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The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion

This article presents the approach to religion taken by the *Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, edited by Robert Segal. The approach taken is largely, though not wholly, that of the social sciences: anthropology, economics, psychology, and sociology. The social scientific approach to religion is pitted against the approach taken by the field of religious studies itself—an approach called "religionist." The claims by the religionist approach against the social sciences are identified and refuted.

The Blackwell *Companion to the Study of Religion* was published in 2006. It consists of twenty-four chapters, divided into nine approaches and fifteen topics. The approaches refer to the disciplines that have studied religion. Those disciplines are, above all, the social sciences: anthropology, economics, psychology, and sociology—plus the comparative method. The other disciplines covered are literature, phenomenology, philosophy, and theology. The topics are more specific: body, death and afterlife, ethics, fundamentalism, heaven and hell, holy men/holy women, magic, modernity and postmodernity, mysticism, myth, nationalism, new religious movements, pilgrimage, ritual, and secularization.

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A revised and much expanded edition is forthcoming in 2016. It will have half again as many chapters. There will be no additional approaches, but there will be many new topics: cognition, emotion, environment, functionalism, gender, globalization, law, material culture, music, race, religion and history, religious studies, science, structuralism, and violence. Why so many additions?

The *Companion* is intended to survey the discipline of religious studies. I myself use "companion" interchangeably with "handbook," "guidebook," "dictionary," and "encyclopedia"—terms that for others may well have distinctive meanings or connotations. By "surveying" I mean merely summing up. The modest aim of the *Companion* is neither to advance the state of the field nor to question it. The aim is simply to convey it, approach by approach and topic by topic. The aim is not to compare approaches, to integrate them, or to rank them but merely to present them.

The *Companion* is pitched less at undergraduates—the intended constituency of the rival *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*—than at graduate students and professors. In actuality, I, who have contributed two and a half chapters to the Routledge tome, see no clear-cut difference in the pitch. No knowledge of the subject surveyed is presupposed by either work.

What is meant by calling religious studies a discipline? According to a conventional view, any discipline must have a distinctive method. Yet most disciplines harbor no distinctive method. Many either share a method—notably, the so-called "scientific method"—or else employ a variety of methods, for example, quantitative as well as qualitative approaches or textual analysis as well as fieldwork. The assertion that religious studies, to qualify as a discipline, must have its own method seems unwarranted.

Still, does religious studies possess a distinctive method? What follow are three defences of the claim.

First Defence

Many of the classical defenders of religious studies as a discipline cite phenomenology as the distinctive method. Among these defenders are Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, Cornelius Petrus Tiele, William Brede Kristensen, and Gerardus van der Leeuw. In his entry in the *Companion* on the phenomenology of religion, Thomas Ryba discusses these figures in working

out the goal of the phenomenology of religion.[1] But at least as practiced, phenomenology of religion amounts to no more than data gathering, if also the classification of the data gathered. The touted method of religious studies turns out to be mere taxonomy. We get an organized *description* of religion—the proverbial insider's point of view—but no explanation of religion. Taxonomy is only preliminary to a full-fledged method.

Moreover, not only are data gathering and classification common to most other disciplines, but the other disciplines that claim to study religion happily utilize the data and classifications provided by religious studies. Anthropologists of religion, sociologists of religion, psychologists of religion, and economists of religion all rely on the findings of specialists in religious studies. What social scientists proceed to do with those findings distinguishes them from those who toil in religious studies. Social scientists *explain* the data amassed, and in their own disciplinary ways—anthropologically, sociologically, psychologically, and economically. Unless religious studies, whether or not the phenomenology of religion in particular, not merely describes various beliefs, practices, and objects but also accounts for them, it serves as a mere underlaborer, to use the term coined by John Locke.[2]

Second Defence

The second defence of religious studies as a discipline is that the field does in fact explain religion, just "religiously" rather than anthropologically, sociologically, psychologically, or economically. The defenders are the same as in the first defence.[3] To explain religion from any perspective is to account for both its origin and its function. An anthropological explanation of religion accounts for religion as a case of culture. A sociological explanation of religion accounts for religion as a case of society. And so on. According to "religionists," as I dub defenders of its disciplinary autonomy, religious studies accounts for religion not as an instance of anything else but in its own right—as religion. The origin and function of religion are therefore distinctively, or irreducibly, religious.

[1] See Thomas Ryba, "Phenomenology of Religion," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. Robert A. Segal (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 91–121.

[2] John Locke, "'tis ambition enough to be employed as an under-laborer in clearing ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of knowledge" ("Epistle to the Reader," *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* [1689], ed. P. H. Nidditch [Oxford: Clarendon, 1975], 9–10).

[3] See, again, Ryba, "Phenomenology of Religion."

Now for religionists, no less than for anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and economists, religion is a human, not a divine, creation. Religious beliefs and practices are concocted by humans, not revealed from on high. But humans purportedly concoct them in order to make contact with God or the holy or the sacred or the Infinite—the last being the term preferred by the founder of the field of religious studies, the Indologist F. Max Müller.[4] Encountering God is the irreducibly religious origin and function of religion. Humans do not happen to seek contact with God. They *need* to do so. Just as they come into the world with a need for food and for love, so they come into the world with a need for God. That need, like the need for food or love, is innate. Religion is indispensable to fulfilling the need but not to implanting it, and itself is not innate.

How religion fulfils this need varies from religionist to religionist. For example, for Mircea Eliade,[5] the most influential religionist of the second half of the twentieth century, religion provides myths and rituals to yield contact with the gods, who are the manifestations of an impersonal sacred. Myths carry one back to the time, always in the past, when, so it is believed, gods were closest to humans—in the case of the Bible, the time of the Garden of Eden. Rituals offer a place where gods, one or more, once appeared to humans and so, it is believed, are likeliest to appear anew.

There are many difficulties with this second defence of the autonomy of religious studies. To begin with, what is the evidence of any need to encounter God? Religionists infer from the existence of religion the existence of a need for contact with God. But social scientists profess to be able to account for the existence of religion in other than religious terms. The social sciences appeal to secular needs, which can range from the need for food (J. G. Frazer[6]) to the need for meaningfulness (Max Weber,[7] Clifford Geertz[8]).

It is not the existence of God but *belief* in the existence of God that the social sciences seek to explain. The existence of God is for philosophers and theologians to determine. The belief itself in God is as secular as the belief in

[4] See F. Max Müller, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by the Religions of India* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1878).

[5] See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harvest Books, 1968).

[6] See James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Abridged ed. (London: Macmillan, 1922).

[7] See Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon, 1964).

[8] See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

the moon. Indeed, religious studies differentiates itself from theology exactly by its circumventing the issue of the existence of God.

True, any explanation of religion must account for the distinctiveness of religious belief. Freud[9] may maintain that God is a glorified human father, but a god is more than a father, however elevated the father may be. Freud's task is to narrow the divide between human father and God, even if there will be always a point at which a human father ends and a divine father begins.

The same is true of other explanations of religion. A religious community may be different from any other kind of community, but a community it still is. And a sociologist can strive to continue to narrow the divide by showing how much like any other community a religious community is. Contrary to religionists, there is no absolute separation of religion from anything else.

There are social scientists for whom everyone is religious. And there are religionists for whom the secular, above all in the form of science, threatens the existence of religion. Eliade is here an exception.[10] For him, religion is universal, just not overt or even conscious among moderns.

Yet even if religion can be shown to be universal, and to fulfill a need for God, why must that need be innate? Why can the need not be a mere means to some other end, including some underlying secular need, itself either innate or implanted? No social scientist need deny that religion serves directly to make contact with God. But why, social scientists would ask, do humans yearn to make that contact?

Religion may be a useful means to a nonreligious end. It may be the best means. It may even, as for Durkheim,[11] be an indispensable means—to, for him, unifying society. But no social scientist is prepared to take the need for contact as an end in itself. None is prepared to accept the conspicuously question-begging claim that humans need God because they need God. And none is prepared to take a yearning for God as a sufficient explanation of religion.

Freud, as noted, takes God to be a symbol of the human father. But he gives two different explanations of the transformation of the father into God. In *Totem and Taboo*[12] he maintains that the guilt felt by sons toward their

[9] See Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950).

[10] See Eliade, *Sacred and the Profane*.

[11] See Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: Allen & Unwin, 1915).

[12] See Freud, *Totem and Taboo*.

father over the sons' parricidal wishes, compounded by the memory of the actual parricide supposedly committed by their primal ancestors, causes them to create a cosmic, divine father to try to love and obey, thereby placating their guilt toward their human father. In *The Future of an Illusion*[13] he maintains that the protection that one's father had given his sons and daughters alike in childhood is restored through the creation of a cosmic, divine father, who now shields them from the world at large. Freud hardly denies that adult adherents yearn to get close to God. He denies that that yearning explains itself. Rather, it is the consequence of pre-religious, childhood experiences or fantasies. Religion is an adult response to a nonreligious need. Religion is a means to a nonreligious end.

The issue is not whether Freud's explanation of religion is convincing. If, according to *Totem and Taboo*, adult sons create God to give themselves a second chance at obedience toward their fathers, how does Freud account for female adherents? How does he account for those religions, the existence of which he acknowledges, in which the chief god is female or in which there are multiple gods of either gender or in which the gods are animals, plants, or even inanimate entities like the sun? If, according to *The Future of an Illusion*, sons and daughters alike create God to restore the security that their childhood father provided, how does Freud account for religions in which God is cruel or capricious or indifferent rather than paternal? How does he account for religions, which means all religions, in which God fails to fend off the travails of life?

The issue at hand is not, however, whether Freud's explanation of religion, in either of his main works on religion, is convincing but whether it subsumes the religionist explanation. Surely it means to do so. What Freud wants to explain is the relationship of humans to God. He may be skewing the relationship, seeing it as he does either as one of hatred, love, guilt, and penance (*Totem and Taboo*) or as one of protection from the elements (*The Future of an Illusion*). But religion for him is still at heart a relationship to God.

Jung, Freud's key rival, may stand closer to the religionist notion of the relationship. In his *Psychology and Religion* Jung actually cites phenomenologist Rudolf Otto's characterization of religion as at heart the experience of God, and of an awesome, overpowering God.[14] Jung simply translates that

[13] See Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. W. D. Robson-Scott, rev. James Strachey (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961).

[14] See C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, Terry Lectures (New Haven: Yale University

relationship into psychological terms—into the encounter of ego consciousness with the unconscious. Jung, too, may be skewing the relationship, seeing it as he does as one of virtual possession by God. But religion for him is still at base an encounter with God. Even if, for Jung, God seeks out adherents more than they seek out God, closeness to God is the aim of religion, just as it is for religionists.

Not only Freud and Jung but all other social scientists as well start with the religionist perspective—that is, with religion as religion. Some social scientists focus on belief; others, like Freud, on practice; and still others, like Jung, on experience. But all seek to explain why adherents have the beliefs, the practices, or the experiences that they do. For none are those beliefs, practices, or experiences self-explanatory.

Third Defence

The third defence of religious studies as an independent discipline is the appeal to other disciplines, especially to literary studies. It is argued that just as the study of literature is autonomous because of the irreducibly literary nature of literature, so the study of religion should be autonomous because of the irreducibly religious nature of religion.[15] By the distinctively literary quality of literature are meant aspects of a work like genre, symbolism, plot, character, and point of view. By the distinctively religious character of religion are meant not only the interpretation of its meaning but also its origin and function. Still, the parallel to literary study is intended to argue that religious studies is as entitled to independence as literary studies is.

Alas, the parallel fails. Literary critics do not merely declare that literature is literature but attempt to prove it—by showing that the interpretation of a literary work depends on the analysis of its literary aspects. Most famous are the essays on "The Affective Fallacy" (1949) and "The Intentional Fallacy" (1954) by the New Critics William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley.[16] By contrast, religionists simply declare that God is God and not a father or an archetype. Yet, once again, Freud and Jung and other social scientists do not

Press, 1938). Jung cites Otto's definition of religion from *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 4.

[15] See Daniel L. Pals, "Is Religion a Sui Generis Phenomenon?," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 2 (1987): 259–82, esp. 276.

[16] See W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1954), 3–18 ("The Intentional Fallacy") and 21–39 ("The Affective Fallacy").

deny that God is God but instead want to account for that conviction. To match their counterparts in literary studies, religionists would have to show that God cannot be accounted for social scientifically.

The religionist appeal to literature is not only vain but also ironic. For in recent decades literary studies has become the most contested of fields. New Criticism, which reigned supreme in the English-speaking world in the 1940s and 1950s, came closest to literary non-reductionism. But its heyday passed long ago, and it has been succeeded by an array of reductionistic approaches—for example, feminist, black, gay and lesbian, deconstructionist, and New Historicist brands of literary criticism. And long before them there existed Freudian, Jungian, and Marxist forms of literary criticism, all of which still exist. It is not anti-literary outsiders but literary critics themselves who espouse these approaches. Like their non-reductionistic fellow critics, they grant that the texts they scrutinize are manifestly literary. But unlike their non-reductionistic kin, they maintain that those texts are latently sociological, political, psychological, and historical. What for non-reductionists in literary studies is the end point of the study of literature is for reductionists—though this term is not used—the starting point. Reductionistic approaches to literature are intended to account for the irreducibly literary level, not to deny it, just as reductionistic approaches to religion are intended to account for the irreducibly religious level, not to deny it. To deny the literary or the religious level would be to leave one with nothing to explain.

At the same time the parallel of religious studies to literary studies shows that the quest for autonomy is by no means confined to religious studies. Just as contemporary literary critics like Harold Bloom[17] seek to defend the study of literature against its collapse into cultural studies and other fields, so, for example, the philosopher R. G. Collingwood[18] argued decades ago that history is not to be collapsed into a natural science. Not only established disciplines but also new ones must defend their turf. At the turn of the twentieth century Durkheim asserted the autonomy of sociology by differentiating it from psychology.[19] Psychology had earlier asserted its own

[17] See Harold Bloom, "The Art of Criticism No. 1" [interview with Antonio Weiss], *The Paris Review*, 38, no. 118 (Spring 1991): 179–232, on what he calls "the school of resentment."

[18] See R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, ed. T. M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).

[19] See Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, ed. Steven Lukes (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982).

independence by differentiating itself from philosophy.

Conclusion

For me, at least, religious studies does not require either a distinctive method or a distinctive explanation to be worthy of disciplinary status. I prefer to conceive of it as a kind of area studies, akin to East Asian studies, albeit one covering a worldwide area. To me, religious studies is a subject matter, open to as many approaches as are prepared to study it. No approach is likely to exhaust the subject. And not all approaches are compatible with one another. But the capacity of each to make sense of religion can still be compared. And the approaches can be judged by the common scientific practice of inference to the best explanation.

What makes an explanation best is not only its capacity to explain the most but, no less, its capacity to tie the phenomenon at hand to other phenomena. Social scientific approaches by nature link religion to other aspects of human life—to culture, society, the mind, or the economy. Religion becomes an instance, though an undeniably distinctive instance, of culture, society, the mind, or the economy. For sociologists, for example, religion is a group enterprise rather than an individual enterprise. Not every group is religious, but every religion is a group. To understand religion is to see it as like any other group, even if also as unlike any other group.

By contrast, the religionist approach to religion separates religion from anything else in life. Its approach is defensive and siege-like. For religionists, religion is what is left standing when everything else to which religion might be linked has been eliminated. For me, religion is best deciphered when it is connected to as much of the rest of human life as possible. Contrary to religionists, religion does not thereby lose its distinctiveness. Rather, it becomes a distinctive, irreducibly religious part of nonreligious life.

The *Companion* reflects this view. Take, if I may, my own contribution, which is on myth.[20] Let me contrast my chapter to the entries on myth in both the first (1987) and the second (2005) editions of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Both entries are by Kees Bolle.[21] The second version is an expan-

[20] See Robert A. Segal, "Myth," in Segal, *Companion to the Study of Religion*, 337–55.

[21] See Kees W. Bolle, "Myth: An Overview," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 16 vols., editor in chief, Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Reference, 1987), 10: 261–73; "Myth: An Overview" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, rev. 2nd ed., editor in chief Lindsay Jones, 15 vols. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 9: 6359–71.

sion of the first. Bolle's entries epitomize the religionist approach. Myth is assumed to mean religious myth. Secular myth is not considered. The origin and function of myth are assumed to be irreducibly religious: making contact with the sacred. Myth is assumed to be universal. There is no incompatibility between myth and science. Indeed, the issue is considered only incidentally. The key theorist of myth is assumed to be Eliade. Few social scientific theorists are even mentioned. Bizarrely, the chief criticism of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who is discussed, is that he fails to take into account Eliade's theory.

By contrast, my entry, which similarly will be merely expanded for the second edition of the *Companion*, takes the religionist approach, as likewise represented by Eliade, to be merely one approach among dozens. Other approaches, including those of E. B. Tylor, Frazer, Bronislaw Malinowski, Rudolf Bultmann, Hans Jonas, Freud, and Jung, are given equal time. In fact, I classify theories less by disciplines than, both within disciplines and across disciplines, by the origin and function they find in myth. I do not assume that myth is necessarily part of religion or that myth is necessarily compatible with science. No discipline or theory garners any priority, let alone any monopoly, on the proper study of myth. Want to fathom myth? Fathom the disciplines and theories, from outside as well as from inside religious studies, that have sought to study it.