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# *Rethinking the Relationship between the Study of Religions, Theology and Religious Concerns: A Response to Some Aspects of Wiebe's and Martin's Paper*

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Recently, as European scholars living in a liberal society and mostly teaching at state universities, we are not under political or cultural pressure to accept a dominant world view, even a scientific one, as exclusive, and to deny others. Therefore our motivations for doing the humanities may be very diverse, private and as such also hidden. However, it is true that simply relying on an appropriate scientific method might not be always sufficient for preventing us from cultural presuppositions, personal motivations and expectations. I consider addressing these limits and “determinations” in our own scholarly endeavors as one of the most important obligations of a scholar.

Speaking about “religious” agendas behind our knowledge systems as in Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe's paper, “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion”<sup>1</sup> requires especially rethinking the relationship between the study of religions and theology in particular, which is, supposedly, a very specific one. In the history of the field, debates about the differences between theology and the study of religions were inadequately frequent compared to the discussions about the relationships among the study of religions and other disciplines. However, at present most European scholars consider the distinctions between the study of religions and theology as clear, with all misunderstandings solved. Hence some colleagues of mine unambiguously reject opening such new discussions, but after all I, as a historian of the study of religions, must do that from time to time. My colleagues say that now, more than one hundred years after the establishing of the field, the topic is a sidestep, wasting precious time; besides, the relationship is usually discussed by those scholars

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1 Luther H. Martin – Donald Wiebe, “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, 9-18. All references in the text, unless otherwise noted, are to this article.

who do not understand clearly the distinctions, the possibilities and borderlines of both disciplines.<sup>2</sup>

The issue addressed by Wiebe and Martin in their paper is, however, most likely deeper than we are willing to admit. Furthermore, as they claim, it is also chronic. And if the concerns with the “loss of trust” in the study of religions as a discipline can be heard so loudly from the inside, moreover voiced by such renown scholars, they must not be taken lightly. Thus, I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to their provocative paper, which I understand to be also a personal confession.

Despite the fact that I unequivocally defend the concept of the study of religions as a “value-indifferent science”, I have to admit that it is a science specifically inclined to ideologization. It is obvious from the history of modern disciplines, particularly of the humanities, that especially philosophy, history, ethnology, oriental studies and others had struggled, at times, with similar difficulties. These stem mainly from efforts of some interest groups or even individuals to mis/use scientific knowledge for purposes considered by scholars as extra scientific, such as political, racial, national, economic or religious agendas. In our case, it need not be only religious promotion. For example, many scholars from the former Soviet block had numerous experiences with what can be called “anti-religious propaganda”. During the Communist era, religion was seen as the enemy of the state, of politics, of the “only right worldview”, and of course, of science. All science was influenced by the Marxist-Leninist philosophy; the study of religions was considered a bourgeois pseudoscience and thus, with the sole exception of Poland,<sup>3</sup> scientific atheism was the official theoretical instrument for the critique of and studying of religion.

Even the present tendency to mis/use scientific knowledge for the promotion of national objectives by some Ukrainian scholars can be named as an example of the extra-scientific agenda in the humanities, and by impli-

2 See the discussion in *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku*: Jiří Gabriel, “Mezi teologií a religionistikou”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 1/1, 1993, 91-96; Ivan Štampach, “Může být teolog religionistou?”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 1/2, 1993, 180-182; Jan Heller, “Ještě jednou teologie a religionistika”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 1/2, 1993, 190-191; Otakar Funda, “Rozdíl mezi teologem a religionistou”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 1/2, 1993, 177-179; Břetislav Horýna, “Religionistika a teologie”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 1/2, 1993, 183-189; Ivana Dolejšová, “‘Nezávislá religionistika’ a otázky pomezí mezi filozofií a teologií”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 2/2, 1994, 155-158.

3 See Henryk Hoffmann – Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska, “The Science of Religion in Poland: Past and Present”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 10, 1998, 352-372; Henryk Hoffmann, *Dzieje polskich badań religioznawczych 1873-1939*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego 2004.

cation in the study of religions. There are several orthodox churches operating in Ukraine, and the largest one, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, is under the ecclesiastic jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. With regards to the strong patriotic efforts of the Ukrainian society (struggling for independence from the influence of the former colonizer) the other orthodox churches are seen as those legitimizing Ukrainian statehood while the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is considered to be the instrument of political interests of Russia. Then Churches' activities are seen by some scholars through the lens of the national and patriotic interests.

I claim therefore that the ideologization of science can have various forms and can change in accordance with social development and dominant interests. Extra-scientific objectives of – in our case – the study of religions cannot be reduced to only religious ones in the way suggested by Wiebe and Martin. Let me further illustrate that not only religion influences science but that science can influence religion, i.e. that research and knowledge in the study of religions can question one's personal religious experience and similarly the role of theology in the life of a church. I will show in accordance with Wiebe and Martin that seeking a practical use of the study of religions, be it for religious or humanist reasons, is a way to its ideologization. Briefly, on one hand I generally agree with their apprehension and critique of “extra-scientific and non-epistemic agendas” (p. 12), which is, according to them, constantly present in the field, but on the other hand I am perhaps more optimistic, or naïve, about its future and do not feel deluded yet.

In the following I attempt to analyze potential influences of extra scientific agendas, especially religious ones, on the study of religions to prove whether Martin and Wiebe's delusion is equally justified in Central and Eastern Europe.

In the past years, I have focused intensely on the reflection of the Czech academic study on religions<sup>4</sup> and I must confess my surprise at the amount and the forms of extra-scientific agendas, not only in theological or philosophical workshops. On the other hand, high-quality and well-respected works were done also by theologians, Catholic and more often Protestant ones, a fact that may seem paradoxical in the context of Wiebe and Martin's argumentation. An event from the first national congress of the Polish Society for the Study of Religions in Tyczyn in 2003 can serve as

4 Tomáš Bubík, “Outsider and Insider Perspectives in the Czech Study of Religions”, *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 45/2, 2009, 235-254; id., “Osobiste doświadczenia a naukowe założenia w stosunku do religii”, *Przegląd Religioznawczy* 235/1, 2010, 73-82; id., *České bádání o náboženství ve 20. století*, Červený Kostelec: Nakladatelství Pavel Mervart 2010.

a good example of this paradox. It was also the first time when the representatives of the former Marxist wing of the Polish study of religions met with the representatives of the Catholic-oriented study of religions (called “religiology”). One of the keynote speakers was a philosopher, a specialist on the methodology of science and also a Catholic priest, Andrzej Bronk, member of the *Societas Verbi Divini*. At the opening of his speech, he pointed out that any time his listeners would feel he spoke like a priest they should alert him to the fact. There was not a single reason to do so and afterwards his lecture was considered as the congress’ best contribution. His work *Podstawy nauk o religii* (“Elements of the Study of Religions”, 2009)<sup>5</sup> is seen by secular Polish scholars as one of the most important books on the methodology of the study of religions. Similarly, in the Czech study of religions the excellent book *Jak srovnávat nesrovnatelné?* (“How to compare the incomparable”, 2005)<sup>6</sup> was written by a religious studies scholar originally with a theological education, Dalibor Antalík, who even currently serves as a protestant pastor.

It is quite interesting to note in this context that in the study of religions we can hardly find cases of scholars who became theologians or wanted to succeed in theology. However, a contrary movement, i.e. a theologian becoming a religious studies scholar, is quite frequent. It happened, more or less successfully, rather often in the post-communist countries. Nevertheless, it is not only regional specific, as we can find similar examples in the international study of religions as well. It seems that speaking about religious issues in a secular and, at the same time, scientific way is more attractive than doing so in ecclesiastical terms.

Based on the above, we can argue, in the context of Wiebe and Martin’s text, that a reverse influence occurs, namely that science influences theology and religious agendas. We know that the study of religions as a discipline is part of various study programs at universities, including theology. Even some contemporary, respected religious studies scholars such as Ilkka Pyysiäinen, Jeppe S. Jensen or Armin W. Geertz (coordinator of the research unit Religion, Cognition and Culture at Aarhus University) are affiliated to faculties of theology. For example, in the Czech Republic there are six departments for the study of religions, three of which are based at faculties of theology. Without doubt, theologians influence the study of religions but also the study of religions influences theology. My crucial question then is: What motivations can a theologian have for studying other religions and what role can the study of religions at facul-

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5 Andrzej Bronk, *Podstawy nauk o religii*, Lublin: Towarzystwo naukowe KUL 2009.

6 Dalibor Antalík, *Jak srovnávat nesrovnatelné*, Praha: Oikúmené 2005.

ties of theology fulfill? And can such a use of the findings of the study of religions be considered as serving religion? I think it cannot.

Since the beginning of the establishment of the study of religions many theologians refused the study of religions on principle, while others cultivated it. A number of theologians used the approaches of history and of comparative religion to progress from studying prehistoric forms of religion to what they perceived as the truthful one, to „the true religion“, to Christianity – we could even say they tried to get through science to religion! According to others, the study of religions cannot be used for critique or apology of religion, but instead it can lead to personal decisions in choosing the best among the plentitude of religious traditions.

Such motivations can be documented even in sources from the times of the establishing of the discipline.<sup>7</sup> Generally to deepen one's personal faith can be seen as an important motivation for the acceptance of the findings of the study of religions, as we can see in many works of theologians in Euro-American cultural background. Nevertheless, studying other religions can also have other reasons than purely personal ones; it can be collectively motivated as for example in the case of missionaries.

I see another significance of the study of religions for theology in its stress on accommodating “religious otherness”, its “positive acceptance of religious plurality”, and thus the ability to deal with plurality within European secular society. Still, the emphasis on multi-disciplinary cooperation in theology (in our case with the study of religions) is sometimes critically seen especially by church authorities and by conservative church members. Why? Namely, a study of religions approach applied in theological studies makes Christian faith relative, just one among many. Therefore the acceptance of the principle of plurality by theology makes Christianity deeply ambiguous. Also, the proclaimed indifferent position of the study of religions to studying religions and, at the same time, potential application of methodological agnosticism go against the traditional model of Christianity and theology, and simultaneously against the concept of “one truth” and a promotion of an exclusive form of religion.

The study of religions makes theology relative, it secularizes it and liberalizes it and at the same time it motivates it towards greater openness and towards objectification of its assumptions. Such influences are visible wherever the study of religions becomes an integral part of theological education, usually at university levels, as mentioned earlier. Apart from this, the fact that faculties of theology in Central and Eastern Europe are

<sup>7</sup> David J. Burrell, *Religions of the World*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work [1888], 305-332; Alfred S. Geden, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, London: C. H. Kelly 1898, 25-26; Alban G. Widgery, *Comparative Study of Religions*, London: Williams & Norgate 1923, 29.

part of state universities plays a specific role in secular academia. Compared to private institutions, state universities in this region have a much higher level of quality both in teaching and in research. The stress on the scientific relevance of theology and a moderate church discourse in theology can be applied more effectively because the theological faculties are not isolated from the rest of the academia. In this respect, the situations and the roles of the study of religions and of theology are very different from those in North America. In predominantly private education, various corporations can exercise their influence and control more easily than in mostly state and public education in Europe. Here, theology is usually part of a secular university system and as such it is strongly motivated to stand in research competition with other humanities; it is more often confronted with requirements of modern scientific discourse and must, in many cases, follow them. Such “scientific” theology can in many respects be very close to the study of religions and lay, non-professional society (sometimes even professionals, academics) might not perceive any fundamental difference between the two. Nevertheless, this “non-religious” (meaning scientific) agenda and the more or less secular objectives can cast a bad light on theology within its own churches, particularly for its tendency towards secular modernity.

Let me now turn to the reverse influence, i.e. to that of theology upon the study of religions, religious studies scholars and their professional activities. A tendency in contemporary Russian study of religions as described by Alexander Krasnikov can serve as a good example. Krasnikov claims that the main inclination in the current Russian study of religions can be labeled as the “orthodox study of religions”, which means that in many regions of Russia the study of religions develops in close relation with the Orthodox Church or even under its direct control.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the previous Marxist discourse in Russia was replaced by a theological one, in other words, its contemporary religious studies’ paradigm is a mixture of both, though the Marxist one is rather hidden. However, it does not mean that in addition there is no secular study of religions. Along with that, Russian scholars are disconcerted by the fact that the Supervisory Committee of Sciences of the Russian Federation granted the status of scientific discipline to orthodox theology. Although many academics refused it, the committee’s decision remained unchanged.<sup>9</sup>

Another aspect of the mutual relationship between religious studies and theology is the question of motivations religious studies scholars may have

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8 Aleksander Krasnikov, *Metodologičeskie probljemy religiovedenja*, Moskva: Akademiceskij projekt 2007, 3-8.

9 Ekaterina Elbakian, *Did the Soviet Religious Studies Exist Indeed?*, unpublished manuscript.

for applying certain theological (or humanistic) issues into their own research. And also what role can a theological enterprise fulfill at a secular university? It is generally expected that scientific findings should be socially useful and applicable. If the practical application of knowledge and its findings is a very important criterion for measuring the success and the results in natural sciences, than in the humanities the public (or the state) can require the same. This claim can be a consequence of the economization of science. Hence the humanities must lately more and more often defend their own weak status within science in general and in the social structure as well. The “production” of only intellectual goods by the humanities is something very difficult to measure in economic terms. From that perspective the study of religions as a discipline can be considered too weak, unpractical, and useless, just wasting the state budget.

When comparing theology and the study of religions from the point of view of their practical role in society, the applicable aspect of theology is, to me, more evident. In European society it is generally understood what theology is and what its goals are. Its knowledge is applied in church life. Churches use theological opinions for more effective economization of Christianity, particularly for better organization of churches, for deeper reflection of faith, and at the same time for more effective missionary work, or, generally said, for its activity inside and outside. Many Europeans understand the sense and practical role of churches and theology in social and ideological contexts, even if they do not appreciate it or disagree with these activities completely.

But how about a practical role of the study of religions? Do we as scholars of the field have any special public space for the application of our findings and knowledge? How can we be useful for society and on the other hand what is an acceptable way for justification of the study of religions in social and economic system? One option, even if generally refused by the religious studies scholars, is the following: Modern concept of sciences and humanities got rid of the question about the meaning of life and of what contemporary scholars should believe. However it does not mean that we all as scholars and as human beings do no longer ask such questions and that in our disciplines we have no “seekers” of answers to these questions any more. My experience is that the study of religions is a very attractive discipline for many seekers. It is not unusual for the students of the study of religions to see themselves as people who came into the field to study various traditions in order to select the one most suitable for themselves or to combine elements of diverse traditions as they see fit. Because universities fully respect students’ rights for privacy, they do not ask for their motivation to study and do not know that they have come for



some a kind of spiritual supermarket.<sup>10</sup> Therefore the study of religions in particular can be perceived as a space for doubts giving rise to suspicions that the academy is not only the space for intellectual and scientific interests, but also for personal quests of religious faith or of somebody's world view.<sup>11</sup> However, it cannot be prevented.

Unfortunately, in many Eastern European countries the study of religions as a subject is not included yet in the educational curricula of elementary and secondary schools; however, teaching "about" religions is a part of other subjects, such as Civic Education or Ethics. If it is, by chance, the courses are only optional. In the Czech Republic many school managements consider any particular religion, and likewise any scientific education "about" religions, as having no place at public schools. The paradox then is that each year many religious studies specialists graduate from secular universities (in the Czech Republic between 50 and 100 graduates annually) but they cannot find appropriate jobs in their field of study. In Poland,<sup>12</sup> where the Catholic Church holds a dominant position among all churches, priests and catechists are preferred to teach religious education (teaching of religion) at elementary and secondary schools. In Slovakia the situation is generally similar.<sup>13</sup> Simply, teaching "about" religions from a study of religions point of view has very little practical use in a religiously homogeneous society such as Poland or Slovakia. In the Czech Republic, any significant inclusion of the study of religions into elementary and secondary schools curricula is prevented by the general indifference (even hostility) towards religion as such, which is paralleled by a very low level of knowledge about religious issues; at best one can expect some scarce and disparate awareness about Christianity. People personally refuse religion/s and thus do not want to know anything about it/them. If the public is informed at all, it is usually via unqualified persons, "specialists" without qualification.

I am afraid that a long-lasting economic depression and the cutting of state budgets in many European countries will undoubtedly generate similar sorts of political questions: For what reasons should we as politicians financially support the humanities? What would be a politically adequate criterion for measuring their social usefulness and their results? What

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10 See Miroslav Vrzal, "Studium religionistiky jako duchovní hledání", *Sacra* 7/2, 2009, 72-81.

11 Thomas A. Idinopulos, "Must Professors of Religion be Religious", in: Thomas A. Idinopulos – Edward A. Yonan (eds.), *Religion and Reductionism*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1994, 65-81.

12 Henryk Hoffmann – Ania Książek, "Religioznawstwo w szkole – polskie doświadczenia", *Pantheon: Journal for the Study of Religions* 6, 2010, 33-49.

13 Roman Kečka, "Religionistické témy vo vyučovaní na základných a stredných školách na Slovensku", *Pantheon: Journal for the Study of Religions* 6, 2010, 51-70: 54.

would help us to reduce their increasing number?<sup>14</sup> Will the study of religions, as a marginal discipline of humanities, be able to defend not only its own position within humanities but even its pure existence?

Let us again return to the question of what motivations religious studies scholars can have for applying certain theological (or humanistic) issues into their own research. Reflecting the situation in Central and Eastern Europe, I have noticed one particular trend in the activities of some scholars. The conscious absence of a special social function of the study of religions can lead to aspirations at using its findings in active inter-religious dialogue. Religious studies scholars very often participate in panels and discussions with representatives of various religions and contribute in their solution seeking processes. What motivates their efforts? Can the felt absence of a specific role of the discipline or humanist's efforts be sufficient as an argument? Personally I disapprove of such involvement. As much as peace among religions is needed and desired, after all we have to ask the question whether scholars of the study of religions are really those able to reconcile disunited sides in an appropriate way. As needed as the peace among religions is, we still have to ask the cardinal question whether it should truly be religious studies scholars playing an active role at some round table of religions.

One of the reasons why they could be is the fact that the study of religions attempts to approach all religions indiscriminately and neutrally. That certainly is a good prerequisite. It would also allow the scholars to justify the discipline's practical usefulness for society. A question remains whether religions, especially those which are not originally part of the European culture and which refuse a scientific study of religions, would welcome such an activity of secular science. On the other hand, let us suppose that individual religious traditions striving for inter-religious dialogue would invite religious studies scholars to participate in it – what should then be their specific task? If scholars are to fulfill the role of mediators among religions in conflict, who should initiate such a dialogue? Should the initiator be some academic or religious institution? However, to delegate scholars as judges or referees might be perceived as yet another arrogant ambition of science to make decisions about religious issues.

I hope that the task of the study of religions as an academic discipline is neither to create conditions for an inter-religious dialogue nor to initiate one. Inter-religious dialogue is, above all, a religious initiative, religious

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14 Such questions are currently very frequent among politicians in the Czech Republic. In the Czech academia, significant apprehension about the future development can be felt, including concerns about the sole existence of study programs and departments. Because the study of religions in the Czech academy is a marginal discipline, such worries are, unfortunately, grounded.

activity that the study of religions as a science should certainly closely observe, critically study and analyze but should not take active part in. Our role as scholars is to be in touch with religions but not to be involved in religious endeavors. Active effort at inter-religious dialogue can be a specific example. After all, a true dialogue does not allow for keeping a distance. And scholars actively engaging in such a dialogue, which is a religious activity, can undoubtedly easily lose their scientifically detached, bird's eye view. Thus I consider such endeavor misleading because it inconspicuously brings ideology inside the discipline.<sup>15</sup>

Judging from the situation of the study of religions in Central and Eastern Europe from both historical and contemporary perspectives, I cannot say that it is in thrall of some “universal cognitive proclivity” to religion. I would claim instead that human cognition in general is prone to universalism, i.e. to philosophical addressing of problems. But if science is to stay scientific, it cannot become a “project” to solve the existential questions of a scholar or of the academic community. If the study of religions is to protect itself effectively from such a fallacy, it must be wary of theology as well as of any attempts to changes into a philosophy (of religion); and these were numerous throughout the discipline's history. I personally understand the study of religions as a “modest cognitive project”, as an empirical and descriptive field to which historical-philological method is central. As a philosopher with interests in the history of the field, I would dare to say that it must also be strongly anti-philosophical and it must not bring back meta-narrative theories and the spirit of the 19th century, I mean any attempt to create generally accepted theory.

At the very end, allow me a personal note. I asked Donald Wiebe during his and Luther Martin's visit in Pardubice in February 2012 what he saw as the greatest problem of the field, he answered with a smile: “Money!” If he meant it seriously then the problem of ideological agendas present in the study of religions is not the first, but second, and that sounds more hopeful than the very beginning of our purely academic discussion.

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15 T. Bubík, *České bádání o náboženství ve 20. století...*, 221-222.

## SUMMARY

**Rethinking the Relationship between the Study of Religions, Theology and Religious Concerns: A Response to Some Aspects of Wiebe and Martin's Paper**

This response deals with some aspects of Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe's paper "Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion". The authors think that the human mind in general constantly tends towards religiousness and thus comprehensive scientific inquiry into religion is actually impossible. They argue that "such study is not ever likely to occur in that or any other setting" (p. 9). They also stress that they were deluded in the past and argue that especially (or only) the cognitive approach can help us to elucidate the proclivity towards religiousness. I partly agree with them, particularly that the promotion of "extra-scientific" agendas in Academia is questionable, but I do not see it as such a serious problem. The reduction of the biases to only "religious" agendas is mistaken. The history of the field is a history of diverse "extra-scientific" agendas which change in accordance with social development and prevailing political interests. I present the situation from a central and eastern European point of view. At the same time, I argue that many scientific fields deal with the same issue, even if not to such an extent. This is because religious studies, more than other disciplines, attracts scholars with a special inclination toward religion. I also argue that scholarly results are much more important than "personal" agendas. Also, the aspiration of religious studies as presented by Martin and Wiebe seems to me too idealistic, perhaps utopist and thus unrealizable.

**Keywords:** Study of Religions; theology; religious concerns; Central and Eastern Europe; ideology of humanities; politics of education; inter-religious dialogue.

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