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Appropriating Religion

Understanding Religion as an Object of Science[1]

I want to begin by saying I consider it an honour to address this conference devoted to the methodology of the Study of Religion. And I would like to thank the Finnish Society for the Study of Comparative Religion and the Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History for the invitation to be here and for making arrangements to permit further analysis and debate of the methodological problems of our field. I must admit, however, that as I prepared for participation in these discussions I had second thoughts because I am not myself actively engaged in the kinds of scientific studies of religious phenomena to which participants in this conference have been asked to give attention. I am not a historian of religions; nor am I an anthropologist, sociologist, psychologist, phenomenologist, or cognitive scientist. I am, rather, only a philosopher of religion, and it occurred to me that for reasons of intellectual integrity I ought perhaps to withdraw my initial acceptance to participate. Before airing my concerns in this regard, however, I took time to re-read the proceedings of the first Turku conference on methods in the study of religion, edited by Lauri Honko (1979), to see if I might find some justification for my involvement after all. My concern in this regard, I was happy to discover, was sufficiently mitigated by C. J. Bleeker's observation at Turku 1973 "that the average historian of religions should abstain from speculations about matters of method which can only adequately be solved by students of philosophy and of philosophy of religion" (1979: 176). But this, unfortunately, presented me with a further problem. In a subsequent review of the proceedings of that conference I expressed surprise that in fact no philosophers of religion or

[1] I wish to thank Tom Settle for his critical comments on earlier drafts of this paper and to Luther Martin who took it upon himself to comment on several drafts. I also thank Martha Cunningham for her generous editorial assistance.

philosophers of science had been invited to participate; and I ventured hastily that "[i]f progress is to be made in our methodological discussion [of this field] this oversight must surely be corrected" (Wiebe 1980: 633). Furthermore, I had been disappointed that the results of the conference did not provide the kind of framework for the study of religion which would allow it to take its place among the other sciences. It appeared to me, therefore, that arriving in Turku for the current conference I might be expected—at least by those who could recall my rather presumptuous comments—to be able to suggest some resolution to our methodological problems. Indeed, for a time I expected this of myself, and fearing utter failure I was tempted to withdraw from the conference—although by that time it was too late to admit to having cold feet. Fortunately, I was reassured about the propriety of my participation when I recognized that despite approving Bleeker's general call for involvement of the philosopher I had expressed reservation about his suggestion that our problems could be resolved by the student of philosophy alone. And, incidentally, I should admit that I have already published a few methodological essays which fall short of resolving our central problems; nevertheless there might be some merit in approaching the issue from yet another angle.

It is, then, as a student of philosophy—a generalist of sorts—that I enter the conversation here this week. I shall present for discussion and debate proposals for action which I hope will make a positive contribution to the discipline. I will not focus attention on specific techniques or procedures in any one of the disciplines (or subdisciplines) of the field of Religious Studies *qua* academic undertaking, but will instead concern myself with the need for a clear understanding of the framework of assumptions and presuppositions of such academic techniques and procedures—a framework left undefined if not taken for granted in most of our discussions. In other words, I shall direct my attention to the study of religion as a scientific project, for it is the scientific interest in religion which has constituted the grounds for admitting the study of religion into the curriculum of the modern Western university. Despite that academic legitimation, however, the study of religion in the setting of the modern research university is not held in high esteem relative to the other sciences. This, I have suggested elsewhere (1984), is due to a "failure of nerve" on the part of those who succeeded Max Müller and C. P. Tiele, the founders of the science of religion;[2] their successors

[2] I have made a case for Müller and Tiele as founders of the modern Science of Religion in separate essays; see Wiebe 1995; Wiebe 1996.

failed to follow through on that nineteenth-century scientific agenda for the study of religion by rejecting its implicit reductionism, and they have espoused instead a return to a so-called scholarly approach which substitutes understanding religion for explaining religious phenomena—the former being arguably humanistic in intent and therefore more gentle than the latter in affirming the value of religion. Such an approach, that is, appropriates religion for the benefit of self and society and to the detriment of academic advancement. I argue here, therefore, that if the scientific study of religion is to be legitimately ensconced in the modern research university, the notion of religion will have to be wholly appropriated by science; only then will we be able to establish a conceptual foundation from which to make valid knowledge claims about religion on a level commensurate with the pronouncements of the natural and social sciences. Indeed, to go one step further, given the hold on the concept of religion by those committed to the humanistic study of religion, we might need to talk here not of the appropriation but of expropriation of religion by science—that is, of wresting ownership of the concept from the humanists by using it solely as a taxonomic device to differentiate and explain a peculiar range of human behaviour demonstrated in religious practices.

It may be surprising to some that I invoke the notion of appropriation from Robert Friedman's history of the development of modern meteorology in the early decades of this century. But I turn to Friedman's account in my attempt today to propose a methodological framework for the study of religion because an understanding of the work of Vilhelm Bjerknes in the construction of modern meteorology by, as he puts it, "appropriating the weather," may be of assistance to us in defining our own task. According to Friedman, Bjerknes established a new foundation for atmospheric science by moving beyond the purely empirical method of "statistical-climatological understanding dominant since the late nineteenth century" to the larger theoretical " dynamic-physical comprehension of the atmosphere" (1989: xii). Friedman claims Bjerknes was successful in creating the new science because he was able to "appropriate" the weather for his own interests, incorporating it into the domain of theoretical physics and thereby making predictions of weather patterns possible. And it seems to me that the study of religion requires a similar "appropriation" of scientific theory if it is to provide the unification needed by research in our field.

It is interesting that, despite this account of Bjerknes's appropriation of the weather, Friedman seems to insist on a constructivist

reading of the emergence of the new meteorological science—interesting and of some relevance to our field, in which well-intentioned methodological ideals are too often undermined by personal engagement or other less-than-scientific occurrences. Friedman states: "Hard facts were not waiting in nature to be uncovered," rather, new concepts and models were created "by drawing upon analogy, metaphor, existing theory, and ad hoc construction [...] [thereby transforming] insights, speculations, and hypothetical entities into stable scientific 'reality' by integrating them into a structure of meaning and by devising analytical techniques with which the constructs could be regularly reproduced" (1989: 243). He claims, furthermore, that the concepts and models of the new Bergen school of meteorology "were not the inevitable result of observation and theory" (1989: 243) but that they were theory-laden and even practice-laden; they were the result not only of simple interaction with nature, but also of complex interactions between scientists and society. Some examples given by Friedman show why he might have arrived at a constructivist interpretation. Enormous changes in the social relevance of weather, significantly influenced the development of this science. Military operations during World War One, for example, obviously made improvements in prediction of weather conditions extremely valuable. And, subsequently, as Friedman points out, "the understanding of weather as a resource for rational military operations suggested new possibilities for meteorology in peacetime" (1989: 142). And of course the impact of accurate prediction of weather conditions on market forces—with respect to the shipping and fishing industries and the emerging air travel industry—are almost too obvious to mention. Lastly, Friedman even draws on references to personal matters in the development of Bjerknes's career which directly influenced the development of this new science, including the "dead end" he reached in his research in physics, his attendant anxiety in taking up a new line of research in the field, his appreciation for the interest members of the international meteorological community took in aspects of his work in physics relevant to theirs, his anxiety at being too closely associated with them because of the lack of rigor in (most of) their work, and his strong desire for international recognition. Friedman summarizes Bjerknes's position (1989: 237):

> [He] made history, but not the history of his choosing. His career developed in a manner he had never envisioned; so did the science of the atmosphere he endeavored to shape. Both his professional evolution and the science he established were shaped by unexpected exigencies. He learned early that curiosity, vision,

> and innovative work were not sufficient to secure success in professional science. Success would depend as well on convincing other scientists to adopt his research problems and methods and on placing his disciples in authoritative situations where their reputations could contribute to both his prestige and his program.

Despite Friedman's constructivist reading of Bjerknes's development of a scientific model, I think it would be going too far to claim that the new Bjerknes meteorology differs substantially from science as traditionally conceived. Friedman aside, Bjerknes was not merely engaged in subjective and constructivist work. His legitimate concern was to use meteorology to be able to predict the weather rationally; and the theory upon which the predictions would be based was to be open to empirical test. Bjerknes did not somehow manufacture the reality and adapt it to his theory, for he was well aware that appropriating the weather required that it also be appropriable by non-scientists—that is, for commercial as well as academic interests. It is clear, I repeat, that the creators of the new science, despite their complex interactions with society, were not responsible for the reality commanding their attention; for there were indeed "hard facts" in nature and they had already been discovered by a wide range of interest groups—hard facts which could legitimately be exploited and discussed with reference to their newly devised methodological framework. Friedman notes correctly, "[...] Bjerknes and his school ably managed to combine the search for knowledge with the imperative to serve public interests" (1989: 240), and he is well aware that this required Bjerknes's bringing "the erratic and seemingly random phenomena of the seas, atmosphere, and solid earth into the domain of exact physical science" (1989: 34). Let me be clear: in seeing this science as constructive, Friedman is not necessarily denying that meteorology made discoveries. But he seems to be asserting that the science is nevertheless in some sense creating the reality with which it is dealing. He concludes by saying that "[t]hrough Bjerknes's own quest to know and to succeed professionally, these issues [such as the expansion of the state's role in commercial activity and the growth of regular commercial and military flying] played a constituent role in shaping a new meteorology" (1989: 246). There is, however, a considerable difference between shaping the new meteorology and shaping the weather itself.

I trust it is obvious that I have not rehearsed Friedman's account of the development of modern meteorology because I am proposing an affinity between the weather and religion—although I can imagine someone being ready to remind me of a Christian text comparing the

Spirit of God to the unpredictable movements of the wind. I do think, however, that in this one particular study there are important general lessons to be learned about methodology in science, and, by extension, methodology in the study of religion. It is fair to say, for example, that even though Bjerknes was concerned with the refinement of empirical techniques and methods necessary for predicting the weather, he was also concerned in a much more general and theoretical way with the research program as a whole; he held very clear ideas about the nature of the scientific enterprise which enabled him to appropriate the weather—that is, to provide an explanation of it, permitting predictions of meteorological patterns which made the weather in turn capable of appropriation by others.

Students of religion, I suggest, do not have a similarly cogent idea of what constitutes scientific knowledge of religion and have been unable to frame a research program to unify their field. We are partly to blame: having minimized the value of theory we have too readily espoused polymethodism (if I may so put it) as an essential aspect of our study, and as a consequence we have failed to establish firmly the science of religion envisioned, as I mentioned earlier, by Max Müller and C. P. Tiele. Furthermore, I am convinced that this polymethodism has gained, and maintains, its strength as a methodological position in the field—whether explicitly expressed or implicitly assumed—because of what amounts to a certain kind of "pollyanna-ism," by which I mean the insistence that as students of religion we must assume the goodness and "value" of religion and that we are consequently responsible for the welfare of society in which religion plays a role. I direct my attention in turn, therefore, to an adequate response to the prevalence of polymethodism in the field, and to an understanding of the proper role of theory as a unifying framework in the academic study of religion. On the former matter, it will be useful, I think, to cite several religious studies scholars to indicate the differing forms this "approach" to the study of religion assumes and I shall point to the rather remarkable methodological—that is, quasi-methodological—tasks imputed by them to the student of religion which warrant comment.

I refer first to the position taken up by Ninian Smart in his essay "Some Thoughts on the Science of Religion" in a volume recently published in honour of Eric Sharpe. Although Smart acknowledges here that most departments and programs of Religious Studies indulge in theological reflection, he nevertheless maintains that there is solid ground for optimism about the future of the Science of Religion. For despite their involvement in matters religious, such depart-

ments he maintains at least provide room for a Science of Religion to exist (Smart 1996: 24), — all this assuming, apparently, that alternative institutional arrangements are impossible. And in fact he sees an advantage in blending the two, "steer[ing] a middle channel between the Scylla of secret theology and the Charybdis of reductionism" (1996: 20). Such a blending, he mistakenly asserts, would yield "genuinely scientific and objective" results. And despite the danger that "the outside world in academia may [...] misunderstand [...] what the field of Religious Studies is all about—and, categorizing it as some form of tertiary Sunday school, [...] resist it and despise it," (1996:24) he nevertheless insist that we not narrow our conception of the nature of the field, since in so doing we may forfeit valuable philosophical insights. Where Smart's argument breaks down is in the implicit independent status of the two enterprises—(theologically informed) Religious Studies and the Science of Religion (*Religionswissenschaft*). He may seek to combine them by means of philosophical reflection (Science of Religion + "presentational concerns" = Religious Studies) but fails to identify that the very effort at reconciliation points to a fundamental difference in the essence of and approach to the two subjects. To be fair, what has been referred to here as the Science of Religion doubtless involves scientific study from a number of disciplinary angles—that is, in a variety of sub-disciplines relevant to the study of a range of religious phenomena: religious texts, beliefs, experiences, ritual practices, etc.—and is referred to in the literature, appropriately in this case, as polymethodic or polymethodological. In each of these disciplines, of course, the techniques and methods of analysis are at least empirically or theoretically grounded. Whereas the so-called "discipline," described by Smart, created by the blending of Religious Studies and the Science of Religion involves a profusion of imprecise methods derived from incompatible philosophical and ontological frameworks, and I therefore refer to the methodological stance of those who support such a study of religion as polymethodism; briefly put, it signifies an attempt to combine within one methodological framework both cognitive and non-cognitive agendas. Nor is Smart's "blending" approach innocuous; for on the theoretical front, to claim that the Science of Religion is found at the core of Religious Studies is to taint the former and cause disciplinary confusion within university departments; and on another—financial—front, one must consider the potentially damaging effect upon funding efforts and resource-management when what claims to be a legitimate academic enterprise shows itself participating in realms of social engagement beyond its mandate.

In an essay entitled "South Africa's Contribution to Religious Studies" Martin Prozesky similarly urges the student of religion to stray beyond the academic framework. According to Prozesky, the academic study of religion includes considerably more than the Science of Religion; but his call is not just for a more fulfilling personal engagement—he goes so far as to advocate involvement in socio-political action in order to be true to the discipline. With reference to the political climate in South Africa he writes (Prozesky 1990: 10–11):

> Amidst all this [political oppression], Religious Studies in our context will damn itself [...] if it imagines that all it must do is document, analyze, interpret, and explain the reality of religions in South Africa, for the situation cries out for something more. It cries out for *a new ethic of religions, a new, creatively critical interrogation of religion in relation to both socio-personal liberation and oppression.* [...] [T]he field cannot now be credibly studied without prioritizing the problem of religions in the struggle for a more human world order in general, and in the apartheid state in particular.

According to Prozesky, therefore, the task of the student of religion (in South Africa and elsewhere) must go beyond mere description and explanation to "a genuinely liberative praxis" (1990: 18), and it is, therefore, anything but a-political. For Prozesky, such involvement is a natural by-product of religious commitment; grasping "Truth" and propagating it in a political context can only come to one who is beneficially related to the ultimate and deepest truth of religion; religion is a "humanizing" force so that the study of religion cannot limit itself to the acquisition of objective knowledge about the religious world.

However, Prozesky's insistence upon religious and political "correctness" as corollaries for scientific inquiry—just as Smart's concern for philosophic reflectiveness—will be the undoing of our science, because it is not possible within the framework of our knowledge about religion to muster and mobilize a concerted opinion on political and religious values. A blending of scientific, theological, and political interests, such as would result by adopting the combined ethos of Smart and Prozesky, does not produce scientific knowledge; extending our intellectual interest beyond cognitive matters alone may promote an ideology but never a science. Consequently, the task of the scientific student of religion as a scientist is not a moral or social one; it is merely to describe and explain as comprehensively as possible the phenomenon of religious behaviour. If we are to avoid

the decomposition of the academic study of religion into a pseudo-science we must leave broader Religious Studies—with its political and social agendas—to the humanists and religious devotees concerned with their place as public intellectuals in the life of society.

Consider in this regard the deliberations of William Dean, in his *Religious Critic in American Culture*, where he advises "public intellectuals" who currently work in the university—including that religious critic whose primary concern is for religion as it pertains to the well-being of society—to consider the possibility of claiming the universities for themselves should "third sector" organizations outside the university (that is, voluntary as opposed to governmental and commercial institutions) prove an unsatisfactory home for their activities (Dean 1994: 172):

> [i]f voluntary organizations of the third sector do not offer the best venue and vehicle for the religious critic, and they may not, then what does? Should more hope be placed in the prospect of a deprofessionalized university? Should greater energy be lodged, after all, in reforming the university, in the effort to make it a viable psychological home and vehicle for the religious critic?

Most ironic—if not downright frightening—is that many who wish to reclaim the university for their own religious, political, or other ideological agendas do so under the smoke screen of being even more truly scientific than those who hold to a naturalistic concept of science. Kieran Flanagan, for example, argues for an enchantment of the sociology of religion—that is, for a transformation of the sociology of religion into a form of theology—because, he says, "[...] a non-praying sociologist is [...] a contradiction in terms" (Flanagan 1996: 28). "The study of religion," he maintains, "demands a price of understanding which other belief systems and ideologies do not require. To understand the significance of a religious object or ritual is to contemplate an implication that can be transformative. Knowing what to see and what to read involves a grace of enlightenment, a point illustrated in the case of Phillip and the eunuch" (1996: 30–31). He castigates the strictly non-confessional study of religion as "pseudo-science," "untenable in the context of a reflexive sociology that is becoming positively confessional [and] a hairline away from religious belief and commitment which religious studies spurns" (1996: 92).

A further example: Much like Flanagan, Andre Droogers tries to fashion a methodological position for the student of religion—in this case the anthropology of religion—transcending "religionism and reductionism" and making possible a place for methodological theism. His personal interest in such a perspective is admittedly tied to his

dual status as scholar of religion and religious scholar (Droogers 1996: 51) (and of course it is the insistence on maintaining a dual status that is a central focus of my remarks today) (1996: 51):

> As a Christian working in an ecumenical university, holding the chair of the cultural anthropology of religion, and standing in a secular science tradition, it is my job to make sense of religion. It may cause no surprise that I take the religionism/reductionism debate as my test-case and seek to go beyond the established options.

The secular science tradition apparently sits lightly on him since he claims to have found a way of managing contradictions. Helpful to him in this regard is postmodernism, for by deconstructing science it "has eroded the contrast between science and religion as forms of knowledge" (1996: 60), and in criticizing the dominant scientific meta-narrative it has led "to experiment and openness, with carnival as a leading metaphor" (1996: 60). How this contributes to a scientific study of religion and a cumulative growth of knowledge about religion is hard to determine for according to Droogers, this methodological ludism, as he calls it, entertains various equally valid types of explanation of religion "even though contrasting and exclusive among themselves [...]" (1996: 61).[3]

Perhaps the most sustained effort to reclaim the university for a religio-political agenda is exerted by George Marsden in his *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* and his subsequent *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*. In the earlier volume Marsden wonders "whether there are adequate grounds for most academics to insist on naturalistic premises that ignore the possibility of fruitful religious perspectives" (Marsden 1994: 430). Marsden maintains that with the devaluation of neutral science there is no longer a reason to exclude religiously-based claims—even divine revelation—from our research and teaching. As he puts it in the later volume, religious people can "reflect on the implications of such revelation within the bounds of

[3] The entire volume in which Droogers's paper appears is committed to the claim that "at the level of the disciplines there is no unquestioned belief in the conflict-transcending objectivity of the social sciences" (Droogers 1996: i) and many of the authors take this judgment as grounds on which to intrude their religious commitments into their academic work. For example, Droogers's colleague in the Free University of Amsterdam, Philip Quarles van Ufford, leaves the reader in no doubt about his position: "Knowledge at its most reliable arises when silently we open ourselves and acknowledge our contingencies, allowing for the presence of God" (Ufford 1996: 42).

the mainstream academy by talking about them conditionally" (Marsden 1997: 52). They should at least have rights, he insists, similar to those who advocate "feminist, Marxist, liberal democratic, neoconservative, or purely naturalistic views," (1997: 53) ignoring among other things the danger of a concomitant balkanization of the university community into various interest and advocacy groups. This risk he is ready to accept for the sake of his own religious ideals. He insists protectively (and somewhat contradictorily, as it turns out) that, as scholars in the university setting, Christians must live up to "common standards" of practice, but (1997: 56, 57, 58)

> [a]t the same time, there are limits to one's allegiance to such rules. Christians cannot play some of the games of society and they cannot accept some of the prevailing rules of other games. Nonetheless, there are many social conventions to which Christians can give limited allegiance. [...] Christians must remember that, much as they may value liberal institutions they are participating in them on an ad hoc basis, limited by higher allegiances. [...] Deeply religious people should be participating fully in [the] academy and they should be working to improve its rules, particularly those that tend to marginalize their own views.

As for the study of religion in the academy, he laments what he sees as the attempt to raise the academic credibility by treating religion purely as an object of study and permitting a definition of the field in scientific terms only (1994: 414; 1997: 22). The remedy he seeks is to bring religion with its (Christian) salvific agenda back into the university. And that of course would effectively make the university not only unscientific but actually another kind of church.

With the resurgence of religion in modern Western societies and the dominance of postmodernism and deconstructivism in humanities faculties' undermining the prestige and role of science and scientific rationality, current conditions on many of our university campuses are most hospitable to the humanist and the religious devotee. And this situation can only hamper the progress of the Science of Religion. A central task for the methodologist in this latter field, therefore, must be to offset the deleterious effects of these developments wherever possible. In part, our response must involve refuting the arguments presented by religious apologists and postmodernists, but this will not in itself suffice; for it is unlikely that an argument drawing upon the resources of the very rationality they have rejected will be accepted as a properly grounded criticism of their stance. We will need to show, I think, that a broader but less-disciplined importation

of political, cultural, or other non-cognitive criteria in the adjudication of scientific research simply opens the field to the articulation of individual interests and results in the accumulation of contradictory propositions or unsubstantiated claims about the nature of religion. There can be no cumulative growth of knowledge about religions with such lack of structure and our response to this methodological poverty must begin with identification of its insidious presence in our institutions.

Yet this may not be enough. I believe that we will need to intensify our response and to do this we might here take a cue from Bjerknes's activity in the re-founding of meteorological science. To recall Friedman, Bjerknes saw his problem in political terms; he "[...] grasped the outlines of a political economy of institutionalized science, and adapted his strategies to the ecological relations within and among disciplines" (Friedman 1989: 237), and paradoxical as it may sound given my comments above, we too will need to be politically active in our own way within our universities and professional associations if we are not to see our field of research and analysis overcome by politico-religious forces, becoming the avenue through which an ultimately religious agenda is re-established in the curriculum of the modern Western university. According to Friedman, moreover, "[p]assivity was never part of Bjerknes's strategy for achieving professional success" (1989: 179), and we will have to be as active if we are to re-establish the Science of Religion and counteract the "failure of nerve" which has characterized our enterprise for far too long.

First of all, we need to recognize that there is clearly a sense in which the sciences possess a political quality; that is, the very founding (or re-founding) of a science—in this case, the Science of Religion—constitutes a political act. The founders of a science are in some sense political actors because they create the framework—social and economic—within which a particular form of collective life is carried out; they determine acceptable presuppositions, assumptions, and criteria in an attempt to minimize idiosyncrasy and bias in the search for knowledge.[4] The activity which establishes a science is not

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[4] On this matter see Sheldon Wolin's treatment of Max Weber as founder of the social sciences (Wolin 1981). For him, founding is political theorizing and he maintains that for Weber methodology served "not simply as a guide to investigation but as a moral practice and a mode of political action" (1981: 414) because it was primarily concerned with "the disenchanted world and its meaninglessness" (1981: 417). Wolin writes (1981: 416):

> The inherent limitations of science, its inability to make good the deficiencies of the world's meaning, provide the backdrop to the political role

itself scientific, to be sure, but that does not imply that the action is political in the narrow—party-political or practical—sense of the word. In fact, in establishing a science one creates a discourse about methods for the attainment of knowledge about the world rather than a substantive discourse on behalf of a particular set of cultural-political values within the world.[5]

> of the methodologist. His task is not to undertake scientific investigations or even to instruct his co-workers on how best to conduct research, much less to offer a special field of study. Rather it is to show them that significant action in their chosen realm is possible. It is, therefore, a form of political education in the meaning of vocation. Its politicalness comes from the seriousness, even urgency, of the relationship between vocational action and the world.

I disagree with Wolin's interpretation of Weber's "Science as a Vocation" but there is no need to deal with that matter here.

[5] Knut Erik Tranøy (Tranøy 1976), although accepting that "[p]rofessional knowledge seekers are a sub-culture [and therefore] one of the specialized tribes of the world" (1976: 7), insists that (what he calls) the "ideology of inquiry" must involve both internal and external norms of inquiry, that is, both methodological norms and policy norms. The former govern scientific research while the latter relate to issues of education and the application of the results of research. "Methodological norms and values," he writes, "do not suffice to legitimate all types of actions and activities involved in inquiry defined as the search for, and the acquisition and communication of knowledge" (1976: 3). He does not, however, provide a persuasive argument for adopting such a definition of inquiry but merely suggests that "no reasonable person ever [thought] that science and educational policies could and should be *wertfrei* and 'value neutral' [...]" (1976: 4). It seems to me, however, that this is precisely what Ernest Gellner (1973) maintains in his argument that the establishment of science entails the creation of the new value of objective knowledge, wholly unconnected with other political, cultural, and religious values. For Gellner, science only emerges because it has somehow obtained a "diplomatic immunity" from other values; science is knowledge for the sake of knowledge alone and is, therefore, discontinuous with other cultural values. (I have dealt with this matter at greater length in my book *The Irony of Theology and the Nature of Religious Thought* [1991]). If this kind of argument is persuasive, then Tranøy is ready to concede the argument I develop here (Wiebe 1991: 5, 6):

> If these two sub-sets of the ideology of inquiry, methodological norms and policy norms, are completely separate, then a traditional and now so often disputed view of science is not only defensible but incontrovertible. [...]. If the two activities are thus normatively distinct, this means that responsibility in science can be divided between two distinct sets of people. The active scientist is and should be guided and legitimated by

Maurice Cowling's comments about politics and political science are helpful in sorting out the issues involved in the politics of the study of religion (Cowling 1963: 209–210):

> Professors of Political Science who want to engage in political practice (by standing for Parliament, writing in newspapers, advising governments or joining the City Council) are free to do so. But they are, so far as they do this, abandoning their academic function for a practical political one. To do so may, if they are lucky, help them to illuminate the academic subject-matter. But the only rational action to which scholars are committed, the only moral action to which they are commanded and the only "social responsibility" to which their *professional* position compels them, is to use their energies in order to explain in its full diversity as much as they can of the nature of the world in which they live.

According to Cowling, therefore, failure or refusal to demarcate the study of political behaviour from political behaviour itself is to preclude all possibility of a political science. It goes without saying that to explain the character of the world constitutes a form of action and is therefore comparable in some broad sense to a form of political action; but explanation carries with it, as Cowling puts it, its "own conventions, rules, and institutions" (1963: 210) which distinguish it from everyday political action. Thus Cowling writes: "[...] it is desirable to rid university faculties of the pretension to be schools of political practice, not because of the confusions this induces in the conduct of politics, but because of the damage it does to universities themselves" (1963: 120).

This confusion of politics and political science is mirrored by the confusion of religion with the study of religion—in both cases we encounter the necessity of distinguishing between partisan action and theoretical discourse. And this confusion is damaging to the university because it involves the subordination of the academy to an agenda not its own—a development corrosive of the very foundations upon which our scientific work proceeds. And this would require of us, I suggest, a mode of political response more closely connected to that variety which culminates in institutionalized action. It is not enough that our methodological effort restrict itself to the techniques and methods involved in the various disciplines and sub-disciplines of our field. We must generate an organized political response. For in my opinion there is a sense in which the departments—and possibly

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methodological norms. Others will worry about science policy and the application of results.

the university itself—are subject to hostile takeover by interests far from scientific. If science, then, is simply another manifestation of what we generally see as formal political action, the university would be but another participant in party politics rather than an enterprise providing objective knowledge of the world (including politics and religion). In such a scenario those who espouse science as traditionally defined would be justified in defending their form of politics, in a party-political fashion, from imperialistic takeover by the politics of their various critics.

In any event, mapping out political action of this kind is, I think, a particularly important aspect of the task of the methodologist in our field. We need, for example, to establish more appropriate relations between our research and that of other established scientific fields, severing all relationship with religious and political interest groups including those which ambiguously (if not insidiously) engage in the kind of Religious Studies described by Smart and Prozesky. We must be far more active in our protection of the university as an institution dedicated to scientific research. Given the current intellectual atmosphere on our campuses this will require reminding university administrators and government officials of the very specific mandate of the modern university and of their responsibility to see that resources are used to that end.

Although discussion of an appropriate political response to the academic expectations with which students of religion should work is important to our methodological discussion, we are just as urgently compelled to address the question of a research program which will bring a measure of unity to the Science of Religion. We must not only reject the polymethodism of programs of Religious Studies of the kind described above; we must refuse to condone even a polymethodological concept of the Science of Religion—the two strategies are clearly complementary. Without theory to analyze independently available descriptions of religious experience, practice, and belief, (as opposed to constructivist views of religion—on lines similar to those of my criticism of Friedman's constructivism above—which make those descriptions the product of theoretical-scientific activity)[6], we cannot be

[6] There are a number of scholars who take a constructivist view of religion, arguing that religion is the product of the scholar's attention rather than an independent or autonomous reality. Russell McCutcheon (1997), for example, argues such a case against Eliade and his followers who claim religion to be a *sui generis* reality. Although I agree with McCutcheon's critique of the notion of religion as wholly autonomous with respect to other aspects of our social and cultural existence it seems to me unwarranted to claim that relig-

said to vaunt scientific knowledge of religion; so it is to theory above all that we must look if our field is to achieve coherence. I am well aware of those critics of science who, like Paul Feyerabend, insist that "[t]he world, including the world of science, is a complex and scattered entity that cannot be captured by theories and simple rules" (Feyerabend 1995:142) but this observation is hardly sufficient grounds for an all-out debunking of theory in our quest for knowledge of the world around us. Feyerabend's complaint, moreover, that theorists are dangerous because they often believe themselves to have found "shortcuts" to understanding nature or society—"[a] few words, a few formulas, and the Secret is revealed" (1995: 93)—is scarcely a fair or persuasive evaluation of the efforts of the history of any field. Theories may be dangerous when they place constraints upon thought, but without such constraint (which I prefer to call "structure") it is not at all clear that knowledge or insight would ever be gained at all; the alternative, an amorphous oracularism, is not a viable alternative to theory. If theories of religion are "dangerous" in the constraints they place upon our thinking about religion, they nonetheless bear the greater chance of understanding data than anything else.

In considering the need for a research program for the study of religion, it is interesting that it is on the strength of evolutionary theory that the Science of Religion initially made an appearance as a new field of research. The nineteenth-century study of religion, Sharpe notes in his history of the discipline, involved a variety of approaches—theological, philosophical, and scholarly—but he rightly argues that those approaches were devoid of a cardinal principle or idea that might somehow tie them together and provide a coherent explanatory account of the data. Each of these approaches, rather, was concerned with "understanding" religion and its value to society. "What was lacking," in all this, he writes, "was [...] one single guiding principle of method which was at the same time able to satisfy the demands of history and of science" (Sharpe 1986: 26). And Sharpe correctly points out that it was "evolutionism" which provided the guiding principle which made the emergence of the Science of Religion possible. Here for the first time was an opportunity to understand religion in terms other than religious. Darwinism, that is, made it possible for "the real focus of the study of religion [...] to be located,

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ion is therefore the product of the scholar's study. Surely it is the product of human activity long before scholarly attention is focused upon it; indeed, only if that were so, could we pay such attention to it.

not in transcendental philosophy, but in [...] this-worldly categories [...]" (1986: 24).

But this early theory of evolution, with its organismic metaphors often attached to simplistic notions of progress, fell into disrepute by the end of the First World War. Fewer scholars found themselves infused with the evolutionary optimism which had permeated the study of religion since the 1870s, and more and more researchers were drawn to "close and detailed studies in a limited area rather than in vast comparisons and synthetic pattern-making," (1986: 174), giving rise to the polymethodic structure which characterizes it to this day—a structure which, I think it could be persuasively argued, permits the field to return to the polymethodism of its "pre-paradigmatic" state. Furthermore, even though there may have been some enrichment of the field by the variety of approaches adopted since this "paradigmatic" phase, it is also clear that much by way of explanatory power has been forfeited. And I want to suggest here that we need to reconsider the value of a return to evolutionary theory to re-establish a unifying framework for the study of religion. Making a convincing case for this is not really possible here, because it would require not only a thorough analysis of the reasons for the rejection earlier this century of evolutionary theory as a framework but also a detailed account of how neo-Darwinian theory can actually help explain religious phenomena. But I would like at least to provide some indication of why I think the theory worth further consideration.

Daniel Dennett's analysis of the explanatory capacity of evolutionary theory in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, I think, provides a solid case for the application of the theory not only to biological but also to cultural phenomena. The materialistic perspective of modern evolutionary theory, he argues diminishes the sharp divide many think separates *Naturwissenschaften* from the *Geisteswissenschaften*. As he puts it, "[i]f there is just one Design Space [...] in which the offspring of both our bodies and our minds are united under one commodious set of R-and-D processes, then [the] traditional walls [between the two] may tumble" (Dennett 1995: 189). Given that perspective, he then argues, "the central biological concept of function and the central philosophical concept of meaning can be explained and united" (1995: 185). And if this is so, then "all the achievements of human culture—language, art, religion, ethics, science itself—are themselves artifacts [...] of the same fundamental process. There is no Special Creation of language, and neither art nor religion has a literally divine inspiration" (1995: 144).

Dennett has not himself applied this explanatory approach to religious phenomena; there are a number of scholars, however, who have demonstrated the benefits to be gained from such theoretical analyses. Dan Sperber's work, for example, on the epidemiology of beliefs shows that a naturalistic and materialistic program for social science is more than merely conceivable; in fact, it is clearly superior to the holistic hermeneutical approaches which methodologically isolate social science, for it "establishes fundamental continuities between its domain and that of one or several neighbouring natural sciences" (Sperber 1996: 5). His own attempt to account for cultural realities, therefore, is to treat culture as "the precipitate of cognition and communication in a human culture," (1996: 97) for then it is possible to find genuine material causes of culture rather than "attribut[ing] causal powers to entities such as institutions or ideologies" (1996: 99). The adoption of such a framework of explanation and the application of such techniques of analysis are fruitfully applied specifically to religious phenomena in a number of recent works by E. Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley (1990), Pascal Boyer (1994), Ann Baranowski (1994, 1998), Luther H. Martin (1997), Stewart Guthrie (1993), and Walter Burkert (1996) among others, and are very suggestive of the benefits to be gained by the Science of Religion in a renewed emphasis upon theory. These scholars, like Bjerknes, have obviously "grasped the outlines of a political economy of the sciences" and have been able to exploit that economy in the aid of generating genuine explanations of religious phenomena. We can recognize here, at least, a general agreement that whatever religion is, if we are ever to understand it, we will have to study it not simply empirically but also theoretically.

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