Introduction to the Discussion

“Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: A Delusion?”

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The paper “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion” by Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe\(^1\) was originally presented at the tenth annual conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) held in Budapest, Hungary, from 18 to 22 September 2011. I am very happy that *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* can now publish a revised version of this paper, and wish to thank the editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* whose permission made this possible.

The paper by Martin and Wiebe makes the claim that a truly scientific study of religion “is not ever likely to occur”.\(^2\) Unlike various scholars discussing the “ideologization” of the study of religions, however, the authors do not seek the explanation of bias in individual or collective interests, but in evolutionary mechanisms. “[R]eligiousness,” they assert, “will continue to constrain the academic study of religion even as it will continue to dominate the concerns of *Homo sapiens* generally.”\(^3\) If some hope still remains,\(^4\) it is to be sought, according to the authors, in the cognitive science of religion.\(^5\)

*Religio* publishes five responses to this paper, as varied as the respective backgrounds of the different authors.

Hans Gerald Hödl (University of Vienna) deliberately focuses more on Martin and Wiebe’s assumptions than on their reasoning.\(^6\) Primarily, he discusses their view of science and the definition of religion they use, and argues that there are good reasons to prefer wider definitions of religion to those based on the concept of superhuman agency. Moreover, for Hödl,

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religious bias is only one among others in the study of religion,\(^7\) and a “clear demarcation line between object language and meta-language\(^8\)” is much more helpful in avoiding such bias than the realistic epistemology adopted by Martin and Wiebe.

Hubert Seiwert (University of Leipzig) develops an insightful reflection on the status of the academic study of religion and on its history. Even if he is not overly optimistic about the historical development of the discipline, the image he gives is somewhat different from Martin and Wiebe’s.\(^9\) Seiwert also argues that the problems facing the study of religion are unspecific, shared with other disciplines from the humanities,\(^10\) and that ontological naturalism does not offer a plausible solution to these problems.\(^11\)

Radek Kundt (Masaryk University) shares the main assumptions of Martin and Wiebe, their background in the cognitive science of religion, as well as their critical view of the discipline’s history and of constructivist epistemology. However, he questions the extension of their argument, and highlights the possibilities of conscious reasoning, which is capable of reducing the impact of unconscious evolutionary mechanisms.\(^12\)

Tomáš Bubík (University of Pardubice) frames his response by a brief review of the study of religions in central and eastern Europe, its relationship to theology, and the problem of the social relevance of the humanities. Like Hödl and Seiwert, Bubík points out yet other biases than the religious one, including for example anti-religious propaganda.\(^13\) On the other hand, he stresses that good work has been done in the study of religions by theologians and/or at theological faculties.\(^14\)

According to Kocku von Stuckrad (University of Groningen), Martin and Wiebe underestimate the academic rigor of many undertakings in the study of religions, and, at the same time, overestimate the rigor of naturalistic approaches, including the cognitive “science” of religion.\(^15\) In the

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7 Ibid., 24.
8 Ibid., 23.
10 Ibid., 30.
11 Ibid., 34.
14 Ibid., 45-46.
author’s words, Martin and Wiebe adopt “unreflective belief in science”,¹⁶ and they simplify the critique of realistic epistemology in 20th-century thought by reducing it to a merely “postmodernist” and anti-scientific stance.

Should the EASR conference in Budapest, where the paper by Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe was originally given, be indicative of the state of the discipline, we might assume that the philosophy of religion and a quasi-theological kind of phenomenology of religion are again making their way into the European study of religions. I still hope this is not the case, but a more active attitude will most likely be necessary if this development is to be halted. At the same time, a relatively new player, the cognitive science of religion, is more and more visible in the field, and engages in fierce conflicts with the humanistic tradition of the study of religions in its “evolutionary” struggle for life space and recognition. Therefore I believe that discussion about the standards which should be followed in the study of religions – if it is to be considered academic, or even scientific – has become highly topical once again.

¹⁶ Ibid., 58.
SUMMARY

Introduction to the Discussion “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: A Delusion?”

In this text, I introduce the special feature of *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: A Delusion?”. I briefly summarize the main argument of the original article “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion” by Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe, and those of the five responses by Hans Gerald Hödl, Hubert Seiwert, Radek Kundt, Tomáš Bubík, and Kocku von Stuckrad. At the end, I return to the EASR conference 2011 in Budapest, Hungary, where Martin and Wiebe’s paper was originally presented, and comment on this event.

**Keywords:** study of religions; religious studies; science; humanities; EASR conference 2011 in Budapest.
Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion

LUTHER H. MARTIN – DONALD WIEBE *

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

* This paper was first presented at the annual meeting of the European Association for the Study of Religions, Budapest, 22 September 2011. The editors of Religio: Revue pro religionistiku wish to thank the editor of the Journal of the American Academy of Religion for his kind permission to republish this article, which will appear in the Journal of the American Academy of Religion 80/2, 2012.
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. 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] religious belief and practice became an object of study for these men rather than an un-

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questioned way of life”.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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,\textsuperscript{5} and Tiele seems to have been the first to have successfully ensconced such


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 Studies: A Global View, London: Routledge 2007.

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

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

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“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

purpose or meaning, another developmentally early cognitive default that has been identified for our species.\textsuperscript{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,\textsuperscript{20} although in Europe only some 20% do so\textsuperscript{21} – 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”.\textsuperscript{22} We can refer here to those scientists and scholars who seem obliged to offer the public their still enchanted views of religion,\textsuperscript{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

\begin{itemize}
  \item 22 N. Humphrey, \textit{Soul Dust...}, 177, see also 202.
  \item 23 Luther H. Martin, “‘Disenchanting’ the Comparative Study of Religion”, \textit{Method and Theory in the Study of Religion} 16, 2004, 36-44.
\end{itemize}
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.\textsuperscript{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?”.\textsuperscript{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.

\textbf{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.\textsuperscript{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”,\textsuperscript{27} a conclusion, with which Martin also agreed at

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Luther H. Martin, “The Uses (and Abuse) of the Cognitive Sciences for the Study of Religion”, \textit{CSSR Bulletin} 37, 2008, 95-98.
\item \textsuperscript{26} This argument is adapted from Dan Sperber’s and Dierdre Wilson’s observations concerning the current state of semiotics: Dan Sperber – Dierdre Wilson, \textit{Relevance: Communication and Cognition}, Oxford: Blackwell 2\textsuperscript{1995}, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Donald Wiebe, “Theory in the Study of Religion”, \textit{Religion} 13, 1983, 283-309: 305.
\end{itemize}
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.

Keywords: religious studies; history of religions; scientific study of religion; cognitive science; methodology.

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Is an Unbiased Science of Religion Impossible?

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My response to the essay “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion” by Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe is divided into seven paragraphs. Paragraph 1 and 2 give an outline of the argument Martin and Wiebe have brought forth and a short description of what the focus of my critical remarks will be. In paragraph 3-5, I discuss the main assumptions that the line of thought of the article under consideration rests upon. Paragraph 6 sums up the questions raised. In paragraph 7, I add some further reflections with respect to the broader framework of Religious Studies. My critical comment is not intended to be a fully-fledged analysis of the essay in question, but rather aims at pointing to some relevant topics that could be taken into consideration by the authors in order to further develop their argument.

(1) The authors claim that the establishment of an unbiased, scientific Study of Religions will inevitably face great difficulties, because the religious worldview is rather more than less a standard feature of human nature. If they are right, they have found a scientific explanation for the persistence of “theologically” informed studies of religions within the academic field and outside “theology proper”. There is irony of history (of our academic field) to it, since the two authors explain religion as a standard feature of human beings in a rather different way than the propagators of a “science” of religion based upon the standard sui generis definition of religion did.

(2) To discuss their paper means either to discuss the assumptions their reasoning rests on or the soundness of their reasoning. I will concentrate on the first task. As it is not possible here to examine in detail the five assumptions the authors name at the beginning of the paper (p. 9-10) and some further definitions they use, I will mainly restrict myself to some hints concerning what an in-depth analysis of these assumptions should take into consideration.

(3) Assumption 1 and 4 seem to define the nature of “science” as an undertaking to accumulate knowledge about the world, both the natural

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.
and the social. The authors are convinced that, theoretically, scientific research can be undertaken in an unbiased way. The first assumption gives a “minimal definition” of the objective of scientific research that hardly anyone will reject: gaining intersubjectively accessible knowledge of intersubjectively accessible facts.\(^2\) Disagreement will probably emerge when an attempt is made to define both the adjective “intersubjective” and the concept of “fact” To make their point clear, in their fourth assumption the authors reject what they call “the anti-science posturings of postmodernism” (p. 10). To use a phrase coined by Hans H. Penner and Edward A. Yonan, this strikes me as sort of “Fabian tactics of winning a methodological battle by avoiding it”.\(^3\) One does not have to be a “postmodernist” – whatever that may be – to understand that in science there are no bare facts outside their construction by the methodological approach. In science it is always a certain – and therefore defined – sector of reality\(^4\) that is researched by using at least one specified method. The establishing of a study subject therefore involves a construction of “facts”. This construction rests on a theory (at least, an implicit one). This way, there are no facts outside the theory.\(^5\) Accordingly, the minimal requirement for intersubjectivity means that definitions, sources, hypotheses, assumptions and so on, on which the theory rests, as well as the methodological steps taken to arrive at the conclusion(s) (“knowledge about facts”), are laid open. Given that, everyone is able to check the way that a given researcher has arrived at certain conclusions, at least theoretically. Therefore, “facts” constructed by means theoretically not open to be checked by everyone – for example, intuition, inner experience, channelling and the like – cannot, by definition, be counted as valuable sources of scientific theories.\(^6\) Nevertheless, the named alleged ways of gaining knowledge, like channelling, can be made subjects of scientific inquiry. This distinction has been the nerve of critical arguments against theories in the field that claim a sui generis status for religion, in as far as those recur to religious experience.

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2 With my reservations to the concept of a “bare fact” in mind, I would prefer to substitute “knowledge” by “theory”.


4 Sure enough, this can also be the interaction between defined sectors of reality.

5 For the field of “Study of Religions” this point has been paradigmatically formulated in the famous introduction of Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press 1988, XI-XIII.

6 In contrast to facts established by the archetype of scientific inquiry in the modern sense, the experiment: to change one variable of a setting and to record the reaction caused thereby.
(4) While I fully agree with the authors that scientific inquiry in itself is – ideally – an unbiased undertaking, I neither share their description of possible biases, nor the idea they seem to hold, that scientific inquiry is set within an unbiased framework. Certainly, Clifford Geertz is right in calling “disinterested observation” a central characteristic of the scientific attitude towards the world and a possible source of conflict between “science” as a cultural system and other, more biased cultural systems like “ideology”. Nevertheless, “ideology” cannot solely be reduced to the religious point of view, and history provides more examples of science being utilised by various ideologies than we can name here. As the authors put it, university is “a purpose-designed institution” and the purpose of it is “knowledge” (p. 9). But there are manifold interests (of the society as a whole or of special groups within the society) behind the scientific project. The cognitive interest very rarely is but cognitive. Natural and technical sciences, for example, are mostly undertaken with the interest of generating more effective ways of controlling the environment. What could the interest behind a “science of religion” possibly be?

(5) The authors define religion as “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 scientific metric” (p. 9-10) and derive the human being’s inclination to explain the world by “agent causality” from phylogeny. This approach raises two questions: a) Although there is hardly a religion to be found, in which superhuman agents play no role at all, can we really reduce religion to a system of explaining the world by recurring to those agents and systems of interacting with them? b) Even if so, does our proclivity to explain the world by agent causality hinder us to study these phenomena?

Ad a): This is not the place to discuss the many ways in which religion has been defined. Almost all of the definitions proposed have their strong points and their shortcomings. There are essentialist and social functional-

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8 For example, see Werner Dostal, “Silence in the Darkness: German Ethnology in the National Socialist Period”, Social Anthropology 2, 1994, 251-262.
9 This has been reflected by Nietzsche in his “philosophy of science”; see Babette Babich, Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Science: Reflecting Science on the Ground of Art and Life, Albany: State University of New York Press 1994.
10 This is very close to the current definition in Cognitive Science of Religion: religion being looked at as essentially the belief in superhuman agents, see, for example, Jesper Sørensen, “Religion in Mind: A Review Article of the Cognitive Science of Religion”, Numen 52, 2005, 465-494: 466-467, 470.
ist definitions (that stress the role religion plays for society),\textsuperscript{11} those that centre on the role of religion as cognitive systems,\textsuperscript{12} descriptive definitions – as brought forth by Kurt Rudolph\textsuperscript{13} – and the dimensional models. A widely known of the latter type is Ninian Smart’s seven dimensional model, as put forth in the introduction to the second edition of The World’s Religions.\textsuperscript{14} In a way, dimensional models are a sub-genre of descriptive definitions, as they rather attempt to define religion by delineating the phenomenon than to give one central feature. Their best use is, in my opinion, heuristic, but they leave us with the question: what is it, then, that makes all these features religious ones? By looking at one dimension in detail, we are only left with the question: “What exactly is it that makes ritual activity, narratives about the origin of the world, doctrines, ethical systems and so on religious ones?” Martin and Wiebe propose that it is the role that “agent causality” plays in the field so described, whilst Rudolph prefers a more general wording, naming “superhuman or supernatural forces of various kinds”.\textsuperscript{15} Rudolph’s answers seems more apt to me than the definition by Wiebe and Martin: the dimension of “ritual” is a kind of umbrella term for various kinds of activity, which can, but do not have to, refer to “superhuman beings”, take for example initiation rites or calendrical rites.\textsuperscript{16} Creation myths do not in every case involve “superhuman be-

\textsuperscript{11} Prevalent in sociology and anthropology, more or less in the tradition of Durkheim, Malinowski or Radcliffe-Brown. Robin Horton, Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion and Science, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993, 19, has described this approach as looking at religion as “a class of metaphorical statements and actions obliquely denoting social relationships and claims to social status”.

\textsuperscript{12} In the tradition of Tylor’s minimal definition, “belief in spiritual beings”. Robin Horton, Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West..., 31-32, gives an interesting definition that somewhat combines Tylor’s approach with a central aspect of the social functionalist view: “… an extension of the field of people’s social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society … in which the human beings involved see themselves in a dependent position vis-à-vis their non-human alters”.


\textsuperscript{16} For types of ritual, one good overview still is Catherine Bell, Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions, Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press 1997, 93-137.
ings”, unless one wants to include ants, spiders, the sun and archetypical human beings within that category (see the Navajo creation myth), or women that have been killed with the outcome that their bodily parts have been transformed to the basic crops of a given economy. It seems more plausible to me to interpret these myths not with reference to “agent causality”, but to analogies – metaphors and metonymies – to parts of the human body or the environment, used to construct the classifications that order the world. In other words, I do not think that semiotics should be discharged of in the analysis of religious thought for the sake of cognitive science.

Ad b): Take, for example, the definition given by Melford Spiro in the same vein as the one by the authors, according to which religion is “a cultural system consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated super-human beings”. This definition uses a clearly defined meta-language to religious language, and in much of the writings of researchers in the field we can find this sort of meta-language. None of the words used stems directly from a religious framework, as it is the case in much of the writings of those authors that are rightly dismissed as being the propagators of a religious world-view in the guise of being academic (in the Martin and Wiebe’s sense of the word) scholars of religion. Some of the definitions rendered above also meet that requirement. To return to semiotics once more, a minimal requirement of scientific language, when it comes to theory, is that there is a clear demarcation line between object language and meta-language. One of the shortcomings of religiously biased “study of religions” is that it has blurred this demarcation line, to say the least. There have been critics to that attitude. There


19 For the use of religious rituals, taboos and the like to construct and sustain the basic classifications in any society, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, New York: Praeger 1966. There is also a reference to Lévi-Strauss in this remark.

have been definitions of religion – like the ones by Spiro and Rudolph quoted above – that do not fall into that trap. This is, for me, a proof that human beings are capable of making the very distinction between speaking about religion and religious speech. So where is the alleged impossibility to leave the religious point of view when talking about religion?

(6) Conclusion: Questions to be examined in more detail in order to prove or disprove the authors’ proposition as outlined in (1): a) If the delusion the authors talk about was a necessary one in the strict sense of the word – that means: human beings had to fall into because of their biological organisation acquired in phylogeny, determining their outlook to the world – how could they ever find out this was a delusion, even if they think it is inevitable (see 5 b)? b) Is it true, that religion is in its essence a belief in and interaction with superhuman beings of the kind that is postulated in the term “agent causality” (see 5 a)? c) Is there something like an unbiased science in the strict sense of the word? What other biases than the religious one, as conceived of by the authors, could there be (see 4)? d) What is the nature of scientific inquiry (see 3)?

(7) There are some other questions I could have brought forth, but for the sake of brevity have left out. There is also an “answer” I have come to, with respect to the nature of religion. Important as the belief in superhuman beings and agent causality may be for the religious world-view, I do not think that we will have done away with the main questions that religions (purport to) give an answer to by simply leaving superhuman beings out. Very often, religion is defined with reference to transcendence. This need not to be an essentialist definition, as the example of Luckmann shows. This also holds for the definition of religion as brought forth by Clifford Geertz, whatever its shortcomings might be. Human beings live in a world of meaning. Science in itself (the disinterested positivist search for knowledge) cannot provide meaning; it is but a tool. Religion seems to be a cultural system among others (like art) that provide meaning in a more general sense than, for example, personal relationships. There are some questions that, as far as we know, among the living creatures on our planet, only human beings put, because they are the only ones conscious of death and able to construe the concept of an “absolute”. Religions give an answer to that questions, and as long as human beings

21 C. Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures..., 87-125.
23 And it would be imprecise to simply subsume the idea of the absolute under the category of “superhuman being”, although the absolute can be conceived in an anthropomorphic way.
will ask that questions, an unbiased study of religions seems impossible, not because of a religious determination of human beings based in the structure of their brains, but, because of the simple “fact” that answers to these questions cannot be given by science in itself. However these questions will be answered, whether the religious way or not, there will be a “bias” that is based in an attitude distinct from that of the “disinterested scientist”. In case that the authors are right with their definition of religion as being built upon the assumption of “agent causality”, I would say, the religious state of humanity is to be described as the state in which human beings have given an answer to these questions by use of the metaphor of human agents.

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24 This is a Kantian argument that I cannot develop in the framework of this short reply.
25 Most superhuman agents are anthropomorphic in nature.
SUMMARY

Is an Unbiased Science of Religion Impossible?

In this paper I present a critical discussion of the essay “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion” by Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe (Religio: Revue pro religionistiku 20/1, 2012, 9-18). The focus of the argumentation lies on the assumptions the authors adopt. The authors’ understanding of the nature of science, concerning both methodology and the theory of science, is taken into consideration, and their definition of religion is discussed on the background of other definitions available. As an outcome, four questions are formulated that should be taken into account in further discussions of the topic. Finally, some remarks concerning the nature of religions are added. I think that the “Tylorian” definition of religion used by the authors is too narrow and I opt for an understanding of religion as based on the central questions facing human beings about the meaning of life that religions purport to give answers to. The persistence of religion is better explained by the ability of the human being to ask such questions than by the evolutionarily acquired proclivity towards “agent causality”. I try to show that this can be achieved at the level of meta-language that is clearly delineated from religious object language.

Keywords: definition of religion; nature of scientific inquiry; agent causality; religion and meaning.

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The Study of Religion as a Scientific Discipline: A Comment on Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe’s Paper

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Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe characterize their paper\(^1\) as a reflective comment on their aspirations for the field of Religious Studies they have committed their careers to (p. 9). As it turns out, these aspirations have been frustrated by developments in the field in recent decades. The main reason for this is the supposed influence of theological and religious agendas in Religious Studies (p. 12-13). However, the authors go further than complaining. They argue that a scientific programme of Religious Studies “is not ever likely to occur” (p. 9) and that to entertain the hope for it “is to be in the grip of a false and unshakeable delusion” (p. 9).

To support this central thesis, the authors develop two lines of argument: The “historical argument” tries to show that the study of religion actually was a scientific enterprise in the nineteenth century, although it later became compromised by non-scientific agendas. The “scientific argument” relies on theories proposed by the Cognitive Science of Religion to explain why they believe that Religious Studies will never succeed in establishing a truly scientific programme. At the same time, and somewhat in contradiction, they recommend the cognitive sciences as the most promising means of developing a theoretically coherent scientific study of religion.

Before I comment on this paper I should make clear in the first place that I believe it is a polemic pamphlet aimed at provoking and criticising but not at elaborating sophisticated arguments demanding detailed discussion. But as the editors of *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* consider this provocative paper an opportunity to launch a debate on the disciplinary status of Religious Studies, I am happy to participate.

As things stand, Martin and Wiebe’s paper is the point of reference. I shall therefore roughly follow its outline and first consider the historical argument brought forward to substantiate the thesis that Religious Studies are not a scientific discipline, nor are they ever likely to become one.

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\(^1\) 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.
Although I share many of their views, I disagree with the idea that religion is a subject *sui generis* and the Study of Religion is therefore substantially different from other scientific disciplines. The second point deals with their “scientific argument”, which relies on insights from the cognitive science of religion to support their thesis. Finally I will make some remarks on the pitfall of ontological naturalism as theoretical approach to the Study of Religion, which is about to substitute one ideological agenda in Religious Studies by another.

**Religious Studies as an Academic Discipline: Historical and Institutional Aspects**

The authors start with the observation that no undergraduate department of Religious Studies has fully implemented a *scientific* programme of study and research (p. 9). They explain the objective of *scientific* research as being “to gain public (intersubjectively available) knowledge of public (intersubjectively available) facts” (p. 9). Given this explanation, it appears strange to maintain that Religious Studies hitherto have not been engaged in a scientific research programme. Unless we regard historical research as fiction writing, we should think that it is dealing with intersubjectively available facts to gain intersubjectively available knowledge. History of Religions has for decades been a common designation for the discipline from which the Study of Religion emerged, as can be seen from the name still being used by the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR). Historical studies are not a science, but I would not agree that the history of religions generally has been or is in the service of ideological, theological or religious agendas; and it is hard to imagine that Luther Martin, whose works include many fine pieces of historical and comparative studies, would consider the history of religions a futile enterprise.

Their “historical argument” suggests that in the nineteenth century there emerged a scientific programme to study religion, which has been compromised by more recent developments (p. 12). Although their view of the mythic ancestors of the discipline such as Friedrich Max Müller may be idealized, I concede that much which nowadays runs under the name of “Religious Studies” in North America includes teaching and research with ideological, theological, religious and political agendas. “Religious Studies” is not an academic discipline but a catch-all term for dealing with religion in all kind of academic fashions. Thus, part of the problem is terminological. Religious Studies is not the heir of the academic ancestors the authors refer to, but a conglomeration of – well – religious studies. “Religionswissenschaft” to some extent is better off as a discipline, al-
though its history in Germany and other north European countries has been heavily influenced by liberal Protestant theology. Still, it is easier to argue for the autonomy and integrity of *Religionswissenschaft* as an academic discipline than to define the boundaries of Religious Studies. It is intriguing that the term “science of religion”, which was coined by the German-born Oxford professor Friedrich Max Müller, did not gain currency in the English-speaking world.

As can be seen in Germany, to have an unambiguous name is helpful for establishing the Study of Religion as an academic discipline distinct from other religious studies, although it is not sufficient. A number of chairs for *Religionswissenschaft* at German universities belong to faculties of theology and it is an on-going problem that the chair holders must be members of Christian churches. Even if this situation is slightly different from North American universities where Religious Studies are linked to pre-existing departments of theology, it is obvious that disciplinary identity demands institutionalisation as an autonomous discipline. On the international level, the International Association for the History of Religions was a rather successful attempt at institutionalising a field of religious research without a theological or religious agenda. Despite its former domination by liberal theologians and unavoidable internal differences, it used to give the Study of Religion an institutionalised identity distinct from religiously engaged religious studies.

In North America attempts at institutionalising the discipline seem to have suffered a setback. In 1985 the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR) was founded with a similar agenda as the IAHR and became one of its member associations. As Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe, two of its founders, explained twenty years later, NAASR had been established out of frustration with the American Academy of Religion’s (AAR) inability to encourage the development of a genuine scientific approach to the study of religion, free from religious influence.² Thus, thirty years ago the situation was more or less similar to what the authors complain about in their paper today. Possibly because hopes for betterment had proven futile, the NAASR capitulated when in 2008 its representatives – including Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe – strongly advocated affiliating the AAR with the IAHR, which was accomplished at the XXth World Congress of the IAHR in Toronto in 2010. History goes on and we cannot but wait to see how the IAHR will change under the influence of the AAR. It could well be that the North American understanding of Religious Studies, which according to Wiebe and Martin has been “seri-

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ously compromised by extra-scientific and non-epistemic agendas” (p. 12), and the sheer number of AAR professionals following such agendas will finally drive the IAHR in the same direction.

Nevertheless, I do not think that historical considerations are sufficient to support the pessimistic thesis that the Study of Religion cannot develop as a scientific discipline. If history teaches us anything then it is that things change. The academic study of religion and religions was for decades the field of theologians and a very small number of historians of religion. Nowadays religion has moved closer to the centre of academic interest and we find that sociologists, political scientists, economists, historians, psychologists and cognitive scientists have unexpectedly discovered religion as an important area of research. Are we supposed to believe that they all have the same agenda; that they all ask the same questions and use the same methodology? Obviously there are people interested in religion because they believe that religion is something good or that it is something bad. We cannot and probably should not stop them doing so even if they pursue their interest in academia. But this does not prevent us from pursuing other agendas such as studying religion scientifically.

To declare it a delusion to expect that religion could be studied scientifically because humans are naturally religious and their “religiousness will continue to constrain the academic study of religion” (p. 14) is to revert to the argument that religion is a subject *sui generis*. It implies that we can scientifically study politics, economics, art or gender, but not religion. However, such subjects present exactly the same problems for scientific research as religion does. Political science is no less prone to ideological or political agendas than religious studies are prone to ideological or religious ones. It is a common issue that only a limited number of scholars in humanities and social sciences submit to scientific principles. This is because their subjects usually are not enclosed in laboratories but are involved in everyday life. It would be surprising if most people should be able or willing to abandon their personal interests in political or religious matters in order to deal with politics or religion as if they were unconcerned. I do not think that this situation has changed very much during the past few hundred years. The ancestors of the science of religion mentioned by Martin and Wiebe probably were even more an academic minority than are the scholars engaged in scientific research in religion today.

**The Cognitive Science of Religion**

Not only the historical argument is unconvincing but also the “scientific argument”, which relies on theories of the cognitive sciences to show that the Study of Religion can never be established as a scientific discipline.
To understand the argument, let us accept the idea that believing in the existence of agents that are beyond identification by way of the senses or scientific metric has something to do with religion (p. 9-10). Let us further suppose that the authors are right in assuming that evolutionary and cognitive defaults of the human brain make it natural to look for agent causality and to infer the presence of agents even when there are none (p. 15); and let us finally accept the assumption that this offers “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” (p. 16). What would that mean for the possibility of studying religion scientifically? Nothing in particular! It would just explain why presumably most people are more inclined to understand the world religiously instead of scientifically. But this would be the case not only when they are studying religion but under all circumstances. There is no reason to believe that it is easier for scientists to desist from their religious beliefs when they study the physical aspects of the world than when they study its social aspects. Religion is not a subject *sui generis* and to study it scientifically demands methodological training and discipline no less than the scientific study of any other subject. The fact that not many people have this training and discipline shows that practicing science is a special craft, but not that a science of religion is impossible.

The two authors make a case for the cognitive sciences, which they believe offer “the most promising contemporary opportunity for developing a theoretically coherent scientific study of religion” (p. 14). They contrast the cognitive science of religion with humanistic and social scientific studies, which cling to versions of agent causality and therefore are declared not to be truly scientific. This is because humanities and social sciences invoke “intentionality, a primary attribute of agency, to explain and understand textual productions or behavioral motivation” (p. 15). They are therefore blamed for ignoring “advances in scientific knowledge, which are characterized by the replacement of agent causality with natural causality” (p. 16). If I grasp this correctly, it means that historical studies of religion that usually try to understand the meaning that texts had or have for their authors or readers do not produce scientific knowledge because they refer to intentions instead of natural causes. And conversely, the cognitive science of religion offers a scientifically sound theoretical programme because it resorts to natural causality.

What the authors are advocating is a science of religion that not only tries to gain intersubjectively available knowledge of intersubjectively available facts, but also reduces human behaviour to its “natural” causes. They thus subscribe to the methodological and ontological naturalism of
the natural sciences. Unfortunately, they are not explicit in stating that their use of the term “scientific” refers to the natural sciences (and excludes the social sciences). Had they done so, there would be no reason to doubt their thesis that a “scientific” study of religion is impossible. It is in fact impossible to study religion with methods of the natural sciences because these methods cannot identify religious behaviour. According to the authors, 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 scientific metric” (p. 9-10). However, whether human beings maintain such a belief cannot be discovered by methods of the natural sciences without relying on hermeneutics. We have to understand the meaning of what people say, write or express in some other way, and we have to assume they have intentions. Without understanding meanings and intentions, there is no way of discerning religious behaviour. We cannot know if depositing flowers in front of an inscribed stone is somehow related to beliefs in supernatural agents or not, when we ignore meanings and purposes. Only after we have identified religious behaviour hermeneutically can we start trying to explain it by natural causes.

Even if we granted cognitive scientists the privilege of making use of naïve hermeneutics, which simply take linguistic expressions at face value, they would not be in a position to study religion without the humanistic and social sciences. At least they need the concept of religion; they have to import it from somewhere unless they use the term “religion” in a completely different sense than humanities and social sciences. In this case, however, it would be gratuitous for Religious Studies to take notice of the cognitive science of religion because both were dealing with different subjects.

Ironically, it appears that the cognitive science of religion has been influenced by a tradition of Religious Studies that considers religion a phenomenon *sui generis*. Why else should one pay much attention to cognitions that from a “scientific” (ontologically naturalist) point of view are simply incorrect conceptions of the world? To believe in agents that do not really exist is a mistaken belief; but there are numberless false ideas about the world that have been expressed in human history and in our present time. Many ideas processed in human brains are incorrect, possibly including the idea that we can explain human behaviour without taking into account the intentions and purposes of agents.\(^3\) There could be a cognitive

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\(^3\) I adhere to the conventional theory that authors have some intentions when writing a text and that these intentions can be understood or misunderstood. Admittedly I hesitated to respond to Wiebe and Martin’s paper after understanding that trying to comprehend its meaning and purpose was a thoroughly unscientific relapse to the idea of
science of false beliefs (provided the cognitive sciences had methods to
discern which ideas are wrong or right), but why single out beliefs that are
considered religious? From a purely cognitive scientific point of view,
religious beliefs deserve no more attention than other mistaken ideas un-
less it was supposed that they are in some way different. Although most
cognitive scientists of religion insist on denying that in the cognitive sys-
tem there is any difference between religious and other ideas, they invest
energy in doing research into cognitions that cannot be identified by their
scientific methods. Hence, their interest in religious beliefs must be based
on theories other than those of the cognitive sciences. These appear to be
theories that suppose that religion is something special, if not sui generis,
thus at the least deserving the particular attention of scientists.

If there should be an interface between the cognitive science of false
beliefs and the Study of Religion then it is the supposition that beliefs
considered religious are indeed different from ordinary “false beliefs” in
that they can influence human behaviour to an astonishing extent. They
induce humans to invest considerable material and intellectual resources to
engage in behaviour that from a “scientific” point of view is completely
useless because it relies on misconceptions of the world. But to explain
such wasteful behaviour, the cognitive sciences first need the humanistic
studies of religion telling them that building a cathedral or sacrificing a pig
counts as religious behaviour while building a palace or butchering an ox
does not.4 When we exclude considering intentions and meanings, there is
not much left for the scientific study of religious behaviour.

Science and Ideology

It will be clear by now that I am not convinced by the proposal of secur-
ing the scientific character of the Study of Religion by making the cogni-
tive science of religion its theoretical paradigm. Cognitive studies add
a new perspective and theoretical approach to the study of religion but for
methodological and epistemological reasons cannot replace humanistic
and social scientific studies. A similarly basic objection to Wiebe and
Martin’s paper concerns their understanding of science and the axiomatic
assumptions on which they base their argument. They assume “that the

agent causality. The dilemma can be resolved by realising that this discussion on
Religious Studies is not a scientific enterprise but part of humanistic studies, and that
in this context the idea of agent causality is unavoidable if we are not to refrain from
any discussions including on scientific issues.

4 See also 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: 59.
modern western research university is a purpose-designed institution for obtaining knowledge about the world” (p. 9). This obviously is not an empirical statement, for otherwise there would be no reason to deplore the state of the modern western research university. It is a normative statement expressing the belief of the two authors that the university should be an institution such as this – possibly on historical grounds. They further believe that it is possible to gain scientific knowledge of intersubjectively available facts. And they assume “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” (p. 10).

I share these assumptions in principle. But I think that the authors are using arguments that undermine their own comprehension of science and university. They blame modern universities for “inculcating values to undergraduates and providing them with structures of meaning” (p. 12). This cannot be meant as a serious argument; what else can teachers do when they try to convey to their students a scientific ethos and explain them the meaning and purpose of science and the university? It appears that the authors are falling victim to their belief that doing science is to subscribe to a fundamentalist version of naturalism, for which meanings and intentions are anathema. Thus they ignore that their own understanding of what the scientific study of religion should be rests on the assumption of purposes (“purpose-designed institution”) and historical contingencies that cannot be explained by naïve naturalism.

I designate this version of naturalism “naïve” because it undermines critical scientific thinking with folk epistemology believing that our “senses or scientific metric” (p. 9) provide us with knowledge about the world. All they provide us with is some input into our neuronal systems where it is processed by algorithms shaped by phylogenetic evolution and ontogenetic learning. To take the outcome of this process as knowledge about the world may be acceptable as a common convention, but to regard it as true knowledge is naïve. The human brain is prone to producing all kind of wrong interpretations of sensations. Thus, we needed a bit more than our “senses and scientific metric” to know what exists and what doesn’t. If we ignore this, we are running the risk of transforming science into a metaphysical ideology that is unaware of its own epistemological limitations.

I agree that Religious Studies are particularly susceptible to ideological interests and prejudices. It seems to be difficult do deal with religion without feeling obliged to take a position for or against it. In one camp we find the defenders of religion with an “approbation bias” criticised by Donald Wiebe and Luther Martin (p. 17), who instead join the other camp of those
who feel compelled to point to the erroneous beliefs maintained in religions. Both positions are justified as expressions of personal beliefs and convictions; but none of them is helpful for studying religion scientifically because they bring in value judgments, which add nothing to our knowledge about religion but distort unbiased scientific reasoning.

In the case at hand, the value judgements of the authors make them blind to the limitations of scientific knowledge and turn scientific arguments into ideological statements. At the same time they jeopardise their own cognitive scientific approach. Subscribing to an ideology of ontological naturalism, they believe that science can produce unquestionable knowledge about the world, which can be taken as a gauge to measure the truth of religious beliefs. While they see clearly that the functioning of the human brain is conditioned by phylogenetically evolved neuronal algorithms that for instance induce humans to infer the presence of agents even where there are none (p. 15), they ignore the fact that there are other algorithms conditioning its functioning as well. One of them is to conjecture that things have causes in the first place. When according to the cognitive science of religion the proclivity to assume the presence of agents is considered the natural, i.e., biological basis of “religious” beliefs, we can take the human penchant for supposing causes in general as elementary form of “scientific” thinking. Hence, “religion” probably is no more natural than “science” if we reduce them in a simplistic way to basic functions of the brain.

Evolution has not equipped humans with a cognitive apparatus for obtaining knowledge about the world. The functioning of the human brain is shaped by algorithms, which have evolved to adapt human behaviour to the environments of our stone-age ancestors. Humans are not the pride of creation that has been endowed with reason to gain “knowledge”. Without doubt, the ability to think logically is based on neuronal hardwiring that has evolved naturally – a basis it shares with the ability to maintain religious beliefs. Thus, “science” is as much a by-product of the biological evolution of the brain as is “religion”. And in the form of the “modern western research university” it quite obviously also is the by-product of rather contingent cultural developments.

On what grounds can we be sure that this form of knowledge, which happens to be our own, gives a more accurate picture of the world than others; that religious beliefs are rather naïve (p. 16) whereas scientific beliefs are enlightened? Cognitive scientific research could probably show that there are cognitive algorithms making humans inclined to think that their own perception of the world is true and others are false. But we do not need the cognitive sciences for that; it suffices to study the history of religions and the history of science.
What arguments can the cognitive science of religion offer to substantiate the belief that of all things it is modern science that gives us a true understanding of reality? Not many, I guess. What we can say is that we prefer scientific knowledge to religious beliefs, but this is not a scientific argument but a normative decision. We could justify our preference with the consideration that scientific knowledge often proves to be quite useful — though occasionally disastrous —, but the same can be said of religious beliefs. There is no way out of the dilemma that advocating science or a particular understanding of it cannot be grounded on scientific arguments but necessarily refers to normative positions and subjective preferences. This is not upsetting as long as we are aware of it.

If however we believe or make others believe that science delivers somehow objective or unquestionable knowledge about the world, we are deceiving others or ourselves. In this event we make science an ideology. To be sure, the cognitive mechanisms that prompt us to believe in our own convictions are stronger than those enabling us to critically reflect on them, which makes it more “natural” to think ideologically than critically. And perhaps scholars of religion are especially susceptible to ideological thinking, given the subject of their study. For religion is a disputed concept that in everyday life is loaded with value judgments, be they positive or negative; it is unnatural to cultivate a discipline that demands leaving behind one’s everyday convictions. We cannot reasonably expect many people to submit to such a discipline. After all, why should they?

Conclusion

Is the Study of Religion possible as a scientific discipline? I believe that Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe are right in stating that it would be a delusion to think that Religious Studies as they are understood and practiced in North America are a scientific discipline. I also agree that Religious Studies in general are prone to ideological agendas. Although this makes it difficult to practice the academic study of religion, I do not subscribe to their argument that it is impossible to conceive and develop such a discipline.

In particular, I contest the claim that the difficulties in studying religion scientifically are due to the peculiarities of the subject and to cognitive proclivities towards interpreting the world religiously. It is no less possible to scientifically study religion than to scientifically study any other aspect of human culture; and it faces similar methodological and theoretical challenges.

Overcoming these challenges calls for discipline. As the authors put it, “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” (p. 17). It is true that practicing this discipline is difficult, but it is not impossible.

As any academic discipline or science, the Study of Religion is a historically contingent cultural product. It does not have any unchangeable essence, but its boundaries are negotiated and defined by human agents. To opt for a particular understanding of “scientific” is a normative decision that cannot be justified scientifically so that it must be explained by other reasons.

Provided that the Study of Religion is considered an empirical science, it demands rational methodology and empirical arguments to maintain a theory. The theory that religion can be studied scientifically without taking into account the meaning that humans attribute to their behaviour is methodologically wrong because it precludes distinguishing between religious and non-religious behaviour. Thus, the Study of Religion as a scientific discipline necessarily includes “humanistic” approaches, which cannot be replaced by methods of the natural sciences.

Religion is “natural” in that it can be reduced to the behaviour of humans within the limits of their biological nature. Although the Study of Religion aims at explaining the universal conditions of religious behaviour, explaining the particular conditions of historical developments and empirical findings is likewise part of the academic discipline. This calls for considering factors that are external to the individuals exhibiting certain behaviour, which amounts to studying cultures and societies.

I therefore conclude that the Study of Religion as an academic discipline is possible as a combination of various methodological and theoretical approaches. It do not believe that the cognitive science of religion can be a solution to the main issue that prevents Religious Studies from being a scientific enterprise, which is the proclivity towards judging the value of religious behaviour and the truth of religious beliefs. In the form advocated by Donald Wiebe and Luther Martin, the cognitive science of religion appears instead to only replace one normative position – appreciating religion – by another – depreciating religion.
SUMMARY

The Study of Religion as a Scientific Discipline: A Comment on Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe’s Paper

The article discusses Donald Wiebe and Luther Martin’s paper “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion”. The central thesis of the two authors is that Religious Studies are not and probably can never be a “scientific” discipline. It is argued that the reasons given by the two authors to support their thesis are unconvincing and contradictory. Their suggestion that the study of religion should subscribe to an understanding of science that abandons the concept of agency and reduces human behaviour to “natural” causes is criticised on theoretical and methodological grounds. In fact, it is not possible to completely forsake hermeneutics and to study religion using the methods of the natural sciences because these methods do not allow us to identify religious behaviour. Therefore, the Study of Religion, of course, cannot be a discipline of the natural sciences. However, as a social science, the Study of Religion is no less possible than the social scientific study of any other subject.

Keywords: Religious Studies; study of religion; cognitive science of religion; methodology; theory; ideology.

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A Scientific Discipline: 
The Persistence of a Delusion?

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In their academic “confession” “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion”, Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe offer this pithy, provocative statement: “[R]eligiousness will continue to constrain the academic study of religion even as it will continue to dominate the concerns of Homo sapiens generally” (p. 14). While the first part of Martin and Wiebe’s argument, concerning the history of our discipline, is empirically testable (some state of affairs has or has not occurred), the question of actual possibility (if not logical possibility) of a scientific study of religion is mostly philosophical. In this response, I argue that Martin and Wiebe’s claim would, in fact, interfere with all existing sciences.

Considering the first part of the statement, presented in “The Historical Argument” section of Martin and Wiebe’s paper (p. 10-13), I could not agree more. When judging the overall state of our field of study from a broader perspective, taking into account its history as well as its current state, I share the very same view and think that it is valid not only on a global scale or for North American Religious Studies (as they have their specifics), but also within the European or Czech context. That said, my response is not to second or applaud Martin and Wiebe’s view, but rather express my reservations about the authors’ conclusions, even though I share all their assumptions (p. 9-10). This brings me to the second part of Martin and Wiebe’s statement (“The Scientific Argument”, p. 13-17), as well as the second part of my response.

Though I see nothing wrong with the logic of the argument presented in “The Scientific Argument” part of Martin and Wiebe’s paper, or with the evidence from the cognitive sciences used to support the argument; the trouble lies within the extension/reach of this argument. For if everything

* I would like to thank Eva Kundtová Klocová, Martin Lang, Jakub Cigán, Daniel Shaw and Jeffrey Norquist for their comments on earlier drafts
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 I am using the term field of study deliberately as opposed to discipline or science.
3 I intentionally omit those rare centers and departments that are dedicated to scientific approach as they are too exceptional.
falls into predefined category,\textsuperscript{4} that category becomes redundant and can be put aside to make room for something more specific that would enrich our knowledge. And this is exactly what befalls Martin and Wiebe’s argument in “The Scientific Argument” section. Can unconscious mechanisms really play such a dominant role in processes so conscious, so explicit and unnatural as is a scientific endeavor? Coming from cognitive science of religion’s background myself, I do not tend to underestimate the power of unconscious processes. However, from the very same background I also know that the human mind is able to operate on different levels\textsuperscript{5} and that given time and effort one might be able to consciously process knowledge about how unconscious levels operate, trace those mechanisms, make them (or their results) explicit and, in a manner of speaking, “throw them away” on a formal conscious level.\textsuperscript{6} If not, logic would not be possible and we would be forever doomed to make all judgments on account of our heuristics alone. We would have no way of knowing that optical illusions are illusions. We would all have to be openly racist and tribalist, as we would have no ground on which to correct our natural inclinations. In fact, we would not be able to understand Martin and Wiebe’s argument as they are indeed using the same conscious reasoning when trying to unmask unconscious mechanisms that cause our inability to study religion scientifically. Most of all, and here comes the main point of my response, we would have no science at all, as it would not be possible to achieve one in the real world. For example, the same would have to be true about the consequences of our natural inclination to tribalism on theory as well as methods of mathematics, and we would therefore favor certain numbers. Another example can be taken from physics: astrophysicists should be biased against galaxies that differ in shape from our own galaxy. For brevity, the authors name just one of these unconscious mechanisms, the “proclivity for explaining our world in terms of agent causality” (p. 15). Is physics therefore forever doomed to fall back on agent causality, as are humans when trying to make everyday sense of the world? It is obviously not, or at least not in the authors’ view, as they clearly state: “Despite advances in scientific knowledge, which are characterized by the replacement of agent causality with natural causality …” (p. 16). It is this incoherence that I want to point out; that even though both types of scientists fall back on unconscious mechanisms in their everyday online reasoning,

\textsuperscript{4} In this context authors created a \textit{category} that denotes simply any \textit{scientific endeavor affected by unconscious mechanisms}.

\textsuperscript{5} Cf. Dual-Processing Accounts of Reasoning. (I am using this term simplistically, as all my other examples and analogies, for the sake of argument.)

\textsuperscript{6} I do not argue that we can switch them off entirely, just that we can be aware of them on formal conscious level and not to let them interfere there.
when it comes to scientific endeavors, scientists-physicists are not under the same spell as scientists-scholars of religion. This part of my argument is of course relevant if (and only if) the authors do not want to argue that when it comes to religion these unconscious mechanisms (their setup and special mixture) constrain us more strongly or more effectively than in any other context. In other words, their argument would have to be pointed at all sciences or at science in general for it to be sound. If that were so, I would rest my case, as I see no other flaw in it. But it is not pointed at science in general, as they clearly state: “[O]n scientific grounds” (p. 9) thus assuming science possible.

In summary, there is no special reason why scientists-religious scholars should tend to do bad science more than any other scientists, and if they do, they have only themselves to blame. Yes, science is unnatural, it is hard to cultivate, and it takes highly trained minds not to make any methodological oversteps. But as mathematicians cannot let other mathematicians to get away with mistakes in sophisticated formulas, so we cannot let our fellow scholars of religion to get away with appreciation (p. 12) or depreciation of religion while an unbiased explanation of the phenomenon is needed. For the very same reason, the authors themselves should have avoided using evaluating terms like “otherwise very intelligent people” (p. 16), when talking about fellow scientists who express their religiosity, or “rather naïve” (p. 16), when addressing any religious belief, and they should have stuck to pointing out methodological mistakes scientists might be making when they let their metaphysical stances meddle with their scientific work.

From within a broader perspective, I would suggest not to turn our lenses on our lenses yet. There will always be time to reflect upon our reflection after conversion to postmodern tactics and goals. Let’s still work on the cognitive science of religion before turning to the cognitive science of cognitive science of religion, which would once again stir us into an infinite regress heading nowhere.

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7 Which is not an inherent part of Martin and Wiebe’s argument, and my assumption is that it is not even something they would want to hold (given the implications of ganz andere or sui generis of religion, that would secretly crawl its way back into the scientific study of religion just under different guise).

8 Their own scientific grounds would have to be affected by the same doubts of no full emancipation from unconscious mechanisms (generalization from unconscious mechanisms constraining/shaping “religious concerns”).

SUMMARY

A Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion?

In my response to Martin and Wiebe’s academic “confession”, I try to show that there is a major inconsistency in their argument. This inconsistency resides within their partial and therefore biased application of universal unconscious mechanisms that constrain the human mind, where the application should have been complete. Their argument should have been directed at all sciences or at science in general in order for it to be sound, and not particularly at Religious Studies. This would result in the argument that any scientific discipline is a delusion, which is an outcome Martin and Wiebe do not hold, as they make science a sine qua non for their own argument.

Keywords: Religious Studies; Cognitive Science of Religion; Philosophy of Science.

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Rethinking the Relationship between the Study of Religions, Theology and Religious Concerns: A Response to Some Aspects of Wiebe’s and Martin’s Paper

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Recently, as European scholars living in a liberal society and mostly teaching at state universities, we are not under political or cultural pressure to accept a dominant world view, even a scientific one, as exclusive, and to deny others. Therefore our motivations for doing the humanities may be very diverse, private and as such also hidden. However, it is true that simply relying on an appropriate scientific method might not be always sufficient for preventing us from cultural presuppositions, personal motivations and expectations. I consider addressing these limits and “determinations” in our own scholarly endeavors as one of the most important obligations of a scholar.

Speaking about “religious” agendas behind our knowledge systems as in Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe’s paper, “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion” requires especially rethinking the relationship between the study of religions and theology in particular, which is, supposedly, a very specific one. In the history of the field, debates about the differences between theology and the study of religions were inadequately frequent compared to the discussions about the relationships among the study of religions and other disciplines. However, at present most European scholars consider the distinctions between the study of religions and theology as clear, with all misunderstandings solved. Hence some colleagues of mine unambiguously reject opening such new discussions, but after all I, as a historian of the study of religions, must do that from time to time. My colleagues say that now, more then one hundred years after the establishing of the field, the topic is a sidestep, wasting precious time; besides, the relationship is usually discussed by those scholars

* The text is one of the outcomes of the international grant project “Development of the Study of Religions in Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th Century” (GACR P401/10/0311) financed by the Czech Science Foundation.

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.

The issue addressed byWiebe and Martin in their paper is, however, most likely deeper than we are willing to admit. Furthermore, as they claim, it is also chronic. And if the concerns with the “loss of trust” in the study of religions as a discipline can be heard so loudly from the inside, moreover voiced by such renown scholars, they must not be taken lightly. Thus, I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to their provocative paper, which I understand to be also a personal confession.

Despite the fact that I unequivocally defend the concept of the study of religions as a “value-indifferent science”, I have to admit that it is a science specifically inclined to ideologization. It is obvious from the history of modern disciplines, particularly of the humanities, that especially philosophy, history, ethnology, oriental studies and others had struggled, at times, with similar difficulties. These stem mainly from efforts of some interest groups or even individuals to mis/use scientific knowledge for purposes considered by scholars as extra scientific, such as political, racial, national, economic or religious agendas. In our case, it need not be only religious promotion. For example, many scholars from the former Soviet block had numerous experiences with what can be called “anti-religious propaganda”. During the Communist era, religion was seen as the enemy of the state, of politics, of the “only right worldview”, and of course, of science. All science was influenced by the Marxist-Leninist philosophy; the study of religions was considered a bourgeois pseudoscience and thus, with the sole exception of Poland,\footnote{3}{See Henryk Hoffmann – Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska, “The Science of Religion in Poland: Past and Present”, Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 10, 1998, 352-372; Henryk Hoffmann, Dzieje polskich badań religioznawczych 1873-1939, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego 2004.} scientific atheism was the official theoretical instrument for the critique of and studying of religion.

Even the present tendency to mis/use scientific knowledge for the promotion of national objectives by some Ukrainian scholars can be named as an example of the extra-scientific agenda in the humanities, and by impli-
cation in the study of religions. There are several orthodox churches operating in Ukraine, and the largest one, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, is under the ecclesiastic jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. With regards to the strong patriotic efforts of the Ukrainian society (struggling for independence from the influence of the former colonizer) the other orthodox churches are seen as those legitimizing Ukrainian statehood while the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is considered to be the instrument of political interests of Russia. Then Churches’ activities are seen by some scholars through the lens of the national and patriotic interests.

I claim therefore that the ideologization of science can have various forms and can change in accordance with social development and dominant interests. Extra-scientific objectives of – in our case – the study of religions cannot be reduced to only religious ones in the way suggested by Wiebe and Martin. Let me further illustrate that not only religion influences science but that science can influence religion, i.e. that research and knowledge in the study of religions can question one’s personal religious experience and similarly the role of theology in the life of a church. I will show in accordance with Wiebe and Martin that seeking a practical use of the study of religions, be it for religious or humanist reasons, is a way to its ideologization. Briefly, on one hand I generally agree with their apprehension and critique of “extra-scientific and non-epistemic agendas“ (p. 12), which is, according to them, constantly present in the field, but on the other hand I am perhaps more optimistic, or naïve, about its future and do not feel deluded yet.

In the following I attempt to analyze potential influences of extra-scientific agendas, especially religious ones, on the study of religions to prove whether Martin and Wiebe’s delusion is equally justified in Central and Eastern Europe.

In the past years, I have focused intensely on the reflection of the Czech academic study on religions and I must confess my surprise at the amount and the forms of extra-scientific agendas, not only in theological or philosophical workshops. On the other hand, high-quality and well-respected works were done also by theologians, Catholic and more often Protestant ones, a fact that may seem paradoxical in the context of Wiebe and Martin’s argumentation. An event from the first national congress of the Polish Society for the Study of Religions in Tyczyn in 2003 can serve as

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a good example of this paradox. It was also the first time when the representatives of the former Marxist wing of the Polish study of religions met with the representatives of the Catholic-oriented study of religions (called “religiology”). One of the keynote speakers was a philosopher, a specialist on the methodology of science and also a Catholic priest, Andrzej Bronk, member of the Societas Verbi Divini. At the opening of his speech, he pointed out that any time his listeners would feel he spoke like a priest they should alert him to the fact. There was not a single reason to do so and afterwards his lecture was considered as the congress’ best contribution. His work Podstawy nauk o religii (“Elements of the Study of Religions”, 2009)\(^5\) is seen by secular Polish scholars as one of the most important books on the methodology of the study of religions. Similarly, in the Czech study of religions the excellent book Jak srovnávat nesrovnatelné? (“How to compare the incomparable”, 2005)\(^6\) was written by a religious studies scholar originally with a theological education, Dalibor Antalík, who even currently serves as a protestant pastor.

It is quite interesting to note in this context that in the study of religions we can hardly find cases of scholars who became theologians or wanted to succeed in theology. However, a contrary movement, i.e. a theologian becoming a religious studies scholar, is quite frequent. It happened, more or less successfully, rather often in the post-communist countries. Nevertheless, it is not only regional specific, as we can find similar examples in the international study of religions as well. It seems that speaking about religious issues in a secular and, at the same time, scientific way is more attractive then doing so in ecclesiastical terms.

Based on the above, we can argue, in the context of Wiebe and Martin’s text, that a reverse influence occurs, namely that science influences theology and religious agendas. We know that the study of religions as a discipline is part of various study programs at universities, including theology. Even some contemporary, respected religious studies scholars such as Ilkka Pyysiäinen, Jeppe S. Jensen or Armin W. Geertz (coordinator of the research unit Religion, Cognition and Culture at Aarhus University) are affiliated to faculties of theology. For example, in the Czech Republic there are six departments for the study of religions, three of which are based at faculties of theology. Without doubt, theologians influence the study of religions but also the study of religions influences theology. My crucial question then is: What motivations can a theologian have for studying other religions and what role can the study of religions at facul-

ties of theology fulfill? And can such a use of the findings of the study of religions be considered as serving religion? I think it cannot.

Since the beginning of the establishment of the study of religions many theologians refused the study of religions on principle, while others cultivated it. A number of theologians used the approaches of history and of comparative religion to progress from studying prehistoric forms of religion to what they perceived as the truthful one, to „the true religion“, to Christianity – we could even say they tried to get through science to religion! According to others, the study of religions cannot be used for critique or apology of religion, but instead it can lead to personal decisions in choosing the best among the plentitude of religious traditions.

Such motivations can be documented even in sources from the times of the establishing of the discipline. Generally to deepen one’s personal faith can be seen as an important motivation for the acceptance of the findings of the study of religions, as we can see in many works of theologians in Euro-American cultural background. Nevertheless, studying other religions can also have other reasons than purely personal ones; it can be collectively motivated as for example in the case of missionaries.

I see another significance of the study of religions for theology in its stress on accommodating “religious otherness”, its “positive acceptance of religious plurality”, and thus the ability to deal with plurality within European secular society. Still, the emphasis on multi-disciplinary co-operation in theology (in our case with the study of religions) is sometimes critically seen especially by church authorities and by conservative church members. Why? Namely, a study of religions approach applied in theological studies makes Christian faith relative, just one among many. Therefore the acceptance of the principle of plurality by theology makes Christianity deeply ambiguous. Also, the proclaimed indifferent position of the study of religions to studying religions and, at the same time, potential application of methodological agnosticism go against the traditional model of Christianity and theology, and simultaneously against the concept of “one truth” and a promotion of an exclusive form of religion.

The study of religions makes theology relative, it secularizes it and liberalizes it and at the same time it motivates it towards greater openness and towards objectification of its assumptions. Such influences are visible wherever the study of religions becomes an integral part of theological education, usually at university levels, as mentioned earlier. Apart from this, the fact that faculties of theology in Central and Eastern Europe are

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part of state universities plays a specific role in secular academia. Compared to private institutions, state universities in this region have a much higher level of quality both in teaching and in research. The stress on the scientific relevance of theology and a moderate church discourse in theology can be applied more effectively because the theological faculties are not isolated from the rest of the academia. In this respect, the situations and the roles of the study of religions and of theology are very different from those in North America. In predominantly private education, various corporations can exercise their influence and control more easily than in mostly state and public education in Europe. Here, theology is usually part of a secular university system and as such it is strongly motivated to stand in research competition with other humanities; it is more often confronted with requirements of modern scientific discourse and must, in many cases, follow them. Such “scientific” theology can in many respects be very close to the study of religions and lay, non-professional society (sometimes even professionals, academics) might not perceive any fundamental difference between the two. Nevertheless, this “non-religious” (meaning scientific) agenda and the more or less secular objectives can cast a bad light on theology within its own churches, particularly for its tendency towards secular modernity.

Let me now turn to the reverse influence, i.e. to that of theology upon the study of religions, religious studies scholars and their professional activities. A tendency in contemporary Russian study of religions as described by Alexander Krasnikov can serve as a good example. Krasnikov claims that the main inclination in the current Russian study of religions can be labeled as the “orthodox study of religions”, which means that in many regions of Russia the study of religions develops in close relation with the Orthodox Church or even under its direct control. Thus, the previous Marxist discourse in Russia was replaced by a theological one, in other words, its contemporary religious studies’ paradigm is a mixture of both, though the Marxist one is rather hidden. However, it does not mean that in addition there is no secular study of religions. Along with that, Russian scholars are disconcerted by the fact that the Supervisory Committee of Sciences of the Russian Federation granted the status of scientific discipline to orthodox theology. Although many academics refused it, the committee’s decision remained unchanged.

Another aspect of the mutual relationship between religious studies and theology is the question of motivations religious studies scholars may have

8 Aleksander Krasnikov, Metodologiceskie problemy religiovedenja, Moskva: Akademiceskij projekt 2007, 3-8.
9 Ekaterina Elbakian, Did the Soviet Religious Studies Exist Indeed?, unpublished manuscript.
for applying certain theological (or humanistic) issues into their own research. And also what role can a theological enterprise fulfill at a secular university? It is generally expected that scientific findings should be socially useful and applicable. If the practical application of knowledge and its findings is a very important criterion for measuring the success and the results in natural sciences, than in the humanities the public (or the state) can require the same. This claim can be a consequence of the economization of science. Hence the humanities must lately more and more often defend their own weak status within science in general and in the social structure as well. The “production” of only intellectual goods by the humanities is something very difficult to measure in economic terms. From that perspective the study of religions as a discipline can be considered too weak, unpractical, and useless, just wasting the state budget.

When comparing theology and the study of religions from the point of view of their practical role in society, the applicable aspect of theology is, to me, more evident. In European society it is generally understood what theology is and what its goals are. Its knowledge is applied in church life. Churches use theological opinions for more effective economization of Christianity, particularly for better organization of churches, for deeper reflection of faith, and at the same time for more effective missionary work, or, generally said, for its activity inside and outside. Many Europeans understand the sense and practical role of churches and theology in social and ideological contexts, even if they do not appreciate it or disagree with these activities completely.

But how about a practical role of the study of religions? Do we as scholars of the field have any special public space for the application of our findings and knowledge? How can we be useful for society and on the other hand what is an acceptable way for justification of the study of religions in social and economic system? One option, even if generally refused by the religious studies scholars, is the following: Modern concept of sciences and humanities got rid of the question about the meaning of life and of what contemporary scholars should believe. However it does not mean that we all as scholars and as human beings do no longer ask such questions and that in our disciplines we have no “seekers” of answers to these questions any more. My experience is that the study of religions is a very attractive discipline for many seekers. It is not unusual for the students of the study of religions to see themselves as people who came into the field to study various traditions in order to select the one most suitable for themselves or to combine elements of diverse traditions as they see fit. Because universities fully respect students’ rights for privacy, they do not ask for their motivation to study and do not know that they have come for
some a kind of spiritual supermarket. Therefore the study of religions in particular can be perceived as a space for doubts giving rise to suspicions that the academy is not only the space for intellectual and scientific interests, but also for personal quests of religious faith or of somebody’s world view. However, it cannot be prevented.

Unfortunately, in many Eastern European countries the study of religions as a subject is not included yet in the educational curricula of elementary and secondary schools; however, teaching “about” religions is a part of other subjects, such as Civic Education or Ethics. If it is, by chance, the courses are only optional. In the Czech Republic many school managements consider any particular religion, and likewise any scientific education “about” religions, as having no place at public schools. The paradox then is that each year many religious studies specialists graduate from secular universities (in the Czech Republic between 50 and 100 graduates annually) but they cannot find appropriate jobs in their field of study. In Poland, where the Catholic Church holds a dominant position among all churches, priests and catechists are preferred to teach religious education (teaching of religion) at elementary and secondary schools. In Slovakia the situation is generally similar. Simply, teaching “about” religions from a study of religions point of view has very little practical use in a religiously homogeneous society such as Poland or Slovakia. In the Czech Republic, any significant inclusion of the study of religions into elementary and secondary schools curricula is prevented by the general indifference (even hostility) towards religion as such, which is paralleled by a very low level of knowledge about religious issues; at best one can expect some scarce and disparate awareness about Christianity. People personally refuse religion/s and thus do not want to know anything about it/them. If the public is informed at all, it is usually via unqualified persons, “specialists” without qualification.

I am afraid that a long-lasting economic depression and the cutting of state budgets in many European countries will undoubtedly generate similar sorts of political questions: For what reasons should we as politicians financially support the humanities? What would be a politically adequate criterion for measuring their social usefulness and their results? What

would help us to reduce their increasing number?\textsuperscript{14} Will the study of religions, as a marginal discipline of humanities, be able to defend not only its own position within humanities but even its pure existence?

Let us again return to the question of what motivations religious studies scholars can have for applying certain theological (or humanistic) issues into their own research. Reflecting the situation in Central and Eastern Europe, I have noticed one particular trend in the activities of some scholars. The conscious absence of a special social function of the study of religions can lead to aspirations at using its findings in active inter-religious dialogue. Religious studies scholars very often participate in panels and discussions with representatives of various religions and contribute in their solution seeking processes. What motivates their efforts? Can the felt absence of a specific role of the discipline or humanist’s efforts be sufficient as an argument? Personally I disapprove of such involvement. As much as peace among religions is needed and desired, after all we have to ask the question whether scholars of the study of religions are really those able to reconcile disunited sides in an appropriate way. As needed as the peace among religions is, we still have to ask the cardinal question whether it should truly be religious studies scholars playing an active role at some round table of religions.

One of the reasons why they could be is the fact that the study of religions attempts to approach all religions indiscriminately and neutrally. That certainly is a good prerequisite. It would also allow the scholars to justify the discipline’s practical usefulness for society. A question remains whether religions, especially those which are not originally part of the European culture and which refuse a scientific study of religions, would welcome such an activity of secular science. On the other hand, let us suppose that individual religious traditions striving for inter-religious dialogue would invite religious studies scholars to participate in it – what should then be their specific task? If scholars are to fulfill the role of mediators among religions in conflict, who should initiate such a dialogue? Should the initiator be some academic or religious institution? However, to delegate scholars as judges or referees might be perceived as yet another arrogant ambition of science to make decisions about religious issues.

I hope that the task of the study of religions as an academic discipline is neither to create conditions for an inter-religious dialogue nor to initiate one. Inter-religious dialogue is, above all, a religious initiative, religious

\textsuperscript{14} Such questions are currently very frequent among politicians in the Czech Republic. In the Czech academia, significant apprehension about the future development can be felt, including concerns about the sole existence of study programs and departments. Because the study of religions in the Czech academy is a marginal discipline, such worries are, unfortunately, grounded.
activity that the study of religions as a science should certainly closely observe, critically study and analyze but should not take active part in. Our role as scholars is to be in touch with religions but not to be involved in religious endeavors. Active effort at inter-religious dialogue can be a specific example. After all, a true dialogue does not allow for keeping a distance. And scholars actively engaging in such a dialogue, which is a religious activity, can undoubtedly easily lose their scientifically detached, bird’s eye view. Thus I consider such endeavor misleading because it inconspicuously brings ideology inside the discipline.15

Judging from the situation of the study of religions in Central and Eastern Europe from both historical and contemporary perspectives, I cannot say that it is in thrall of some “universal cognitive proclivity” to religion. I would claim instead that human cognition in general is prone to universalism, i.e. to philosophical addressing of problems. But if science is to stay scientific, it cannot become a “project” to solve the existential questions of a scholar or of the academic community. If the study of religions is to protect itself effectively from such a fallacy, it must be wary of theology as well as of any attempts to changes into a philosophy (of religion); and these were numerous throughout the discipline’s history. I personally understand the study of religions as a “modest cognitive project”, as an empirical and descriptive field to which historical-philological method is central. As a philosopher with interests in the history of the field, I would dare to say that it must also be strongly anti-philosophical and it must not bring back meta-narrative theories and the spirit of the 19th century, I mean any attempt to create generally accepted theory.

At the very end, allow me a personal note. I asked Donald Wiebe during his and Luther Martin’s visit in Pardubice in February 2012 what he saw as the greatest problem of the field, he answered with a smile: “Money!” If he meant it seriously then the problem of ideological agendas present in the study of religions is not the first, but second, and that sounds more hopeful than the very beginning of our purely academic discussion.

15 T. Bubík, České bádání o náboženství ve 20. století..., 221-222.
SUMMARY

Rethinking the Relationship between the Study of Religions, Theology and Religious Concerns: A Response to Some Aspects of Wiebe and Martin’s Paper

This response deals with some aspects of Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe’s paper “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion”. The authors think that the human mind in general constantly tends towards religiousness and thus comprehensive scientific inquiry into religion is actually impossible. They argue that “such study is not ever likely to occur in that or any other setting” (p. 9). They also stress that they were deluded in the past and argue that especially (or only) the cognitive approach can help us to elucidate the proclivity towards religiousness. I partly agree with them, particularly that the promotion of “extra-scientific” agendas in Academia is questionable, but I do not see it as such a serious problem. The reduction of the biases to only “religious” agendas is mistaken. The history of the field is a history of diverse “extra-scientific” agendas which change in accordance with social development and prevailing political interests. I present the situation from a central and eastern European point of view. At the same time, I argue that many scientific fields deal with the same issue, even if not to such an extent. This is because religious studies, more than other disciplines, attracts scholars with a special inclination toward religion. I also argue that scholarly results are much more important than “personal” agendas. Also, the aspiration of religious studies as presented by Martin and Wiebe seems to me too idealistic, perhaps utopist and thus unrealizable.

Keywords: Study of Religions; theology; religious concerns; Central and Eastern Europe; ideology of humanities; politics of education; inter-religious dialogue.

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Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe have considerably enriched the theoretical discussion about religion during the past decades. When two distinguished scholars of religion proclaim in fatalistic words that evolution results in an inevitable contamination of the study of religion with religious beliefs, we may expect to learn some important lesson from such a provocative thesis. And when their article on “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion” \(^1\) comes in the format of a classical philosophical argumentation, with ‘conclusions’ that follow logically from ‘assumptions’ that are claimed “to have an initial plausibility” (p. 9), the reader may expect an important contribution to a rigorous scientific debate about religion. Unfortunately, their article does not fulfill such expectations, and much of the scientific rhetoric that steers Martin and Wiebe’s plot turns out to be problematic.

Let me begin with an observation. Often when I read articles or listen to presentations by scholars who advocate the cognitive study of religion (proudly called the ‘cognitive science of religion’) I am struck by the religious connotations that regularly underlie these narratives. In many cases, scholars who were trained in theology decades ago, present their ‘turn’ to cognitive study of religion in words that resemble conversion stories, marking a completely new (scholarly) identity. In their role as adepts of a new cult they have the tendency to preach the gospel and to distinguish clearly between in-group and out-group. The same connotation is apparent in Martin and Wiebe’s text. What is more, to frame their biographical narrative in a genre of “confession” (p. 9) is indicative of the mixture of religious and academic language that, interestingly enough, often characterizes programmatic publications in the field of cognitive study of religion.

This may be accounted for by a certain nostalgia when it comes to the topic of science (and now I turn from mere observation to arguments). Throughout their article, Martin and Wiebe refer to a scientific study of

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\(^1\) 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.
religion as something that would use the empirical methods of the natural sciences. That is why they can present the simple claim: “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” (p. 9, italics original). This claim is surprising given the fact that in Europe already at the beginning of the twentieth century Religionswissenschaft was established as an academic discipline in philosophical – and not theological – faculties, and practiced as a non-confessional study of religion. The study programs typically distinguished between a historical and a systematic (comparative) approach to the study of religion. Martin and Wiebe briefly refer to Müller and Tiele as the initial conceivers of this academic proposition but do not describe the historical development of the discipline that has characterized Religionswissenschaft as an independent academic field. It is too simple to state that by the middle of the twentieth century this ‘scientific’ initiative had been compromised by a “crypto-religious trend” and sabotaged by theological interests (p. 12-13). Their straw man is ‘religious studies’, which indeed is a problematic concept; but that the more accurate translation of Religionswissenschaft is ‘academic study of religion’, thus referring to a study that is not itself ‘religious’, does not seem to fit the authors’ overall polemical interest.

From the beginning, the academic study of religion has had to face the same challenges as other disciplines within the humanities, particularly historiography, anthropology, psychology, and (later on) cultural studies. The most important challenge of these disciplines is not to meet the empirical standards of the natural sciences, but to make scholarly research academically accountable, based on historical and logical argumentation. This is exactly what critical scholarship has been doing even before the cognitive ‘science’ of religion entered the scene. Today, the academic study of religion is mainly defined through its object of study, i.e. an historically identifiable – and I would argue discursively constructed – object called ‘religion’, and it applies methods and theories that are well established in neighboring disciplines (this becomes clear when we look at the collection of research methods in Engler and Stausberg). There is nothing intrinsically ‘religious’ in the study of religion, even though there are many departments of religion in Europe and particularly the United States where religious interests intersect with academic research – the

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reason for this, however, is not evolution or brain functions but politics, power, and discourse.

Hence, Martin and Wiebe underestimate (the potential of) the academic rigor of a critical study of religion. Their first assumption that the primary objective of “the modern western research university” is “scientific, that is, to gain public (intersubjectively available) knowledge of public (intersubjectively available) facts” (p. 9) perfectly fits the understanding of scholars who work in the context of cultural studies, historiography, and self-reflective critical humanities. Claiming that this scholarly endeavor has failed (and is evolutionarily doomed to fail!) is a gross simplification.

In Martin and Wiebe’s text, this underestimation of the study of religion goes along with an overestimation of the scholarly rigor of the natural sciences. To be sure, it is a recurring problem in the academic study of religion that we have to deal with “the actual reality of continuing infiltrations of extra-scientific agendas into the field” (p. 13). However, with this problem we are in good company! Other disciplines within the humanities have to confront this challenge, as well; but more importantly, the natural sciences themselves have been redefined and criticized in the wake of the philosophical, cultural, and discursive turns of the twentieth century. The historicity of knowledge in the natural sciences was already famously discussed by Ludwik Fleck.4 Edmund Husserl, Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem, and others have contributed to this debate and helped us to understand that it is not ‘nature’ that formulates natural laws but that ‘facts’ are produced in communicative and social processes.5 Martin and Wiebe do not seem to take notice of this critical scholarship and stick to a naïve image of the natural sciences that most historians of science would deconstruct today. They run into the trap that Russell T. McCutcheon aptly summarized recently as follows:

Since we can trace the history of “religion” and “religious experience” as items of discourse – and by this I mean a genealogical study of the invention of religious experience as an agreed upon subset of the broader range of interior dispositions known as experiences – it is indeed odd to find naturalistic scholars so confident that they will find where this discursive construct resides in the brain of all human beings.6

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4 Ludwik Fleck, Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache: Einführung in die Lehre vom Denkstil und Denkkollektiv, Basel: Benno Schwabe 1935.
Given their unreflective belief in science, it is not surprising that Martin and Wiebe construct another straw man, this time ‘postmodernism’: “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” (p. 10). Unfortunately, the authors do not explain what they mean by ‘postmodernism’, and there is no single reference to authors who would fit the taxonomy of “anti-theoretical and anti-science posturings”. As a matter of fact, critical responses to realism in the theory and philosophy of science are not at all directed against theory or science, quite the contrary: contributions from the field of sociology of knowledge and discursive approaches to the study of science are highly theorized reflections on the conditions of knowledge and the attribution of meaning to the world – including what is regarded as scientific object and fact.

Against the authors’ prejudices it seems necessary to point out once more that discursive approaches – and related theories deemed ‘postmodern’ by Martin and Wiebe – argue that our knowledge is not about ‘the world out there’ (even if the existence of ‘a world out there’ is not denied) and that we should adopt a relativist, rather than a realist position in the philosophical debate that is linked to these epistemological and ontological issues. The relativist position has led to many, often highly polemical objections. Derek Edwards, Malcolm Ashmore, and Jonathan Potter call the most prominent rejection the “Death and Furniture” response:

‘Death’ and ‘Furniture’ are emblems for two very common (predictable, even) objections to relativism. When relativists talk about the social construction of reality, truth, cognition, scientific knowledge, technical capacity, social structure and so on, their realist opponents sooner or later start hitting the furniture, invoking the Holocaust, talking about rocks, guns, killings, human misery, tables and chairs. The force of these objections is to introduce a bottom line, a bedrock of reality that places limits on what may be treated as epistemologically constructed or deconstructible. There are two related kinds of moves: Furniture (tables, rocks, stones, etc. – the reality that cannot be denied) and Death (misery, genocide, poverty, power – the reality that should not be denied).7

Martin and Wiebe contribute to this anti-relativist polemic. But their argument is itself under-theorized, which turns their critique of ‘postmod-

ernism’ against themselves. For instance, when their fifth assumption refers to the possibility of “scientific research on religious thought and behavior” (p. 10), a critical discursive response would point out that before we can have a scientific (rigorous and empirical) study of religion we will have to define what this “religious thought and behavior” actually is. And this act is not at all empirical, but hermeneutical. The scholarly attribution of meaning to certain human thought and behavior is based on social communication and decisions that scholars have to make to enter into a meaningful conversation with their colleagues. That is why Martin and Wiebe have to introduce what actually boils down to a definition of religion, in their case “a belief in agents that are beyond identification by way of the senses or scientific metric” (their second assumption, p. 9-10). The reasons for this assumption are beyond scientific argumentation, and Martin and Wiebe do not explain why this definition of ‘religion’ makes more sense than others. Don’t get me wrong: I am not arguing against the use of definitions and demarcations in scholarly argumentation. But all definitions and assumptions have a discursive history that critical scholarship should reflect and analyze (this is especially true for the highly problematic concept of ‘belief’ in definitions of religion, but that is another story); what I argue is that generic definitions of religion, such as applied by Martin and Wiebe, should be abandoned and we as scholars should be careful not to generalize and reify findings that are based on discursively constructed knowledge. Otherwise we would shun “questions concerned with the apparent ease of moving from part to whole, from contingent to necessary, from history to ahistory, from local to universal, and from culture to nature”.

As a final point of criticism it is important to note that Martin and Wiebe’s argumentation appears to be self-contradictory. When the authors claim that “[o]ur species’ anti-science proclivity is as true of professional scholars of religion as of other intellectuals, perhaps especially so, given their subject of study” (p. 16), one wonders why the authors assume that scholars who engage in cognitive research are an exception to that rule, as they apparently resist the anti-science proclivity. This is linked to another inconsistency: When the authors claim that “religiousness will continue to

constrain the academic study of religion even as it will continue to dominate the concerns of *Homo sapiens* generally” (p. 14), one wonders why ‘science’ – which the authors, with McCauley, regard as ‘unnatural’ (p. 14-15) – became possible in the first place. I cannot escape the impression that if we really would accept the premises of this article, the propositions concluded from them would be meaningless and logically flawed. The narrative would simply be another example of the prolongation of the delusion that the authors lament.

Reading Martin and Wiebe’s meditations about the “persistence of a delusion” is somewhat disappointing. Many of the assumptions are unwarranted, and the argumentation that is built on these assumptions is problematic, as it mainly reflects an uncritical belief in the success of scientific methods, as well as polemical misrepresentations of scholarship that the authors deem ‘postmodern’.
SUMMARY

Straw Men and Scientific Nostalgia: A Response to Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe

This article argues that Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe present a position that is based on many unwarranted and romantic assumptions. To begin with, the authors underestimate the potential of the academic rigor of a critical study of religion. This underestimation of the study of religion goes along with an overestimation of the scholarly rigor of the natural sciences. Martin and Wiebe do not seem to take notice of critical scholarship in the historiography and epistemology of science and stick to a naïve image of the natural sciences that most historians of science would deconstruct today. The authors have written a polemic against relativist positions in the humanities, but their argument is itself undertheorized, which turns their critique of ‘postmodernism’ against themselves. Finally, it is noted that Martin and Wiebe’s argumentation appears to be self-contradictory. For instance, when the authors claim that the human species’ anti-science proclivity is as true of professional scholars of religion as of other intellectuals, one wonders why the authors assume that scholars who engage in cognitive research are an exception to that rule, as they apparently resist the anti-science proclivity.

Keywords: Luther H. Martin; Donald Wiebe; method and theory in the study of religion; definitions of religion; cognitive study of religion; discursive study of religion; natural sciences; relativism.

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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. 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 “assumptional” 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, 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

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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.
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.
\(^5\) Ibid., 21.
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 ‘superhuman beings’”. 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?”. Precisely, we maintain, a legitimating appeal to the authority of superhuman agency. His alternative appeal to the use of metaphors and metonyms in the construction of religious worlds has, of course, also been explored by cognitivists. However, Hödl’s espousal of Melford Spiro’s “definition” of religion, similar to ours, which hangs onto “culturally postulated super-human beings”, 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 criticism 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, and we defer further comment on it until we respond to von Stuckrad’s similar criticism.

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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.
13 Ibid., 20.
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 so\(^{17}\) – 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.\(^{20}\)

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16 Ibid., 30 (emphasis added).
17 Ibid., 31 (emphasis added).
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

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22 Ibid., 35.
23 Ibid.
implication, a metaphysical naturalism. 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, and, as Max Weber put it, a refusal to invoke mysterious and incalculable forces in our explanations. 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. 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. 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”.

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.
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.
31 Ibid., 31.
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

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-

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.

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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