

Past, Present, and Future in the Scientific Study of Religion: Introduction

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The study of religion today constitutes an academic field that incorporates thousands of scholars dedicated to describing, comparing, interpreting and explaining religious beliefs and practices. Although the first academic (non-confessional) religious studies departments did not appear in the Western world until the second half of the twentieth century, the academic study of religion already started formally in the nineteenth century with the work of such scholars as F. Max Müller, Edward B. Tylor, and James G. Frazer. Müller clearly envisioned a Comparative Religion, where scholars borrowed key theories and methods from comparative linguistics, philology, history, and philosophy. Religiosity was to be viewed as a widespread human phenomenon that manifested itself culturally into diverse beliefs and behaviors. Intellectualists like Tylor and Frazer argued that religious beliefs and behaviors were a way in which pre-modern, pre-scientific cultures expressed an explanation about the physical environment. As Müller was a philologist, he favored linguistic and historical sources, while anthropologists like Tylor and Frazer preferred different patterns of cultural expression (proto-ethnography). Soon thereafter, towering figures in other disciplines attempted to provide their own explanations of religious phenomena. William James and Sigmund Freud provided psychological-philosophical accounts of religion; Max Weber studied it from an economic perspective; while another sociologist, Émile Durkheim, provided his own influential analysis of religion.

One thing that the above scholars have in common is that each one of them is among the founding fathers of their own disciplines as well as the study of religion, which is indicative of the multi-disciplinary nature of the field. Another thing they have in common is that they all argued for a scientific study of religion. These two tendencies are characteristic of the academic study of religion, which incorporates vastly different perspectives of its subject matter while, as opposed to theology, relying on evidence rather than belief.

In March 2012, the Laboratory for the Experimental Study of Religion (LEVYNA) and the Department for the Study of Religions at Masaryk University hosted a conference to assess the development of the scientific study of religion, its past, present, and future. The field has undergone vast changes since the time of Müller and Tylor, including the movement away

from intellectualist approaches to social, functional, symbolic, structural, postmodernist, and cognitivist movements. Although each school exists in some capacity today in the modern study of religion, the paradigm that appears to have flourished in the mainstream of Religious Studies and Anthropology combines the social and symbolic¹ under a Durkheimian paradigm. The work of Émile Durkheim and his students transformed the intellectualists' view of cultural explanation (later coined rationality) into a world of symbols shared by individuals into a social reality. From the writings of Durkheim's student, Robert Hertz, even physical realities of biology needed to be subsumed and controlled by the collective voice of culture.² Social anthropologist Mary Douglas saw these culturally bound properties of controlling the biological and physical world as "natural symbols".³ As social, "meaning making creatures", humans have not only the capacity but also the compulsion to create webs of complex meaning that we call culture.⁴ In fact, as Douglas points out, humans are natural ontologists, and categorization is crucial to understand the human realm of meaning and meaning-making. Dirt in a location that is supposed to be clean presents a problem for most humans. Although the location may be different in each cultural environment, these locations must be demarcated from other locations. Even more importantly, the human capacity to represent agency and ontological shifting (for example a cockroach) into the environment causes humans to react quite strongly to any agent/object that causes ontologies to blur or even collapse. Dirt is bad enough in the kitchen, but "crawling dirt" like an insect causes most humans to find disgust as an environmental danger. However, staying true to Durkheimian social theory, the means by which humans explain such emotional or functional reactions (to the blurring of the ontology) requires cultural semantic meaning and meaning-making processes. This is often the vehicle for religiosity in the human environment.⁵

1 See Maurice Bloch, "Durkheimian Anthropology and Religion: Going in and out of Each Other's Bodies", in: Harvey Whitehouse – James Laidlaw (eds.), *Religion, Anthropology, and Cognitive Science*, Durham: Carolina Academic Press 2007, 63-80; and also Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2004.

2 Robert Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, London: Routledge 2006.

3 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London – New York: Routledge 2002; ead., *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, London – New York: Routledge 2003.

4 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books 1977; William W. McCorkle Jr., *Ritualizing the Disposal of the Deceased: From Corpse to Concept*, New York: Peter Lang 2010.

5 See Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*, New York: Basic Books 2002.

Of course, Durkheim and the social/symbolic perspective is not the only paradigm available to the scholar of religion. Some have adopted a post-modern/post-structural view in which religion is used to unpack the dialectical nature of human interaction. This is the world of viewing second-order types of “religion” and interpreting the world of agent interactions and relationships of power, or relationships that express underlying cultural possibilities. Typically defined as the ideological paradigm (although the uniformity of such a movement is problematic), researchers are less interested in religion as a domain of human belief and behavior than they are about teasing out meanings. Just as in the intellectual shift from intellectualist/evolutionary to sociological schools of thought, which involved changing from diachronic to synchronic reasoning, postmodern scholars are interested in synchronic forms of cultural meaning and relationships of power, just as in linguistics parts of a sentence can only be known in relationship to other components of the sentence. After all, what does it mean if one culture says, “I am riding the horse today”, as opposed to “the horse is running with me today”? These seemingly trivial differences in speech signify different properties of interconnection, and these properties are of particular importance because they expose relations between signifier and signified. They often expose relationships of unequal value, relationships of power. The domain of the synchronist is rarely interested in explaining the data, even though explaining is a type of interpretation. Nevertheless, in the synchronist’s worldview the parts of the cultural syntax are in constant flux, because relationships are always dialectic in nature. Because of this ebb and flow, synchronists prefer social and cultural constructionism as their *modus operandi*. Individual agents are not the actors involved in the creation of dialectical relations; in fact they are mainly seen as objects forced into agency by the cultural web of relationships of power. Although there are strong voices in the academic study of “religion in culture”, the agenda tends not to be interested in explaining the capacity or the reasons for religiosity; it rather tends to concentrate on the consistent dialectical nature of the enculturation of human actors and agency.

On the other hand, there has been a strong move towards a diachronic view within the framework of neo-Darwinian scholars, who are interested in the adaptive functions (if any) of religion and the evolved capacities of the human mind that make religious beliefs and behaviors possible and compelling. As the cognitive revolution advanced a more positivist view of human behavior, the cognitive science of religion looked at the proximate mechanisms that constrain human mental activity to explain the evolutionary features of human belief and behavior into an associative paradigm of methodological empiricism. After its inception in the late

1970s and early 1980s, the cognitive science of religion experienced slow but steady growth and theoretical refinement until the turn of the century, followed by explosive expansion and a move from mere theorizing to empirical hypothesis-testing over the last decade, including experimental studies both in the laboratory and in the field.⁶ In 2011, LEVYNA (Laboratory for the Experimental Research of Religion) became the world's first institute exclusively dedicated to this experimental paradigm in the study of religion.

In March 1-3, 2012, LEVYNA brought together in Brno three leading figures of the scientific study of religion. Donald Wiebe, Luther H. Martin, and E. Thomas Lawson were the keynote speakers of a conference on the "Past, Present, and Future in the Scientific Study of Religion" and reflected on recent paradigms in the field. As the primary scholars involved in the creation of the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR), they provided in their plenary talks and discussions with other presenters at the conference a thorough evaluation and analysis in regard to the conference theme. Each plenary presentation approached the state of the academic study of religion from a different vantage point. Luther H. Martin discussed the major influence that history has played in the evolution of Religious Studies and the current interface between new emerging theories and cognitive historiography; Donald Wiebe gave a positive but critical review of a Religious Studies paradigm still trying to escape the grip of theological underpinnings and anti-scientific sentiment found in the major associations and scholarship in the mainstream; and E. Thomas Lawson made the case (via the jovial title "How to Create a Religion") that the cognitive and evolutionary sciences were the most relevant vehicles to study religiosity comparatively and scientifically. Lawson, in agreement with Martin and Wiebe, further argued that the "zoo" model still in use by most departments of religion greatly reduced the advancement of academic and scientific studies of religion because it lacked the capacity to explore the connection between cognition and culture.

Wiebe, Martin and Lawson all implicitly, if not explicitly, agreed that history and anthropology still have roles to play in a comparative and academic science of religion; however, the rise of experimental methods meant that scholars of religion needed to take seriously methodological advances to examine the data sets which their disciplinary expertise and specialization provided. Furthermore, unlike previous conferences in tra-

6 Dimitris Xygalatas, "Cognitive Science of Religion", in: David A. Leeming – Kathryn Madden – Stanton Marlan (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, New York: Springer, forthcoming.



ditional Religious Studies, Martin and Wiebe provided a positive assessment that new branches in the academic study of religion (specifically centers based in Aarhus, Belfast, Oxford, Vancouver, and Brno) provided the catalyst via funding, institutional support, and training for students and postdocs that represented an ongoing paradigm shift in the study of religion, large and successful enough to gain momentum for a new type of Religious Studies. Lawson furthered that the cognitive science of religion provided the framework for such collaboration and shift of intellectual re-discovery and academic paradigms.

It is important to note that none of the plenary speakers questioned the relevance or usefulness of any of the above-mentioned intellectual endeavors. In fact, it was clear that all intellectual movements (intellectualist, sociological, symbolic, structural, ideological, cognitivist, and so on) have a role to play in a comparative and scientific academic study of religion (and culture in general). Nevertheless, the cognitive science of religion was a return to the desires set by Max Müller, Edward Tylor and Émile Durkheim (as well as other contemporaries), who advanced the notion of a (social) science based upon models of the natural and linguistic sciences. Although some current groups and individuals reject that humanistic disciplines can be scientific, clearly comparative disciplines based upon scientific principles are possible in the study of religion. Current research projects like that of LEVYNA and the Brno conference are evidence for this very point.



SUMMARY

Past, Present, and Future in the Scientific Study of Religion: Introduction

The study of religion is by its nature and by its history multi-disciplinary, incorporating diverse research paradigms ranging from historiography to experimental approaches and from scientific positivism to postmodern reflection. At a conference on the *Past, Present, and Future in the Scientific Study of Religion* (Brno, March 1-3, 2012), the keynote speakers provided an assessment of the field of religious studies. While they agreed on the relevance of traditional methods (in particular those coming from history and anthropology) for the study of religion, the speakers also stressed the contribution of new research paradigms such as cognitive, evolutionary, and experimental approaches, which have rejuvenated the discipline by calling attention to a much neglected but certainly fundamental aspect of human culture (the mind) and bringing methodological rigour that is often lacking in the humanities. The Laboratory for the Experimental Research of Religion in Brno, who hosted this conference, is the product of these developments

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