

Martin, Luther H.

**The future of the past : the history of religions and cognitive historiography**

*Religio*. 2012, vol. 20, iss. 2, pp. [155]-171

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/125418>

Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

# *The Future of the Past: The History of Religions and Cognitive Historiography*

LUTHER H. MARTIN\*

“Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; nor under circumstances they have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted.” (Karl Marx, 1852)<sup>1</sup>

The proposal for a scientific study of religions was born of the scientific impulse that swept Europe from the mid-nineteenth century and that gave birth to the study of history itself as a scientific and autonomous discipline.<sup>2</sup> This new *Religionswissenschaft* was understood to be distinct from its previous philosophical and literary contexts, and, most significantly, from its previous theological commitments.

The scientific impulse in the study of history is perhaps best exemplified by the works of Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886). This German historian emphasized the importance of critically examining primary sources and of establishing historical facts empirically, in order to narrate, thereby, simple historical truth “*wie*”, in his famous formulation, “*es eigentlich gewesen*”, that is, to relate what actually happened.<sup>3</sup> Although von Ranke has acquired a reputation as a “souless [*sic*] positivist”, concerned only with facts,<sup>4</sup> the distinguished intellectual historian Georg Iggers has concluded that “no German historian of the nineteenth century (with the possible exception of Droysen) paid as much attention to the theoretical foundations for his historical practice as did Ranke”.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, a historical positivism promulgated in von Ranke’s name, largely by his American followers, continued to be widely influential among subsequent historians,

---

\* This paper is revised from a presentation to the workshop “Past, Present, and Future in the Study of Religion”, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic, 1-3 March 2012.

1 Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”, in: David Fernbach (ed.), *Surveys from Exile: Political Writings II*, London: Penguin 1973, 146.

2 Fritz Stern, *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, Cleveland: The World Publishing Company 1956, 16; Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies*, New York: St. Martin’s Press 1999, esp. 3-50.

3 Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press 1968, 63-64.

4 *Ibid.*, 65.

5 *Ibid.*, 64-65.

including historians of religion, if generally unacknowledged by them.<sup>6</sup> These historians essentially consider that once the historical evidence is all in, it will speak for itself.

The new scientific study of religion is often associated with, and certainly is exemplified by, the work of von Ranke's near contemporary, Max Müller (1823-1900). His edited translations of the *Sacred Books of the East*, continued after his death, made a large number of primary sources from Asian traditions available for the first time to Western scholars.<sup>7</sup> His critical approach to these texts, and that of his contemporaries, was comparative and historical, modeled on the scientific philology of the time. However, the new *Religionswissenschaft* soon took a decidedly anti-empirical, even anti-scientific, turn.<sup>8</sup>

Increasingly, historians of religion rejected scientific studies of religion as positivistic and reductionist and turned, rather, to various inflections of *Verstehen*, an approach to historiography, associated with the work of Max Weber that seeks an empathetic understanding of historical subjects rather than treating them as empirical data.<sup>9</sup> Influenced by German romanticism and ignoring Weber's own commitment and his major contributions to historiography, historians such as J. G. Droysen, W. Dilthey, and R. G. Collingwood came to embrace *verständnisvoll* hermeneutical methods. Subsequently, historians of religion abandoned historical methods altogether and the study of religion became associated with an ahistorical approach in which "history of religions" became a synonym for assembling a phenomenological corpus of truncated and decontextualized cultural data, the temporality of which was disregarded in favor of claims to their being manifestations of a *sui generis* sacrality, e.g., by members of the "history of religions" school associated with the influential work of Mircea Eliade, especially during the 1960s and 1970. This "humanistic" turn, then, allowed for a return of theological, or crypto-theological, agendas, however furtive, to the study of religion, a return, as it were, to its early nineteenth century pre-scientific predisposition.

A subsequent postmodernist vogue in religious studies revived a kind of pseudo-historicism that emphasized the socio-historical construction of cultural particulars. Despite its abstruse pseudo-philosophical façade, however, the postmodernist emphasis on cultural relativism is simply a naïve reminiscence of the constructionist views of nineteenth-century his-

---

6 *Ibid.*

7 Friedrich Max Müller (ed.), *The Sacred Books of the East* I-L, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1879-1910.

8 D. Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies...*, 141-162.

9 Guy Oakes, "The Verstehen Thesis and the Foundations of Max Weber's Methodology", *History and Theory* 16/1, 1977, 11-29.

toricism.<sup>10</sup> However, their historicist views neglect the historicity of primary sources and are informed, rather, by an anti-theory, anti-science ideology that provided legitimation for many in the academy to pursue religious interests in the academic study of religion.

Given this somewhat desultory view of the history of religions, what might the future hold for such study? I maintain at the outset that the history of religions must regain its core defining characteristic as *history*.

### Historiographical cognition

Historiographical thinking seems to be an aspiration of all human beings. In the concise formulation of the second-century Valentinian Theodotus (as reported by Clement of Alexandria), salvific knowledge consists of knowing “who we are, what we have become, where we have been, and where we are going” (Clem. Alex. *Ex. Theodoto* 78.2) – a historicizing formulation repeated at the end of the nineteenth century by Paul Gauguin on one of his most famous paintings (*D’où Venons Nous / Que Sommes Nous / Où Allons Nous* [1897/1898]). Writing in 1932, the American historian Carl Becker argued that it is the *memory* of what we have said and done that is the “fundamental thing which enables ... [us] to have ... a history”.<sup>11</sup> This ordinary mnemonic proclivity for producing our history is, in the conclusion of historian Sam Wineburg, simply “our psychological condition at rest, a way of thinking that requires little effort and [that] comes quite naturally”.<sup>12</sup> The mind of Everyman, in other words, seems to be characterized by historiographical cognition, whether that history has an actual or a mythical quality.

According to the title of Giles Fauconnier’s and Mark Turner’s study of conceptual blending,<sup>13</sup> Everyman thinks with narratives. The literary scholar Jonathan Gottschall argues that this human facility for narrative is an evolutionary-based strategy that allows for an imaginative exploration of complex

10 As with Postmodernism, Georg Iggers notes that eighteenth-century German historicism was a reaction against Enlightenment thought, and like Postmodernism, it views, in Iggers’ summary, “all social reality as a historical stream where no two instances are comparable and which assumes that the value standards and logical categories, too, are totally immersed in the stream of history” (G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History...*, 30).

11 Carl L. Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian”, *American Historical Review* 37/2, 1932, 221-236; cited here from Robin W. Winks (ed.), *The Historian as Detective: Essays on Evidence*, New York: Harper and Row 1969, 10-11.

12 Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2001, 19.

13 Gilles Fauconnier – Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities*, New York: Basic Books 2002.

social relationships while avoiding the ambiguities of social realities.<sup>14</sup> While narrative might well be foremost in the way we think, it is not the only way – I have previously written about “lists” for example, a genre of genealogical relationships that dominates the earliest written materials.<sup>15</sup>

Initially, historical and comparative studies of religion are often understood as historical genealogies that were neither narrated nor listed but modeled with the diagram of a family tree. This tree-model was borrowed, of course, from the philological models of Indo-European languages from which the study of religion emerged and which it emulated. Thus the Austrian linguist and ethnographer Wilhelm Schmidt argued for a history of religions rooted in an *Urmonotheismus* that, over time, branched into the plurality of religious alternatives.<sup>16</sup> The dominant understanding of early Christianity still employs such a model, whereby the historical diversities of Christianity are commonly represented as branching from a tree rooted in the founding actions and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, which studied religion as a socio-cultural phenomenon that evolved with human culture, modeled their history as a kind of inverted tree, tracing religion from the plurality of primitive polytheism to a triumph of ethical monotheism.

The tree model of historical change and relationships is, of course, based on a view of singular origination as presented in the Genesis story, which dominated Western views of history until the nineteenth century and which assesses historical change with reference to mythological origins.<sup>17</sup> When, however, this mythological tree was felled by the halberd of nineteenth-century science, little consensus remained about how to understand the plurality of non-Christian, as well as Christian, religious evidence that is dispersed over time and throughout space.

14 Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2012.

15 Luther H. Martin, “The Promise of Cognitive Science for the Historical Study of Religions, with Reference to the Study of Early Christianity”, in: Petri Luomanen – Ilkka Pyysiäinen – Risto Uro (eds.), *Explaining Early Judaism and Christianity: Contributions from Cognitive and Social Sciences*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 2007, 37-56: 42.

16 Wilhelm Schmidt, *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee: Eine historisch-kritische und positive Studie*, Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung 1912.

17 Andrew Shryock – Daniel Lord Smail, “Introduction”, in: iid. (eds.), *Deep History: The Architecture of the Past and Present*, Berkeley: The University of California Press 2011, 3-22: 16-17; Andrew Shryock – Thomas R. Trautmann – Clive Gamble, “Imagining the Human in Deep Time”, in: Andrew Shryock – Daniel Lord Smail (eds.), *Deep History: The Architecture of the Past and Present*, Berkeley: The University of California Press 2011, 32-38.

Fundamentally, the problem faced by historians of religion, as by all historians, is that their evidence is not only diverse but it is fragmentary.<sup>18</sup> Thus, no matter how many new discoveries are made and “thick descriptions” assembled, a von Rankean account of “how things really were” will always remain elusive; the historical reality is that all the data is never in, nor will it ever be. The problem is not the discovery or gathering of more data but how to make sense of the data at hand.

A simplistic analogy for this historiographical problem is the children’s game of connect the dots. In this game, children are presented with dots on a piece of paper, which, like the diverse fragments of historical evidence, are seemingly unrelated. Unlike the historical evidence, however, the dots in the children’s game are numbered, allowing the children to connect them in a way that represents some image that is replicable to anyone playing that same game. So, for example, in one familiar exemplar game, connecting five dots that are numbered in diagonal opposition produces the image of a star; this same star is infinitely replicable as long as the dots are connected in the given numerical sequence. Were this an example of a historical problem, a solution would be suggested that involved a network of reciprocal relations.

Since historical evidential dots are unnumbered, however, they may be connected in alternative ways. Thus, the evidential dots of our example may be connected contiguously to form a pentagram; were *this* an example of a historical problem, the same data would suggest a relationship of data defined by their mutual occupation of a common space. Given the same evidence, in other words, a set of unnumbered dots, this solution while entirely plausible is nevertheless diametrically opposed to the former. Although the numbers of possible connections are constrained by the evidential dots, unnumbered dots may nevertheless be connected arbitrarily to produce various nonsensical diagrams – a solution that has characterized far too much historiography. It is, in other words, the historians’ task to reconstruct a historical event by connecting the dots of their fragmentary evidence in the most plausible way. Plausible reconstructions of historical occurrences not only depend upon a critical evaluation of evidence but, as von Ranke already emphasized, upon a theoretical commitment by historians that supports the probable historiographical reconstruction of the relationships allowed by that evidence.

---

18 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996, 23.

## Historiographical theory

If historical thinking is an ordinary process of human cognition, then academic historiographical thinking is a specialized and professionalized version of this ordinary process that corrects – or should correct – the “common sense” biases of the ordinary thinking.<sup>19</sup> It should do so, it would seem by replacing “common sense” with reflective theoretical stances. The British historian Neville Morley notes that advocates of theory in historical work “insist that un- or undertheorised historical accounts are inadequate, because they depend on a set of implicit and problematic assumptions masquerading a ‘common sense’”.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the more positivistic historians, who question the use of theory, “maintain that any account of ... [the past] using modern concepts and theories is illegitimate and misleading, as the evidence has been corrupted and distorted with anachronism”.<sup>21</sup>

Over the years, historians have proposed a number of theoretical models for “connecting-the-dots” of their historical data and, thereby, “fill-in-the-gaps” of the historical record, which have, indeed, proven to be anachronistic. These include such approaches as the dynamics of dialectical materialism, formal rational choice theory, the role of social networks, dynamic population models, social epidemiology,<sup>22</sup> most of which have been found to reflect contemporary views and values imposed on historical agents.<sup>23</sup>

Since the 1990s, however, some historians have begun to reconsider the biocognitive universals of *Homo sapiens* that have been established by evolutionary theory as a frame for historiography.<sup>24</sup> Even as Darwin’s evolutionary theory represented a historicization of biology, a number of historians, including historians of religion, became intrigued with the idea of employing evolutionary theory for explaining historical change and development already with the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* (1859). For example, in 1882, the comparative anatomist Alexander Macalister presented an evolutionary history of the Christian church to the in-

19 C. L. Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian...”; Robin G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, New York: Oxford University Press 2<sup>nd</sup> 1956, 268.

20 Neville Morley, *Theories, Models and Concepts in Ancient History*, London: Routledge 2004, 1.

21 *Ibid.*

22 R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity...*, xii.

23 *Ibid.*, 23.

24 Luther H. Martin, “Evolution, Cognition, and History”, in: Luther H. Martin – Jesper Sørensen (eds.), *Past Minds: Studies in Cognitive Historiography*, London: Equinox 2011, 1-10: 3-6.

augural meeting of the Dublin Presbyterian Association.<sup>25</sup> The address seemed to have been well received since Macalister notes in his Preface that it was printed at the request of “some of those who heard it”, although he does acknowledge that others “seem to have thought that [his] line of thought tended to the depreciation” of their religion<sup>26</sup> – an ambiguity about scientific approaches to the study of religion that continues to the present day.

Perhaps the most audacious historiographical proposal based on evolutionary theory to date is the recent programmatic agenda of Harvard historian Daniel Lord Smail. In his groundbreaking work *On Deep History and the Brain*,<sup>27</sup> Smail proposes a history of *Homo sapiens* beginning with the African origins of the species ca. 80,000 BC which focuses on our evolved biocognitive substrate. For Smail, this history would trace the development of, changes in, effects of, and relationships between various practices and behaviors that have violated, manipulated, or modulated our evolved neurochemical systems within various environmental and historical contexts.

However, few historians have actually produced comprehensive studies that employ an evolutionary frame. A notable exception is the Canadian historian Gregory Hanlon who has written a *mentalités*-type history of the Tuscan village of Montefollonico in the seventeenth century.<sup>28</sup> Hanlon organizes and interprets the results of his detailed archival evidence in terms of Darwinian evolutionary themes of governance, cooperation, competition, reproduction and exchange. Citing the Belgian philosopher of science Robert Franck, Hanlon notes that the theoretical constraints of evolutionary theory – “the larger context” for proximate contextual causes – “sets the limits of what can and cannot occur or endure beyond the short term”.<sup>29</sup> And, the evolutionary biologist Peter Turchin employs evolutionary theory as a frame for his comprehensive study of *War and Peace and War: The Rise and Fall of Empires*,<sup>30</sup> a study of human ultrasociality or the ability of *Homo sapiens* to cooperate in groups of millions and more genetically unrelated individuals. The well-known works of Jared Diamond are, of course, also explicitly informed by evolutionary theory, especially,

25 Alexander Macalister, *Evolution in Church History*, Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co. 1882.

26 *Ibid.*, 3-4.

27 Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain*, Berkeley: The University of California Press 2008.

28 Gregory Hanlon, *Human Nature in Rural Tuscany: An Early Modern History*, New York: Palgrave 2007.

29 *Ibid.*, 8.

30 Peter Turchin, *War and Peace and War: The Rise and Fall of Empires*, New York: Penguin Books 2007.



*The Third Chimpanzee: The Evolution and Future of the Human Animal*<sup>31</sup> and his *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*<sup>32</sup>.

Although a number of historians of religion have turned their attention to evolutionary theory, few have actually employed such frames in their historiographical work. Rather, many scholars of religion are still spending their efforts debating the value of such an approach – if they expend any effort in this area at all. Others engage in crypto-apologetic debates about whether or not “religion” is itself a naturally selected evolutionary product and, therefore, a socially beneficial adaptation.<sup>33</sup> This latter debate analogizes historical change and cultural developments to the biological model of variation and natural selection, an analogy that, in my judgment, is weak and unproductive<sup>34</sup> – an example of what British wag Raymond Tallis considers an immoderate instance of “Darwinitis”.<sup>35</sup>

Properly, evolutionary theory describes *natural* causes for human behaviors in terms of the ultimate Darwinian imperatives of biological survival and reproduction and, of course, those proximate strategies for realizing these ultimate ends. The cognitive sciences have been perhaps the most successful in identifying proximate causes specifically within an evolutionary context, namely those evolved mental capacities and constraints of *Homo sapiens*. But what might be the contribution of cognitive science to historiography?

31 Jared Diamond, *The Third Chimpanzee: The Evolution and Future of the Human Animal*, New York: Harper Collins 1992.

32 Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, New York: Norton 1997.

33 Among those who think that religion is a socially beneficial adaptation are David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2002, Joseph Bulbulia (Victoria University, New Zealand) and Richard Sosis, who largely follow Wilson in understanding religion as an evolved social adaptation, e.g., Joseph Bulbulia – Richard Sosis, “Signalling Theory and the Evolutionary Study of Religions”, *Religion* 41/3, 2011, 363-388; iid., “The Behavioral Ecology of Religion: The Benefits and Costs of One Evolutionary Approach”, *Religion* 41/3, 2011, 341-362; Joseph Bulbulia, “Religion as Evolutionary Cascade,” in: Michael Stausberg (ed.), *Contemporary Theories of Religion: A Critical Companion*, New York: Routledge 2009, 156-172; id., “Nature’s Medicine: Religiosity as an Adaptation for Health and Cooperation”, in: Patrick MacNamara (ed.), *Where Man and God Meet: The New Sciences of Religion and Brain*, Westwood, CT: Greenwood Publishers 2006, 87-121.

34 Luther H. Martin, “Does Religion Really Evolve? (And What Is It Anyway?)”, in: Joseph Bulbulia – Richard Sosis et al. (eds.), *The Evolution of Religions: Studies, Theories, and Critiques*, Santa Margarita, CA: The Collins Foundation Press 2008, 349-355.

35 Raymond Tallis, *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis, and the Misrepresentation of Humanity*, Durham: Acumen Publishing 2011, 168.

### Cognitive historiography

Historians, like cognitive scientists, are concerned with human minds. As concisely formulated by the American historian of ancient history Chester Starr: if one is to understand “any era of the past, one must be able to penetrate into the minds of its inhabitants”.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the German sociologist and philosopher of history Georg Simmel contended that “[m]ind is the material of history. ... If history is not a mere puppet show, then it must be the history of mental processes. ... [T]hose matters which come first in the rational order of things – the cognitive functions of the mind – come last from the standpoint of our awareness and our observation”.<sup>37</sup>

Cognitive scientists, like evolutionary psychologists, now agree that the morphology of the human brain and the functions of that morphology have changed little, if at all, over the past 100,000 years, well outside the constraints for the 80,000 year deep history proposed by Smal. Since these scientists also agree that mind is constrained by brain, the minds of “modern and historical people are sufficiently similar in general cognitive function to warrant a meaningful comparison”<sup>38</sup> – and the cognitive sciences are increasing our knowledge about modern minds exponentially.

Few historians of religion, however, have acknowledged the challenge of cognitive historiography suggested by Starr and Simmel – despite the argument made already in 1994, by Thomas Lawson, himself a historian of religion and one of the founders of the field of cognitive science of religion, that history, like any human production, is a product of the human minds which require cognitive explanation.<sup>39</sup> Although some scholars have made pioneering studies in this area, they have all been limited to considerations of specific historical problems. And while some of these studies have *in concert* addressed the history of a specific religious tradition – particularly Graeco-Roman religions<sup>40</sup> – no one has yet produced a sustained historical

36 Chester G. Starr, *A History of the Ancient World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1965, 27.

37 Georg Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History: An Epistemological Essay*, trans. Guy Oakes, New York: Free Press 1977, vii, 39, 43.

38 Anders Lisdorf, “Towards a Cognitive Historiography: Frequently Posed Objections”, in: Panayotis Pachis – Donald Wiebe (eds.), *Chasing Down Religion: In the Sights of History and the Cognitive Sciences: Essays in Honor of Luther H. Martin*, Thessaloniki: Barbounakis Publications 2010, 235.

39 E. Thomas Lawson, “Counterintuitive Notions and the Problem of Transmission: The Relevance of Cognitive Science for the Study of History”, in: Luther H. Martin (ed.), “History, Memory, and Cognition”, *Historical Reflections / Réflexions historiques* 20/3, 1994, 481-495.

40 Among others, I might mention Roger Beck’s and Aleš Chalupa’s work on the Roman cult of Mithras (Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire:*

study framed by cognitive theory comparable to those of Hanson and

*Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*, New York: Oxford University Press 2006; Aleš Chalupa, “What Might Cognitive Science Contribute to Our Understanding of the Roman Cult of Mithras”, in: Luther H. Martin – Jesper Sørensen [eds.], *Past Minds: Studies in Cognitive Historiography*, London: Equinox 2011, 107-123), Douglas Gregg’s studies of Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* (Douglas Gragg, “Do Multiple Initiations of Lucius in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* Falsify the Ritual Form Hypothesis?”, in: Luther H. Martin – Jesper Sørensen [eds.], *Past Minds: Studies in Cognitive Historiography*, London: Equinox 2011, 125-130), Anders Lisdorf’s innovative work on the preservation and spread of Roman prodigies (Anders Lisdorf, “The Spread of Non-Natural Concepts: Evidence from the Roman Prodigy Lists”, *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 4/1, 2004, 151-173), Panayotis Pachis’s study of the Graeco-Roman Isis cult (Panayotis Pachis, “Dream and Healing in the Isis/Sarapis Cult during the Graeco-Roman Age”, in: Roger Beck – Luther H. Martin [eds.], *Data from Dead Minds? Challenges on the Interface of History of Religions in Graeco-Roman Antiquity and the Cognitive Science of Religion*, forthcoming) and Esther Eidinow’s study of luck and fate in classical antiquity (Esther Eidinow, *Luck, Fate and Future: Antiquity and Its Legacy*, New York: Oxford University Press 2011), in addition to my own attempts to explore the usefulness of the cognitive sciences for understanding the early Christianities as well as the Roman cult of Mithras (e.g., Luther H. Martin, “Ritual Competence and Mithraic Ritual”, in: Timothy Light – Brian C. Wilson [eds.], *Religion as a Human Capacity: A Festschrift in Honor of E. Thomas Lawson*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 2004, 295-263; id., “Towards a Cognitive History of Religions”, in: Christoph Kleine – Monika Schrimpf – Katja Triplett [eds.], *Unterwegs: Neue Pfade in der Religionswissenschaft: Festschrift für Michael Pye zum 65. Geburtstag / On the Road: New Paths in the Study of Religions: Festschrift in Honour of Michael Pye on His 65th Birthday*, München: Biblon 2004, 75-82; reprinted with corrections and minor revisions in *Revista de Estudos de Religião* 5/4, 2005, 7-18, <[http://www4.pucsp.br/rever/rv4\\_2005/p\\_martin.pdf](http://www4.pucsp.br/rever/rv4_2005/p_martin.pdf)>, [14 August 2012]; id., “The Very Idea of Globalization: The Case of Hellenistic Empire”, in: Luther H. Martin – Panayotis Pachis [eds.], *Hellenisation, Empire and Globalization: Lessons from Antiquity*, Thessaloniki: Vaniass Press 2004, 123-139; id., “Performativity, Discourse and Cognition: ‘Demythologizing’ the Roman Cult of Mithras”, in: Willi Braun [ed.], *Rhetoric and Reality in Early Christianity*, Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press 2005, 187-217; id., “The Roman Cult of Mithras: A Cognitive Perspective”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 14/2, 2006, 131-146; id., “The Promise of Cognitive Science...”; id., “Does Religion Really Evolve?...”, 349-355; id., “What Do Religious Rituals Do? (And How Do They Do It?): Cognition and the Study of Religion”, in: Russell McCutcheon – Willi Braun [eds.], *Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith*, London: Equinox 2008, 325-339; id., “The Amor and Psyche Relief in the Mithraeum of Capua Vetere: An Exceptional Case of Graeco-Roman Syncretism or an Ordinary Instance of Human Cognition?”, in: Patricia A. Johnston – Giovanni Casadio [eds.], *The Mystic Cults of Magna Graecia*, Austin: University of Texas Press 2009, 277-289; id., “Why Christianity Was Accepted by Romans But Not by Rome”, in: Ulrich Berner – Ilincă Tanaseanu [eds.], *Religionskritik in der Antike*, Berlin: LIT 2009, 93-107; id., “Globalization, Syncretism, and Religion in Western Antiquity: Some Neurocognitive Considerations”, *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 94/1-2, 2010, 5-17; Harvey Whitehouse – Luther H. Martin [eds.], *Theorizing Religions Past: Archaeology, History, and Cognition*, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press 2004; Luther H. Martin – Jesper Sørensen [eds.], *Past Minds: Studies in Cognitive Historiography*, London: Equinox 2011).

Turchin framed by evolutionary theory – a historiographical poverty that leaves many historians of religion still doubting the value of evolutionary and cognitive theorizing for their study of religion.<sup>41</sup>

This absence of a sustained cognitive history of any religious tradition is unfortunate, for the cognitive sciences can provide empirically and experimentally tested theoretical models which can allow historians to connect the dots of their data with a greater level of confidence than has previously been the case,<sup>42</sup> for example Thomas Lawson's and Robert McCauley's ritual competence and ritual form hypotheses,<sup>43</sup> Dan Sperber's cognitive attraction theory of cultural stabilization and transmission,<sup>44</sup> Harvey Whitehouse's ritual modes theory of religious transmission<sup>45</sup> and Roy D'Andrade's cognitively framed "cultural schemas"<sup>46</sup> have all been productively employed to connect the dots of historiographical evidence in the study of religion.

In addition, the evolutionary and cognitive defaults identified by cognitive scientists include a number of developmentally early behavioral practices and mental figurations frequently associated with either scholarly or with "folk" understandings of "religion" and can offer explanations for their existence and historical perseverance. These include, for example, the detection of agency in the environment, which provides an evolutionary advantage for any organism since it alerts that organism to possible predatory threat. However, our capacity to identify agency in the environment often results in false positives based on partial or faulty sensory input, i.e., an identification of agency where none exists. Secondly, experimental evidence has shown that we have a developmentally early "theory of mind" or disposition for an "intentional stance", that is, for viewing the behavior of others in terms of their assumed mental properties.<sup>47</sup> This intentionality, appropriately associated with other agents with whom we must interact in our environment, can also become associated with false positives, resulting in an imagined agent-causality for events in the environment, e.g., for creation. Unreflective

41 E.g. Michael Stausberg, "D. Jason Slone, Theological Incorrectness. Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn't", *Numen* 52/1, 2005, 149-151: 151.

42 Luther H. Martin, "Rituals, Modes, Memory and Historiography: The Cognitive Promise of Harvey Whitehouse", *Journal of Ritual Studies* 16, 2002, 30-33: 31.

43 E. Thomas Lawson – Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990; Robert N. McCauley – E. Thomas Lawson, *Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002.

44 Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach*, Oxford: Blackwell 1996.

45 Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission*, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press 2004.

46 Roy D'Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995.

47 Daniel C. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1987.

perceptions of agent-causality, whether actual or imaginary, evoke similar responses and motivate similar behaviors. Understanding these responses and behaviors can help historians to explain otherwise puzzling human beliefs, ideologies and actions. One markedly recurring human action is ritual. Evolutionary psychologists and social anthropologists have shown that ritualized behavior is a universally common practice whereby an environment is organized.<sup>48</sup> Religious rituals are but an institutionally structured subset of this ordinary behavior. So disenchanting, these behaviors become more accessible to scientific as to historical understanding.

The theoretical object of a cognitive history of religion would not be a *Heilsgeschichte* of the gods and their divine entourages and chosen peoples, nor one of presumed cultural manifestations of “the sacred”. Rather, the theoretical object of a cognitive history of religions would be that of the recruitment and exploitation of those default evolutionary and cognitive biases by those institutions, ideologies, and practices that have deemed “religious” at some point or other in human history. Already in 1909, the Cambridge classicist Jane Harrison proposed a research program that anticipated, within the frame of Darwinian theory, such a cognitive history of religion. Citing Darwin’s expectations for the future of psychology, Harrison proposed an evolutionary history of religion that would focus on “the necessary acquirement of each mental capacity [for specific religious practices and ideas] by gradation”.<sup>49</sup> Her proposal for understanding religion as a suite of evolved behavioral features presciently articulates the agenda of contemporary evolutionary psychologists and cognitive scientists. According to these scientists, the behaviors and mental representations identified by evolutionary and cognitive theorists – such as biases for agent causality, teleology, sociality, the fundamentals of morality – are, because of the common evolutionary history of *Homo sapiens*, transcultural and transhistorical characteristics of *Homo sapiens* and of their behaviors. Such panhuman proclivities should, consequently, be of central concern to historians – to the extent, of course, that we get the science right. (We must recognize that inquiries into the complexity of human minds and their functions are, after all, still new areas of scientific investigation.)

---

48 Pascal Boyer – Pierre Liénard, “Why Ritualized Behavior? Precaution Systems and Action Parsing in Developmental, Pathological and Cultural Rituals”, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 29, 2006, 595-650.

49 Jane E. Harrison, “The Influence of Darwinism on the Study of Religions”, in: Albert C. Seward (ed.), *Darwin and Modern Science: Essays in Commemoration of the Centenary of the Birth of Charles Darwin and of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Publication of the Origin of the Species*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1909, 494-511: 497.

Although shaped by historical antecedents, cultural contexts and the cognitive capacities of historical subjects, explanations for historical events and change cannot, of course, ever be reconstructed with certainty from among the range of possibilities these sets of variables allow. This is not only because of the complexity of these variables and the number of their possible relationships, but also because much history is a consequence of accident. As Nobel Prize recipient Daniel Kahneman rightly contends, “[t]he idea that large historical events are determined by luck is profoundly shocking, although it is demonstrably true”.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, knowledge of antecedents, contexts and cognition allows for a retrodictive reconstruction of historical events and change with some approximate degree of accuracy. An understanding of cognitive, in addition to material, constraints may, however, well temper Kahneman’s surprise about the seemingly accidental character of historical change. That is to say, historical data, including those of the history of religions, are produced and transmitted – at least in principle – in historically, contextually, and cognitively tractable ways. Nevertheless, few of the historians of religion who have employed cognitive approaches to specific historical problems have addressed what is potentially their most significant contribution, namely, the problem of historical change.<sup>51</sup> Those who have, have largely employed the literary implications of conceptual blending for understanding textual transmissions, for example, Ted Slingerland’s work on the fourth-century BC Chinese text of *Mencius*,<sup>52</sup> and Hugo Lundhaug’s analyses of early gnostic texts.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to employing cognitive insights and models in their historiographical work, historians of religion can productively participate in the cognitive project generally, by assessing the “real-life” validity of cognitive models. After all, if behavioral and cognitive defaults identified by evolutionary psychologists and cognitive scientists are, in fact, panhuman proclivities, then their effects should be readily documented from what is known from the entire deep history of *Homo sapiens*.

---

50 Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux 2011, 218.

51 But see L. H. Martin, “Why Christianity Was Accepted...”, 93-107.

52 Edward Slingerland, *What Science Offers the Humanities: Integrating Body and Cultures*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008, 185-206.

53 Hugo Lundhaug, *Images of Rebirth: Cognitive Poetics and Transformational Soteriology in the Gospel of Philip and the Exegesis on the Soul*, (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 73), Leiden: Brill 2010.



## Conclusion

James Laidlaw, who describes himself as social anthropologist who is “well-disposed” towards the cognitive sciences,<sup>54</sup> has acknowledged that developments in cognitive science have real consequences for social anthropology in general and the study of religion in particular. Nevertheless, he cautions his colleagues that these consequences should not be “exaggerated” with an expectation that interpretation will be superseded or encompassed by scientific methods.<sup>55</sup> This same emphasis on the compatibility of interpretation and explanation was emphasized already by Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley, the founders of the field of cognitive science.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, as I have emphasized elsewhere, I, in no way, mean to suggest that cognitive historicizing can or should replace traditional historical methods.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, a cognitive historiography, including a cognitive historiography of religion, can draw upon well-founded theory that can supplement and provide correctives to traditional historiographical tools. It can do so by identifying and explaining data that have been produced by ordinary processes of human cognition but that have otherwise been neglected in favor of more explicit forms of evidence that historians have, for one reason or another, come to privilege – principally texts, which are themselves, of course, constrained products of human minds to be explained rather than unembellished reservoirs of historical facts. Cognitive theories can contribute insights into how and why some representations of historical behaviors emerged, were favored and remembered, but not others that may have been historically, culturally or cognitively possible or present. They also offer explanations for how and why some representations but not others have been exploited by religious institutions as efficient ways by which elaborated and complex information, such as theologically elaborated codes of morality and religious ideologies, have been legitimated and successfully transmitted over time.

Perhaps those historians of religion currently engaged in framing their historical work with evolutionary and cognitive theorizing might collaborate with other academic historians to move towards the scientific historiography promised at the end of the nineteenth century. Two recent developments would seem to support this promise. The first promise of note is

---

54 James Laidlaw, “A Well-Disposed Social Anthropologist’s Problems with the ‘Cognitive Science of Religion’”, in: Harvey Whitehouse – James Laidlaw (eds.), *Religion, Anthropology, and Cognitive Science*, Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press 2007, 211.

55 *Ibid.*, 212.

56 E. T. Lawson – R. N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion...*, 12-31.

57 L. H. Martin, “The Promise of Cognitive Science...”, 51-52.

the establishment of a full-time faculty position in the cognitive science of religion in the Religious Studies Department at California State University, Northridge.<sup>58</sup> The second is an “expertise” in history of religions advertised by the School of History and Anthropology, Queen’s University, Belfast.<sup>59</sup> The School of History and Anthropology at Queen’s University is, of course, the administrative home of the Institute of Cognition and Culture.<sup>60</sup>

### Epilogue: The Future of the Past

Whereas theoretical and experimental work in the cognitive sciences is necessary for cognitive theorizing, a cognitive historiography is perhaps the most promising way for actually realizing a scientific study of religion. And the initial works on specific historical problems that employ such a cognitive historiography, which I have cited above, supports that promise in that they go beyond theoretical constructions and laboratory experimentations to engage in actual cognitive history of religions research and explanation.

However, this promise for a scientific study of religion is compromised by what Robert McCauley identifies as the fragility of the modern scientific enterprise generally.<sup>61</sup> Scientific inquiry has been independently pursued throughout human history, in fifth and fourth century BC Greece, for example, in China from the first century BC until the fifteenth century AD, and in Arabic-Islamic civilization until the thirteenth century.<sup>62</sup> These pursuits all floundered, however, because of a failure of social and political will to provide the material conditions and intellectual commitment necessary to sustain such inquiry. Have conditions changed with modern Western scientific pursuits? Given the historical trajectory of scientific achievement over the past 150 years, one might be optimistic about the future of the scientific enterprise. Given a deeper historical perspective, however, one is more wary. And, in face of the fragility of the scientific

58 <<http://www.csun.edu/religious.studies/AA1CognitiveScience.doc>>, [14 August 2012].

59 “School of History and Anthropology, Queen’s University, Belfast”, <<http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofHistoryandAnthropology/Research/ResearchClusters/History/>>, [14 August 2012].

60 “Institute of Cognition and Culture”, <<http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/InstituteofCognitionCulture/>>, [14 August 2012].

61 Robert N. McCauley, *Why Religion Is Natural and Science Is Not*, New York: Oxford University Press 2011, 279-286.

62 Toby E. Huff, *The Rise of Early Modern Science: Islam, China, and the West*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993; R. N. McCauley, *Why Religion Is Natural...*, 276-277.



enterprise, there is, of course, the “natural” appeal of religion.<sup>63</sup> The naturalness of this appeal is based on the cognitively optimal and mentally attractive defaults of *Homo sapiens* that have been exploited by religious institutions but which tend to persist even among scientists and intellectuals, including among scholars of religions themselves.

Historical predictions, whether positive or negative, like any attempt to predict future trends, tend to “regress to the mean” – to adapt to historical change a counterintuitive model from statistics.<sup>64</sup> That is to say, what are presently perceived either as historical innovations or stagnations tend over time to revert to a central tendency or probable expectation. And, as Donald Wiebe has fastidiously documented, the 150 year history of the academic study of religion is characterized by a pervasive and perduring mean of religiosity.<sup>65</sup> As Kahneman warns, all “nonregressive predictions will be found to be biased” towards a current situation, based as they are on overly confident causal intuitions.<sup>66</sup> For example, the advertised position in cognitive science of religion at California State University, Northridge, mentioned above as an optimistic harbinger for the future for a scientific study of religion, nevertheless stipulates that the successful applicant must, among other responsibilities, “be able to develop curricula dealing with Neurotheology”.<sup>67</sup> Accordingly, Wiebe and I have agreed in our Budapest “confession” that it is unlikely that a scientific study of religion will ever be established as an academic field – as opposed to an innovative but restricted area of specialized research.<sup>68</sup> This assessment, we maintain, is neither pessimistic, as some colleagues have judged it to be, nor, obviously, is it optimistic. Rather, we maintain, on historical and scientific grounds, that it is a *realistic* assessment – that the future of the study of religion will inevitably differ little from that of its past.

---

63 R. N. McCauley, *Why Religion Is Natural...*, 279-286.

64 D. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow...*, 175-184, 190-191, 194-195.

65 D. Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies...*, esp. 141-162, 255-275.

66 D. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow...*, 190-191.

67 <<http://www.csun.edu/religious.studies/AA1CognitiveScience.doc>>, [14 August 2012].

68 Luther H. Martin – Donald Wiebe, “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80/3, 2012, 587-597; iid., “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, 9-18.



## SUMMARY

**The Future of the Past: The History of Religions and Cognitive Historiography**

The proposal for a scientific study of religions (*Religionswissenschaft*) was born of the scientific impulse that swept Europe from the mid-nineteenth century and that gave birth to the study of history itself as a scientific and autonomous discipline. Increasingly, however, historians of religion abandoned historical methods altogether and the study of religion became associated with an ahistorical approach in which “history of religions” became a synonym for assembling a phenomenological corpus of truncated and decontextualized cultural data, the temporality of which was disregarded in favor of claims to their being manifestations of a *sui generis* sacrality. A history of religions, informed by the insights of the new cognitive sciences, can draw upon well-founded theory that can supplement and provide correctives to traditional historiographical tools. Nevertheless, the weight of the 150 history of the study of religion suggests that the future of the study of religion will inevitably differ little from that of its past.

**Keywords:** *Religionswissenschaft*; scientific study of religion; historiography; historiographical theory; evolutionary theory; cognitive science; cognitive historiography.

Department of Religion  
University of Vermont  
481 Main Street  
Burlington, Vermont 05405  
USA

LUTHER H. MARTIN  
luther.martin@uvm.edu