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Religio. 2012, vol. 20, iss. 1, pp. [63]-72

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

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/125400>

Access Date: 20. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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Why the Possible is Not Impossible but is Unlikely: A Response to Our Colleagues

LUTHER H. MARTIN – DONALD WIEBE

We wish to thank the editors of *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* for their invitation to publish our reflections on the study of religion as we find it in most, if not all, modern research universities.¹ And, we are grateful to our colleagues in Europe for taking the time to critically review our work in this same issue of the journal. Despite our “confessed” frustration with our attempts to further a scientific study of religion, we appreciate the critical responses we have received with respect to our position. We hope that this conversation might make some contribution to “breaking the spell” of religion, theology, and other normative agendas and ideologies that constitute major constraints on our field of study. If we may be allowed to speak with a bit of irony, only the gods really know whether conversations like this might make it slightly more likely that the scientific approach to understanding and explaining religion might come to dominate our “religious studies” (and so-called *religionswissenschaftliche*) departments.

Our ironic comment may come as somewhat of a surprise to Hubert Seiwert, Kocku von Stuckrad, and Radek Kundt, all of whom seem to think that we have argued that a scientific study of religion is completely and wholly impossible. Although we made it very clear, both in the “assumptive” framework for our arguments and in the body of the paper itself, that a scientific study of religion is *indeed* possible, it may well benefit our conversation if we once again restate the core of our concern.

Radek Kundt claims that we offer a “pithy, provocative statement” of the essence of our argument,² when we claim that it is delusory to think that “Religious Studies” has ever achieved or can achieve a full emancipation from religious concerns. Note, however, that while we considered such an emancipation to be highly unlikely, we specifically acknowledged the *logical possibility* for such a study, precisely because of the reflective

1 Luther H. Martin – Donald Wiebe, “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, 9-18. All references in the text, unless otherwise noted, are to this article.

2 Radek Kundt, “A Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, 39-42: 39.

as well as reflexive capacities of human brains emphasized by Kundt but which he seems to think we neglect.³ We also emphasized the fact that there are many *individual* scholars in the field who study religion in such a scientific fashion as well some research centers which do so (p. 13). Thus, to reiterate, the primary object of our criticism was, and still is, the disciplinary units within the curricula of our modern western research universities that are dedicated to the study of religion (the so-called Religious Studies departments in the U.K., North America, and elsewhere in the world, as well as those that exist as departments of *Religionswissenschaft* in Europe). As we put it in our paper, the historical record “[s]hows 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” (p. 9).

We noted in our paper that our argument rests on several assumptions, which we considered to have at least some initial plausibility and which, consequently, we would not specify further. Nevertheless, we appreciate Hans Gerald Hödl’s concern that, despite that “initial plausibility”, there may be some “relevant topics that could be taken into consideration ... to further develop” our argument.⁴ We also appreciate Hödl’s recognition – and that by Hubert Seiwert and Kocku von Stuckrad – that our paper does not attempt to provide a comprehensive argument in support of our position and that, consequently, the reader should not expect to find every aspect of the problem we tackled to be fully elaborated. This disclaimer applies, of course, to this response as well.

Like us, Hödl accepts that scientific inquiry in itself is, at least ideally, “an unbiased undertaking”.⁵ Nevertheless, his concern with our first assumption concerning the purpose-designed character of the modern research university is that we fail to acknowledge that science can itself be invoked to support various ideologies.⁶ We are, of course, quite aware of this,⁷ but this is not the issue about science that is germane to our argument and so we leave it without further comment here.

Hödl’s concern with assumptions two and three regarding our claims that the study of religion concerns a “kind” of human behaviour, individual

3 *Ibid.*, 40-41.

4 Hans Gerald Hödl, “Is an Unbiased Science of Religion Impossible?”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, 19-26: 19.

5 *Ibid.*, 21.

6 *Ibid.*; cf. Kocku von Stuckrad, “Straw Men and Scientific Nostalgia: A Response to Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, 55-61: 57.

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

and collective, rather than some “reality” called religion that lies beyond the boundaries of empirical and theoretical study, amounts to a simplistic definition of religion in terms of supernatural agency only. So, for example, Hödl correctly notes that “‘ritual’ is a kind of umbrella term for various kinds of activity, which can, but does not have to, refer to ‘super-human beings’”.⁸ But, he asks, “[w]hat exactly is it that makes ritual activity, narratives about the origin of the world, doctrines, ethical systems and so on *religious* ones?”⁹ Precisely, we maintain, a legitimating appeal to the authority of superhuman agency.¹⁰ His alternative appeal to the use of metaphors and metonyms in the construction of religious worlds has, of course, also been explored by cognitivists.¹¹ However, Hödl’s espousal of Melford Spiro’s “definition” of religion, similar to ours, which hangs onto “culturally postulated super-human beings”,¹² should nevertheless make him relatively happy with the clear delineation we provide about the field of interest for students of religion.

Hödl’s criticism of our fourth assumption, which rejects postmodernism’s understanding of science as simply another historical form of discourse rather than as a superior epistemic route to knowledge, as being a mere rhetorical way of avoiding criticism¹³ is simply wrong. To provide argument for this assumption would have taken far more time and space than was available. Moreover, we have dealt with this matter at length elsewhere,¹⁴ and we defer further comment on it until we respond to von Stuckrad’s similar criticism.

8 H. G. Hödl, “Is an Unbiased Science...”, 22. Cf. Pascal Boyer – Pierre Liénhard, “Why Ritualized Behavior? Precaution Systems and Action Parsing in Developmental, Pathological and Cultural Rituals”, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 29, 2006, 595-650.

9 H. G. Hödl, “Is an Unbiased Science...”, 22.

10 The insertion of a role for superhuman agents into otherwise ordinary human practices is, of course, the governing thesis of E. Thomas Lawson – Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990. The volume is generally considered to have inaugurated the field of the cognitive science of religion.

11 E.g., Gerooge Lakoff – Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980.

12 H. G. Hödl, “Is an Unbiased Science...”, 23.

13 *Ibid.*, 20.

14 E.g., Donald Wiebe, “Dissolving Rationality: The Anti-Science Phenomenon and its Implications for the Study of Religion”, in: Jeppe S. Jensen – Luther H. Martin (eds.), *Rationality and the Study of Religion*, London: Routledge 2003, 167-183; id., “Appropriating Religion: Understanding Religion as an Object of Science”, in: Tor Ahlback (ed.), *Approaching Religion*, Åbo – Stockholm: Almquist and Wiksell International 1999, 253-272; id., “Modern Western Science and the Study of Religion: A Response to Richard King’s *Orientalism and Religion*”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religions* 14, 2002, 265-278.

In large part Hubert Seiwert is in agreement with our historical argument about the nature of the study of religion. He agrees that a scientific study of religion did emerge late in the nineteenth-century and that it subsequently became dominated by ideological concerns. However, Seiwert goes on to claim that the ideological character of the field was, and is, largely a North American phenomenon. He finds evidence for this in the fact that other social sciences in the university context have now picked up on the study of religion as of considerable interest and importance – but not, we would argue, because of any research findings produced by scholars of religion who are rarely cited by such social scientists, if at all. Further, he points to the importance that the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) has played in Europe to provide a context exclusively given over to the scientific study of religion (a context which he now sees as “under threat” by the recent admission to its membership of American Academy of Religion).¹⁵ Thus, he concludes that our historical argument does not show “that the Study of Religion *cannot* develop as a scientific discipline”,¹⁶ or that it is *impossible* for it to do so¹⁷ – a claim, as we noted above, that we do not make in our paper.

To claim that the ideological element in the study of religion is primarily a characteristic of North American institutions ignores the evidence. The studies commissioned by Gregory Alles for a volume on *Religious Studies: A Global View*,¹⁸ for example, provide sufficient evidence to undermine Seiwert’s claims in this regard as well as the contribution to that volume on “religious studies” in Western Europe by Michael Stausberg.¹⁹ Furthermore, to cite the IAHR as an example of the institutionalization of religious studies in the university is misdirected since it is not affiliated with any university and it should be noted that the IAHR has itself been continually forced to counter the influence of religion and theology in its endeavours.²⁰

15 Hubert Seiwert, “The Study of Religion as a Scientific Discipline: A Comment on Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, 27-38: 29-30.

16 *Ibid.*, 30 (emphasis added).

17 *Ibid.*, 31 (emphasis added).

18 Gregory Alles, *Religious Studies: A Global View*, London: Routledge 2008.

19 Michael Stausberg, “Western Europe”, in: Gregory Alles, *Religious Studies: A Global View*, London: Routledge 2008, 14-49. For further analysis of Stausberg’s argument, see Donald Wiebe, “Religious Studies: Toward Reestablishing the Field”, *Religion* 39/4, 2009, 372-375.

20 See the political and/or religious orientations of the IAHR program in Rosalind I. J. Hackett – Michael Pye (eds.), *IAHR World Congress Proceedings, Durban 2000: The History of Religions: Origins and Visions*, Cambridge: Roots and Branches 2009; also Brian Bocking (ed.), *IAHR World Congress Proceedings, Tokyo 2005: Religion and Society: An Agenda for the 21st Century*, Cambridge: Roots and Branches 2010; esp.

As for our scientific argument, Seiwert is wholly unconvinced because, according to him, (1) it is ideological in that it assumes an ontological naturalism that has not the slightest plausibility; (2) it is incoherent because it ignores the contributions of the social sciences and humanities and utterly fails to recognize, as do these disciplines, the importance of hermeneutics for any explanatory project; (3) it assumes religion to be a *sui generis* phenomenon; (4) it lacks a motivation for the study of religion; (5) it is internally incoherent; and (6) it is based on faulty assumptions.²¹

Seiwert's list of faults in our arguments is long and precludes detailed analysis and response here but they are, for the most part, based upon misunderstandings of our argument. It should first be noted, with respect to Seiwert's concerns about our commitment to science in general and the cognitive science of religion in particular, that we never even suggest, let alone claim, that "science can produce unquestionable knowledge about the world",²² or that it "can be taken as a gauge to measure the truth of religious beliefs".²³ We do not concern ourselves with "religious truth". Our focus is religious belief as it expresses itself in observable religious behaviours, trying to find out what motivates them and seeking both a proximate (historical, social, economic, political) as well as "ultimate" (cognitive/biological) explanation for those behaviours. We do not seek either to "appreciate" or "depreciate" religion, but rather to understand it (in a non-gnostic way,²⁴ that is, to describe it properly according to the available "empirical" evidence) and then to explain it.

Perhaps the most serious argument Seiwert raises against us is that we are naïve and uncritical in our assessment of the character of science and that we are, therefore, at "risk of transforming science into a metaphysical ideology that is unaware of its own epistemological limitations".²⁵ Seiwert's justification for this claim is that we are, so to speak, in thrall to an "ontological naturalism". It is difficult for us to respond to this claim because Seiwert provides no clear indication of what he means by this allusion. Indeed, he uses a proliferation of locutions with respect to the notion of naturalism without any indication of what the diversity of adjectives mean; the terms include "naïve naturalism", "methodological and ontological naturalism", a "fundamentalist version of naturalism" and, by

625-626; and Donald Wiebe (ed.), *Proceedings of the XXth World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions: Religion: A Human Phenomenon*, Toronto: An IASR Publication 2011, esp. 75, 90, 105-107.

21 H. Seiwert, "The Study of Religion as a Scientific Discipline: A Comment...", 30-33.

22 *Ibid.*, 35.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Donald Wiebe, "'Understanding' in Religious Studies: A Gnostic Aberration in the Modern Study of Religion", *Fu-Jen Religious Studies* 6, 2002, 15-56.

25 H. Seiwert, "The Study of Religion as a Scientific Discipline: A Comment...", 34.

implication, a metaphysical naturalism.²⁶ However, the assumptions we make in this essay clearly commits us only to a *methodological* naturalism. This commitment simply amounts to the acceptance of the value of knowledge for the sake of knowledge alone – a value that possesses what Ernest Gellner has called a diplomatic immunity from other cultural values,²⁷ and, as Max Weber put it, a refusal to invoke mysterious and incalculable forces in our explanations.²⁸ And this does not preclude invoking intentional language at the descriptive level of our enterprise. A proper description of our object of explanation – namely, human behaviour – will clearly require the use of intentional language but this does not preclude an explanation of intentionality at a different level of reality. What exists at one scale of reality, in other words, is built from material at a lower scale of reality. Consequently, Seiwert's claim that we reject "hermeneutics" and therefore ignore and exclude the descriptive work done by our colleagues in the social and humanistic sciences is simply misdirected.²⁹ Simply to jump into hermeneutical exercises without any intersubjective explanation of what is to be interpreted is, for us, a futile exercise in subjective fantasy.

A final comment on Seiwert's critique must suffice. Seiwert believes that our commitment to the cognitive science of religion somehow implies our adoption of a *sui generis* notion of religion.³⁰ We fail to see how this claim follows from our espousal of a cognitive science approach to religion, particularly since he acknowledges that our approach can explain why "most people are more inclined to understand the world religiously instead of scientifically".³¹

It appears to us that our "confession" has created more heat than light in Kocku von Stuckrad's critique of our arguments. Von Stuckrad reads our essay as a conversion story, a religious narrative by former theologians who have given up the faith for the new cult of the cognitive science of religion. He claims that the framing of our "biographical narrative in a genre of 'confession'" is indicative of a "mixture of religious and aca-

26 *Ibid.*, 31, 34.

27 Ernst Gellner, "The Savage and the Modern Mind", in: Robin Horton – Ruth Finnegan (eds.), *Modes of Thought: Essays on Thinking in Western and Non-Western Societies*, London: Faber 1973, 179-181.

28 Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation", in: Hans H. Gerth – C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press 1981, 139.

29 See, for example, the first chapter of E. T. Lawson – R. N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion...*, 12-31, in which the founders of the cognitive science of religion clearly emphasize a necessary relationship between interpretation and explanation.

30 H. Seiwert, "The Study of Religion as a Scientific Discipline: A Comment...", 30, 31, 32.

31 *Ibid.*, 31.

ademic language”.³² This rather curious claim would seem to indicate von Stuckrad’s own “discursive entanglements” more than ours. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, lists numerous meanings of “confession”, from its initial entries on general uses to its juridical ones. Specifically religious uses of the word are relegated to its penultimate entry (entry 8 and 9 of 10).

Von Stuckrad rejects our historical argument but, unlike Seiwert, he does so by making the historically inaccurate claim that *Religionswissenschaft* at the beginning of the twentieth century “was established as an academic discipline in philosophical – and not theological – faculties”.³³ Further, he maintains that if we were able to recognize the distinction between *Religious Studies* and *Religionswissenschaft* we would see that our empirical claim regarding undergraduate departments is simply wrong. However, von Stuckrad has not taken the historical evidence about these matters to heart and he fails to see that the difference in terminology does not somehow transform into counter-evidence the evidence documented in Alles’ “global view” of the academic study of religion in Europe, North America, and around the world. Contrary to von Stuckrad’s claim, therefore, it is not we who misrepresent scholarship in the field. What von Stuckrad fails to see is that the “history of religions” engaged by historians and philologists in the early development of the field of religious studies is not the “History of Religions” of their successors. The ahistorical, faith-imbued scholarship of phenomenologists like Gerardus van der Leeuw, Rudolph Otto, or Ninian Smart or of Historians of Religion like Mircea Eliade does not amount to a scientific study of religion. Von Stuckrad’s complaints about not taking seriously the importance of hermeneutics for our field and not taking seriously the work of scholars in the humanities also fail to hit their target for the same reasons we indicated in our response to Seiwert’s critique.

Again, like Seiwert, von Stuckrad insists that we overestimate the achievements of science (naturalism) just as we underestimate the achievements of the humanities and that we simply exhibit an “unreflective belief in science”.³⁴ According to von Stuckrad, “critical scholarship” (postmodern scholarship) has revealed the historicity of scientific knowledge, by which, we take it that he means that science is simply another form of discourse rather than a different, and epistemically superior, method for understanding and explaining the world. And we have, as a consequence, undertheorized relativism which is responsible for our overestimation of

32 K. von Stuckrad, “Straw Men...”, 55.

33 *Ibid.*, 56.

34 *Ibid.*, 57-58.

the epistemic value of science. To mount a fully-fledged argument against the claim that science is but another discourse among many is not something we could undertake in our original article nor is it possible to do so here. But this is no greater fault than is the failure on the part of both von Stuckrad and Seiwert to mount a fully-fledged argument in support of their critical stance with respect to science. Furthermore, we think that our assumption here has a greater degree of initial plausibility than does theirs. Consequently, we think it reasonable – not surprising – to seek for an account (explanation) of religious beliefs and behaviours that forms part of a causally integrated model of explanation that takes seriously all of the sciences, including the natural sciences.³⁵

Tomáš Bubík focuses on the continuing problem of the relationship of religion and theology to the study of religion specifically in Europe – Central and Eastern, as well as Western. Like Hödl, Seiwert, and von Stuckrad, he insists that European scholars clearly understand the differences between and among these disciplines. And like them, he is committed to undertaking *Religionswissenschaft* as a scientific enterprise. Also like them, he recognizes that *Religionswissenschaft* is susceptible to ideologization. However, unlike them, he (and Kundt) recognizes that such ideologization of the study of religion, including a pervasive religiousness, characterizes Europe as much as it does North America. Ironically, this judgement is by two scholars from a country that is considered to be one of the most secular in Europe. They are well positioned to recognize how the study of religion has been, and continues to be, used ideologically – to defend religion or scientific atheism, for example, or to defend existential/religious questions and quests for meaning.

Despite his general agreement with our argument, Bubík is less pessimistic than we are about future prospects for scientific study in the context of religious studies/*religionswissenschaftliche* departments. It appears that he thinks that only if we can generate more practical (social) value for scientifically credible knowledge, which such a study might produce, we will have improved the chances of ensuring that the scientific approach to religious studies will form the dominant framework in our undergraduate departments for the study of religion. Perhaps, but we remain skeptical.

Surprisingly, all of our respondents seem to have taken our historical and our scientific arguments as two distinct claims that might be separately accepted or questioned. Our intent, however, was that our scientific (i.e., cognitive) argument was offered in support of, and provided an ex-

35 John Tooby – Leda Cosmides, “The Psychological Foundations of Culture”, in: Jerome H. Barkow – Leda Cosmides – John Tooby (eds.), *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press 1992, 19-136.

planation for, our observations about the historical failure of any scientific paradigm becoming as “at home” in the study of religion as has historical description, phenomenological typologization, and/or the defence of cultural relativism – what we characterized as the aspects of “religion appreciation courses”. Consequently, we are pleased that Radek Kundt not only agrees with our basic assumptions, with our historical argument about the study of religion as well as with the importance of a cognitive science of religion. However, Kundt disagrees radically with what he understands to be an “extension” of our scientific argument, which we take to be our prognostications about the future for a scientific study of religion. He claims that, in effect, we neglect the human ability “to consciously process knowledge about how unconscious levels operate, trace those mechanisms, make them (or their results) explicit”.³⁶ Otherwise, he concludes, we “would have no way of knowing that optical illusions are illusions”.³⁷ While Kundt is absolutely correct about the capabilities of human brains, there are, of course, innumerable instances where people do *not* recognize optical illusions as illusions and there are numerous optical illusions that the visual system cannot recognize as illusory even though we know consciously, even scientifically, that they are illusions. We agree, consequently, with Kundt’s observation that “there is no special reason why scientists-religious scholars should tend to do bad science more than any other scientists”³⁸ – except historically, they have, and, we argue, they continue to do so. With apologies for the liberties we take with the title of von Stuckrad’s response to our paper, we have sought to offer some scientific explanation for the enduring weight of this historical reality rather than retaining any nostalgia for what we describe as the academic chaff of previous scholarship in the study of religion.

36 R. Kundt, “A Scientific Discipline...”, 40.

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*, 41.

SUMMARY

Why the Possible is Not Impossible but is Unlikely: A Response to Our Colleagues

This paper is a response to the responses to our paper “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion” by Hans Gerald Hödl, Hubert Seiwert, Radek Kundt, Tomáš Bubík, and Kocku von Stuckrad, published in this same issue of *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku*. Some of the respondents actually overstate our position. We have claimed, and still now claim, that a fully scientific program of “Religious Studies”, even if possible, is highly unlikely to ever be achieved.

Keywords: religious studies; religious concerns; history of the study of religion; cognitive science of religion.

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