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# *Waking up the old boogeymen? Some comments on Donald Wiebe's text*\*

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This year marks thirty years since teaching religious studies was institutionalized at universities in the former Czechoslovakia.<sup>1</sup> After forty long years, when religion was viewed from the Marxist-Leninist position primarily as an ideology perceived as the proverbial *opium of humanity*, it was possible to study this important phenomenon again *sine ira et studio*. But the re-establishment of religious studies as an academic discipline which ceased to be pejoratively labelled as bourgeois science not only meant the creation and gradual stabilization of an institutional framework but also ignited a fierce debate about what “form” religious studies should take.<sup>2</sup> What might be somewhat confusing to a foreign observer is that this debate was not so much about the emancipation of a newly-established scientific discipline from the unfortunate legacy of so-called scientific atheism, which was anything but science, but rather about the relationship of religious studies to another theoretical reflection on the phenomenon of religion – theology.

At first glance, this “archaic” dispute might have seemed unnecessary and trivial. Still, in the context of “setting the playing field” of religious studies as a “new” science, it was a clash about its justification and logic. As it gradually turned out, it was far from being a dispute peculiar to the

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\* The article has not been peer reviewed.

- 1 For more on this issue see e.g., Tomáš Bubík, “The Czech Journey to the Academic Study of Religions: From the Critique of Religion to its Study”, in: Tomáš Bubík – Henryk Hoffmann (eds.), *Studying Religions with the Iron Curtain Closed and Opened. The Academic Study of Religion in Eastern Europe*, Leiden: Brill 2015, 1-55; Tomáš Bubík – David Václavík, “The Czech Study of Religion and Western Scholarship”, *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* 87/2, 2021, 554-579.
- 2 This fact is well documented in the second issue of this journal published by the *Czech Society for Religious Studies* in 1993. *Religio* was the most respected religious studies journal in the former Czechoslovakia. A substantial part of issue 2, 1993 was devoted to the debate on the relationship between theology and religious studies. Cf. *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 1/2, 1993, <<https://journals.phil.muni.cz/religio/issue/view/1683>> [18. 11. 2023]. However, other contributions published in the same journal in subsequent years dealt with this topic in various ways.



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then Czechoslovakia or, more broadly, the countries of the former Soviet bloc. In a somewhat modified form, discussion on the “theologization” of religious studies was also taking place in many so-called Western countries, from the United States to Finland, in the context of numerous debates on coming to terms with the legacy of the classical phenomenology of religion and its variants, especially Eliade’s conception of religion and its study.

All these debates corresponded to a distinctive feature of religious studies in the 1990s and the 2000s, which was the search for a new form of the academic study of religion after all the major theories and concepts of religion that had emerged after the establishment of religious studies in the 1870s had been subjected to a thorough critique. The newly-emerging discipline of Czech religious studies could not intervene in these disputes in any relevant way. Still, it had the opportunity to become an observer and, in a sense, an imaginary “laboratory”.

The first generation of Czech religious studies scholars was fortunate in that in their efforts to revive the field they were given a helping hand by prominent figures in the world of religious studies at the time, e.g., Jacques Waardenburg, Michael Pye, Zwi Werblowski, Gary Lease, Luther H. Martin, and Donald Wiebe. Many of them came to Czechoslovakia and later to the Czech Republic many times and directly contributed to the shaping of religious studies at Czech universities. Equally important, however, was the fact that several interesting international conferences were held in the Czech Republic, two of which, in my opinion, contributed to the abovementioned debate on the nature of religious studies as a science. The first was a special IAHR conference held in August 1999 and entitled *The Academic Study of Religion during the Cold War*.<sup>3</sup> The second was the 8<sup>th</sup> EASR Congress *Time of Decline, Time of Hope: Scientific, Cultural and Political Engagement of the Study of Religions* held in September 2008.

Two North American scholars, Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe, were influential in organizing and conducting both events. Both were active and vehement participants in numerous debates on the character of the emerging Czech religious studies and its relation to other forms of the theoretical thematization of religion, including theology. Both, and especially Wiebe, were already at that time advocating a strictly scientific approach to religious studies, which, in addition to clearly-defined methodological requirements concerning, above all, the facticity of religious

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3 Key papers from this conference were published by Peter Lang. For more information, see Iva Doležalová – Luther H. Martin – Dalibor Papoušek (eds.), *The Academic Study of Religion during the Cold War. East and West*, New York (NY): Peter Lang 2001.

research and its capacity for objective critical reflexivity, also included what could be described as its de-theologization.

But Wiebe did not see de-theologization only as the emancipation of religious studies, including institutional and political emancipation, but also as methodological and conceptual emancipation.<sup>4</sup> This position is clear from most of Wiebe's works published during this period, beginning with his famous book *The Politics of Religious Studies*<sup>5</sup> and ending, for example, with his contribution to the aforementioned IAHR special conference.<sup>6</sup> It should be noted, however, that Wiebe was not alone in calling for the de-theologization of religious studies. In somewhat modified forms, this calling also appears in the works of other prominent religious scholars of the turn of 21<sup>st</sup> century – T. Fitzgerald,<sup>7</sup> R. McCutcheon<sup>8</sup> and J. Z. Smith.<sup>9</sup>

It must be said, however, that while the topic of the de-theologization of religious studies was an important part of the “great debate” on the form of the scientific study of religion that took place during this period, it was only one of many issues that religious studies confronted during this phase of its “search”. There were equally heated discussions on whether the subject of religious studies, i.e. religion, existed at all and whether any discourse associated with the theoretical reflection on religion could be superior to others.

Arising from this ferment, then, were numerous attempts to create a new “grand theory of religion”, of which the most significant, in terms of enthusiasm for it as well as criticism of it, has probably been the effort to “redefine” the scientific study of religion on the basis of the so-called cognitive sciences, especially cognitive anthropology and cognitive psychology. Wiebe also entered this discussion very actively and, with a certain degree of simplification, it is possible to say that he also reflected his earlier ideas on the “scientificity” of religious studies. A reasonably representative summary of this discussion can be found in the fifth chapter of

4 Primarily, it was a critique of notions and related concepts that understood religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon or identified the sacred in the Otto-Eliade tradition as the key category of the study of religion.

5 Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies*, New York (NY): Palgrave 1999.

6 Donald Wiebe, “Religious Studies in North America during Cold War”, in Luther H. Martin – Dalibor Papoušek (eds.), *The Academic Study of Religion during the Cold War. East and West*, New York (NY): Peter Lang 2001, 267-289.

7 Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, New York (NY) – Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000.

8 Russel T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion. The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and Politics of Nostalgia*, New York (NY) – Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997.

9 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion. From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago (IL): Chicago University Press 1982.

*Conversations and Controversies in the Scientific Study of Religion*, co-edited by Wiebe,<sup>10</sup> which is based on a paper Wiebe presented with Luther H. Martin at the 10<sup>th</sup> annual EASR conference in Budapest in September 2011. The lecture and the article based on it were rather provocatively titled *Religious Studies as Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion*.<sup>11</sup> Several scholars representing a wide range of approaches to the study of religion, such as Kocku von Stuckrad,<sup>12</sup> Hans Gerald Hödl,<sup>13</sup> Hubert Seiwart,<sup>14</sup> Radek Kundt,<sup>15</sup> and Ann Taves,<sup>16</sup> joined the discussion, which is recorded in the fifth chapter just mentioned.

Although on a first reading of Wiebe's (and Luther's) text it may seem that they are primarily concerned with methodological issues relating to how religious studies should function as a science of religion, on closer reading, it becomes clear that Wiebe's concerns about the possible ideologization of the study of religion, which Wiebe associates primarily with its theologization, are present in the background.

I believe Wiebe's latest book, *An Argument in Defence of a Strictly Scientific Study of Religion. The Controversy at Delphi*,<sup>17</sup> the gist of which is summarized in his text published in this issue of *Religio*, should be read in this context. Against the background of a formalist dispute concerning

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- 10 Luther H. Martin – Donald Wiebe, *Conversations and Controversies in the Scientific Study of Religion: Collaborative and Co-authored Essays by Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe*, Leiden: Brill 2016.
  - 11 The text of the lecture was first published under the same title in 2012 in the journal *Religio*. Luther H. Martin – Donald Wiebe, "Religious Studies as Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion", *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 20/1, 2012, 9-18. The same issue of *Religio* also published some of the responses that, together with Martin and Wiebe's essay, form the fifth chapter of *Conversation and Controversies* (L. H. Martin – D. Wiebe, *Conversations and Controversies...*).
  - 12 Kocku von Stuckrad, "Straw men and scientific nostalgia: a response to Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe", in: Luther H. Martin – Donald Wiebe, *Conversations and Controversies in the Scientific Study of Religion*, Leiden: Brill 2016, 271-279.
  - 13 Hans Gerald Hödl, "Is an unbiased science of religion impossible?", in: Luther H. Martin – Donald Wiebe, *Conversations and Controversies in the Scientific Study of Religion*, Leiden: Brill 2016, 236-244.
  - 14 Hubert Seiwart, "The study of religion as a scientific discipline: a comment on Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe's paper", in: Luther H. Martin – Donald Wiebe, *Conversations and Controversies in the Scientific Study of Religion*, Leiden: Brill 2016, 244-256.
  - 15 Radek Kundt, "A scientific discipline: the persistence of a delusion?", in: Luther H. Martin – Donald Wiebe, *Conversations and Controversies in the Scientific Study of Religion*, Leiden: Brill 2016, 256-260.
  - 16 Ann Taves, "A Response to Martin and Wiebe", Luther H. Martin – Donald Wiebe, *Conversations and Controversies in the Scientific Study of Religion*, Leiden: Brill 2016, 294-297.
  - 17 Donald Wiebe, *An Argument in Defence of Strictly Scientific Study of Religion. The Controversy at Delphi*, Toronto: Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion 2021.

a possible change of name for the IAHR and the potential deepening of the cooperation of this organization with more or less “theologizing” associations, such as the *American Academy of Religion*, he unleashes a whirlwind of arguments, which at times have the character of a kind of prophecy, pointing out the possible dangers of the methodological, but above all political, opening up of the institutional framework of religious studies. Wiebe’s argumentation confirms that Wiebe himself is a trained philosopher of science. As in previous work, his text is full of analytical reflections and analyses of key texts. Some of its passages could thus serve quite well as a guide to the history of religious studies over the last hundred years or so. At the same time, it is a text full of very sharp jabs at its opponents and their positions.

I do not want to and will not be a judge of whether these criticisms are adequate, justified, and constructive. Let the reader judge that for himself. I see provocative ideas in the whole text, some parts of which disconcert me and others which, on the contrary, illuminate in a new way a whole series of problems and questions that I had considered already resolved or even outdated. The text forms part of a sometimes messy, perhaps at times circular, but substantial and yet unfinished debate concerning the nature of religious studies as a science of religion, its role, and its relationship to other, primarily theological and philosophical systems that theoretically reflect on religion(s) as a problematic phenomenon. In a sense, I can understand that Wiebe’s persistence and the form of argument he chooses in his text may irritate and perhaps even tire many readers, especially the actors to whom his words are primarily addressed. I can even imagine that many of his claims, and indeed the very aim of Wiebe’s endeavors, will be seen as unfair, unnecessarily provocative, and perhaps even in some ways arrogant because they vehemently promote a single concept of science. Yet, isn’t that the charm, and above all the power, of intellectual debate? Shouldn’t one of its main goals be the restlessness that keeps us prepared to the need for methodological skepticism, the basis of all critical thinking? Let us look at the aforementioned text by Donald Wiebe from this perspective, even if we disagree with his claims and the arguments he uses to support them. It is a text that stirs up debate about what some see as the shadow of an old boogeymen and others see as an as-yet unresolved but crucial issue concerning the very nature of the scientific study of religion and its grounding in the system of sciences.

## SUMMARY

**Waking up the old boogeymen? Some comments on Donald Wiebe's text**

Throughout the existence of religious studies as a science and academic discipline, there have been quite heated debates about its nature and its relationship to other disciplines that are also interested in religion. Among the most passionate are the debates about the relationship between religious studies and theology, which have transformed over the past few decades. From the original emancipatory discussions concerning the very possibility of studying religion scientifically, objectively, and without religious intent, the debates are now more on the level of debates focused on the methods of studying religions, their origins and character, as well as the topics that religious studies as a science should or could address.

That these are still lively and heated debates is demonstrated by the recent writings of the eminent theorist of religious studies, the Canadian scholar Donald Wiebe. The purpose of this reflection is to place the discussion initiated by D. Wiebe in a broader context and thus to enable a better understanding even of some of the primary intentions of the text Wiebe has published in this issue of *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* as part of this debate.

**Keywords:** religious studies; IAHR; Donald Wiebe

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