

Kundt, Radek; Blaško, Jan; Wiebe, Donald

**Rozhovor s profesorem Donaldem Wiebem**

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## Rozhovor s profesorem Donaldem Wiebem

Radek Kundt, FF MU, Ústav religionistiky,  
Jan Blaško, FF MU, Katedra filosofie

Osmé konference European Association for the Study of Religions, která se – pro připomenutí konala – od 7. do 11. září 2008 v Brně, se zúčastnil i profesor Donald Wiebe. Při této příležitosti jsme neváhali využít domácí půdy i dříve navázaných přátelských vztahů<sup>1</sup> a požádali ho o interview.

Rozhovor, při kterém Sacra zastupovali Jan Blaško, Radek Kundt, Eva Klocová a Jitka Klesnilová vám nabízíme v téměř nezměněné podobě.

**Donald Wiebe** (\*1943) je profesorem filosofie náboženství na teologické fakultě (Faculty of Divinity) Trinity College univerzity v Torontu. Jeho odborný zájem se soustředí především na filosofii vědy, teorii a metodologii religionistiky a dějiny akademického a vědeckého studia náboženství. V současnosti patří mezi nejvýznamnější teoretiky oboru. Kromě mnoha článků je autorem knih *The Irony of Theology and the Nature of Religious Thought* (1991) a *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy* (1999). Spolu s Lutherem H. Martinem a E. Thomasem Lawsonem založil North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR), která je od roku 1990 přidružena k International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR). Byl výkonným ředitelem XIV. světového kongresu IAHR a bude působit jako ředitel XX. světového kongresu IAHR, který se bude konat v Torontu v roce 2010.

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### Sacra

Let's start with a little bit of introduction to our readers which I am sure is not needed but anyway. Do you consider yourself to be more of a philosopher or a scientist?

#### Donald Wiebe

Philosopher. I like science, I do philosophy of science but I have not undertaken any scientific project. I came into the field because I was asked in my final year of my doctoral program to teach a course on theories of religion. And that's what got me interested in. I mean I was in simply philosophy of religion then doing course on theories I became interested in methodological issues and the study of religion. And so my philosophical interests changed to philosophy of science and to methodology, so I came into this field as they say in our country "by happenstance", by good or bad fortune.

<sup>1</sup> Profesor Wiebe se účastnil konferencí v dánském Aarhusu, o kterých se můžete dočíst více v článcích: Klocová, E.: „Religious Ritual, Cognition and Culture; Religion and Cognition in Context (Aarhus, 28.–30. května 2008; 31. května – 1. června 2008)“, *Sacra* VI, 2: 115, 116 a Blaško, J.: „Konference: Symbolization in Religion, Cognition and Culture, Aarhus 31.5.–2.6. 2007“, *Sacra* V, 2: 188–190.

**Sacra**

The field is great because you are then the most suitable person for this interview. Most of the questions I think are related to method/methodology. Let's start with probably one of the most important ones. In your opinion what discipline or disciplines should deal with the theory of religious studies?

**Donald Wiebe**

Well, it seems to me that a number of theoretical perspectives can be taken. Obviously, I mean in terms of all of our experiences, the cognitive sciences have been really valuable but I am not sure that the cognitive sciences are the only way to explain religious phenomena. From what I see there are various levels of reality and explaining some forms of behavior is going to require something more than that kind of basic level. How would one explain the cognitive capacities of human minds? We look at our evolutionary history, our evolutionary biology, we take a look at the neurobiology and that begins to give us some perception of the mechanisms of the mind. First of all at the level, let's say, of a visual perception or auditory perception because most of that is unconscious. We could explain that neurobiology in terms of neurochemistry or biochemistry; we could begin to explain biochemistry in terms of theories of physics, but to go to the level of physics in order to explain human behavior seems to me to be problematic. Whether our beliefs and our behaviors can be explained simply in terms of cognitive mechanisms I am not at all sure that that is possible. I think that they are necessary but not sufficient. So theories I think may have to be there at the level of psychology other than just evolutionary psychology, perhaps in terms of social psychology, sociology. So I don't think that there is any one discipline that is the most significant but we are going to have to make use of number of theories from a number of perspectives in order to make sense of human behavior.

**Sacra**

I think that it answered partially my question, maybe it is because of my own point of view but I think that we will get to it in more detail in other questions.

**Donald Wiebe**

Alright.

**Sacra**

What currently is and what in your view should be the academic study of religion? Is it a science or an area of study?

**Donald Wiebe**

I use the phrase Religious Studies with capital "R" and capital "S" and for me that designates an institutional structure or department. I don't think that there is a discipline of religious studies. Our disciplinary tools and techniques come from real disciplines. So for me Religious Studies is a department and in another sense Religious Studies is an area of studies like Russian Studies, Canadian Studies, USA Studies, and what we do there is that we pull in economists, historians, political scientists...we are drawing knowledge and perspectives from different disciplines. So that's the first thing I want to say about Religious Studies, I don't think it's a discipline I think it's an area of study. The second thing I want to say is that I think we should stop talking about explaining religion. It's just too big a word. That's like explaining culture. Good Lord! How can we do it! So I look at my approach to this business by saying: "I want to explain a certain kind of

human behavior. “ And along that continuum of human behavior there is ordinary physical kind of overt behavior. You play soccer, you play baseball...you have psychological behavior so you bring in disciplines that relate to that, political behavior, economic behavior...and religious behavior might be one element of that. And all these behaviors overlap with each other. I mean soccer is also very much an economic enterprise, people make lots of money. Religious behavior could be an economic enterprise. People give money to religious institutions. So if we are looking at a kind of behavior and we call it religious behavior, we need to make kind of definition. How does religious behavior differ from ordinary political or ordinary economic behavior? And for me that's in terms of people who act on the basis of beliefs in transcendent powers, beings or states. So if you sell drugs on a street corner that's likely not religious. But if you do it for your religious community and you think that you have the approval of gods to do it and that's why you are not afraid of being put in jail if you are caught, then that's a kind of religious behavior even though it's an economic and a criminal behavior. In this way I think we get away from having to define very broad category like religion, but in saying that too I don't mean to get rid of the category religion, because I think it can be use to talk about institutions that house people that live together with respect to the same kind of beliefs and same kind of transcendent realities, beings or powers or states etc.

**Sacra**

Thank you. What title do you prefer for this area of studies in this connection? Is it just one, just Religious Studies with capital “R” and capital “S”?

**Donald Wiebe**

I would use Religious Studies, again for institutional reasons or I would say Scientific Study of Religion. I don't like Academic Study of Religion because there are a lot of people doing study of religion in academies that is not scientific. So if you say Academic Study of Religion then anything that goes on in the academy with respect to religion is considered the academic study. But very little of it is scientific. So I would use Scientific Studies, in a plural, Scientific Studies of Religion.

**Sacra**

A little bit more specifically. What is in your opinion the position of Philosophy of Religion within the Religious Studies if there should be such a position?

**Donald Wiebe**

Very simply. I think The Philosophy of Religion in Religious Studies or Scientific Studies of Religion is essentially methodology. You can do more than methodology in that philosophical frame of mind. You are likely to get into metaphysics and theology.

**Sacra**

Wouldn't that mean that the subject of Philosophy of Religion is different from the subject of Religious Studies?

**Donald Wiebe**

I think it is. I think most philosophers of religion want to deal with questions of meaning and truth of religion. And when I talk about truth I mean with the capital “T”. What I think Scientific Studies of Religion are interested in is obtaining true or false propositional claims about states of affairs in the world relevant to religious behavior. Distinguishing Truth of religion from true or false propositional claims is

absolutely essential. And that I think excludes most of Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion.

**Sacra**

If I understand it correctly it does not mean that Philosophy of Religion should have as a subject Religious Studies itself. As its metatheory...or should it?

**Donald Wiebe**

Well, I think it should be focused on methodology and not on the subject religion because then its subject religion usually means the intentional object of religious behavior. The intentional object of religious behavior is a religious object. A god, Nirvana...then you take up ontological and metaphysical positions.

**Sacra**

Then it would mean that Philosophy of Religion would be part of Philosophy of Science? I mean if you said that Religious Studies are just an area of several studies then this methodological quest for philosophical work is kind of overlapping with that of Philosophy of Science, isn't it? Or what would be the difference in Philosophy of Religion and Philosophy of Science?

**Donald Wiebe**

Well, Philosophy of Science is concerned at a metalevel, Philosophy of Religion is at the metaphysical level. That's not immediately clear but at a metalevel Philosophy of Science looks at what scientists and social scientists who study science are saying about science and trying to provide a coherent understanding of its historical development and its structure and maybe its productivity, its implications. Philosophy of Religion is concerned again with the intentional object of religious belief, behavior, activity and is usually concerned with how it is meaningful to the individual that is engaged in that religious activity and whether or not it is a true or veridical experience, i.e. if I have an experience of a glass of water in my hands the truth or falsity of that claim can be determined empirically. I mean if you would have asked me „Does your wife exist?“, it is a pretty strange question. To the religious believer the question „Does God exist?“ is a pretty strange question. They are in community with God. So when they talk about the truth of religion they are talking about the truth of their experience and are assuming that God is there, so they are assuming the veridicality, the truthfulness, of the statement about their relationship. Philosophers of Religion test that truth rationally. In terms of coherence, no contradictory character of the claims and so on and the Scientist of Religion does not give a damn about that question because the Scientist of Religion says we cannot assume the existence of gods. So I think those distinctions can then be kept clear.

**Sacra**

If you could elaborate little bit more about the subject of the Scientific Studies of Religion. Is it just behavior, the religious behavior or is it religion or religions in their factual states.

**Donald Wiebe**

Religions. I like that. I want to say that this is really crazy. The terminology is so intricate because religious people study religion, we study religion. When they study religion they are studying something different from what we are studying though. When you say religions here is a word that I think is absolutely normal, everyday word, we talk about Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and so on and then

we talk about the different divisions within each one of those. We say there are religious sects or denominations and when we use that word we are talking about the sociological phenomenon. We can see these things. There is a church just down the street somewhere that I passed. And I presume that there is a community that is taking care of it. And they pay the bills for heating and lighting and so on. So we can talk sociologically about religions. That is not talking sociologically about religion, because we are going to tend to use the word religion simply to say any kind of behavior that is related to those people, who believe in all the things I said before. So the people who keep that church going I presume believe in gods. So their behavior of looking after that church is religious behavior. When they pray it is a different kind of religious behavior because they are still relating they are doing all of that work and that activity in relationship to beliefs in this transcendent being. The subject of religion is a very human phenomenon, i.e. a form of human behavior. There is nothing more beyond that. The people that you are studying think that there is something beyond that and we can't say they are wrong. We don't know, but we are not interested because we can't get at that data. Therefore we are just interested in the behavior that they have in relationship to that intentional object. But how did you put that question to me, could you do it again?

**Sacra**

What is and what should be the subject of Scientific Studies of Religion?

**Donald Wiebe**

Ok. Then I would say very simply. Human behaviour of a particular type and I have awkwardly described that particular type.

**Sacra**

Do you think, and this is may be question more for the philosopher of science, that it is necessary for a science to have one single specific method to justify its own existence?

**Donald Wiebe**

It's a good question and there is a complex answer. I suppose that I won't be able to spend a lot of time at it. I would distinguish methods from methodology. Methodology is a broad category in terms of approaches and philosophical assumptions and presuppositions that we have to clarify before we ever get into analyzing the kind of activity we undertake. Methods I see as very particular kinds of things. The methods that are used in laboratory in biology or in chemistry or in physics are not the methods that we use in fieldwork and historical analysis. Methodological issues would be what are the presuppositions or who are making the presupposition that we have to have intersubjectively available evidence. That makes our discipline; I shouldn't use the word discipline, our studies, capable of being integrated with other studies right down to physics. So we know that that would explain human behavior perhaps in terms of wishes, goals, aims, desires, and then at more refine level we will try to explain those psychological categories in terms of structures of the brain, perhaps in terms of cognitive science, and then we will try to explain those categories in terms of the neurochemistry, and then the neuron-firing of the brain, electricity, and we will try to explain that in terms of physics, if we are interested in going that far down the road. The point of our being able to go that far down the road is that each one of those disciplines allows

you to obtain evidence that is available to everybody. When you have intuitive experience, when you have revelations from the gods, this is restricted access. If you are one of those prophets who received word from the gods then you have special privilege. I have the truth; you don't, so you must listen to me. It is a different kind of authority. I think philosophically and methodologically speaking what is tremendously important in methodology is that we keep the categories that we use common to all of the scientists. The methods, the individual methods, will differ amongst the sciences. This is what Tooby and Cosmides in their cognitive science analysis talked about: having an integrated causal model of explanation, so what you explain up here may use quite different methods and concepts but they must be able to be integrated with these. Another way of saying that is to say that physics is the boundary condition for chemistry; chemistry cannot say anything that contradicts physics. Chemistry is the boundary condition; let's say for biology, biology for psychology and sociology. So you cannot contradict with what comes from the lower level but you might evoke principles and explanations that go beyond those at a lower level. Does that make sense?

**Sacra**

It does. It's just that all the lower disciplines do not help a lot at a higher level.

**Donald Wiebe**

That's right. This is why I have some problem with people in the cognitive sciences. You see, they think that they would be able to explain everything at that level alone.

**Sacra**

You are not alone.

**Donald Wiebe**

Good. I am glad to hear that. So you have not been taken in by all the hype as we would say. I mean you look at Pascal Boyer's book *Religion explained* and the first phrase that jumps to my mind is „give me a break“. There is a long way from explanation there. I think we need to recognize that we work at different levels. One of the nicest books I have read in recent past is by Douglas Hofstadter *I am a strange loop*, that's a title of the book; I am not talking about myself. And he does the same thing. He says you have to take a look at how new levels of reality emerge requiring different kind of principles for explanation but those principles cannot contradict the principles of the previous sciences.

But there are problems in terms of talking the way I have been talking though too. The notion that explains moving from level to level that's usually evoked it is called emergence. We have emergent levels of reality. It is not easy to explain emergence without explaining why it's not totally discontinuous from previous sciences. So the question of continuity and discontinuity is a philosophical problem. In terms of history of philosophy and I find the history of philosophy in the West tremendously important to understanding science. If we take a look at Pre-Socratics and what was there before the Pre-Socratics, it is generally in the West seen as the origin or the beginnings of modern western philosophy. Prior to the Pre-Socratics you have mythical accounts of human behavior of the meaning and value systems so it is always in the narratives kind of form and narrative means it is linear. You may have all sorts of contradictions in that but there is a linear sense of beginning, middling and an end. Whether it involves gods and purposes

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and you either obey or disobey, get yourself in trouble or get great rewards. That presumes an agentic view of the world. And you notice that in Homer's account or Hesiod, everything is made sense of in terms of the gods and the will of the gods. I see that as the agentic worldview, not a mechanistic or materialistic worldview. When the Milesians, Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes that first little group in Miletos, whether they were religious or not we don't know, but they were likely religious, there is no reason to believe that they were atheistic. But one thing we do know that they wanted to know how the world operated. And when I say world, I mean the physical world. So they asked questions as to how it came about that we have all this multiplicity of things, where did it come from. And each of their results is monistic. They think it comes from one basic kind of substance. Now the answers are silly from our perspective, it is all water or it is all air or it is all *apeiron*, which is the boundless. So we have kind of what look like philosophical answers. One thing they not do is to refer to the gods. So we are outside agentic worldview there. And we are looking for a substance from which all things come from. And principles or processes of transformation seem to be physicalistic. So for Thales it is water. Actually he also uses the notion of god, says all things are filled with gods and I find that really fascinating because there was no concept of basic substance or matter. And these things were made and when you smash them accidentally or on purpose, they are no longer here. You melt them down they become something else. So there is something that is basic to this that can take on a different form, gets transformed. What they are doing in this process of talking back and forth about where did it come from and how did it come from? They are creating the concept of matter itself. Inert matter that requires some kind of transforming power to become the various things that we deal with. I think it is really fascinating as you go on in a history of pre-Socratic philosophy you will find that the gods themselves who used to be principles of explanation now become objects of explanation. That is the transition in worldview that I think is utterly essential to science and the methodology there. As Karl Popper put it, it's a methodology of conjecture and refutation, i.e. you throw it a guess about how the world came to be what it is and then you try to test it, try to break it down and if it breaks down you throw it another conjecture and then you test that one. And what you do? You look at the empirical data. For me science, at least the idea of science, the idea of modern western science, began all the way back there, in giving up agentic worldview, substituting causality for agency.

If you look at the *Phaedo*, you see Socrates drinking the hemlock and before he dies he talks to his students who are all gathered around and he tells them a bit of the history of his own educational background and how he was fascinated with Anaxagoras' view of the world, because Anaxagoras said that fundamental to the operation of the world was the notion of *nous*, mind. And the more he heard about Anaxagoras the more he found out that Anaxagoras was like the atomists, i.e. they thought that *nous* itself, mind itself, can be explained in terms of smoother particles. And at that point he says that it is crazy! Life is not meaningful that way! Better that you give that up and seek to know yourself. He is quite aware that there is that huge transition where we begin to look at the world not in an agency sense, so the gods are irrelevant, they became objects of the explanation and he wants to turn the world around again. And by the way he and later did so

that it became much more religious again. Gilbert Murray in England in first two decades of the 20th century wrote a book on crypt religion. And he has a chapter in there (in the early version it's chapter four in second edition it's chapter five) and it's called *The failure of nerve*. Socrates is the failure of nerve to follow through on the scientific project of understanding the world in terms of causality not agency. They were frightened about rejecting the gods.

The gods reveal themselves to you and that's privileged access. What is absolutely essential in science is intersubjective availability to the data. If there is not data common to all of us, then we can't talk to each other in a critically significant fashion.

**Sacra**

Just to clarify on the methods. You don't see a problem in pluralism of methods?

**Donald Wiebe**

I have no problem with a plurality of methods. I think that there is only one overarching methodological framework within which you can operate. And I think that framework started as I said way back to the Pre-Socratics and I like Popper's phrase for it. Again it might be a mantra but one can use it a little more sensibly than that, i.e. science is essentially a conjectural-refutational mode of thinking. That has all sorts of implications, but I think that is the methodological framework in a nutshell and you can have many different methods within that.

**Sacra**

Is it somehow relevant to shape our field as a history of religion anymore? Meaning: Is it important for young students to have a good orientation within the historical data or is it theoretical competence that matters?

**Donald Wiebe**

I think you have to have both. Our scientific studies are not as precise and specific as physics, chemistry, biology... There we need to work at laboratory benches and spend great deal more time doing that. We need to understand our data and I think that requires descriptive work and much of it is done of course in terms of historical traditions. But in terms of new emerging religious movements and the like we still need to collect data, categorize it, give it some kind of systematical coherent view. Besides, I think that both kinds of study are of particular importance to society at large and that does not mean I am suggesting we became public intellectuals. But I think that other people within society, policy makers and so on, can use the data we bring forward. In terms of recent political developments in Europe and north America as well in terms of the increasing multicultural character of our societies, the more information we can get across to everyone about various religious traditions, the easier it is for us to get along, i.e. if you don't live next door to people the possibility of having sinister views of them is far greater than if you had more information about them. I think erudition; knowledge about individual traditions and behaviors of people is very valuable in terms of everyday interaction in multicultural societies. I also think it is particularly important in seeing systematic structures of particular religious traditions. Our explanations of the sociological level will obviously be contingent on knowing that information. So I don't think that it's an either or.

Theoretically I still think that there is no science unless one attempts to explain the phenomenon that you are interested in. You can be tremendously erudite, have all sorts of information and that might even be valuable to you individually and to society but you still will not have fulfilled the scientific task of understanding the phenomenon by seeing what its causal emergence is.

Did you want to get out of doing historical stuff?

**Sacra**

No. It had I think more to do with our own department where we did not really get that many theoretical background or at least not enough for me in my opinion. It had a lot to do with facts...

**Donald Wiebe**

Is there a basic methodology course that has to be undertaken?

**Sacra**

There is. But again, it is more of a history and facts how people did it then learning how we should be able to use them or showing us how to work with it.

**Donald Wiebe**

I think that there should be at least one philosophical-methodological course in terms of saying lets have a look at the history and development of science, how do each of sciences fit in to that development, how does the discipline – pardon me – the scientific study of religion as part of that historical development fit in with it and how are the peculiar methods that one uses at both of the descriptive and the explanatory level in the way to follow the tenets there... So I think without that kind of broad philosophy of science framework the students of religion are at a great disadvantage.

**Sacra**

Let's get back to the methods. If we should follow the demand to base our study at naturalistic testable theories, what are our current possibilities? Is it just the cognitive science or some other...?

**Donald Wiebe**

No, I don't think it is just the cognitive science. I think we are going to have to work at the macro level of human behavior, I think we are going to have to recognize that intentionalities – so wishes, goals, aims, desires – are kinds of pushes and pulls in terms of human behaviors. I am thinking of work of Benjamin Libet in cognitive science where he is looking at what is the relationship of consciousness and act of will in relationship to human behavior. And there is an interesting disjunct there because it appears that our electro-muscular behavior already begins equal we are conscious of having decided to move our hand in one way or another. That would seem to suggest there is nothing like free will. If that's the case you wouldn't be able to predict other people's behavior on the basis of your psychological knowledge of them. That is you know what their aims and goals are, you know how they've behaved in the respect to certain kinds of contextual conditions. And it seems to me that we could not to get along at life unless we were not able to do that. If I am in Rome, I cross the street in a different way than I do, when I am in Toronto...What I have noticed is that the Roman pedestrian and the Roman driver of the automobile are predicting each other's behavior. You step upon the street, the persons slow down, because they know that you are going to cross anyway and they don't want to hit you and have to pay to insurance company

an extra money after settling the courts and the like... Whereas in Toronto or maybe in Germany it would be better – everything has to be *in Ordnung*... You wait for the light turn, because the person who has the green light he just goes through and they hit you...

So what we are doing? The human brain seems to be a prediction device. Just like the all of our lower forms of life... Lions and spring parker and other forms of dinner for them, they get their action-potentials ready in terms of their predictions of what predator will do. And the predator also does it in terms of its prediction. Not because all of this is beneath the level of consciousness, it shows that brain is largely a prediction device. And that's tremendously important in terms of evolution of any species. It seems to me that when the consciousness of homo-sapiens emerges that it doesn't change the fundamental character of the human brain and its fundamental function, namely be able to predict. And we do that now in terms of guessing each other's behavior in terms of what you want and what it is you're aiming for, how are you gonna get it and how is that going to deprive me... So all the time here we are making guesses at agent's decisions I don't think this is just all mechanical.

Now, if you read Dan Dennet, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, you tell you all can be reduced down to mechanics at molecular level and mentally atomic level. And even if that's true and we could have all that atomic knowledge, all that molecular knowledge, (but) on the basis of that molecular knowledge we could not predict each other's behavior. So even if the reductionism can take place, we have not provided an adequate explanation of human behavior. Here and less we can understand the psychological behavior of people that allows us to predict behavior. So I think psychological explanations are necessary. And to be fair to Dan Dennet here, though he is an archmaterialist, he admits that anybody who tries to explain the human behavior to molecular level is a *greedy reductionist*. Why? Because you can't predict on that basis, so you have to tailor your explanations to the level on which the brain is operating.

So I think psychological explanations are tremendously important in terms of understanding religion. And if cognitive sciences and neurosciences can tell me at lower levels of explanation how those psychological categories allow me to predict, that's fine, but I still need the psychological categories to do it. I think I do. You see I am also a materialist, I don't believe that... Gosh! This is too bad.

**Sacra**

Ok, you've started...

**Donald Wiebe**

I am also materialist...

**Sacra**

Do you mean in a metaphysical way...

**Donald Wiebe**

No, I am a methodological materialist. Well, ok I will admit it, I am committed... No "committed" that makes a decision. I believe that if the truth were ever fully available to anybody, it's all matter. I believe that if truth, the total truth – truth here is a true-or-false propositional frame – is known about a pat material world, that it has peculiar properties that allows different patterns of material behavior to emerge. And one of those patterns is called organisms. We explain those patterns

at a different level from the basic material. So in that sense I believe that there is an emergence of different types of reality... So still one uses the word "reality", but I would say that they do not have an ultimate ontological independence. So mind for me is... See, here I am in trouble with my colleagues like Luther Martin, Pascal Boyer and all the others. Without being a dualist, I think we can talk about mind *and* brain.

So I believe that minds emerge in terms of the molecular behavior of neurons in the brain. So I want to talk about a mindful reality but I do not think that there can ever be minds without matter. So if the matter isn't operating in the way it acts to in those patterns, then mind collapses.

I think that Susan Greenfield, her book *The Private Life of the Brain*, here is a delightful thing to read, and Richard D. Hofstadter who I mentioned earlier. Each of them talks about different patterns of activity in the brain and that those patterns constitute reality, but they don't have an ontological existence independent from the matter. So each of them then talks about different levels of personhood. A neonate, the child that is just born, thus is not as much of a person as you or me. So what is it that makes personhood? Memories, experience... And as Susan Greenfield puts it, if you see a teenager at a rave, at a party at their own drugs, we say "stoned out of his mind" or "smashed out of his mind", if you drink too much, but not "smashed out of his/her brain". Brain is there, the mind is no longer operating... The connections have been disrupted. So what you see is patterns of brain activity that nobody has yet measured. I mean the experiments that go on with fMRI, PET scan and all of that measure at very slow rate. You're seeing the rate of the blood flow into the brain... So the question we ask here – the mechanism, the module is here. Now the brain, we have got hundred billion neurons, hundred trillion connections, and when we think, respond, observe, tens of thousands, if not tens of millions of firings go on in cascades automatically. Our instrumentation can't measure that. And what she is arguing is that as we learn and memory grows you're building personality, you're building mind. At the other end, the end where Professor Martin and I are apt, the brain cells are dying, they are not cooperating. So if you find us going into dementia or Alzheimer's, we are losing personhood, we are losing mind. What that means is we are losing the experience that we gained over all of those years. So it is the experience and the memories and the way those cooperate in terms of our individual activity in the brain and our interaction with each other that is the loss of mind but not the loss of brain. So I think that we not only can but have to talk about mind and I don't think that we can simply reduce it to computations in the brain. It is the type of computation which depends on the type of behavior and I don't think that there are general laws there.

### **Sacra**

Would you consider yourself still an epistemological optimist in a way that you would say that science will be one day at such a state that it will answer all the questions about the brain, that all the stuff about the brain cells and brain itself putting together should or will be able to explain the mind?

### **Donald Wiebe**

No, I am not such an optimist, no, I am a pessimist, but I am a happy one ☺... If you are popperian, you can never know that you are right. Even when you are, you cannot know it. And because you could be wrong, you have to keep testing

the theory. I mean Newton was right for physicists for two hundred years and more and then the little postmaster came along and screwed everything out, that's Einstein. So we have totally different physics. We know that we are further ahead, that is we can explain more data with fewer categories and principles than our predecessors, but we do not know whether we are right. And if you look at the history of science, it is more likely that we are wrong than we are right, but we are not as wrong as our predecessors. And that's the good part.

So I am optimistic that science will continually grow and I am optimistic about that in the negative sense as well. If science can't know it, certainly religion and intuition can't either. And science has again intersubjective credibility, not only subjective one. So in one sense I am optimistic, but not as greatly optimistic as the question would suggest one could be. Such optimists rather scare me.

### **Sacra**

If we have a look at the cognitive science of religion or cognitive approach, what would you consider should be that approach within the scientific study of religion? Should it take over the method completely or is it just one of the complementary approaches?

### **Donald Wiebe**

I think it is one of the more exciting, and that's largely because it is one of the most recent, but one of the more exciting possibilities for explaining the human behavior. It provides hypothesis that allow testing little bits of things in terms of human behavior and we might be able to put together a broader picture years down the roads... I think it is what I call after Imre Lakatos a positive research program. So as long as we keep on doing these kinds of things I think people in that area that methodology will probably exaggerate their claims. We have to do it to get visibility both for eager development and financing.

I think it is still a very positive parading move and as long as we keep on getting new data out of this... And this is one of the valuable things about theories as well. Not only are they attempts to explain the data that we already have, they must have a positive influence on disclosing new data. And I think that cognitive sciences do that immensely well.

The person who I think I am most impressed with in terms of connecting the cognitive and the cultural or the cognitive and the religious is Merlin Donald. The title of his for me the most important book is *Origins of the Modern Mind*. It is a marvelously complex yet simple argument, but complex in sense of its time coverage and the data that it recovers to show you how you can connect the cognitive and the cultural in very fruitful ways to understand both the historical and evolutionary data and to give you also valid news for all kinds of experiments to get more data.

Now back to the question... The cognitive approach should be one of the more approaches. I think that there always has to be a plurality of approaches. Paul Feyerabend who is a little radical on this score, he wants a constant transition of theories... But I think that we have to have a plurality of theories like a safety debit – you put all your aid in one basket and if you drop the basket then you have very little left to work with... And I think the same here. For example in terms of cosmology, I wouldn't, if I were a funding agency, give a great deal of money to Erich von Denicken. I mean this is a weird man... But ones he started extra terrestrial

explanations for terrestrial phenomena he sold tens of millions of books and he is a multimillionaire. I wouldn't put a lot of money in that kind of research program. It does not have what philosophers of science would call an *initial plausibility*. That kind of theory would have less initial plausibility in 1940, 1950, 1960 until we actually started believing that the possibility of extra terrestrial intelligent life was actually there in terms of our cosmology. We now know that it is possible, but in the fifties we didn't, it was a guess work. So could there be people who came from other space and did all of it's here in the way Denicken thinks? Highly unlikely, but now it's not logically impossible as it was then. So I wouldn't reject all of that kind of theorizing, I just wouldn't put any money there and just say it is so bizarre that you should find your own research money. I would rather put the money in other places with greater degree of initial plausibility.

The theories that we work with as we see in all through the history of science we have grown in our knowledge by rejecting earlier theories. If we again have just one theory to work on we'd run out of the steam if that one is really falsified. So this is why Karl Popper did not reject metaphysics, he rejected it as a mode of knowledge. He called it the *penumbra of science*... He says that out of that kind of sometimes very nucky ideas that were stamped in our science we might find some insights, something of value that we can begin to reformulate in light of the knowledge that we have achieved here to find ourselves formulating a new testable hypothesis. So metaphysics and nucky theorists like Denicken should never be totally rejected. It might be the new source of knowledge for us if we can reformulate the claims in a new testable form.

### Sacra

So what ground would you build the initial plausibility on?

### Donald Wiebe

The first thing is something that is logically contradictory has no initial plausibility. I think in terms of history of science you would have to look at this and see if the question has been there and whether or not we are now able to produce technologies on the basis of that science, and I think technology is important in this regard. How do we tell what is a good science and a bad science. If we are looking for causal connections and that's I think what science is, causal connection is intimately tied to manipulability – if you know that this emerges because of this, you can manipulate this and you can prevent or increase the emergence of this. That's technology. If we take a look the development of the scientific streams where we have been able to create technologies, that is a good bet that gives you the initial plausibility.

In a very strange kind of sense I find initial plausibility by doing a research which for me is reading. I have all of my life purchased books constantly. You have to have a lot of material. It is like diamond mining or gold mining; you have to have tons of this material to get just ounces of gold. When I buy books, I first look at (if I don't know the author) at the publisher: Did this come from Harvard, University Chicago Press, University California Press or from Tantum Press? Why? Because it has an initial plausibility, because it has an institutional structure that these books were vetted and reviewed by external reviewers, internal editors went through it again... So you can trust this because there is a community behind it, not just a single author. This is why I find the web a trap. I think it is rubbish.

I know that there is a lot of stuff out there, but I stay away from it, I want to see the editorial board that lies behind. Those are the kind of things that give you the initial plausibility when your research is reading.

**Sacra**

So you mean the community?

**Donald Wiebe**

Yes, it is whether or not there is an intellectual interacting community that is testing the material you are making yourself. So those kinds of things give you an initial plausibility. Another one that you have there and this is a little less forceful is what is intuitively obvious. But what is intuitively obvious in one culture is not in other, perhaps even with one person and another. If there is not a kind of intuitive quality to this that involves more than just you then you don't have an initial plausibility. So that is what I mean by initial plausibility.

Now, in the assumptions that one adopts some of them might not have an initial plausibility, but you don't see anything immediately, incoherent about them... You say "If I made this assumption, it seems to me that I might be able to move forward through the research. So I am going to give it a try knowing that if this has no initial plausibility, but here are the reasons why I am going to doubt. That is in terms of hypothesis that I formulate, it does make sense and if I can predict something that after occur in light of this theory and it does occur then it gives me some reason to continue with the assumption." So that is initial plausibility is in a broad and general sense. It is what most people who are reading your paper or your book would not immediately reject. I know that it is a really broad way of formulating but you don't want an assumption that most people would immediately reject. So once you got the initial plausibility then you can begin to structure hypothesis and go for the tests.

**Sacra**

So would you still consider Popper's falsifiability as a useful tool?

**Donald Wiebe**

Oh yes. But remember that falsifiability is also ambiguous. There are conventionalist stratagems that are invoked with respective falsifiability. For example, if you have a theory like Newton's which has been very productive for two hundred years and there is a counter instance of falsification... If you read Thomas Kuhn then he says you don't immediately reject Newton's theory. So how falsifications do you need before you reject a long standing positive development in theory? Nobody can give you a precise answer, but all of these become anomalies until you say "Now, there are too many and I don't feel comfortable any more." So you begin searching for an alternative kind of theory. Before that feeling of yours these are not falsifications, they are just anomalies. But logically, if you have one anomaly, it should be falsified. You give the benefit of the doubt to the long standing theory.

When you create a new theory and you would expect this to happen and in objective evidence of experiments it didn't happen, then you get the benefit of the doubt for the new theory. You are going to get a bit of time and a bit protection from an immediate falsification, because there are so many elements in the world that can falsify any theory immediately. So now you are to give it a chance to see whether or not it is going to have a positive research result. And again, how long

that is it depends on the number of people who are interested in the theory and think that it has an initial plausibility, how much research money you have. So there are all kinds of things that are conventional – that is we make the decision on them. So falsification is not very precise and simple device, but still the important one.

### **Sacra**

If you should have a wild guess what would you consider will be the future methodological development in social sciences? Is it going to be this kind of concilience of Wilson's or something else?

### **Donald Wiebe**

I think it has to be that kind of concilience. I think that any development in social sciences that radically deviate from what I would call boundary conditions set by the other sciences I would have a great deal of hesitation in terms of providing it any funding or any attention. That is again an initially plausible position to take. If in the field that you are operating and that is social sciences you simply cannot get anywhere, you might want to question something in the background – boundary conditions of the other sciences. Because even though we accept those as boundary conditions that can never be an absolute metaphysical kind of acceptance either. I mean there could be something wrong there. I think of Willard Quine and Oxford in terms of talking about the web of believes. You might have to go back to that web of believes that is all of the boundary conditions back here to see how they are integrated, if we haven't made a mistake and the like.

I felt that this was a kind of thing that I had to do with my religious-philosophical work on understanding religion. When I was attempting in my doctoral work to provide a compatibility system between science and religion and I could not work it out. What I did then was to go and say "Am I making an assumption somewhere here that I haven't recognized?" And I think I did do that, I assumed that the theology and religion were the same thing. And what I did then was to say "Let's have a look at the development of theology!" And what I found to be the case is that theology is a mode of scientific thinking. Whereas religious thinking is as I say agentic, narrative, linear, scientific thinking is hierarchical – you don't have a being in middle or end and a story pattern, you have premises and conclusions. Theology then actually reflexes what was going on with the pre-Socratic revolution from mythopoeic thinking that it had preceded it. In terms of looking back at the compatibility issue, I said "If I do not make that assumption and take a look at the relationship of religious thinking which is identical in structure to mythical thinking that is stories, narativity, and theology then is an essence to make religious thinking more credible, then there cannot be any compatibility between religious thinking and scientific thinking." Now there are still some people who think that I am wrong about that. It is such a shame, but that's the case...

I really do think that mythopoeic mode of thought is, I mean structurally, incompatible with scientific mode of thought. I think this is the great discontinuity between pre-Milesian thinking and the Milesian's. Even though that there may still be a kind of cultural-historical continuity in the thinking over that line between pre-Milesians and Milesians, structurally it is a radical different thing. So when Christianity comes along, it has got a narrative, agentic, mythic structure, and the influence of platonic thought on that was to make out of it theology. So now if

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I leave theology out of this non-religious mode of thought, I get to the conclusion that I've got to... This is also why I titled the book *The Irony of Theology*. The irony is the fact that people think that theology is a religious mode of thinking when it isn't, it's detrimental to religion. But let's go back to the question...

**Sacra**

The answer was fruitful. We wanted to ask you if you feel that naturalistic approaches and the methods of cognitive science are strong enough to be the future or if the new phenomenologists, new hermeneutists are still strong enough to take over it again?

**Donald Wiebe**

That I think is more a political question than a methodological one. As I said earlier, I think knowledge, erudition is important. I think we need it as anthropology and ethnography do. I mean refined ethnographic description is much better than crude ethnographic description. For me the crude ethnographic description would be basically at the macro-level of interaction of individuals, spatially and temporally. What we want is much more a refined description of that which takes in its consideration psychological aspects of this interaction connected again to each others behavior. And we can begin on that basis of that kind of description to predict the kind of behavior to this kind of situation if we change it to that... Concerning hermeneutics I would like to leave the word out, I would like to leave the word "phenomenology" out. I think that is about as likely as leaving the word "religion" out... I think that the thing we should do is to transform the terminology, to just say that hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, phenomenology are different modes of refining the description of human behavior. Ones we get that kind of pattern down it makes explanation much easier. But it only does that if you don't go that far as Clifford Geertz who wants to say once you got that kind of thick description, you don't need to look for an explanation. So thick description becomes explanation, it is like magic. I don't think that any thick description is an explanation. On the other hand we have to be careful to think that we can actually begin to explain in that very quick fashion without being careful about our description and understanding – that's a very slippery word too... I hate it, because "understanding" is often used to substitute for "explanation". But it is not a substitute; understanding is a part of descriptive exercise. And very often the word "understanding" is used in a kind of Gnostic sense – when you understand, you've done it from inside etc. So I think that one should use the word understanding very carefully and again keep in mind that understanding is a part of descriptive enterprise. Understanding is not the end task of the study of religion – explanation is. But understanding religion can be tremendously important politically. So new hermeneutists and new phenomenologists have lot of activity in the future. I think so and I don't think that's bad. As I would say in our complex multicultural society having a great deal of refined descriptive knowledge of various traditions can make our political life much easier and much less dangerous. But that is not the full task of our departments.