Waardenburg, Jacques

The emergence of science of religion : explanatory theory and hermeneutics

Religio. 1997, vol. 5, iss. 2, pp. [107]-116

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Religio V / 1997 / 2 / Studie

The Emergence of Science of Religion: Explanatory Theory and Hermeneutics *

Jacques Waardenburg

1. Issues at the beginnings

The emergence of *Religionswissenschaft* did not come from heaven but from earth. It had been preceded nearly everywhere by intense debates about its scholarly nature and the appropriateness of formally recognizing and introducing it. In Roman Catholic countries, the Church clearly resisted it. Its introduction to state institutions came about thanks to more liberal thinkers and favorable political constellations. In Protestant countries it met the resistance of the orthodoxies and could only be introduced thanks to some cultivated people and Protestant theologians who saw it as an asset for Christian theology. In Orthodox countries, which had scarcely known the Western European Enlightenment, it simply was not introduced. On the other hand, there was a scattered interest among Jewish intellectuals in the non-religious, objective scholarly study of religions, although their chances of being appointed to the newly established chairs were minimal.

Religionswissenschaft was accepted as a discipline precisely at a time that religion had become subject of intense debates of which at least three aspects deserve mentioning:

(1) There was an ongoing debate about the truth or untruth of religion, and about the question of whether it represented a positive value or was fundamentally something to be rejected. In the course of the 19th century, a coherent criticism of religion developed not only among intellectuals but also on a more popular level. In those debates, different parties had very different ideas, representations and feelings of what was actually meant by the term „religion", something that added to the confusion.

(2) The question of the true nature or „essence" of religion occupied the minds and this was closely linked to the problem of the causes or „origin" of religion. This led to intense debates on the question of whether religion could be explained out of non-religious and even material causes. Again,

---

* This lecture was delivered on 12 May 1997 at the Institute for the Study of Religions, Masaryk University, Brno, sponsored also by the Czech Society for the Study of Religions. The stay of the author at the Masaryk University, Brno, was realized thanks to the kind support of the Open Society Fund (Higher Education Support Program, grant no. HC11/96).

people differed on what they understood to be religion, but the question was clear: could religion be explained scientifically or not? Those scholars who believed so were accused by their opponents of neglecting possible „transcendental" explanations of religious life. They could also be corrected in so far as they presented a world view or an explanatory theoretical model based on conviction, instead of proving conclusively a causal relationship between religious and non-religious realities.

(3) In their context the two aforementioned questions came down to the problem of which attitude to take *vis-à-vis* the existing forms of Western Christianity. Should one accept, reject, reform or reinterpret it altogether? Here again opinions differed widely about what Western Christianity was held to be, and whether one identified with it as a faith and religion, or as a cultural heritage and civilization. Many of the scholars who advocated the study of religion were themselves liberals or humanists, agnostics or radical secularists who were critical towards Christianity as they had experienced it, and to Christian theology whether they had studied it or not. Scholars probably held many presuppositions in common but did not necessarily express them; they could unite in a scholarly discourse on religious matters that remained restricted to empirical facts.

2. Construction

The difficulty with the emergence of science of religion was the elusive nature of its subject, apart from given texts, facts and artifacts. There is reason to speak of a certain construction, the „making" of the object of the new discipline. Masses of materials of all kinds could be assembled from all parts of the world, and all had to do with religion. Now the problem is how the religions of peoples from past and present could be reconstructed or constructed out of these materials. What was selected from these materials? Which questions were asked? How did scholars interpret these materials in order to find a „religion" in them?

The question is all the more interesting since not only the religions of other peoples had to be discovered, reconstructed or constructed, but also the new discipline itself was in process of construction. It was, fundamentally, a Western way of putting Western questions in order to discover in non-Western societies something that in Western technical language could be called „religion". This means, strictly speaking, that religions in other cultures and civilizations were focused on only in so far as Western researches recognized „religion" in them. In this sense, together with the making of *Religionswissenschaft*, there was the making of religion! Consequently, non-Western religions only turned up insofar as they corresponded with what researches at the time saw, were able to see or wanted to see in them, and, in the worst case wanted them to be or to become. Thus, on logical

grounds there is a fair chance that Western researches have not well understood religious as well as other expressions of other peoples, not only through those historical texts which have come down to us but also through contemporary accounts of eyewitnesses who did not quite understand what they saw or heard. And if one tends towards scepticism, one may even surmise that a systematically constructed Western *Religionswissenschaft* could be an impediment to perceive religious expressions in other cultures correctly, since it tended to make Western constructions of them. A study of religion which allows for methodological variety and theoretical flexibility simply might offer perhaps the best conditions to perceive how other peoples live with their religions.

3. Varieties in empirical research on religion

The beginnings of the scholarly study of religion were less empirically minded than we would be inclined to think today. If we take „empirical" research to be based on facts but with a constructive use of reason, it stands over against „speculative" thought as represented by philosophy and theology at the time and over against subjective attitudes and ideas on the part of the scholar that impinged on the demand of objectivity imposed on scholarly work. Empirical facts were to be studied in a strictly empirical framework. So it was said that facts are to be recognized as facts and that empirical research is precisely factual research. Consequently, literature was studied as texts „which speak for themselves", history was investigated in terms of „historical reality", the study of society had to start with that of „social facts" and the study of the human being had to be carried out according to what he or she is „in fact". Evidently, a problem in the empirical study of religion is that religion itself is perhaps more than the factual reality that can be grasped by empirical research. Even the most empirically minded comparisons between religious data – whether made for classificatory purposes, in view of discovering general rules, or in the search for overall explanations – have more than a strictly empirical bearing since they touch „religion" with its aspects – for the believers concerned – of truth (or untruth), meaning, sensitivity, emotions, and much more, „reducing" it to empirical factual reality.

I would like to contend that in empirical research on religious data certain scholarly extra-empirical schemes of interpretation are unavoidable, in hermeneutics as well as in explanatory theory. With regard to *religious data*, we see this already in the definition of empirical „religious data" and the way in which the difference between „religious" and „non-religious" or the possible relationships between both kinds of fact are envisaged. If the search for causes demands its part, the question is not only how real evidence of

borrowings and influences can be given but also how the religious aspects of such borrowings should be accounted for.

With regard to the *religious frameworks* within which the individual data are put, and which are in the believers' view the various religions, we again find the problem of definition of empirical „religion" and „religions". For instance, ideas about the features by which religious systems distinguish themselves from other regulative or normative systems as, for instance ideologies, or ideas about the very nature of religions are implied in the definitions given.

Extra-empirical *schemes of interpretation* have not only to do with religious data and religions, they also concern broader relationships. For the history of religions it makes a difference if history is seen in tearms of linear evolution or not. For the sociology of religion it is important whether present-day societies are interpreted in terms of rationalization/secularization or not. In comparative research it is important whether one assumes essences to exist behind groups of data that contain particular classes of facts, and whether one believes that recurrent combinations of different facts go back to deeper structures. And for any theoretical explanatory model it is important to know if there are different „levels" according to which reality is organized, or whether any distinction between „higher" and „lower" levels is rejected from the beginning.

4. Religion as a subject of empirical research

One of the most interesting features of the first decades of science of religion is that scholars seem to have thought that they knew what religion is. In fact this idea stemmed mostly from a personal conviction, whether religious or non-religious. Only later, for instance in the debate about definitions, this old certainty falls apart. In general scholars also took for granted that there is a real dichotomy if not opposition between science and religion; few of them seem to have realized that one of the effects of science of religion was that religion became rationalized. Scholars, by objectifying religion and thus taking a certain distance to it, implicitly put into doubt and contested current authorities on religious matters as well as current ideas about religious truth in their own societies. What seems to have escaped the attention of the earlier scholars is the simple fact that religion always is more than facts. The élan of science and scholarship at the time was discovering new facts; the scholarly tendency of the time equally was to explain and understand religion in terms of empirical facts.

The problem of what constituted the subject of study and investigation of the new science of religion has been present from the beginning and has never been solved by general agreement. The question, for instance, of how to distinguish the religious aspects from other aspects of empirical realities

imposed itself in the study of historical, social, cultural and political realities where the religious aspects are closely interwoven with other aspects of reality. Such questions were important for students of literature, historians and social scientists who encountered curious mixtures of ordinary texts, historical events and living societies with religious elements in their research. Current essentialist and other definitions of religion at the time were not very helpful, as the current schemes of interpretation of religion either as meaning-giving or as an illusionary reality were.

As a matter of fact, from the beginning science of religion had extrapolated religion to the extent that such intricate interplay fell practically outside its horizon. Among scholars the opinion prevailed that religion is some „thing" in itself: a metaphysical spiritual reality, a whole of particular beliefs and practices, a revelation believed in, a network of symbols and myths, an institutional setting, etc. This led for instance to the idea that certain cultures and societies were more „religious" than others, either because they were richer in religious symbols, myths and rites or because these societies were more critical to lived practices and were based on mystical or monotheistic norms. In all cases, however, the entity „religion" or „religious reality" was seen as opposed to „empirical reality"; both were seen as a particular kind of „things". This situation led to different kinds of discourse about religion among scholars, intellectuals and persons interested in the subject. One discourse developed on the basis of lived experience of people in or with religion. Another discourse was that of the theologians and had a more or less rigid normative character. Again, those subjecting religion for whatever reason to critical thinking had a completely different discourse.

Unavoidably, with the development of different approaches in the science of religion there arose various scholarly discourses about religion. The historical discourse tended to see the empirical reality of religions in the fact that they had historical consequences or became „historical" religions. In the sociological discourse the empirical reality of religion was seen in its social effects. The anthropological discourse saw the empirical reality of religions in the function or role they performed in cultures. And last not the least, the literary discourse saw the empirical reality of religions in religious texts, preferably Scriptures, which dealt with non-empirical realities and witnessed the truths and norms that had to be followed in empirical reality. But after some fifty years of science of religion, shortly after World War I the fundamental debate took shape, at least in Europe, about the question of whether the scholar should try to explain religion by non-religious causes (*erklären*) or whether he should try to understand religion in terms of religion itself (*verstehen*). Positing a nearly absolute dichotomy between these two tasks brought about a crisis in the construction of a unified science of religion as the founders of the discipline had conceived it. The hermeneutically

oriented scholars who wanted to study and understand religions from within, nearly in religious terms, were confronted by those colleagues who wanted to study and explain religions according to the same rules which govern the study of other, non-religious aspects of reality.

Before trying to sketch the bifurcation of these two approaches on a more theoretical level, it is appropriate to say something about those scholars who were not interested in theoretical issues as such. The majority of scholars working on religious data (texts and phenomena from history, antropology, sociology and psychology) seems to have been little moved by theoretical concerns like those on comparative research which we sketched earlier. As craftsmen they worked on the materials they had chosen to work on and their scholarship went in the direction of detailed investigation and ever increasing specialization, in order to acquire knowledge about things real. There was a large group of scholars who concentrated on descriptive work, making surveys or classifying facts like books in a library, and were less concerned with exploring and putting questions to striking facts. Such descriptive practice was not necessarily linked to a particular theory but could be useful for the formation of any theory. This group of scholars may be called the „surveyors" of the field. Needless to say, we will also leave out all those philosophers, theologians and scholars obsessed by their own particular theories, who interpreted selected facts in the light of their concerns, and did not give heed to other facts which would not be useful for or even contradict their theories.

Our interest here, in short, is the rise of theoretical thought in the first decades of the science of religion. Such theoretical thought apparently was nourished by at least two basic theoretical schemes which led to different interpretations of religious data and religion and, consequently, to different ways of studying it. These may be called explanatory theory and hermeneutics respectively.

5. Explanatory theory

In order to make reality understandable and to explain it, one develops a scholarly theory about it and applies this theory as a general model to given facts. This way of studying had given rise to the great scientific discoveries of the 17th-19th centuries which could claim objective general validity. This approach was particularly promising for the study of religion, a kind of study which otherwise was at risk of becoming completely conditioned by the personal stands or positions of individual scholars or by current interests of scholarly and religious institutions (like churches) with regard to religion. In the search for an objective, generally valid study of religion one has to break up religious data into empirical facts and bring to light objective relationships that exist between such facts, apart from the subjective

opinions of the researcher. In fact, the researcher as a person would not play a significant role in research and any general theory would be developed apart from subjective preferences of particular scholars. In this way the broader scholarly explanatory theories were developed in the first fifty years of the discipline. As we know, they tried to explain religion out of nature (nature of the human being, or the human being's dealings with nature around him or her), out of society (laws of society and culture making for its survival, the specific role of religion thereby), or out of the human psyche (internal laws of the psyche, the role of religion as providing an answer to psychological needs). In all these cases, theory is developed about a certain sector of reality (nature, society, psyche) which is not primarily religious, and the theory in question could explain the occurrence of religion in this sector, either in general or under particular conditions. Religion is then looked at from the point of view of this theory. The virtue of explanatory theory is its thorough objectivity once it has been proved to be true, and the developement of a model that is independent of the person of the scholar. Unfortunately, such theories have been used not only for scholarly purposes. They could serve criticism of religion of various kinds and be used ideologically by movements seeing religion as an obstacle to progress.

6. Hermeneutics

In order to lay bare the meaning of religious texts for practical applications in law, ethics and preaching, religious thinkers in the three monotheistic religions had already developed in the course of history certain rules in order to interpret such texts. These rules of interpretation constituted what may be called *religious* hermeneutics. Besides practical concerns, there were also philosophical concerns which led to different kinds of hermeneutics that were able to trace particular philosophical and even esoteric meanings of a given text.

On a scholarly level the problem changes. It becomes the problem of the meanings which a particular religious text – or any religious phenomenon - has had or has within a given cultural and religious tradition and for particular groups or persons within that tradition. In order to increase the objective character of the study of such meaning, research should be freed from subjective biases as given for instance by the excessive stress that can be laid on the experience of a particular person, such as in the case of G. van der Leeuw, or through the application of a largely pre-established meaning system, such as in the case of Mircea Eliade.

This scholarly „meaning research", as pursued in what I would call „applied" hermeneutics, can be extended from the history of the exegesis of particular Scriptural texts to the history of interpretation of other religious phenomena like myths, symbols, rites and ethic as well. It can even be

opened up to wider subjects such as the interpretations which have been given by adherents to their Scripture as a whole or to particular selections from it. It can also be applied to the interpretations given by adherents to the nature and history of their community and its people, or to the nature of the world in which they live and of the other communities or peoples amongst which they live. It is particulary fruitful in the study of contemporary religions and religion. This „applied" hermeneutic approach, in which the central question is *what is meaningful to other people*, arose after the first emergence of the science of religion itself. This happened over against more or less arbitrary ideas about religion, such as those that showed up in more or less scholarly and unscholarly discourses about religion at the time. Here, the meanings which particular religious data or even wholesale religions had or have for their adherents or for particular groups of adherents, was stressed. Efforts were made to develop research techniques that would be able to explore such meanings and hermeneutic, semantic and other theories were developed as to the construction, perception and transmission of meaning. The virtue of this approach was that it paid attention to religious data that turned out to be or to have been particularly meaningful to specific groups of people. Unfortunately, this approach has been used not only for scholarly purposes. It could be put in the service of certain apologetics of religion in general or Christianity in particular. Politically, it could be used by certain conservative movements or establishments eager to use religious arguments to support their particular claims.

Looking back, it appears to have been unfortunate that the two major theoretical approaches which were introduced in the science of religion by the end of the last century and which used the explanatory and the hermeneutic model respectively, broke apart around the time of World War I. The exaggerated claims of certain „hermeneutical" scholars to have direct scholarly access to religious realities are in part responsible for it. They were made, however, in response to exclusivist scientific claims by the other side which, consequently, bears part of the responsibility as well.

7. Conclusion

First we described some of the issues at stake when the science of religion as an empirical, non-normative discipline was established in the 1870's. We then elaborated on the paradox that the empirical study of religion, in so far as it is more than empirical fact finding, does not contain only empirical elements. As becomes evident in the discussions about science of religion already before its establishment, the problem of the right definition of „religious", „religion" and „religions" could not be solved by empirical means alone. This showed the need for theoretical thought and sound epistemology. This need could not be fulfilled by the theological or philo-

sophical positions taken by scholars individually. Such positions did not offer scholarly solutions properly; in fact they delayed arriving at such solutions and tended to compromise the scholarly nature and validity of these studies.

Recognizing that the majority of scholars were working on fact finding and the detailed analysis of religious data, or that they were engaged in descriptive and survey work, we drew attention to the relatively few scholars at the time who were aware of methodological problems in science of religion on a fundamental level. This meant paying attention to the beginnings of more theoretically oriented thinking in the study of religion during the first fifty years. We then distinguished two main lines of developement, those of explanatory theory and of hermeneutics respectively. It turns out that several scholars could not be subsumed under one or the other line, but that their research as well as their theoretical thought shows elements of both lines. This leads us to think at least that they were not necessarily mutually exclusive. In the course of the 20th century, the scholarly study of religion started to develop on a theoretical level in terms of the two lines described. In due course, there developed especially in Germany a certain dualism between the two approaches to the point that they were perceived as antagonistic and mutually exclusive. On closer consideration, however, such opposition and even antagonism between both approaches seems to have been caused less by scholarly than by ideological and institutional interests. We think of the ongoing debate about the nature and value or unvalue of religion in general, which seems to have lost its acumen since the 1970's. And we think of the defense of ancient privileges which theology as a normative Church discipline enjoyed at universities and other institutions of learning at the time.

The said antagonism between the two approaches mentioned cannot be called the result of an impartial scholarly search for truth. On the contrary, just as there are in empirical research no stricly empirical definitions of the subject matter of science of religion, there are no explanatory models without some elements of meaning research. And the other way round, there is no applied hermeneutics without certain elements of explanation. In science of religion this only seems to be recognized about a century after its emergence, at the time that ideological and institutional interests do no longer interfere in the free development of scholarly research. But, I may be too optimistic.

RESUMÉ

Vznik religionistiky. Explanační teorie a hermeneutika

Empirický charakter religionistiky je zdůrazňován od jejího počátku. Výzkum se soustřeďoval na historickou skutečnost, empirická náboženská fakta a sociální kontext, v němž se náboženství vyvíjela. Přednáška se zaměřuje na způsoby, jimiž byla mladá religionistika konstruována a jimiž byla stejně tak konstruována různá náboženství jako předmět výzkumu včetně obecného pojmu náboženství. V průběhu 20. století se vyvinuly dva hlavní směry výzkumu: explanační teorie a (aplikovaná) hermeneutika. Autor hájí stanovisko, že tyto dva směry nejsou navzájem antagonistické nebo exkluzívní. Oba by měly být využity k dosažení skutečného poznání a porozumění.

Université de Lausanne
BFSH 2, CH-1015 Lausanne
Switzerland

JACQUES WAARDENBURG