

The Fate of Religious Studies

The future of an illusion

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...what we call religion in anthropology is a rag bag of loosely connected elements, without an essence or core.

Maurice Bloch (Bloch, 2007: 77)

The study of religion is as haphazard a discipline as they come. Since the inception of the comparative study of religion, or Religionswissenschaft, over hundred and some odd years ago, scholars interested in a "science" of religion have failed to agree on a basic definition for their endeavor. From Freidrich Max Müller's "Nature Worship" to Edward Tylor's "Supernatural Beings" to Emile Durkheim's theory of the social, definitional problems have plagued scholars and the field of religious studies in general.

Now it is generally assumed by many in the religious studies field that the study of religion is as much a product of the history of the study as the actual phenomena "religion" itself (Masuzawa, 2005; McCutcheon, 2003; Sharp, 1986; Smith, 2004). By in large this has lead to three distinctive methodologies for a "science" of religion that operate at the academic level. First, is at the level of explaining religion as a mode of a special type of experience, expressed in variant cultural forms (Eliade, 1965; Eliade & Sheed, 1996; Otto & Harvey, 1958). Second, is at the level of explaining religion by the methodology that constructs the phenomena itself, or the "Standard Social Scientific Method" of religion (psychology frames religion in psychological terms, sociology in sociological terms etc.). Third, is what is considered the anthropological approach, which views religion as a heuristic at best and a "junk box" at worst of cultural ideas, behaviors, and artifacts.

All of these approaches have their supporters and critics; however, almost none of them have claimed them as "scientific," at least in the regards to the natural sciences (i.e. physics, chemistry, and biology). Instead, as Clifford

Geertz argues the study of culture (and by analogy religion), is "not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz, 1973: 5). Many in all three of the above methodologies of religion borrow, beg, or steal from Geertz and other hermeneutic, interpretive enterprises. Nevertheless, scholars should take F. Max Müller's dictum for a science of religion (obviously realizing the positivism of such an endeavor) extremely serious, for one of the main problems in the study of religion is the scholar's willingness to allow the phenomena of religion certain transcendent qualities.

Two scholars in recent years have made extremely salient arguments for the scientific study of religion. Donald Wiebe, on the one hand, has made a zealous effort to critically examine the modern academic study of religion and identify many of the pitfalls and shortcomings along with the explicit and implicit theologies that exist within the field at large. Wiebe argues that we must extremely careful to allow religious studies to become mere theology (in disguise) (Wiebe, 1992), while at the same time being critical that religion may not be reducible to lower levels of analysis (i.e. neuro-anatomy, biology, and chemistry) (Wiebe, 2006). For Wiebe there isn't a god gene, god part of the brain, just as much as there is no science where a priori theological commitments are made.

On the other hand, Russell McCutcheon (a former student of Wiebe) has taken on the daunting task of identifying "hidden theologies" in the social scientific model, called the history of religions (McCutcheon, 2003). McCutcheon has coined the study of religion as "manu-

factured" phenomena by academics. Along with J.Z. Smith, McCutcheon has identified "religion" as the product of academic "discourse" within the history of the field (Smith even going so far as to say that there is no such thing as religion outside of the academic conversation) (Smith, 2004: 362-374). Furthermore, McCutcheon (2003) argues that the history of religions, as it presently is constructed is a manufactured discipline with very hidden theological goals and implications.

The influence of Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade can't be underestimated in McCutcheon's thesis. Students, especially of Eliade, were extremely successful in acquiring prominent academic posts in Religious Studies over the last forty plus years. Although, the history of religions appears to wane in employment opportunities and in departmental sub-fields for other specialties like area studies and religion and culture, Eliade and Otto's profound influence is still felt in the mainstream field of Religious Studies, especially as it pertains to the phenomenology of religions (experience, emic based studies) and the history of religions (methodological based study of religions).

Many of the problems with the "Manufactured" study of religion are that scholars remain without a core methodology that unites religious studies as a discipline. Rather Religious Studies utilizes many methodologies from other disciplines (e.g. sociology, linguistics, ethnography, and history to name but a few); however, Religious Studies as a discipline doesn't appear to have its own voice as a methodology, only a topic of interest -Religion.

This also exposes certain problems within the academic construct of Religious Studies as well. Many in Religious Studies departments do not – explicitly at least- share a common topic of interest or theory on what religion, or for that matter the study of religious phenomena is. Examples taken from North America where departments typically have biblical/textual scholars, linguists, area studies (religions of Japan, China, and India), Islam (which at many times appears to be able to transcend disciplinary models), Indigenous cultures/anthropology, and theory and method positions, all suggest no underlying feature for the phenomena of religion. In fact Religious Studies,

perhaps more than any other departments in the Arts and Sciences, is a discipline without topical clarity as well as methodological commitment. Some might argue that history (above all) has provided the best "crane" theory (Dawkins, 2006: 155, 158; Dennett, 1996) for the study of religion; however, as post-colonialist and those interested in dialectical critical theory of religion and culture suggest this methodology has inherent problems associated with Western intellectual construction (some might say intellectual imperialism) and positivism (Cho & Squier, 2008a, 2008b).

Though I agree with many of the post-colonialist points on this matter, reduction is always a form of science, even if it is "violent" intellectual imperialism. Although it would seem probable that philosophers of science could entertain the notion of "other" models of "scientific" expression that are non-Western models. In fact as philosopher of science, Robert McCauley, has argued the science of religion must contain reduction, science as a methodology is reduction to basic laws, mechanisms, and types that are dependent on different levels of analysis (i.e. socio-cultural, psychological, biological, and physical) (McCauley, 2007, 1996). Very few scholars in the cognitive science of religion believe that "religion" is simply reducible to biology or physics. Some religious beliefs and behaviors might be reducible to the evolved cognitive architecture, but certainly not all the beliefs and behaviors associated with "Religion."

One inherent problem with the "reduction thesis" proffered by post-colonial cultural theorists toward scientific studies of religion is that the category/discipline/field "religion" is itself a "reduction." As Harvey Whitehouse has argued religion is a collection of beliefs and behaviors that "we" as scholars throw out like a "hoola-hoop" to catch religion as a cluster of phenomena (Whitehouse, 2008). Whitehouse is clear that "religion" can be whatever we agree to define it as (Whitehouse, 2004b: 230). Moreso, Whitehouse argues that what scholars really study are various cultural phenotypes or modes of religiosity, where (implicitly at least) in Whitehouse's argument, is the possibility that scholars might liberate themselves from the inherent problems, in regard to the history of

the study of religion by critically examining behavioral clusters (associated with religiosity) and the mental systems involved in their transmission (Whitehouse, 2004a, 2007).

Whitehouse's argues forcefully that cognitive and evolutionary methodologies, along with critical studies in regards to ethnography, archaeology, and history provide the best (as of now) theory for a unifying methodology in the scientific study of religion (Whitehouse & Laidlaw, 2004, 2007a; Whitehouse & Martin, 2004). In the words of Richard Dawkins (2006), a weak scientific (crane) theory borrowed from another discipline like biology (that utilizes natural selection and the theory of evolution) is still better than a weaker theory that relies on metaphysics and fuzzy terms like "experience."

Recently Whitehouse and James Laidlaw (2007a) debated on the methodological role of cognitive science and its place in the study of religion and culture. Laidlaw argues that cognitive science already has a topic of interest, cognition (26). Laidlaw remains skeptical on the explanatory power of the cognitive sciences of religion and culture. Nevertheless, Whitehouse remains more optimistic. He proffers the idea that cognitive methodologies can be incorporated into existing classical theories, especially in regards to anthropological studies. Whitehouse's argument is compelling in that cognitive science and evolutionary approaches might be the strongest crane theory for the study of culture (and by extension religion), since the methodologies of history and ethnography were established over a hundred years ago.

Recently, Luther Martin proffers that history and cognition are interdependent upon each other. Martin offers that "By bringing... neurophysiology into history, we also bring history to neurophysiology....the new science of the brain cannot make sense without history" (Martin, 2008: 20; Smail, 2008: 201-202). This brings up an interesting point for the study of religion. Why would cultural experts be so wary of cognitive methodologies in study of religion? Unless, cultural experts believe that human minds are really like blank slates (Pinker, 2002) how can the study of any cultural phenomena be completely void of human minds? When ethnographers go into the field to

describe cultural events, part of their interpretive endeavor relies upon human minds and the transmission of culture. Culture is then at some level The Extended Mind (public representations). Historians are no different, theorizing historical events almost always relies on the historian unpacking the available data and picking the more plausible explanation from weaker ones.

Historians spend a great deal of energy trying to (re)construct what happened at a past event in history. Many times scholars try to imagine via comparative historical analysis what an individual or society thought and how this thought influenced behavior and belief. However, taking Todd Lewis' concept of "The Domestication of the Text" seriously, almost all (if not all) historical reconstructions are always informed by the present world of the historian (Lewis, 2000 165-180). So, the historian constructs the past into a horizontal (synchronic) material portrait that speaks volumes of the present, rather than the past. Those scholars interested in the hermeneutic endeavor have always known this. However, hermeneutics are not the entire picture of historical knowledge and the transmission of history.

Historical knowledge has also played an important role in the academic study of religion (Religionswissenschaft). History has provided one of the best methodologies for the study of religion over the last hundred years or more. From linguistics to textual and area studies, many scholars in the field of Religious Studies pay particular attention to the hermeneutic stance of the construction of history; however, very little attention (until recently) is paid to how history is transmitted vertically (generation to generation). Dan Sperber (1996) argues that representations are spread epidemiologically. Like viruses, representations replicate, transmit, and survive based upon natural selection pressures related to their host (humans) and their environment. For Sperber, humans are hospitable for some memes because human beings are good at making "meaning out of almost anything" at will (McCorkle Jr., 2007: 89). Sperber coins this theory relevance.

Relevance is the theory that humans make meaning using a complex cognitive process that connects representations into symbols (Sperber,

1975) and therefore, post hoc meanings are attached to these meta-representations (Sperber, 1996: 71-72, 146-150, 2000). Therefore, representations stand a good probability of replication, but the down side is that they mutate often (Dawkins, 2006: 191-201). This is obviously the opposite in genetic transmission. Sometimes, however, according to biologist Richard Dawkins, some representations (memes) become "selfish" and spread without any concern for their host (Dawkins, 1976). Dan Dennett argues that this feature known as the selfish meme (in this case religious memes) spreads throughout a given host population at will, without immunity (Dennett, 2008). It has survived selective pressures and become an epidemic in the evolutionary pool of representations. Selfish memes become epidemics until their hosts become immune to them. However, sometimes certain types of memes re-occur throughout human history and become epidemics again. Many times this epidemic is due to the hospitable world of the host, the human mind.

History operates in much the same way. Historical facts (if we can call them that) are analogous to memes (or memplexes) (Blackmore, 1999: 19-20). Out of the billions and billions of possible representations, historians pick and chose the most select, the more fit of the group. Historians in some ways become part of the environmental selective pressures because they pick the fit memes from the weak memes in the pool of ideas. Moreover, the memes that are selected for by historians are not just facts, but more relevant historical phenotypes that win out over weaker, less plausible ones.

Meme theory has generally worked at a level of The Extended Phenotype (Dawkins, 1982); meaning memes like genes are selfish. Contrary to human individuality and social theory (vis-à-vis Durkheimian sociology) selfish memes and genes utilize human hosts to travel the variable paths of evolution to survive, transmit, and replicate without regards for human survival. It just so happens that these genes and memes have allowed complex organisms –in this case humans- to co-evolve because they simple need us to travel the evolutionary superhighway. Every once in

awhile, memes go as selfish as to cause harm to their host (like genes that mutate and cause cancer), eventually destroying their vehicle for survival.

History is dependent upon this meme theory because all historians have modern human brains and the individuals that they study typically are humans. The transmission of historical cognition is simply possible because of this epidemiological feature. It would be very difficult to try to tease out what ants think, much less try to figure out what ants were thinking three thousand years ago when they built anthills that utilized trees and animal bones in their construction. Human historians and their subjects typically share one major feature in common, the evolved mind.

Cognitive Archaeologist, Steven Mithen, has traced the material remains of humans over the last several hundred thousand years to argue that humans have developed an evolved cognitive fluidity out of specialized systems of the brain that were designed to perform certain functions (Mithen, 1996). Mithen, using the theory of John Tooby and Leda Cosmides (Barkow et al., 1992), argues that the mind is analogous to a "Swiss army knife" where most animals have special tools to handle specific behavioral functions. An example might be the knife on the Swiss army knife. The knife is designed to cut things. You could use the knife to pound on objects like a hammer, but you would soon realize that it wouldn't work very well, it might break, or you might give up the enterprise entirely; therefore, the knife is a very simple tool to perform a very specific function. However, the magnifying glass on a Swiss army knife is quite a different story. The magnifying glass is designed to magnify small objects. Nevertheless, it also can magnify sunlight to help start a fire. To use this tool involves at least two steps to get the desired result. First the tool is made to magnify things; here this involves the sun. Second, the individual uses the tool to create another tool, fire. So, the knife like our minds evolved out of simple and complex tools (or in regards to mental systems) to handle certain functions.

The magnifying glass tool is analogous to a certain mental system called the Intuitive Psychological System, or more commonly known

as Theory of Mind. Theory of Mind is a social intelligence cognitive system that informs individuals about inferences about another agent's intentions, emotions, and psychological state. In other words, I know that Suzie is mad at me. I could be completely wrong about my inference that Suzie is mad at me; however, this psychological inference is an important step for human social interaction and cooperation. Contrary to some social theories, individuals have evolved a social intelligence to bond together in groups. Groups (and culture for that matter) do not simply socialize us as blank slates (Pinker, 2002). Theory of Mind is also an exciting mental tool because in humans it allows us to hold strategic social information about multiple inferences from multiple individuals in a group. This is known as The Gossip Hypothesis (Dunbar et al., 2005). Gossip exists in every human culture on Earth. By making the inference that Susie is mad at me because John told her that I said something bad about her because he is jealous is an important piece of socially strategic information. Imagine if I needed John's help for hunting prey in the ancestral environment. John might just assume that he is better off letting me get eaten by the animal, rather than cooperating with me to catch the food. He is after all (hypothetically) in competition with me for Susie's affection.

Theory of mind is important because humans appear to be able to make multiple inferences on the intentional states of other agents (humans or other agents). John (1) wants Suzie to be in (2) love with him; so, he (3) believes the best way to get rid of me is to tell Suzie that I (4) love someone else. Apparently, humans are extremely gifted at processing four to six levels of Theory of Mind in any given situation. Other animals do not appear to have the capacity for this (human) complex social intelligence. Homo sapiens, according to Mithen (1996), evolved this mental system in reaction to environmental selection pressures, specifically bi-pedalism, the dropping of the voice box, the ability to produce complex patterns of phonemes, group size, complex tool making, and size of the neo-cortex to list a few. All of these important evolutionary steps were crucial to human cognitive fluidity. This fluidity is the connection between the mind of the

historian and the mind of the subjects s/he studies.

The transmission of relevant historical knowledge presupposes that the historian can "get into" the mind of the subjects s/he studies to make certain inferences about why the historical actions took place, but also the why question is important because humans may be natural teleologists (Dawkins, 2006: 181). If we have a design, we want to know the designer and we want to know the intention behind the design. Here historical change is the design; a subject caused something to happen. The historian analyzes all the relevant data on the period, the biography of the subjects involved, and the modern theoretical insights on the relevant topic of interest. So, the historian is not only interested in when the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity (if he really did at all), but why he converted to Christianity. Did he have a revelation? Did he do it for political purposes? What were the social, cultural, and environmental factors that shaped his decision? Or was this a later invention by biographical redactors of Constantine? All of these inferences by the historian are made possible by the evolved architecture of human minds, especially Theory of Mind. Without it, humans wouldn't be able to create history, much less study it.

In conclusion, the cognitive science of religion provides another major crane for Religious Studies. Like ethnography, history, and archaeology, the cognitive sciences might provide a sound testable methodological way to study, critique, interpret, and explain why billions of people around the world participate in special behaviors that some might call religious. Religious Studies in principle could be unified by a method; however, religion would not be unified by definitional problems that still plague the field.

The future for the scientific study of religion is by most accounts, an illusion created by the "special" properties religion contains (i.e. it walks and quacks like a duck, so, it must be a duck). Nevertheless, without a methodology of its own, Religious Studies will most likely never be taken seriously by the rest of the intellectual community. Until scholars liberate the study of religion from hidden theological enterprises,

weak methodologies, and problematic discourse there will never be a science of religion; thus, making the study of religiosity in its many forms reducible to other departmental paradigms (i.e. Literature, Linguistics, History, and Anthropology). Research going on now at many major universities around the world may provide

evidence for the need for a cognitive "science" of religion (Whitehouse & Laidlaw, 2007b: 13). The future of Religious Studies as a science and field of study is, therefore, an illusion at present. Nevertheless, cognitive and evolutionary approaches lend themselves for a future for the scientific study of religion.

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