In a recent issue of the Journal of the American Academy of Religion, we find the following statement: “…religiousness will continue to constrain the academic study of religion even as it will continue to dominate the concerns of Homo sapiens generally.” And a second: “it is delusory to think that ‘religious studies’ has ever achieved, or can achieve, a full emancipation from religious concerns.”

Complicated religious pasts and presents

For these two authors, the culprit is two-fold: an institutional context within higher education for the academic study of religion that is, in their view, still too much dominated by “theology” and concern for meaning and value, on the one hand, and on the other the human brain, which is evolutionarily predisposed, on their account, to try to find external causality for things, including the ultimate delusion, the explanation for which should be the only goal of a properly scientific study of religion—the persistence of belief in what are by definition false imaginary beings.

The authors present themselves with deliberate self-irony, couched as a statement of public repentance of the optimism of their middle years about forging a properly scientific study of religion uncontaminated by religion; instead, now elder statesmen, they throw up their hands and renounce their ‘faith’ (my word) or ‘hope’ (their word) in the ability of properly scientific human beings to overcome the delusions that constitute religion, which are so thoroughly perpetuated by others in forms both individual and structural. Although two of the four respondents to the piece in this issue of JAR try to cheer the authors up with some evidence of the traction the cognitive science of religion is having in some circles of the study of religion (while the other two, including our own Alumna of the Year in 2012, Professor Ann Taves, dispute Martin and Wiebe’s model of science, on the one hand, and vision of the university, on the other), in their afterword Martin and Wiebe pronounce themselves still among the de-converted, misplaced hope now set aside with the weary resignation of defeated Jeremians (my image) or brilliant, but still unheeded Freuds (their title, evocative of his 1927 book, The Future of an Illusion, with more than a soupçon of Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion). In their own response to the responses we see that they have actually had two ‘de-conversions,’ as they refer to their former, former selves as ‘recovering humanists’ (p. 619). Converted from humanists to optimistic scientists, they now convert yet again from optimistic scientists to pessimistic ones.
Professor Martin and Wiebe yearn for a completely, utterly scientific study of religion that must, by their definition of science, be entirely uncontaminated by its object. The scientist of religion, on this model, conducts his or her work in a laboratory, in a HazMat suit, with sanitized theoretical tools, with the goal being explanation of religious thought and behaviors (and also, it appears, the legitimization of the scholar of religion as a bona fide scientist along-side the biologists, physicists, and others in the university). This scholar is a genuine modernist (he inveighs against the post-modernists), and a noble figure, defiant against all academic disciplines that are organized in any way other than scientific explanation (so not only religious studies, but the humanities entirely, and, with a bit more of a zazz, anthropologists, for instance, among the social scientists, get rebuked for getting too close to their subject matter). Religion— we have the tools, we can explain it, but we have to get religion out of the way.

There is much of interest in this essay and dialogue with the respondents, and I encourage all to read, think and talk about them. In conveying a flavor of their own self-irony I hope I have not given the impression of dismissal of their argument— I take it very seriously, and hence have forefronted it for our consideration today. That we can find ample evidence in religious studies scholarship of some religious tourism and religious self-valorization, if not outright apologies, seems to me correct, and needs critical assessment; it is our job to assess continually which is which. And yet there are problems with their essay, significant ones. For instance, I find a blatant self-contradiction in the essay, in that eschewing causal explanations of any type (including intentionality) they in turn hypostatize ‘religions’ as causative agents that prey on the cognitive impairments of human beings. But let’s let that go for now. In examining this same venue on “playing with fire” and “the work in a laboratory, in a HazMat suit, with sanitized theo-
gogy in the academic study of religion? I cannot find any clues in the two essays other than a similar commitment to embrace ‘theory.’ Frustratingly, the concession they offer that “[t]his is not to deny that many in the field [of religious studies] have done valuable empirical work, and are increas-
ingly doing so” (p. 194) bears no footnote, so we are not even given models for this model of the study of religion.

What we are left to divine is that the scientist must either have left ‘religiosity’ behind or have found some way to separate their ‘religiosity’ from their scholarship (appearingly left in the locker room after donning the Haz-
Mat suit) and must have renounced the quest for meaning and value, in life or in religion (which quest they regard as itself an expression of the same cognitive defect — you can see why they are ‘recovering humanists’). The recipe for getting to the scientific mind-set resounds with rugged frontier values: by power of will and hard work. The model pre-
sumes (and an interview with Donald Wiebe that I heard online confirms), above all, that it is possible to separate those other ‘religious scholars’ from ‘non-religious’ ones and, as well, to know securely what camp oneself resides in.

I am not at all so sure. For one thing, this model assumes that what a ‘religion’ or ‘religiosity’ is (and what is really the object of study) is ‘faith’ or ‘belief’ in invisible beings. Not complex social systems of practice and thought variously conditioned and fashioned by human beings over time, but individual brain (mixing is what this ‘religion’ is that we seek to understand. This ‘belief’ in the supernatural may be a constant or semi-constant along much of what we study across the degree programs and areas of study of the Divinity School (as you know, the point is much debated, such as whether a Buddhist ‘believes’ in the supernatural in the way certain Christian theists do), but it is surely not comprehensive of all that is studied, and perhaps not even what is ever or always most important. For instance, turning to my own practice and/or appreciation of religion,” which they take to be identical with a simply non-critical perspective on religion? From where do these smooth pebbles, untouched by the grit of religion, come? Where, in other words, does what they call passionately the ability to have “the mind of a scientist” come from, and what would it mean for peda-
gogy in the academic study of religion?

A World Full of Gods

All of us who study religion and have made it our work to talk about religion critically … have complicated pasts and presents in religion.
We scholars of religion should rightly bristle at such a blunt instrument, a rhetoric of reasonability that masks religious differences for political ends.

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