Back to the Future: A Response to Martin and Wiebe

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LIKE MOST RELIGIOUS STUDIES graduate students of my generation, I was assigned Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* in my theories and methods course. As brilliant, eloquent, and constantly re-readable as the essays collected in this volume are, something about them troubled me even back in my grad school days, and I have since come to view this work as a signpost marking the point when religious studies—like many humanistic disciplines—took a wrong turn down into the postmodern rabbit hole of interminable *Verstehen*. Geertz combines his celebration of Gilbert Ryle's "thick description" as a process of endlessly uncovering semiotic turtles upon turtles (Geertz 1973: 29) with a clear disdain for "reductionistic" attempts to *explain* religion or other cultural forms. In the process, the grand explanatory ambitions of the early figures in our field are made to seem both culturally naïve and dangerously hegemonistic.

I recently re-read most of the early religious studies pioneers in a seminar I taught to my own graduate students, and was shocked anew by the pervasive triumphalist Protestantism and the condescending tone of their surveys of "primitive" customs—surveys typically conducted from the comfort of Oxbridge armchairs. With some historical distance, we might almost find this cultural parochialism amusing, were

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it not for the horrific consequences it entailed for those "savage" peoples. It is arguably this laudable awareness of the excesses of colonialism—economic, political, and intellectual—that has lent so much moral force to the reaction against old-fashioned comparative religion. Again, this may be generationally idiosyncratic, but I associate the final triumph of the interpretation-only school of humanistic inquiry in our field with the publication of *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Taylor 1998)—hailed by my colleagues at my first job in religious studies as representing the definitive state of the art—with its destabilization of analytic categories and pervading suspicion of explanatory frameworks.

In their piece, "Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion," Luther Martin and Don Wiebe argue that the results of this move away from explanation have been disastrous for our field. They characterize the current state of religious studies as one of intellectual paralysis, as a combination 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.

Their complaint that religious studies scholars are unique in the modern university in "systematically avoid[ing] critical studies and theoretically based explanations of their subject of study" perhaps unfairly singles out our field: the explanatory project has, in fact, been in serious retreat in most humanistic disciplines over the past several decades. Nonetheless, as a colleague and I have recently argued (Slingerland and Bulbulia 2011), it is hard to take issue with their characterization of much religious studies scholarship and pedagogy in the modern university as amounting, essentially, to "religion appreciation" courses—documenting endless diversity without attempting to situate it in any sort of explanatory framework. This echoes similar critiques of contemporary religious studies by other pioneers in the cognitive science of religion, such as Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley, who have critiqued religious studies for the fact that its "ambitions extend no further than contorted taxonomies and thick descriptions" (Lawson and McCauley 1990: 1). As Martin and Wiebe point out in their piece, this allergy to explanation has not always characterized our field. They do a wonderful job of recovering religious studies' early origins, which we now shun or have simply forgotten, and their identification of forerunners of current cognitive

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approaches in the early twentieth century, such as Jane Harrison, points to a path not taken.

Where I would take issue with Martin and Wiebe is with regard to their pessimism about our ability to change this state of affairs. They are quite correct in arguing that "advances in scientific knowledge, which are characterized by the replacement of agent causality with natural causality" swim against the natural current of human cognition, and therefore are very difficult to achieve: religion is natural and science is not (McCauley 2011). The difficulty that human beings have in adopting a scientific standpoint—bracketing intuitive teleology, folk statistical intuitions, and other natural cognitive tendencies—is, ironically, being increasingly well documented by work in cognitive science. Evolutionary scientists constantly fall back upon the cognitively "easy" compressions afforded to us by intentional language when discussing evolutionary processes—this or that feature of an organism evolved "in order to" respond to a certain adaptive problem—and, as the work of Deborah Kelemen and colleague has shown, even highly trained scientists resort to naïve intentional explanations when placed under time pressure or cognitive load (Kelemen and Rosset 2009).

Martin and Wiebe are also right that this promiscuous intentionality and teleology presents a specific and—at least at a certain level—ineradicable challenge to scientific explanations of religion, as I have also once argued in these pages (Slingerland 2008). Scholars such as Daniel Dennett and Paul Churchland have predicted that, like the Ptolemaic worldview, intention-based explanations of the world will simply give way in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence (Churchland 1979; Dennett 1995). What they fail to recognize—and the source of Martin and Wiebe's pessimism—is that, whereas the Ptolemaic worldview falls naturally, but somewhat accidentally, out of our innate perceptual tendencies, there is nothing accidental about our hyperactive intentionality: it is itself a design-feature of the human mind, probably latched upon and reinforced over the course of human evolution by cultural evolutionary pressures (Norenzayan et al. under review). Martin and Wiebe are therefore justified in concluding that, in the case of the scientific study of a topic such as religion, we have the additional barrier of "specialness" (Taves 2009) added on the top of the inherent cognitive difficulties of thinking in mechanistic terms.

Yet, in the end, they remain too pessimistic about our inability to bracket our "natural" forms of cognition. Applying the not only nonintuitive but actively "dangerous" (Dennett 1995) ideas of evolution and cognitive science to human religiosity or morality is bound to meet with both personal and institutional resistance. Yet one of the amazing

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features of the human mind is its capacity for compartmentalization: its ability to simultaneously accommodate multiple, often contradictory frames of reference. We actually see this phenomenon at work in many historical religious traditions, because, when it comes being counterintuitive, contemporary science gets a run for its money from religious theology. The early Chinese author Zhuangzi argued for subordinating the human perspective to a radically impersonal "Heavenly" view, and the doctrine of *anatman* that we find in the early Pali Canon is surely as strange as anything we find in modern physics. (Do not get me started on the Trinity.) And yet at least some humans seem capable of embracing counterintuitive theories of reality while still managing to go about their daily lives. Zhuangzi even had a name for it, "walking the two paths," by which he seemed to mean trying to live one's life informed by the destabilizing perspective of Heaven while recognizing that one is human, and therefore subject to all of the constraints—physical and mental—of the human world. When it comes to the counterintuitive theories of the contemporary sciences, the motivation to accommodate them should be particularly strong, considering their wildly successful explanatory track record. And accommodate them we do. It is a simple matter of fact that all over the world, as we speak, devout Christians—committed theologically to the principle that Creation is the result of Godly design—are applying Darwinian principles of random variation and blind selection to all aspects of biological and cultural evolution, including the evolution of religion. Similarly, even atheists such as myself continue to value the "specialness" of human life and see profound meaning in a world that, at an intellectual level, is perceived as having no ontological place for such specialness. Proximate psychology and abstract theoretical reasoning are in no way coterminous, and it is this wiggle room that has allowed the whole project of modern science to get off the ground in the first place.

In addition to their broader pessimism concerning the prospects of religious studies, Martin and Wiebe have two specific observations about our field that are, I would maintain, belied by developments on the ground. First of all, they quite rightly observe that "no undergraduate departments of religious studies have fully implemented a *scientific* program of study and research," going on to "argue—on scientific grounds—that such study is not ever likely to occur in that or any other setting." Although the embrace of scientific methodologies in departments of religious studies in the United States leaves much to be desired—perhaps not surprising given the United States' unusual degree of religiosity and social conservatism among industrialized nations—the science of religion is certainly making inroads in more civilized parts of

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the world. In Europe, for instance, there are at least two departments of religious studies—at Aarhus University in Demark and Masaryk University in the Czech Republic—where cognitive and evolutionary approaches are predominant, and the School of Anthropology at the University of Oxford has similarly become a Mecca, as it were, for the scientific study of religion. In Canada, at the University of British Columbia (UBC), we have begun planning the establishment of a new, independent program in the study of religion that will integrate "traditional" religious studies with the latest developments in the evolutionary and cognitive sciences.

The second of Martin and Wiebe's observations is that the "comprehensive scientific study of religion is not likely to be achieved by scattered scientific studies of one or another aspect of religious thought and behaviour by those individual scholars who are committed to scientific research on religious thought and behaviour." This is an important point, but again a reason for optimism rather than pessimism. Although large-scale, interdisciplinary collaboration—the standard working method in the sciences for getting anything interesting done—has been, to date, extremely rare in religious studies, this too is beginning to change. There are several such projects currently up and running, including the €2m, three-year "Explaining Religion" (EXREL) project, funded by the European Commission, and a £4m, five-year project on "Ritual, Community, and Conflict" (RCC), funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council, that began this year. In addition, the impetus for the creation of the religious studies program at UBC mentioned above was the success in the first round of adjudication of a grant application to study the "Evolution of Religion and Morality," led by UBC. This grant, just funded, will devote almost CAD $7m in direct and matching funds to establishing, for at least six years, an international, radically interdisciplinary research network, involving partner institutions throughout North America, Asia, and Europe, and bringing together historians, linguists, archeologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and mathematicians to explore precisely the sorts of questions that possessed the early pioneers of our field—only this time in a scientifically rigorous, empirically grounded manner.

The awareness that the scientific study of religion faces unusual barriers is nothing new to our field. It was bemoaned by early figures such as Émile Durkheim, for instance, who nonetheless saw it as a call to arms, not a reason to abandon the attempt:

> The great majority of men continue to believe that here there is an order of things which the mind cannot penetrate except by very special

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> ways. Hence comes the active resistance which is met with every time that someone tries to treat religious and moral phenomena scientifically. But in spite of these oppositions, these attempts are constantly repeated and this persistence even allows us to foresee that this final barrier will finally give way and that science will establish herself as mistress even in this reserved region. (Durkheim 1915/1965: 478)

Durkheim was perhaps a bit too optimistic concerning the timeline, but it does appear that the tide is beginning to turn, and I think that the generation of graduate students whom we are currently training will come to inherit a very different field.

Martin and Wiebe challenge us to recall that scholars of religion once upon a time *did* have explanation as their goal, and saw the task of explaining religion as an inherently interdisciplinary and comparative task. We can take again the example of Durkheim, who saw the sociology of religion as a "positive science," which "has as its object the explanation of some actual reality which is near to us, and which consequently is capable of affecting our ideas and our acts" (13). Taking aim at what sounds very much like the contemporary religious studies practice of simply accumulating insider accounts like so many uncategorized butterflies, Durkheim argued that, as scholars, we do not study ancient and other religions "simply for the pleasure of telling its peculiarities and its singularities," but rather with the goal of understanding the "religious nature" of human beings. Yes, the early pioneers of our field were culturally parochial, theoretically naïve, and typically sexist and racist. We have, however, ended up throwing the explanatory baby out with the colonialist bathwater. The result has arguably been to bring the progressive research projects of the early pioneers of our field to a screeching halt, ceding the task of exploring the origins and nature of human religious life to scholars coming from other fields, who too often lack the linguistic and cultural backgrounds to do the job well. We scholars of religion need to get back in the explanation game. In this respect, Martin and Wiebe's diagnosis of some of the ills of our field needs to be taken to heart.

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