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Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion

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The title of our paper might well be taken as a gloss on that of Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* or, perhaps, on that of Dawkins' *The God Delusion*. However, our paper is not focused on the theoretical object of the study of religion; rather it is a reflective comment on our own aspirations for the field to which we have committed our careers.

The historical record, we maintain, shows that no undergraduate departments of Religious Studies have fully implemented a *scientific* program of study and research since such an approach was first advocated in the late nineteenth century – much less has there been any broad establishment of such a disciplinary field of study. And we argue – on scientific grounds – that such study is not ever likely to occur in that or any other setting. In our judgment, therefore, to entertain a hope that such a development is, pragmatically speaking, possible, is to be in the grip of a false and unshakeable delusion. And we “confess” that we ourselves have been so deluded.

Assumptions

Our argument rests on several assumptions which we hold to have an initial plausibility and are defensible even though we will not present arguments in defense of them here. Our *first assumption* is that the modern western research university is a purpose-designed institution for obtaining knowledge about the world. The pursuit of this knowledge is successful only when it is not in service of ideological, theological and religious agendas. Rather, its primary objective is scientific, that is, to gain public (intersubjectively available) knowledge of public (intersubjectively available) facts. Our *second assumption* is that the study of religion is the study of human behaviors that are engaged in because of, or somehow related to, a belief in agents that are beyond identification by way of the senses or

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scientific metric. Our *third assumption* is that religions are intersubjectively available for analysis and that, as Max Weber put it, no incalculable forces need come into play in explaining these phenomena.¹ In other words, a scientifically respectable knowledge of religion and religions is logically possible. Our *fourth assumption* is that the current anti-theoretical and anti-science posturings of postmodernism have not undermined the credibility of modern science as a peculiarly successful instrument of inquiry into the character of the world, either natural or social. Our *fifth and final assumption* is that comprehensive scientific study of religion is not likely to be achieved by scattered scientific studies of one or another aspect of religious thought and behavior by those individual scholars who are committed to scientific research on religious thought and behavior.

The Historical Argument

It seems to us beyond question that what has come to be known as Religious Studies – that is, a study of religions academically legitimated in separate departments in modern western research universities – is the product of a series of intellectual advances in European thought from the seventeenth through the twentieth century. These developments are already evident in the implicit critique of religion in Jean Bodin’s *Colloquium of the Seven about the Secrets of the Sublime* (1683), a dialogue among seven educated men representing various religions, confessions and philosophical schools of thought. By debating the fundamentals of religion, these seven disputants bring religion into doubt and suggest the need for tolerance, which, in turn, encouraged the “comparative” study of religions. Some fifty years after Bodin’s “interreligious dialogue”, a seven-volume work on *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of All the Peoples of the World* by Jean Frederic Bernard and illustrated by Bernard Picart (English edition 1733-1739) presented religions and their institutions as cultural practices, which helped make possible a secular understanding of religion. As historians of science Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt point out in their volume, *The Book that Changed Europe: Picart and Bernard’s Religious Ceremonies of the World*, Bernard’s and Picart’s treatment of religion “encouraged readers to distance themselves from religious orthodoxy of all kinds [to the extent that] [r]eligious belief and practice became an object of study for these men rather than an un-

1 Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation”, in: Max Weber – Hans Heinrich Gerth – Charles Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press 1981 (first published 1919).

questioned way of life”.² These publications constituted a major intellectual shift in the conceptualization of religion in Europe.

An even more important development for the re-conceptualization of religion was the reconstruction of the notion of reason itself in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This new mode of thought involved the dissociation of knowledge and virtue as essential components of reason and replaced it with the notion of reason as a non-moral instrument of inquiry that is equivalent to our contemporary understanding of scientific reasoning. This was an essential element of the European Enlightenment that contributed to a further re-conceptualization of religion by separating it from the power of the state. In his *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud*, Samuel Preus clearly shows that a new paradigm for the study of religion emerged out of Enlightenment rationality and its criticism of religion.³ More recently, Guy Stroumsa has pointed out in his *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* that these intellectual developments made possible a scholarly and scientific study of religion that predates the establishment of university departments for that purpose.⁴

It is, then, the new scientific ethos that made it possible for scholars in the mid- to late-nineteenth century to attempt an emancipation of the study of religion from religious constraints and to institutionalize a new, non-confessional and scientific approach to the study of religions. Their aim in doing so was clearly to distinguish knowledge *about* religion and religions from the devotional and the theological goals of religion that earlier held sway in Europe’s universities and other institutional settings. The founding figures in that development are generally recognized to be Friedrich Max Müller in England and Cornelis Petrus Tiele in the Netherlands. Müller first proposed the idea of a “science of religion” – a *Religionswissenschaft*,⁵ and Tiele seems to have been the first to have successfully ensconced such

2 Lynn Hunt – Margaret Jacob – Wijnand Mijnhardt, *The Book that Changed Europe: Picart and Bernard’s Religious Ceremonies of the World*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2010, 27.

3 Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1987.

4 Guy Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2010, 170, n. 13.

5 Friedrich Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1870; id., “Essays on the Science of Religion”, in: id., *Chips from a German Workshop I*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons 1881; id., “Science of Religion: A Retrospect”, *Living Age* 219, 1898, 909-913.

a discipline in a university setting on the basis of a clear demarcation of its intellectual activities from those of the scholar-devotee.⁶

In reviewing the subsequent history of this newly founded scientific enterprise, it is clear that by the middle of the twentieth century – and especially so after the 1960s with the accelerated development of departments of Religious Studies in Europe and North America – the scientific objectives of the new discipline had become seriously compromised by extra-scientific and non-epistemic agendas. As disappointing as this may be, it is, in hindsight, not altogether surprising given that the matrix out of which the field emerged was not simply the new intellectual ethos. Theological concerns with meaning and values persisted not only in society at large but also within institutions of higher education themselves, the successors of the medieval Christian university. While the modern research university opened its doors to Religious Studies, it did so by situating such study in, or connected with, pre-existing departments of theology where Religious Studies flourished as a liberalized form of *Glaubenswissenschaft*.

Modern research universities also established various faculties of humanities and other institutional structures charged, at least implicitly, with similarly inculcating values to undergraduates and providing them with structures of meaning. Departments of Religious Studies where faculties of theology did not previously exist – mostly in the US – were most often associated with those same “humanistic” objectives which they engaged by teaching what can only be characterized as “religion appreciation” courses.

Donald Wiebe first documented this crypto-religious trend in the growth and development of “Religious Studies” departments in the English-speaking world more than a quarter of a century ago in his article on “The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion”,⁷ and provided further evidence of the continuation of this state of affairs two decades ago in his *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict With Theology in the Modern University*.⁸ This assessment most recently finds strong confirmation in the material found in *Religious Studies: A Global View*, edited by Gregory Alles.⁹ The surveys of “Religious

6 Cornelius Petrus Tiele, *Elements of the Science of Religion I: Morphological*, Edinburgh: William Blackwood 1897; id., *Elements of the Science of Religion II: Ontological*, Edinburgh: William Blackwood 1897.

7 Donald Wiebe, “The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion”, *Studies in Religion* 13, 1984, 401-422, reprinted in: id., *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy*, New York: St. Martin’s Press 1991, 141-162.

8 D. Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies...*

9 Gregory Alles (ed.), *Religious Studies: A Global View*, London: Routledge 2007.

Studies” in this volume all reveal a continuing influence of theology on the field world-wide. It shows that in both a political and institutional sense, theology has been, and to a large extent remains, the matrix out of which the academic study of religion has emerged. Further, it shows that the academic study of religion remains subservient to theology, in however subtle or nuanced a fashion, by continuing to support a learned practice and/or appreciation of religion rather than by any scientific study of religion.

We recognize and emphatically acknowledge the increasing numbers of scholars engaged in a scientific study of religion as indicated, for example, by the large number of unsolicited scientific papers and panels submitted for presentation at the XXth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions in Toronto in 2010. And, there are a growing number of institutes and programs dedicated to such research, albeit primarily at the graduate and post-graduate level (often compromised, however, by funding from such religiously oriented sources like the John Templeton Foundation).¹⁰ However, there are depressingly few *departments* devoted to the study of religion from a naturalistic perspective – a handful at best – much less any fully committed to a scientific study of religion.

It is almost needless to say, therefore, that a history of the development of Religious Studies as a scientific enterprise in the modern university is an incoherent contradiction that reveals tensions between putative claims to academic status and the actual reality of continuing infiltrations of extra-scientific agendas into the field. And it is this incoherence that we hope to explain here.

The Scientific Argument

Despite our rather bleak history of the scientific study of religion, there have actually been a few notable attempts to establish such a study. In the mid-nineteenth century, a number of scholars of religion responded quite favorably to the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species* (1859).¹¹ Their initial attempts to understand the history of religions in an evolutionary framework, however, are to be differentiated from the misguided embrace of “social Darwinism”, primarily by anthropologists. The resulting collapse of evolutionary theory in religious studies created what historian of religion Svein Bjerke describes as a “nomothetic anxiety”, that

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

11 Luther H. Martin, “Evolution, Cognition, and History”, in: Luther H. Martin – Jesper Sørensen (eds.), *Past Minds: Studies in Cognitive Historiography*, London: Equinox 2011, 1-10.

is, the fear of moving beyond positive facts to generalization, which continues to characterize the field today.¹²

In the late nineteenth century, of course, an academic study of religion flourished in the context of comparative and scientific philology, a pursuit still profitably employed by textual scholars, though, perhaps, with decreasing theoretical consequence. In the mid-twentieth century, rational choice theory attracted a small following, though this approach, based on classic economic theory, has been challenged by behavioral economics, the implications of which, to our knowledge, have not been explored by scholars of religion. The promising field of behavioral economics builds, in turn, upon the insights of research in the cognitive sciences, which also offers the most promising contemporary opportunity for developing a theoretically coherent scientific study of religion. Interestingly, the approach of the cognitive sciences for the study of religion was already anticipated in 1909 by the Cambridge classicist Jane Harrison. Citing Darwin's expectations for the future of psychology, Harrison proposed an evolutionary history of religion that would focus on "the necessary acquirement of each mental capacity [for specific religious practices and ideas] by gradation".¹³ Her proposal for understanding religion as a suite of evolved behavioral features presciently articulated the agenda of contemporary evolutionary psychologists and cognitive scientists.

The cognitive sciences now offer an empirical, experimentally based, paradigm for the study of religion in both its comparative as well as in its historical domains (as of cultural phenomena generally). Ironically, however, it is the cognitive sciences which predict precisely the continuing situation we have described for the history of Religious Studies. To paraphrase Nicholas Humphrey's conclusion about reductionist theory generally, one of the strengths of cognitive research is that it can explain how the experience of religiousness adds to people's lives by convincing them that any alternative explanation must be false.¹⁴ In other words, religiousness will continue to constrain the academic study of religion even as it will continue to dominate the concerns of *Homo sapiens* generally. As epitomized in the title of Robert McCauley's new book, this is because

12 Svein Bjerke, "Ecology of Religion, Evolutionism and Comparative Religion", in: Lauri Honko (ed.), *Science of Religion: Studies in Methodology*, The Hague: Mouton 1979, 237-248: 242.

13 Jane E. Harrison, "The Influence of Darwinism on the Study of Religions", in: A. C. Seward (ed.), *Darwin and Modern Science: Essays in Commemoration of the Centenary of the Birth of Charles Darwin and of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Publication of the Origin of the Species*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1909, 494-511: 497.

14 Nicholas Humphrey, *Soul Dust: The Magic of Consciousness*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2011, 204.

“religion”, from an evolutionary and cognitive perspective, “is natural and science is not”.¹⁵ Only by noting the natural interests and anxieties of ordinary human beings can we begin to see the *raison d’être* for this state of affairs.

Most briefly, ordinary evolutionary and cognitive defaults of human brains have been identified by cognitive scientists as underlying their religious exploitation. These include, at their center, agent causality. Humans are very adept at identifying agency – and we do so pre-reflectively, often on the basis of minimal sensory stimuli. Thus, we are spontaneously startled by “bumps in the night”, by shadowy movement in dark and unfamiliar places, by vague and unfamiliar shapes, etc. Such reflexive responses, which presumably arose during the proverbial “environment of [our] evolutionary adaptedness”, endowed our species with a survival advantage – namely, a precautionary readiness to respond to predatory attack. Our evolutionary history has, in other words, endowed our species with a developmentally early proclivity for explaining our world in terms of agent causality. This history has resulted in a mental proclivity for inferring the presence of agents even where there are none, for example, the imaginary companions claimed by some 65% of children between the ages of 2 and 8 world-wide,¹⁶ the cross-cultural and trans-temporal ubiquity of ghosts, the populations of “little people” universally reported in folklore, as well as the claims to spirits and deities documented globally by historians of religion.¹⁷ And, of course, our default human penchant for agent causality motivates an understanding of religious traditions in terms of a quest for the actions and “authentic” teachings of reconstructed phantom founders.

Versions of agent causality, we suggest, continue to inform not just the study of religion, but humanistic and social “scientific” study generally – for example, by invoking intentionality, a primary attribute of agency, to explain and understand textual productions or behavioral motivation.¹⁸ And associated with intentionality, of course, are teleological inferences of

15 Robert McCauley, *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not*, New York: Oxford University Press 2011. Cf. id., “The Naturalness of Religion and the Unnaturalness of Science”, in Frank C. Keil – Robert A. Wilson (eds.), *Explanation and Cognition*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2000, 61-85.

16 Marjorie Taylor, *Imaginary Companions and the Children Who Create Them*, New York: Oxford University Press 1999, 32, 156; Marjorie Taylor – Stephanie M. Carlson – Bayta L. Maring – Lynn Gerow – Carolyn M. Charley, “The Characteristics and Correlates of Fantasy in School-Age Children: Imaginary Companions, Impersonation, and Social Understanding”, *Developmental Psychology* 40/6, 2004, 1173-1187.

17 Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*, New York: Oxford University Press 1993.

18 Andrew Shryock – Daniel Lord Smail, *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2011, 8-11.

purpose or meaning, another developmentally early cognitive default that has been identified for our species.¹⁹ Despite advances in scientific knowledge, which are characterized by the replacement of agent causality with natural causality, most people – including scientists and scholars – nevertheless still tend to fall back on agent causality to make everyday sense of the world. For example, various surveys indicate that some 40% of Americans reject the scientific theory of evolution with its mechanism of natural selection in favor of some form of creationism,²⁰ although in Europe only some 20% do so²¹ – a more reasonable but still significant number.

Such naturalistic reversions to psychic “instincts” contribute a theoretical dimension to our understanding about why Weber’s prediction of religion’s deflation under conditions of modernization has largely failed to materialize. And, these atavistic inferences from those ordinary cognitive defaults exploited by religions offer an explanation for the large number of otherwise very intelligent people – including leading scientists – who persist in retaining and expressing rather naïve religious beliefs even while successfully cultivating their own circumscribed craft. As Humphrey insightfully concludes, “[w]hat [really] matters is psychological impact, not philosophical rectitude. And, psychologically, the result is that [we all] ... inhabit an enchanted world”.²² We can refer here to those scientists and scholars who seem obliged to offer the public their still enchanted views of religion,²³ or otherwise beguiling sentiments about the meaning of life, typically in the final chapter of their specialized studies – but that’s a story for another time.

Our species’ anti-science proclivity is as true of professional scholars of religion as of other intellectuals, perhaps especially so, given their subject of study. For such scholars are as susceptible as are specialists in other fields to cognitively default understandings of religiosity, and have spent

19 Deborah Kelemen, “Are Children Intuitive Theists?”, *Psychological Science* 15/5, 2004, 295-301; Paul Bloom, “Is God an Accident?”, *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 2005, <<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/12/is-god-an-accident/4425/>> [4 May 2012].

20 E.g., Doug Mataconis, “40% Of Americans, Majority Of Republicans, Reject Evolution”, <<http://www.outsidethebeltway.com/40-of-americans-majority-of-republicans-reject-evolution/>> [4 May 2012]; “Despite Media Insistence, Many Americans Reject Evolution”, <<http://www.opposingviews.com/i/despite-media-insistence-many-americans-reject-evolution/>> [4 May 2012].

21 E.g., James Owen, “Evolution Less Accepted in U.S. Than Other Western Countries, Study Finds”, <<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/08/060810-evolution.html>> [4 May 2012].

22 N. Humphrey, *Soul Dust...*, 177, see also 202.

23 Luther H. Martin, “‘Disenchanting’ the Comparative Study of Religion”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 16, 2004, 36-44.

their lives in the study of religion under the influence of what we might term an “approbation bias”, that is, a positive – even apologetic – evaluation of religion.²⁴ This bias, which explains the teaching of religion as “appreciation courses”, exemplifies a “theory shyness” identified for Religious Studies already by Hans Penner and Edward Yonan some forty years ago in their article, “Is a Science of Religion Possible?”²⁵ In no other department of the modern university do researchers systematically avoid critical studies and theoretically based explanations of their subject of study (except, of course, in the study of literature – at least in North America). In the face of such cognitive defaults and the reflexive responses they prefigure, having the mind of a scientist requires a reflective resolve to do so – and considerable effort explicitly to cultivate the cognitive, social, and material conditions necessary to actively maintain that resolve.

Conclusion

We conclude with a close paraphrase of Dan Sperber’s and Deidre Wilson’s critique of the semiotic program, which, we consider, applies aptly to Religious Studies as well. Like semiotics, the history of Religious Studies has been one of simultaneous institutional success and intellectual bankruptcy. On the one hand, there are now numerous departments, institutes, associations, congresses and journals dedicated to Religious Studies. On the other hand, the academic study of religion has failed to live up to earlier promises of theoretical coherence and scientific integrity; indeed, such promises have been severely undermined. This is not to deny that many in the field have done valuable empirical work, and are increasingly doing so. However, it does not follow that “Religious Studies” *as a field* has been productive, let alone theoretically sound; merely that it has not been entirely sterile.²⁶

Three decades ago, after reviewing the literature in the field, Wiebe concluded that “all the signs point in the direction of future research in the field of religious studies being increasingly theoretical, and, concomitantly, increasingly fruitful”,²⁷ a conclusion, with which Martin also agreed at

24 Luther H. Martin, “The Uses (and Abuse) of the Cognitive Sciences for the Study of Religion”, *CSSR Bulletin* 37, 2008, 95-98.

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

26 This argument is adapted from Dan Sperber’s and Dierdre Wilson’s observations concerning the current state of semiotics: Dan Sperber – Dierdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Oxford: Blackwell ²1995, 7.

27 Donald Wiebe, “Theory in the Study of Religion”, *Religion* 13, 1983, 283-309: 305.

that time. We were wrong. We now understand that we were both deluded by our overly-optimistic but cognitively naïve expectations for the development of a truly scientific field for the study of religion in the context of a modern, research university. The cognitive sciences, the most promising approach to date for developing a coherent research paradigm for such a study, not only offers insight into the failure of any such development in the 150 year history of our field, despite initial resolves to the contrary, but affords us – Wiebe and Martin – an explanatory palliative for our persistent delusion about any possibilities for such a science.

SUMMARY

Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion

The historical record shows that no undergraduate departments of Religious Studies have fully implemented a scientific program of study and research since such an approach was first advocated in the late nineteenth century – much less has there been any broad establishment of such a disciplinary field of study. And we argue – on cognitive- and neuro-scientific grounds – that such study is not ever likely to occur in that or any other setting. In our judgment, therefore, to entertain a hope that such a development is, pragmatically speaking, possible, is to be in the grip of a false and unshakeable delusion. And we “confess” that we ourselves have been so deluded.

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