transform students into religiously literate persons committed to structuring a meaningful and socially responsible existence in light of a transcendent ultimate reality.

Now it is true that the University of Berlin, established in 1810, was the earliest model for the modern research university, and that it actually harboured an Emersonian conception of scholarship that involved a great deal more than a search for knowledge or the creation of tools and techniques for obtaining new knowledge. Brad S. Gregory rightly points out that at its inception the University of Berlin actually constituted what he calls "the Romantic research university" in that it was as much concerned with the formation of students as it was with producing knowledge; that is, that it was as consciously engaged in *Bildung* as it was concerned with *Wissenschaft*. As he puts it: "The modern university was originally hatched from a Romantic vision of research as an adjunct to student self-realization."³⁰ However, Gregory also rightly points out that Protestantism's influence on the sciences over the past two centuries has effected a "secularization of knowledge in research universities" that extends to "the consideration of religious traditions strictly as objects of study rather than as potential sources of knowledge" or avenues of transformation or self-realization.³¹ What happened to the study of religion in the modern research university of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century then, to use Toulmin's language, is that that enterprise became single-valued in a way that made it possible for scholar-scientists to engage in them in isolation from other

29 Donald Wiebe, "Responses to Miller and Sutcliffe", *Bulletin of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religions* 28, 1999, 115-118.

30 Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2012, 349.

31 *Ibid.*, 359; see also Thomas Albert Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern University*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006; Julie Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996.

everyday and religious activities. In other words, the academic study of religion became a “compact discipline.”

A brief description of Religious Studies as a compact scientific discipline here may be helpful in determining, as the organizers of the conference “Past, Present, and Future in the Scientific Study of Religion” have put it, “the constant issues in keeping [it] scientific.” First and foremost, of course, is that the scientific study of religion operates with the same understanding of the secularization of knowledge that Brad Gregory correctly notes characterizes the modern western research university. This means that the “mission” (i.e., purpose) of Religious Studies must be the same as that of any and all other scientific disciplines in the university, namely, that its primary task is to provide a soundly-based knowledge of religion as a human phenomenon – that is, of human behaviour influenced to whatever extent by beliefs in the supernatural. And the knowledge sought must not be merely descriptive: that is, providing empirical data, phenomenological portraits, critical comparative analyses of religious traditions, accounts of their historical development, and the like. This, clearly, is an important element of Religious Studies, but to be fully scientific it must move on to a search for explanations of religious behaviour, religious institutions and traditions, and theoretical accounts of human behaviour that give depth to those explanations. To put it bluntly, students of religion must aim at providing intersubjectively testable propositional and theoretical claims about religiously determined states of affairs in the world. And this means, contra Miller, that (scientific) purity for the student of religion sets the limits of her/his academic and pedagogical responsibilities. It is especially important here to emphasize the importance of the limits of science for this enterprise given the fact that what one might call “methodological slippage” is more likely to occur in the study of human social and cultural (that is, intentional) phenomena than in, say, the study of physics. The point that needs making is that the “scientific purity” Miller rightly claims is sought by me and others in the field is not a search for some comprehensive alternative secular framework within which one might understand one’s broader social responsibilities or within which one might make sense of life in some holistic sense. And it is a matter of the utmost importance, therefore, that the scientific student of religion refrain from taking up positions that might be so interpreted because this can only embroil the study of religion in social, political, and metaphysical debates that are outside its mandate.³² The only social obligation the scientific student *qua* scientist has, that is, is to make the knowledge about religion gained available to the public and to those who have taken on the respon-

32 D. Wiebe, “Transcending Religious Language...”, .

sibility for the management of the affairs of society. Those who wish to do more than this should, as Stanley Fish advises colleagues in his field of literary studies, give serious consideration to a change of profession – a matter to which I give further attention below.

Miller, and others, quite correctly point out that departments for the study of religion in most of our research universities do not operate in this fashion; that they do not limit themselves to what can be said about religion within such strict boundaries. He therefore suggests this indicates that the field is, at best, a “diffuse discipline,” and more likely a “would-be discipline,” and he, consequently, proposes a “poetic” rather than a “theoretical” approach to this field of study.³³ I suggest, however, that given the significant number of scholars in the field today – both within and without the context of the academy – who’s sole purpose is to understand and explain religion in the spirit I have just outlined is a clear indication, contra Miller, that Religious Studies as a compact scientific discipline actually exists, even if at the moment it holds only a “minority position” within university and college departments for the study of religions, and may, for all we know, remain so for the foreseeable future. (As a self-serving aside, it is this possibility that is the fundamental cause of my and Martin’s pessimism about the field.) That there are many university-trained scientists and scholars – some even within the academic setting although not likely in departments of biology – who believe in Scientific-Creationism or Intelligent Design theory and on that basis incorporate socio-political and religious agendas in their work, does not undermine the claim that biology and evolutionary biology are genuine sciences; nor would it do so even if they (the intelligent-design types) were to gain positions within university and college biology departments.

Although neither the dominant paradigm for the study of religion in most, if not all, university and college departments for the study of religion, nor finding much, if any support, for this paradigm in that setting, it is nevertheless the case that there is considerable structural and institutional support for this approach in the broader academic world. There are now in a number of universities special institutes, centres, and other units given over to the scientific study of religion. There is, for example, the Institute for Cognition and Culture at Queen’s University, Belfast that has for some time been engaged in the scientific study of religion; the more recent establishment of the Centre for Anthropology and Mind at Oxford University and its sponsorship of the Explaining Religion Project; and the Religion, Cognition and Culture research unit in the Department for the Study of Religion at Aarhus University. The Center for Mind, Brain, and

33 R. B. Miller, “On Not Keeping...”, 200.

Culture at Emory University is another special unit that strongly supports the scientific approach to the study of religious phenomena. In addition to the involvement of such university- and college-based institutions there are also a number of independent associations, societies, and institutes whose primary objective is to support the scientific study of religion. The International Association for the History of Religions is the oldest of these institutions and its mission statement not only includes its support “for the critical, analytical and cross-cultural study of religion, past and present,” but also clearly states that the IAHR “is not a forum for confessional, apologetical, or other similar concerns”.³⁴ More recently those who are interested in the import of the cognitive and neurosciences for the study of religion formed the International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion (IACSR), and a group of independent scholars in Toronto formed the Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion (IASR) committed to working to advance a general scientific understanding of religion through organizing research and educational activities to that end.³⁵ Finally, there are a number of journals and other publishing ventures that are committed to the support of a science of religion, journals such as *Numen*, the highly regarded journal of the IAHR; *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* which accepts articles from a variety of naturalistic/scientific perspectives; the *Journal of Cognition and Culture* which is a primary venue for research in the cognitive sciences and other evolutionary psychological perspectives; and, more recently the *Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion*. These buttresses to the scientific study of religion lend considerable support to my argument above about the nature of the academic study of religion being a compact science.

Keeping Religious Studies Scientific

Few will dispute that the natural sciences have been incredibly successful in explaining aspects of the physical universe in which we live. Nor are there many who will claim that the scientific explanations we have of our biological and social world are bogus knowledge claims. Despite that success, however, scientific thought in a number of ways is also quite fragile. Evolutionary psychologists, for example, point out that science is not a natural mode of thought but rather emerged as a cultural phenomenon in recent history and could not exist without strong institutional support for the sustained critical reflective thought it requires.³⁶ And this suggests that

34 <<http://www.iahr.dk/>>, [25 August 2012].

35 <<http://www.trinity.utoronto.ca/iasr/>>, [25 August 2012].

36 Robert N. McCauley, “The Naturalness of Religion and the Unnaturalness of Science”, in: Frank C. Keil – Robert A. Wilson (eds.), *Explanation and Cognition*, Cambridge,

without care, and in periods of cultural crisis, it is not impossible that the sciences could be seriously curtailed or lost altogether.³⁷ Further, philosophers, with some justification, suggest or claim that modern science is without a solid philosophical grounding and that scientists' commitments to their disciplines, therefore, involve "a leap of science,"³⁸ and that this leaves them open to criticism from several vantage points. The fact that the sciences operate on the basis of a "methodological atheism," moreover, and are ultimately reductionistic in their search for "mechanistic" explanatory accounts of all aspects of our universe including human behaviour, means that they disenchant the universe.³⁹ And such disenchantment, of course, challenges past and present "certainties" by which people have guided their lives. Consequently, reductionist science is seen as morally offensive. This, needless to say, constitutes something of a threat to the social and political stability of science and negatively effects funding for the sciences⁴⁰ – and the scientific study of religion in particular. Finally, the fact that science as a culture-transcending mode of thought, and the fact that it cannot replace the moral certainties it undermines with better alternatives, has spawned what can only be called an anti-science backlash that threatens to undermine the very purpose of the modern research universities committed to producing reliable objective knowledge about our natural and social worlds.⁴¹

Given the fragility of science, and the attack on science by postmodernists in the university itself, it seems to me that an important aspect in keeping religious studies scientific is that we become actively engaged in criticism of radically postmodern attempts to paint the scientific study of religion as a regime of epistemic violence.⁴² This, in my judgment, re-

MA.: MIT Press 2000; id., *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not*, New York: Oxford University Press 2011.

37 R. N. McCauley, *Why Religion is Natural...*, 286.

38 Ernest Gellner, *Legitimation of Belief*, Cambridge – London: Cambridge University Press 1974.

39 Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation", in: Max Weber – Hans Heinrich Gerth – Charles Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1946, 129-156.

40 Tom Sorell, *Scientism: Philosophy and the Infatuation of Science*, London: Routledge 1991; Mary Midgley, *Science as Salvation: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1992.

41 D. Wiebe, "Dissolving Rationality...", 167-183.

42 Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East'*, London: Routledge 1999; David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press 1996.

quires both an intellectual and a political component if it is to be successful.⁴³

It is not possible, unfortunately, on the intellectual end of things, to structure a rational argument that will undermine postmodernism since that would require the postmodern critics to buy into the very 'hegemony of reason' they believe themselves to have undermined. Equally, the scientist cannot without self-contradiction attempt such a critique from a postmodern perspective, although one might think the claim – not argument – that deconstructivism is itself simply a social construction and therefore without force of rational argument might do the trick.⁴⁴ What one can do, however, is provide a careful history of the origin and development of science and the sciences to show that science is a new, and in some important senses, peculiar value, namely, the quest for “knowledge for the sake of knowledge alone”.⁴⁵ Whether the truth of that mantra could ever be established need not be debated here since it expresses an idea and ideal that can be thought and sought, even if not attained. On establishing this historical claim one can then elaborate the obvious, namely, that the concerns of the sciences are wholly epistemic – concerned only with the formulation and testing of empirical and theoretical propositional claims about states of affairs in the world, and leaving matters of truth, value, and meaning to other “conversations”.⁴⁶ There is also a clear awareness that the reason of the scientist is not pragmatic, and a recognition that science is of little, if any, help in establishing a basis of obligation and cooperation in society, or for providing consolation for the afflicted.⁴⁷ Nor is there a hegemonic conception of reason which would argue that all spheres of culture – morality, art, religion, and science – can be moulded by reason into a harmonious framework for meaningful existence. Nor is the reason of science spoken of here that of the “philosopher as comprehensive sage” but rather simply that of a non-moral instrument of inquiry that allows one: (1) to cut short special pleading; (2) to seek out and neutralize as best one can hidden ideological influences; and (3) to formulate all knowledge

43 Donald Wiebe, “Appropriating Religion: Understanding Religion as an Object of Science”, in: Tore Ahlbäck (ed.), *Approaching Religion* I, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International 1999, 253-272.

44 D. Wiebe, “Dissolving Rationality...”, 167-183.

45 M. Weber, “Science as a Vocation...”, 129-156.

46 Donald Wiebe, “Can Science Fabricate Meaning? On Ritual, Religion, and the Academic Study of Religion”, Timothy Light – Brian C. Wilson (eds.), *Religion as a Human Capacity: A Festschrift in Honor of E. Thomas Lawson*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 2003, 89-103; id., “A Scientific Account of Meaning: Deflationary But Not Disenchanting”, *Zygon* 44/1, 2009, 31-40.

47 Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion*, London: Routledge 1992; id., *Legitimation of Belief...*

claims in propositional form and submit them to rational analysis and empirical test. It is for precisely this sort of project that the modern research university was brought into existence.⁴⁸

The political component of the task in protecting science and the scientific study of religion is strictly limited to the academic realm. It seems to me that we need to become more deeply involved in pressing for changes in the curriculum of the departments in which we work that will, at the very least, balance the overwhelming number of what we might call religious appreciation courses with courses that involve the student in critical and theoretical reflection on religion. We ought also to press both our chairs and our deans to review the overall complement of courses in our departments to ensure that there is a purpose for and coherence in the curriculum that takes it beyond simply “serving a multicultural demographic” in our cities, provinces, and states. Finally, we need to be alert to the fact that departments of religious studies are often appropriated by others in the university community who are religious, as an avenue through which a religious agenda can be re-established in the university curriculum, and work together with deans and provosts to ensure this does not happen, even if it means, at times, taking up a “crusading” spirit.⁴⁹

I think a final comment or two on the vulnerability of the sciences and the modern research university as an important cultural institution deliberately created to foster this peculiar and fragile mode of thought may buttress my critique of postmodernists in the field of Religious Studies. Scientific students of religion may be unaware of the fact that science was not discovered but have no need to try to hide the fact that it is the creation of the human spirit. But what the postmodern critic of the scientific study of religion fails to recognize is that science emerged for a very limited purpose – producing and accumulating propositional knowledge about the world and states of affairs in the world. However, the desire for such knowledge, as everyone knows, is but one cultural value among many. As Weber noted nearly a hundred years ago: “Whether ... science is a worth while ‘vocation’ for somebody, and whether science itself has an objectively valuable ‘vocation’ are again value judgments about which nothing can be said in the lecture-room. To affirm the value of science is a presupposition for teaching [in the university classroom] ...”⁵⁰ Nevertheless, this new cultural value stands apart from other cultural values for, as Ernest Gellner puts it, it can only function properly as a knowledge-seeking enterprise by claiming “diplomatic immunity” from all other cultural val-

48 D. Wiebe, “On Religious Studies...”, 265-278.

49 D. Wiebe, “The Learned Practice of Religion...”, 475-501.

50 M. Weber, “Science as a Vocation...”, 152.

ues.⁵¹ And it is in virtue of its “diplomatic immunity” from other values – not being constrained by other cultural value, moral, political, or religious commitments – that the method by which knowledge is obtained stands as a unique mode of thought and produces what can be reasonably described as culture-transcending knowledge. And, to repeat myself, it is for the promotion of this scientific method that the modern research university came into being.⁵²

There is no mandate, law, or revelation that requires a person to espouse the value of ‘knowledge for the sake of knowledge alone’ in the study of religion or in any other discipline. However, if one does espouse that value, one is then committed to the special epistemic morality linked to the sciences; to a set of intellectual presuppositions and social obligations without which science cannot function. And one is then simultaneously committed to upholding that ‘morality’ in the modern research university. If one wishes rather to search for the meaning of life and the universe, or to find a way of creating a set of conditions necessary for social harmony, or discover principles to console the ills and sorrows of one’s family, friends, or neighbours, one ought not turn to the research university for support. As Weber pointed out, the university is neither a social agency nor a dispenser of wisdom: “Science is a ‘vocation’ organized in special disciplines in the service of self-clarification and knowledge of interrelated facts. It is not the gift of grace of seers and prophets dispensing sacred values and revelations, nor does it partake of the contemplation of sages and philosophers about the meaning of the universe.”⁵³

So much then for those who would criticise science and the university as oppressive institutions and structures. Before bringing this paper to a close, however, I wish briefly to identify a few other issues that may create obstacles to keeping Religious Studies scientific. The first is the resurgence of religion around the world. On the one hand, governments having to deal with a new set of religious problems are putting pressure on scholars of religion to be “socially relevant” and are beginning to influence, if not politically determine, research agendas in the university.⁵⁴ Whereas financial support for basic research is thin, support for research tailored for political agendas seem likely to be approved.⁵⁵ On the other

51 Ernest Gellner, “The Savage and the Modern Mind”, in: Robin Horton – Ruth Finnegan (eds.), *Modes of Thought*, London: Faber 1973.

52 M. Weber, “Science as a Vocation...”, 129-156.

53 *Ibid.*, 152.

54 Gregory Alles, *Religious Studies: A Global View*, London: Routledge 2007; Donald Wiebe, “Religious Studies: Towards Reestablishing the Field”, *Religion* 39/4, 2009, 372-375.

55 D. Wiebe, “Religious Studies...”, 372-375.

hand, this resurgence of religion has encouraged a number of scholars in the field, as well as departments as a whole, to become engaged in the political issues generated. The opportunity to get involved in matters on the national and international stage is just too much for some scholars/researchers to ignore. Russell McCutcheon, for example, thinks we should be very much engaged in public affairs because otherwise we leave the public realm and its concerns with law, justice, social welfare, and the like open only to the influence of the religious communities.⁵⁶ Consequently, he argues vigorously, that the student of religion should be a public intellectual.⁵⁷ But this, clearly, is to draw students of religion away from their basic responsibilities as scientists – the ‘vocation,’ as Weber has it, for which we are being paid.⁵⁸ But if it is the national or international stage on which one wishes to make her or his mark, then Stanley Fish’s observation about his colleagues in literary studies who illegitimately “employ the academy’s machinery and resources in the service of those other purposes”⁵⁹ also applies to scholars of religion. And if they wish to save the world, Fish correctly points out, they should do it on their own dime and time. This “syndrome” is only exacerbated, I would argue, by an increasing number of natural scientists who, in addition to their work in the natural or social sciences, wish to draw on that work in order to fill what I would call “the meaning vacuum” they think is left in the wake of a strictly scientific account of the world.⁶⁰

The flip-side of this problem is what we might call the “New Atheism Problem.” Many of our colleagues seem overjoyed with the publicity the New Atheists have brought to the field of Religious Studies. There seems to be some justification for the claim that the interest shown by Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett in atheism has brought some much needed public attention to what we do in Religious Studies. This needs to be rethought. First, it is clear that the New Atheists have become hopelessly engaged in religio-theological argumentation that can make no positive

56 Russell McCutcheon, “A Default of Critical Intelligence? The Scholar of Religion as Public Intellectual”, *Journal of the American of Religion* 65/2, 1997, 444.

57 *Ibid.*

58 M. Weber, “Science as a Vocation...”, 129-156; Donald Wiebe, “Are the New Atheists Contributing to or Detracting from the Scientific Study of Religion?”, in: Ulf Plessentin – Thomas Zenk (eds.), *Critique of Religion and the Study od Religion*, Berlin: Weißensee Verlag, forthcoming 2013.

59 Stanley Fish, *Save the World on your Own Time*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008, 81.

60 See, for example, Owen Flanagan, *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2007; Stuart A. Kauffman, *Reinventing the Sacred: A New View of Science, Reason and Religion*, New York: Basic Books 2008; or Adam Frank, *The Constant Fire: Beyond the Science vs. Religion Debate*, Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press 2009.

contribution to our work. Secondly, the New Atheists function not as students of religion but as public intellectuals concerned for the welfare not only of their communities but of the whole world. Neither of these tasks belong to the scientific study of religion. The only atheism that is of interest and benefit to the student of religion is “methodological atheism,” and to cosy-up to the New Atheists and their metaphysical and political concerns can only damage the image of Religious Studies.⁶¹ As Joseph Ben-David points out, any association with their work and that of other ideologists is problematic for science. As he puts it: “If science is perceived as partial to some social interests, and scientists are seen in an invidious light, then people start doubting the moral value of seeking scientific truth for its own sake and apply it for the purpose of changing the world. *This may spell the end of scientific culture.*”⁶²

Finally, a serious concern for students of religion, especially since the advent of experimental studies and the growth of collaborative research projects in our field, is the lack of sufficient “no-strings-attached-funding.” This should not be altogether surprising for a field in which most of the university departments involved have been largely engaged in programs dedicated to student self-realization and moral and political formation, or to programs of “religious appreciation courses” that are designed to contribute to peaceful relations in pluralistic cultures, or to programs that are designed to show the complementarity of science and religion in order to highlight how the sciences confirm religious truths. The problem, of course, is that since *bona fide* science funding agencies will be suspicious of such “religious studies projects,” funding remains meagre at best. This in turn “pushes” scholars in our field to seek other sources for their projects and many of these have been religious in character. Whether funding from those sources has actually skewed the writing of research grant proposals in order to insure favourable attention or not is difficult to tell. Nevertheless, funds from such organization for research in religious studies will likely only further generate suspicion in many scientific circles about the quality of the Religious Studies research being carried out. Serious attention needs to be given to the avenues open to us to gaining access to more reputable sources of financial support for our work.⁶³

61 D. Wiebe, “Are the New Atheists Contributing...”.

62 Joseph Ben-David, *The Scientists' Role in Society: A Comparative Study*, New York: Prentice Hall 1971, 180 (emphasis added).

63 D. Wiebe, “Religious Biases in Funding...”.

Conclusion

It should be clear from the analysis I have provided here that the idea and ideal of an empirically testable scientific study of religion is rationally sound. It is also beyond question that there were many scholars in the field of Religious Studies in the past who sought and gained a degree of recognition for this field in their universities and beyond. Furthermore, I think we can all agree that there are more such scholars in the field today than there were in the past.⁶⁴ And the field has seen some very important developments which suggest that a scientific study of religion may actually come to dominate the field in the future including: (1) serious research into the deep history of religious behaviour; (2) taking seriously the fact that the natural and social sciences have set important boundary conditions for the research on religion and that theories in religion really do need to cohere with theories in other disciplines; and (3) the exponential increase in experimental work that the cognitive science of religion, among other sciences, has brought to the field. And these developments may at some point provide the kind of centripetal force that will bring into a coherent pattern what today remains, for the most part, scattered studies of those individual scholars in Religious Studies who are committed to scientific research. But as of now, this model does not characterize the field of religious studies either in our university departments or, unfortunately, in many of the societies and associations that support “Religious Studies.” Moreover, as I have pointed out in this paper, it is also still true that the financial and institutional supports for these more recent developments in the field are themselves scattered in, with, and among institutions, societies, and associations still committed to religiously-imbued agendas and therefore remain, so to speak, under threat. I do not, therefore, think that Martin’s and my confession of being deluded about the (pragmatic, not logical) possibility of establishing a genuinely scientific study of religion in Religious Studies departments in our modern research universities is being overly pessimistic. Rather, I think we are simply being realistic.⁶⁵ Needless to say, however, I am ready to support the scientific enterprises in which our younger colleagues in religious studies are engaged, and I am encouraged by the fact that they are hopeful that their work can bring the

64 Donald Wiebe, “American Influence on the Shape of Things to Come: Religious Studies in the Twenty-First Century”, *Journal of the Korean Association for the History of Religions* 20, 2000, 1-24.

65 Luther H. Martin – Donald Wiebe, “When Pessimism is Realism: A Rejoinder to our Colleagues”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80/3, 2012, 618-622; iid., “Why the Possible is Not Impossible but is Unlikely: A Response to Our Colleagues”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, 63-72.



scientific spirit to dominance in those departments. As Robert McCauley notes, it took more than two hundred years for Antonie van Leeuwenhoek's discovery of micro-organisms to eventually triumph in the germ theory of disease and we might leave open the possibility that the "triumph" of the scientific study of religion may be a similar, but hopefully shorter, "scientific revolution in slow motion"⁶⁶ that will ultimately result in the dominance of a scientific study of religion in our university departments of Religious Studies.

Hope, they say, springs eternal; and that is especially so in youth. But I remind the younger scholars in our field to be cautious and shrewd in their politics in the academic context since, as the cognitive science of religion, not to mention the current global resurgence of religion, provide pretty good evidence to date that religion, and the religious spirit among many of our colleagues in the university, also springs eternal.

66 R. N. McCauley, *Why Religion is Natural...*, 108.



SUMMARY

It's Never Been Better: Comments on the Current State of the Science of Religion

I have argued in the past that there has been a massive failure of nerve in the study of religion in the context of the modern research university; that it failed to live up to the scientific objectives enunciated for the field in late nineteenth-century European academic communities. The “comments” here on the current state of the science (or sciences) of religion constitute, in part, a kind of informal critical history of the field known as “Religious Studies.” I suggest here that the overall development of the field might actually indicate a positive trajectory since its inception in late nineteenth-century Europe. This essay, therefore, may mitigate somewhat my recent claim (with L. H. Martin) that it is highly unlikely that the scientific study of religion will actually some day come to dominance in religious studies departments in our modern universities.

Keywords: theology; religious studies; meaning; ideology; postmodernism; science; reductionism; funding; research universities.

Trinity College
Faculty of Divinity
University of Toronto
6 Hoskin Avenue
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M5S 1H8

DONALD WIEBE

dwiebe@trinity.utoronto.ca