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The "Luther (Martin) Effect" on the Study of Religion – Up to Eighty

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I am pleased to have this opportunity to present some observations on, or, perhaps more accurately, stories about, the academic career of Luther Martin – my good friend, colleague, sometime-co-author, and collaborator – on the occasion of his eightieth birthday.

Luther and I first encountered each other at the Thirteenth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), which met in Lancaster, England in 1975. I had just completed my doctoral program at the University of Lancaster the year before and was about to deliver my first paper at an important international academic conference.[1] Luther, with the help of Tom Lawson, made it clear to me that the paper would likely be a flop because I had "stolen" the title for my paper from Hans Penner and Edward Yonan.[2] Both Luther and Tom, nevertheless, complimented me on the paper afterwards, and kept me in tow – tied up – for the rest of our time in Lancaster. On returning home I was quite convinced – bearing in mind Rousseau's comment in his *Confessions* that he was like no one else in the whole world – that there was no one else in the whole field of the study of religion like Luther Martin.[3] In some respects I saw Luther as the field's Morris Zapp (in David Lodge's *Changing Places* and *Small World*).[4] He was brash, carefree, and irreverent. To my mind, Luther clearly didn't fit the mold of the typical denizen of the field of "religious studies". It was also quite clear that he had little to no esteem for the "religious studies" found in most departments for the study of religion or for the major associations and societies supporting the humanistic

* I want to express appreciation to the editors of *Religio* for the opportunity to publish this essay recognizing Professor Martin's contribution to the field of "religious studies", and my special thanks to Dr. Michaela Ondrašinová for making the invitation and for her critical feedback and helpful editorial corrections and suggestions to early versions of this essay.

1 Donald Wiebe, "Is a Science of Religion Possible?", *Studies in Religion* 7, 1978, 5-17.

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

3 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, London: Penquin Books 1953 (1st ed. 1789).

4 David Lodge, *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses*, London: Secker and Warburg 1975, and id., *Small World: An Academic Romance*, London: Secker and Warburg 1984.

study of religions. Unlike Zapp, however, Luther has never given any indication that he ever "caught himself brooding about the meaning of life".[5] He simply spends his time enjoying it.

Although, as I found out later, his early post-secondary education involved training in biblical studies and theology, it is quite evident that he didn't care to try solving the "riddle" (a pseudo-problem for Luther) of the ultimate meaning of life or feel compelled to explore what others called the "great questions" of human existence. Moreover, as long as I have known Luther he has expressed a vigorous antipathy to philosophy and philosophers. Questions about transcendence and the absolute (whether God, gods, or other superhuman or supernatural agents) were subjects of interest to him only as cultural postulations, as Melford Spiro helpfully referred to them.[6] And I presume that it is his near infinite distance from any such brooding that left him free to focus on philological and historical matters in his "divinity studies" and unconsciously, I suspect, made him a historian of religions in a rather traditional IAHR/European sense – at least academically.

Luther's interest was simply in historical scholarship as an objective, epistemically valid enterprise, alone of value in gaining credible – that is, scientific – knowledge about religions and credible explanations of religious thought and practice. With his continued participation in the IAHR from 1985 and on, Luther has buttressed his historical studies with critical (in the analytical philosophical, not the postmodern, sense) clarification of conceptual and methodological issues in the field, including the value of theory for historical studies of religions, which – in concert with the work of others – has been instrumental in creating a coherent naturalistic framework for a genuinely scientific study of religious phenomena. It is this trajectory in Luther's published work that I think is worth spelling out here as exemplary for the field. How Luther practiced, and still practices, what he "preached" is also an important part of the story about this newly-minted octogenarian I will tell here.

Before continuing with that story it might be helpful to say a bit more about the early Luther Martin for the readers of this journal who may not have met him. Like many scholars of his age engaged in the study of religions and religion, Luther's early training included earning a Master of Divinity degree (in his case, from Drew University in 1962) and a Master

5 David Lodge, *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1978, 43.

6 Melford Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation", in: Michael Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, London: Tavistock 1968, 242-261.

of Sacred Theology degree (in 1963). He changed course somewhat in 1965-1966 pursuing "special studies" in Göttingen before taking up a teaching post at the University of Vermont (UVM) in 1967. He eventually earned a PhD degree from Claremont Graduate School in 1972.

Luther's publication record is impressive (his first published article appearing in 1970),[7] although some of his early pieces – his two essays on Jung (both published in 1985),[8] for example, and his admiration for Foucault (in his co-edited *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, which was published in 1988)[9] – still raise my eyebrows and made me suspicious of this Morris Zapp of religious studies. It seems that Luther had similar suspicions about me since he did not attend the Fourteenth Congress of the IAHR held in Winnipeg (Manitoba, Canada), for which I served as Executive Director. It is possible that my credentials as a philosopher may have been the main reason for his absence from that important meeting, though he is likely to tell you a different story to rationalize his non-attendance. But being absent, and not rubbing shoulders with other real historians of religion, may well account for his "wayward" work on Jung and Foucault. Yet, an interesting shift in his thought finally occurred. Luther's second encounter with the IAHR crowd at the Fifteenth Congress held in Sydney, Australia in 1985 had a greater influence on his thought than the Lancaster meeting held in 1975. Even a cursory review of Luther's CV shows a definite change of direction in his work after 1985, not only in terms of his research interests and number of publications but also in the fact of his entry into the "academic politics" of the field we then called "religious studies." From my perspective on his development, Luther's publications after 1985 particularly benefited from his unexpected entry into the politics of the field on the occasion of the Sydney meeting, but also have been beneficial to shaping the politics of the discipline since then. A little background information will be helpful in understanding the political significance of this congress for Luther's career and for the field.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Ivan Strenski and I had approached a few "eccentric" but nevertheless well-respected senior scholars in the

7 Luther H. Martin, "The Nekyia of Belle de Jour", *Agora* 1, 1970, 43-49.

8 Luther H. Martin, "Jung as Gnostic", in: Luther Martin – James Gross (eds.), *Essays on Jung and the Study of Religion*, New York: University Press of America 1985, 70-79, and id., "C. G. Jung and the Historian of Religion: The Case of Hellenistic Religion", in: Luther Martin – James Gross (eds.), *Essays on Jung and the Study of Religion*, New York: University Press of America 1985, 132-142.

9 Luther H. Martin – Huck Gutman – Patrick H. Hutton (eds.), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press 1988.

American Academy of Religion (AAR) to ask for their support in trying to get the AAR to take more seriously the scientific study of religion and to balance its emphasis on "humane" and humanistic studies of the type supported by the likes of Mircea Eliade, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and their students. Although our senior scholar-friends sympathized with our concerns, we got nowhere with these entreaties. Bumping into Luther and Tom – my erstwhile friends of Lancaster Congress days – from time to time at the AAR meetings, I freely expressed my frustrations not only with the dominance of the humanistic study of religion in the AAR but also with the refusal of like-minded colleagues to engage in political action to try to broaden the understanding of AAR officials as to the nature of the field. Despite our conversations about the plight of the study of religion under the auspices of the AAR, none of us held positions of influence in the Academy, which left us with no other option than to complain – sometimes very loudly – but to no effect.

Fortunately, Luther and Tom decided to attend the Fifteenth IAHR Congress and I found time over dinner one evening to carry on complaining about the AAR. Soon, Luther and Tom had had enough of what I think they called my "bellyaching" and, grabbing a couple bottles of wine from the table – and me, although I was not on the table – we went off to Tom's room to consider what, realistically, could be done to improve the quality of the study of religion in the context of the modern research university. We decided that nothing less than the creation of a new association was essential. We were convinced that what was needed was a more hospitable institutional context within which American and Canadian members of the AAR interested in the scientific study of religions would find critical support for their search for explanations of religious phenomena rather than merely continuing with the AAR agenda of teaching religious appreciation courses and furthering inter-religious dialogue, practices we thought inappropriate for departments for the study of religion in the modern research university.

We settled on the name "North American Association for the Study of Religion" (NAASR), (very) briefly spelled out its objectives, and "held an election" of officers of the Association. As I recall that evening, I was elected President, Tom was elected Vice-President, and Luther was elected Secretary, although it would have been more reasonable that his title be Executive Secretary because, from that time on, the welfare of the Association was entirely in his hands. Luther (Tom and I) moved quickly to gain some kind of credibility for this "paper tiger" (as Jacob Neusner put it to me, learning of this development some days later). Earlier that day I had been elected a member of the Executive Committee of the IAHR (an even stranger "success story", but appropriate for another time) and

Luther, as I recall, insisted that the newly-formed NAASR submit a request for affiliation with the IAHR – a request which I would be able to support at the Executive Committee level until the resolution was voted on at the next meeting of the IAHR in Rome in 1990. The election of Michael Pye as Secretary General, to replace Professor Zwi Werblowsky in that position, and a burgeoning friendship between Luther and Michael, was also of considerable importance for the future of the NAASR (but that too, is another story for another time). Luther's first act as Secretary, however, was less than inspiring. We thought it important that our intention to apply for NAASR's membership in the IAHR be kept secret until the meeting of the General Assembly of the IAHR. Luther, however, having made copies of the petition for distribution at the General Assembly, left the original on the photocopy machine, which was found by, of all people, Professor Zwi Werblowsky, whom we feared the most as capable of crushing the petition. Fortunately, this mistake did not botch the success of our application for IAHR membership.

Luther's involvement in this meeting of the IAHR and its entanglements in political matters was unquestionably a major turning point in his career. It did not draw Luther away from his research projects and publications on Greco-Roman religions, and especially his interests in Mithraism, but rather brought him to realize the importance of establishing institutions within which sound research on religious phenomena could be secured. Luther's concern for the credibility of the study of religion – not to put too fine a point on it – brought him to pay attention to more general issues in the field, and brought him into contact with scholars around the world with similar objectives. Politically, he saw to it that the NAASR was incorporated as an academic association in the state of Vermont. He worked hard, although to no avail, to have the NAASR approved by the AAR as an affiliated society. He saw to it that a respectable constitution and set of bylaws was created and approved by the NAASR Board and membership. Without his tireless efforts with these mundane matters, the NAASR would not have survived those early years.

Luther, moreover, was largely responsible for getting *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* – a journal founded and run by graduate students at the University of Toronto – accepted by a reputable academic publisher as an official NAASR publication. (His gregarious Morris Zapp-like nature was particularly helpful in achieving this, and many of our other objectives.) At Michael Pye's invitation, Luther participated in a conference in Marburg on "Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religion", at which he presented a paper on "Fundamental Problems in the

World-Wide Pursuit of the Study of Religion", published in 1989.[10] He was also invited to the second IAHR conference on methodology in the study of religion in Warsaw, at which he addressed historiographical issues in a paper titled "The History of Religions: A Field for Historical or Social Scientific Inquiry?", published in 1990.[11] This was followed several years later with a paper on "Rationality and Relativism in the History of Religions Research" at a conference on rationality and the study of religion at Aarhus University organized by Jeppe Jensen (the paper was published in 1997 in a volume edited by Luther and Jeppe).[12]

Luther's first book, *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction* (1987)[13] was, no doubt, in preparation long before the Sydney IAHR Congress meeting, but Luther's increasing involvement in the IAHR, I think, gave that book a measure of international influence, both scholarly and political, it may not otherwise have had. Its translation into Czech in 1997 and into Greek in 2004 created an ongoing interaction between scholars of religion in those countries and their counterparts in the USA and Canada. As Secretary of the NAASR, and in cooperation with the IAHR, Luther and colleagues from Masaryk University (and the Czech Association for the Study of Religions, formed in 1990 – at that time as a Czechoslovak association) organized a couple of conferences in the 1990s on "Religions in Contact" (1994) and "The Academic Study of Religion during the Cold War: Ideological and Theological Constraints, East and West" (1999), which greatly increased cooperation between Czech and North American scholars.[14] And having hosted Professor Panayotis Pachis as a visiting scholar at UVM, a similarly important connection was established with Aristotle University in Thessaloniki (and the Greek Society, formed in 2003) and with the young scholars in the scientific study of religion based there.

10 Luther H. Martin, "Fundamental Problems in the World-Wide Pursuit of the Study of Religion", in: Michael Pye (ed.), *Marburg Revisited*, Marburg: Diagonal Verlag 1989, 27-30.

11 Luther H. Martin, "The History of Religions: A Field for Historical and Social Scientific Inquiry?", in: Witold Tyloch (ed.), *Studies in Religions in the Context of the Social Sciences: Methodological and Theoretical Relations*, Warsaw: Polish Society for the Science of Religions 1990, 110-116.

12 Luther H. Martin, "Rationality and Relativism in History of Religions Research", in: Jeppe S. Jensen – Luther H. Martin (eds.), *Rationality and the Study of Religion*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 1997, 145-156.

13 Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction*, New York: Oxford University Press 1987.

14 Luther's close association with colleagues in the Department for the Study of Religions at the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, and contributions to the Department, was recognized by the Dean of the Faculty in awarding Professor Martin the Commemorative Medal of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, in 2012.

The Sydney IAHR Congress was not the only one to have a significant influence on Luther's career. A little background information, however, will be helpful in understanding the effect of the Durban IAHR meeting in 2000. In the late 1980s and early 1990s Tom Lawson "abandoned" religious studies organizations (like the AAR) for more credible intellectual conversation partners in philosophy, evolutionary theory, and psychology. Together with his student Robert McCauley, they brought evolutionary psychology and the cognitive sciences to bear on the search for explanations of religious thought and practice. Their volume, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting the Cognitive and the Cultural* (1990),[15] brought serious attention to the role of theory in the study of religion. They also involved Justin Barrett, a young experimental psychologist, in their work because of the importance of testing their theories against empirical and experimental data. Collegial discussion and debate with Harvey Whitehouse, then in Belfast, who was working on similar problems in his anthropological work on religion(s) led to presentations on what has come to be called the "COGSCI of religion" at the Eighteenth Congress of the IAHR held in Durban, South Africa in 2000. Luther's presence at this IAHR Congress became another turning point, so to speak, in his academic career. He had been invited by Whitehouse and the others to become part of the COGSCI enterprise by bringing to their attention historical data essential for testing their anthropological and psychological theories – complementing the work of Justin Barrett's experimental contributions. Luther, however, did not simply keep COGSCI of religion researchers apprised of this principle, but took up a COGSCI approach, considering it an important addition to his own historical research. On this, he happily quotes his "friend" Morris Zapp as saying: "I don't need any more data. What I need is a theory to explain it all."[16] Luther's early papers applying cognitive science methodologies to the study of religion include studies of syncretism, prayer, and cognitive historiography in 2004,[17] an overview of "religion and cog-

15 E. Thomas Lawson – Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting the Cognitive and the Cultural*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990.

16 D. Lodge, *Small World…*, 24.

17 Luther H. Martin – Anita Maria Leopold, "New Approaches to the Study of Syncretisim", in: Peter Antes – Armin Geertz – Randi R. Warne (eds.), *New Approaches to the Study of Religion* II: *Textual, Comparative, Sociological, and Cognitive Approaches*, Berlin – New York: Walter de Gruyter 2004, 93-107; Luther H. Martin, "Petitionary Prayer: Cognitive Considerations", in: Brigitte Luchesi – Kocku von Stuckrad (eds.), *Religion in Cultural Discourse: Essays in Honour of Hans G. Kippenberg on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, (Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 52), Berlin – New York: Walter de Gruyter 2004, 115-126, and id., "Towards a Cognitive Historiography of Religions", in: Christoph Kleine – Monika Schrimpf – Katja Triplette (eds.), *On the Road: New Paths in the Study of Religions: Festschrift in Honour of Michael Pye*, München: Biblion 2004, 75-82.

nition" in 2005,[18] and an essay in 2008 on the uses and abuses of the cognitive sciences in the study of religion.[19] He, along with a few other scholars, has also applied the cognitive sciences extensively in the study of Mithraism, which seems to have added a new vitality to that sub-field.[20]

In addition to his own COGSCI studies of religious thought and practice, Luther again became involved in political action by working to give stability to such study by providing it an institutional home. This became particularly important for him as he saw the North American Association for the Study of Religion drifting away from the scientific objectives for which it was originally founded. Luther was particularly insistent that COGSCI of religion researchers and scholars create an association focused entirely on this scientific approach to the study of religion, one that would be exemplary for the field, and he was instrumental in the creation of the International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion, which was founded in 2006. Luther served the Association as President Elect from 2006 to 2008, President from 2008 to 2010, and Past President in 2010-2012. He was also active in the founding of both the *Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion* and the *Journal of Cognitive Historiography*, for which he served as editor for a short period of time.

Though Luther retired from UVM in 2010, he did not retire from other institutional obligations to the societies and associations to which he still belongs. His association with the IAHR again came to play a significant role in his academic career from 2008 to 2010. Luther agreed to become the Chair of the Academic Program Committee for the Twentieth Congress of the IAHR which was held in Toronto in 2010. His use of cognitive theory to complement his own historiographical study of Greco-Roman

18 Luther H. Martin, "Religion and Cognition", in: John Hinnells (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, London: Routledge 2005, 473-488 (revised for 2nd edition, 2010, 526-542).

19 Luther H. Martin, "The Uses (and Abuses) of the Cognitive Sciences for the Study of Religion", *CSSR Bulletin* 37, 2008, 95-98.

20 The books and essays referred to in this "story" do not adequately represent the range of Luther's scholarly productivity. Fortunately, his most important articles have been republished recently in two volumes, each with a helpful account for the essays selected. The first volume presents essays on general historical and scientific studies of religion (Luther H. Martin, *Deep History, Secular Theory: Historical and Scientific Studies of Religion*, Berlin: Walter de Guyter 2014); the essays in the second volume focus on historical and COGSCI approaches to the study of Mithraism (id., *The Mind of Mithraists: Historical and Cognitive Studies in the Roman Cult of Mithras,* London: Bloomsbury Academic 2015). A third volume of Luther's collected essays is forthcoming under the editorship of Panayotis Pachis (Panayotis Pachis [ed.], *Studies in Hellenistic Religions: Essays by Luther Martin*, Eugene Oregon: Cascade Books, forthcoming in 2017). Luther's *Introduction* (Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction*, New York: Oxford University Press 1987) is still of great value and remains in print with Oxford University Press.

religions from the IAHR Congress in Durban ten years earlier convinced him that the IAHR program in Toronto should give serious attention to this clearly scientific approach in the study of religion without displacing any of the traditional history of religions approaches of the past. He was insistent as Chair, however, that papers still based on religio-philosophical issues, or concerned with politico-religious issues, be politely refused a place in the program. It is still a delight for him to hear from time to time that the Toronto IAHR Congress was "too scientific," or "the most scientific" of all the IAHR world congresses. In recognition of his many contributions to the field of religious studies the IAHR awarded Luther Honorary Life Membership of the IAHR in 2010.

Luther's CV does not fully document his contributions to shaping the field. I have worked closely with Luther for more than thirty years, and what has impressed me repeatedly has been the time and energy he has given to assist others – particularly younger scholars – in their research projects and careers, both in welcoming them as visiting scholars or inviting them to spend their sabbaticals at UVM, writing letters of support for their grant proposals and job interviews, or conducting seminars for graduate students at institutions other than his own. In this regard, the "Luther Effect" on the field, I believe, significantly complements his other contributions to the scientific study of religion.

It is not inappropriate here, I think, to provide testimony to the "Luther Effect" on my own work. His complaints about the failure of philosophers in general – and me in particular – to deal with "real stuff" rather than wasting time on analytical quibbles or airy metaphysics was not entirely off the mark. His constant insistence, moreover, that I attend virtually every conference to which he was invited introduced me to more "real stuff" to which I began to give serious attention. Just one example will have to suffice here: Luther was instrumental in having me invited to participate in a small workshop on "The Ecology of Threat Detection and Precaution" held at Tilodi Wilderness Lodge in Leerpoort, South Africa, organized by Dr. Joel Mort. I appreciated the invitation and enjoyed the conversations with the evolutionary psychologist, animal behaviourist, computer modeler, and other scholars of religions there but was quite aware that I was out of my depth and far away from my usual academic activities. When it was announced that each member of the workshop was expected to publish a paper on the workshop topic within a year, it was clear to me that I would be morally bound to repay the funding agency that covered my expenses to attend this event. Luther wasn't phased by my displeasure about being required to write and kept pushing me to find a way to make a contribution to the published results of the workshop. Having received a pre-print copy of a paper focused on the impact of para-

sites and pathogens on human existence, Luther suggested that I research the issue and write a paper on the influence of pathogens on religions – what he later referred to as my "bug paper". Without his irritating persistence I would not have read that pre-print, followed it up with more research, or written the paper "Pseudo-Speciation of the Human Race: Religions as Hazard-Precaution Systems".[21] What started out with Luther being a big pain-in-the-neck, ultimately resulted in an extension of the boundaries of my research interests and a minor contribution to the discussion of the origins of religion. I admit that I am still essentially a philosopher at heart but am grateful to Luther's persistence in moving me into new modes of thought and taking seriously the "stuff" we study.

Every so often Luther claims that he has nothing more to contribute to the project of securing the scientific study of religion in our modern university departments, or to understanding and explaining religious thought and practice. Don't believe it. Despite the claim, Luther continues to produce critical studies of religious phenomena, travels the world to contribute to the discussion of these matters at conferences and congresses, seeks new theoretical avenues that might be beneficial to the study of religion (such as network theory, for example – and herein lies another story that could be told, but not here), edits or co-edits books in the field such as the Bloomsbury series on "enquiry and explanation" in the study of religion, and continues to encourage and assist young scholars (and older recalcitrant ones) in the field to make the most of their talents and opportunities. Given the influence Luther – as scholar, author, academic politician, editor, teacher, friend, and mentor – has had on the field of what we used to call "religious studies", talk about the "Luther Effect" on our field is appropriately descriptive of his decades-long contribution to it.

21 Donald Wiebe, "Pseudo-Speciation of the Human Race: Religions as Hazard-Precaution Systems", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 25/4-5, 2013, 410-430.