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# The history (and philosophy) of religions

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**Abstract:** In a paper given at a Roundtable at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) National Annual Conference in Montreal in November of 2009, jointly organized by the North American Association for the Study of Religion and the Critical Theory and Discourses in Religion Group of the AAR, I argued for the ineluctably philosophical nature of what is most commonly called ‘method and theory in the study of religion.’ That paper (Rennie, 2010) also argues that what is conventionally referred to as ‘philosophy of religion’ does not, strictly speaking, warrant that name since it is in fact a form of theology that utilizes philosophical methodologies to consider principally, if not exclusively, Christian concerns. I also argued that a philosophy of religion(s) constituted along the lines of the philosophy of science would be a potential improvement in both ‘philosophy of religion’ and ‘method and theory in the study of religion.’ In this paper I would like to consider—with the help of a closer look at contemporary philosophy of science—precisely what a reconstituted history (and philosophy) of religions might look like, how it might differ from current scholarship, and what it might achieve.

**Résumé:** Dans une communication donnée lors d’une table ronde à l’American Academy of Religion (AAR) National Annual Conference à Montréal en novembre 2009, organisée conjointement par le North American Association for the Study of Religion et le groupe de Critical Theory and Discourses in Religion de l’AAR, j’avais argué la nature inéluctablement philosophique de ce qui est couramment appelé « Method and Theory in the Study of Religion ». Cet article (Rennie, 2010) soutient également la thèse que ce qu’on appelle couramment « Philosophie de la religion » ne correspond pas *stricto sensu* à ce qu’une telle dénomination recouvre puisqu’il s’agit en fait d’une forme de théologie recourant à des méthodes philosophiques pour envisager des préoccupations principalement, sinon exclusivement, chrétiennes. Je

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soutiens aussi qu'une philosophie des religions constituée à partir des lignes de force de la philosophie des sciences pourrait apporter une amélioration potentielle de la philosophie de la religion, de la méthode et de la théorie dans l'étude des religions. Dans cet article, j'aimerais examiner précisément —par le biais des apports de la philosophie des sciences contemporaine— ce à quoi l'histoire (et la philosophie) des religions pourrait ressembler, les termes dans lesquels elle se distinguerait des approches actuelles et ce à quoi nous pourrions ainsi aspirer.

### Keywords

philosophy of religion, method and theory in the study of religion, philosophy of science and the study of religion, philosophical theology, insider/outsider problem, principle of charity, globalatinization, mono-theo-lingualism

### Mots clés

philosophie des religions, méthode et théorie dans l'étude des religions, philosophie des sciences et étude des religions, problème initié/profane, principe de charité, théologie philosophique, mondialatinization, mono-théo-linguisme

I recently argued that the study of religion could benefit from a philosophy of religion that reconciles philosophy and method and theory in the study of religion and focuses on the application of philosophy to the broad history of the world's religious traditions while remaining conscious of the problem of identifying traditions as 'religious' (see Rennie, 2010: esp. 116, 133). I will refer to this idealized discipline as philosophy of religions, plural, simply to distinguish it from contemporary philosophy of religion (singular), which I argue to have 'simply failed to distinguish itself from philosophical theology' (Rennie, 2010: 120). In that earlier paper I concentrated on what specifically I meant by (Western) philosophy<sup>1</sup> and the philosophical method, but here I would like to focus more on what I conceive such a reconstituted philosophy of religions to consist of. To begin, I need to flesh out my remarks that there is a need 'to restore the philosophy of religion to a more significant position in the academy of religion in a form that more closely resembles contemporary philosophy of science' (Rennie, 2010: 116) and that

any productive study of religion must be a *history and philosophy* of religion along the lines of the very successful department of the History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Pittsburgh and further exemplified by the fact that the History of Science Society meetings are held jointly with those of the Philosophy of Science Association. (Rennie, 2010: 118)

Quite simply, science studies can in general be said to have reached the conclusion that the attempt to write an accurate and nuanced *history* of science must be informed by a thorough grasp of the philosophy of science with its analyses and interrogation of the terms and categories of the study, just as much as the attempt to write an accurate and nuanced *philosophy* of science must be informed by a thorough grasp of the history of science with detailed archival research into the actualities of science's past.

Effectively integrating both history and philosophy of science with sociological analysis in 1962, Thomas Kuhn brought the scholarly world's attention sharply to—among other things—the situation that even the best-informed representations of the past could not be simply taken at face value but must be carefully inspected and cross-checked against alternate independent witness and carefully subjected to philosophical analysis. Such an integrated approach is best exemplified by the 'Integrated History and Philosophy of Science' (see <http://www.pitt.edu/~pittcntr/About/about.htm>), which states—among other things—that

Good history and philosophy of science is not just history of science into which some philosophy of science may enter, or philosophy of science into which some history of science may enter. It is work that is both historical and philosophical at the same time. The founding insight of the modern discipline of HPS is that history and philosophy have a special affinity and one can effectively advance both simultaneously.

This is not to imply that the History and Philosophy of Science provides a simple and direct analogical model for the History and Philosophy of Religions—the relationship is more complex—but the fundamental notion of the integration of the two disciplines is more than simply instructive.

If one thinks of the division between data, human agents, and researchers, it is apparent that the parallel between science studies and religious studies is not simple. Physical facts, scientists, and scholars of science studies do not stand in the same relations as religious data, religious agents, and scholars of religion. They are barely comparable. To add some nuance to the point I will refer to an excellent introduction to Science Studies of 1997 by David Hess. His chapter on the philosophy of science makes it clear that he does not see it as in any way dominant over the field, which is, rather, 'an interdisciplinary conversation among a wide range of 'constituent disciplines' (Hess, 1997: 3). Hess tries

to encourage ... what some of my more open-minded colleagues call a charitable reading ... Each field, and even each theorist and each empirical study, has a unique contribution to make, if read with the proper spirit ... those moments of transdisciplinary insight that occur when we put on someone else's lenses, if only for a moment. By moving from the discipline-bound blinders of a sociology, history, philosophy, or anthropology of science to a transdisciplinary field, science studies is able to provide a valuable set of tools for public discussions of the role of science and technology in a democratic society. (Hess, 1997: 4–5)

It is this transdisciplinary nature of our study that I seek to advocate, but to do so I believe that philosophy must be encouraged to play a more active and a more global role. Although he sees that '[t]he most significant disciplinary division has been between those who have some allegiance to traditional Anglo-Saxon and German philosophy of science and those who have a more social or cultural orientation' (Hess, 1997: 6), Hess, following Steve Fuller (1988), seeks

a middle ground in the dialogue between philosophers and social studies researchers by beginning with the distinction between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to science and technology ... it is helpful to see the central problem of the philosophy of science as

making clarifications that could help scientists decide how they *should* go about improving the ways they think about and do science. (Hess, 1997: 7)

He also interprets ‘the traditional philosophy of science as prescriptive in a more narrow sense: its contribution to understanding how to make better scientific theories and explanations’ (Hess, 1997: 7). In

a productive dialogue between philosophical and social studies outlooks . . . philosophy may be helpful to social scientists and humanists when they are in the prescriptive mode, and likewise the research of social and cultural studies may be helpful to philosophers when they are making descriptive claims about science and technology. (Hess, 1997: 8)

For Hess, ‘the key disciplinary division is seen as descriptive versus prescriptive work . . . philosophy is “the study of how, a priori, an ideally logical scientist should think”’ (Hess, 1997: 12). Of course, this is not our problem in the History of Religions but the study is nonetheless unavoidably prescriptive when we consider how we should *study* the field—how an ideal *historian* of religions should think.

So the considerations of parallels between science studies and the study of religion must itself be subject to the closest of scrutiny. To my mind, the initial problem that presents itself is a manifestation of the insider/outsider problem in religious studies.<sup>2</sup> After all, science and philosophy are close cousins. Despite the gulf that some see as stretching between empirical science and speculative philosophy, we must always remember that Newton’s great work was *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* and that the *nova scientia* was the new knowledge that was generated by the pursuit of natural philosophy. They are both ineluctably Western cultural products. While I agree that ‘the West’ is in the end as spectral as ‘the Orient’ (see Mandair, 2009) the temporal and geographical proximity of (Western) philosophy and (Western) science does indicate their close relationship. The philosophy of science thus conducts an ‘insider’ study in which the data is local to the method. A revised philosophy of religions, on the other hand, would unavoidably be dealing with the outsider analysis of traditions other than those culturally proximate to the analyst and therefore requiring ‘translation’ from one cultural milieu into another. It might be suggested that the current, arguably provincial, status of the philosophy of religion has been exacerbated by its reluctance to deal with this problem. Current philosophy of religion primarily engages Western Christian insider concepts such as the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the existence of evil, etc. and thus remains comfortably within its own cultural milieu. This insider/outsider distinction exists in the philosophy of science in the guise of the apparent ‘incommensurability’ of alternative paradigms or research traditions,<sup>3</sup> and probably the most serious problem thrown up by a potential history and philosophy of religions is the question of whether or not the Western academic tradition has any right to assume the position of a master culture or metaculture into which any and all other cultures can be translated in order to carry forward analysis and understanding. Arvind Mandair warned in 2001 that ‘secular reason has been placed in a position of supervision in respect of any possible inquiry into religion’ (Mandair, 2001: 50). But what are the alternatives? Could (Western) philosophy of religions operate as one competing tradition among many that

assume their own significance and so, in the interests of full disclosure, one that needs to recognize its inevitably apologetic nature? Or could the history and philosophy of religions perhaps show the way for the academy genuinely to globalize itself and find a way to speak with the voices of many instead of trying to forge one dominant voice (one ring to bind them all)?

Arvind Mandair's recent work, *Religion and the Specter of the West* (Mandair, 2009), is, in one aspect, a work of postcolonial Sikh studies that analyses and responds to earlier Sikh responses to Western studies of Sikhism, particularly the work of W. H. McLeod (McLeod, 1968). Mandair concludes that many Sikh respondents have been dominated by the very voice in opposition to which they wrote (Mandair, 2009: 238-239). It is in tracing the workings of this dynamic that another aspect of Mandair's work emerges: he outlines (Western) philosophical analyses of religion from Kant through Hegel and Heidegger to Derrida and in so doing he both illustrates the importance of that tradition and produces a work that is itself exemplary of the kind of history and philosophy of religions that I seek to encourage. Despite my considerable admiration for and respect of Mandair's work it seems to me that he over-emphasizes the dominance of Hegelian historicism and so neglects other significant currents in the history of religions (see Rennie, forthcoming). Nonetheless, it is significant that he highlights—among other things—the fact that this problem of translatability was one with which Jacques Derrida wrestled in an article of 1996:<sup>4</sup> are terms (specifically the term 'religion') necessarily translatable, and what if they are not? To give some examples, consider three written terms: 15; 1111; F. As insiders in the decimal system we are content to simply halt at '15,' assuming that we know what it means: it seems intuitively obvious, it 'makes sense,' we know how to use it, how to respond, how to manipulate it. On the other hand, if it is pointed out that the number 1111 is *binary*, columns representing powers of 2 rather than powers of ten; now deprived of its apparent meaning of one thousand one hundred and eleven (and note the misleading *apparent* meaning in the wrong context) it has to be 'translated' into decimal to be comprehensible and useful to decimal insiders—as does the hexadecimal number F. Hexadecimal is a system used in computing in which columns represent powers of 16. In fact they both have the same numerical value as 15.<sup>5</sup> Of course, as integers, they *do* have precise translations, whereas most cultural products might have close equivalents, but not exact translations. 'Cornish Pasty' does not translate 'Jamaica Patty,' no matter the similarities of function, form, and content. Korean Bibles have rendered Jesus as the 'Rice Cake of Life' because of their unfamiliarity with bread. Mandair's point, following Derrida's arguments and his own experience, is to suggest that 'religion' is simply *not* translatable. It is a Romance word with Latin implications, whose referents might have some counterparts in non-Latin languages but which does not have a precise equivalent. Assuming that it does could be simply wrong and potentially very misleading, like a decimal insider assuming that we 'know' what 10 'means' ('there are 10 kinds of people in the world—those who understand binary and those who don't'). This returns the problem of meaning—a problem that Hess showed to be central to a variety of philosophical approaches to science—to center-stage in prescriptive considerations of the study of religion.

The main problem (especially from Mandair's postcolonial point of view) is not just mistaken assumptions of meaning but of assuming that there is one single voice, one

tongue, one *langue*, into which all others can be translated in order best to be understood and best represented. The truth is simply that such an assumption is unavoidably complicit with the will-to-power of those fluent in that single tongue, into which all others can be translated in order best to be *governed*—not promoted but oppressed. This is what Derrida has referred to as ‘globalatinization’ (*‘mondialatinization’*—Derrida, 1996: 11 n.7) and, following him, Mandair, combining Hegelian ontotheology, calls mono-theo-lingualism (Mandair, 2009: 13, 15, 45-105).

Mandair recognizes the problem with the current study of religion in a somewhat similar manner as have I, although where I critique theory and method and the philosophy of religion, he critiques the continental philosophy of religion (not for operating a philosophical theology but for a provincial ignorance of other cultures) and area studies (for failing to appreciate the relevance of philosophy):

The material of continental philosophy of religion is drawn almost exclusively from the European philosophical and religious traditions while history of religions and postcolonial theory apply themselves to non-Western cultures . . . continental philosophers (and philosophers of religion) showed little or no interest in reading materials that they considered to be too ‘specialist’ (i.e., non-Western) . . . likewise, scholars in South Asian, and especially Sikh, studies tended more often than not to regard my [i.e. Mandair’s] engagements with continental philosophy, theology, and critical theory as either superfluous to the real labor of producing and interpreting archival data, or simply irksome. (Mandair, 2009: *xiii*—once again, a form of the insider/outsider problem)

The history and philosophy of religions—plural—requiring the integration of both a wide knowledge of global traditions and a sensitivity to contemporary philosophy would be required to be polyvocal, heterolingual, poly-theo-lingual, as I suggested in an article of 2003.<sup>6</sup> This follows not only the aforementioned critique from Derrida via Mandair of mono-theo-lingualism, but also the direction pointed out by significant American historians such as Hayden White, Peter Novick, and Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr. (Rennie, 2003).<sup>7</sup> The history (and philosophy) of religions must represent all the voices that it represents (following critiques from Vine Deloria to Armin Geertz, who insist that Western anthropologists must not simply appropriate the voices of the native Americans they seek to study but must fairly and accurately represent those voices—Geertz, 1997; Deloria, 1969, see also Biolsi, 1997): thus requiring the scholar to speak from an *insider* position. There is an impulse here to recover—surely now with more nuance and understanding—the charitable positions of Wilfred Cantwell Smith in respect of the history of religions being necessarily comprehensible to the adherents of any tradition under scrutiny (Smith, 1959: 52-53), and of Mircea Eliade in respect of studying traditions *in their own terms* (Eliade, 1973: *xvii*).<sup>8</sup> Mandair’s exposition of the Sikh texts/gurus (yet another aspect of his work) is a masterful example of such insider analysis, and it, too emphasizes the methodological utility of a principle of ‘love’ (Mandair, 2009: 408). However, the continental philosophy of religion combined with the philosophy of science shows us that while we cannot ever relax our guard against the self-serving uses and abuses of language and the procrustean application of Latinate definitions to non-Western cultures, no more can we take insider representations entirely at face value. Mandair’s critique

of some of his fellow Sikhs' accounts of their own tradition bears this out (Mandair, 2009: 234-235, 238-239).

As I say, the philosophy of science is essentially a Western method analyzing Western data. Following Derrida, Mandair shows us that if we are not to abuse non-Western data and perpetuate Western stereotypes and latent imperialist colonization of the intellectual arena, the history and philosophy of religions must allow itself to be a vehicle for marginalized voices, some of which have always been present in the Western tradition, such as the Jena Romantics (Mandair, 2009: 15, 122, 127, 131, 169, although Mandair seems to assume that voice to have simply disappeared). That this perspective (called 'romantic postmodernism,' by Rachela Permenter, 2001) never went away is shown by both Derrida and Eliade, whom I have compared in the past (Rennie, 1996: chs. 16 and especially 17). Eliade recognized the implications of ontotheology in a way entirely consonant with Derrida's argument that secularization as we know it is a (post-)Christian phenomenon.<sup>9</sup>

Since the history (and philosophy) of religion(s) is undeniably something that began as a Western phenomenon but one that genuinely seeks to globalize itself not by converting or translating colonized subjects into its own terms but by opening itself to terms, categories, and concepts new (to it), imported rather than translated, fairly traded for their inherent value rather than oppressively appropriated, it must remain open and adopt the model of the History (and Philosophy) of Religion(s) suggested by such a charitable approach, rather than attempting to impose an ersatz (Western) 'scientific' model that can only remain imperialist, translating all cultures into its local terms. Instead of Latinizing the globe we must attempt to globalize the Latin.

In demonstrating the applicability of his philosophical analysis to the scientific demarcation problem in respect of the case of 'Brazilian spiritism, a religious-philosophical movement whose members insist that it is scientifically grounded' (Hess, 1997: 48), David Hess revealed that one of the most important criteria in evaluating claims to scientific status is the criterion of 'consistency in the sense of consistency with the rest of science' (Hess, 1997: 50). However, he is keenly aware that 'consistency is the very problem that standpoint epistemologies [such as feminism and postcolonial theory] seek to redress' (Hess, 1997: 50). This returns us to our problem of translation. In order to render terms such as science or religion meaningful, can we avoid imposing the consistency of a single language? As Hess concludes, 'like all philosophical discussions, this one is by no means closed, and it is part of an ongoing dialogue in which the strengths and weaknesses of alternatives are clarified' (Hess, 1997: 51). This will require the careful analysis of argument—philosophy—in order to progress.

## Notes

1. Throughout this paper I will preface the word 'philosophy' with a parenthetical (Western) to indicate that, although the word *can* be used in other senses, I am using it to refer to a methodology intensively, albeit not exclusively, employed in the European and post-European academy. Compare this with the word 'science,' which *can* be applied to other cultural forms such as Ayurvedic or Taoist practices, but is, more often than not, applied in the same (implicitly Western) sense.
2. I appreciate that Arvind Mandair, to whose work I am going to refer, emphasizes the 'modernist turn from religious to secular thinking' rather than the insider/outsider problem (see Knott,

2005: 254–255). However, that turn itself gave rise to another position, of which one can be an insider or outsider.

3. The problem of translation between apparently incommensurable paradigms, research programs, or research traditions is one that has received some attention in the philosophy of science. See Hess: ‘Originally the thesis [of incommensurability between scientific theories] held that the advocates of different paradigms live in such different worlds that their theories are mutually unintelligible, but over the years the thesis has shifted to the problems of translatability across theories’ (Hess, 1997: 25). In fact, ‘the incommensurability thesis has not proven very useful because proponents may be able to sidestep translation and move to direct rehearsal of procedures and protocols. . . . Furthermore, opponents often are quite adept at understanding the terms of the opposing side’ (Hess, 1997: 26).
4. I thank Professor Mandair for making me pay closer attention to this material, and Kim Knott (2005) for first bringing Mandair’s work to my attention.
5. For those unfamiliar with this concept: in binary, 1 = decimal 1, but binary 10 = decimal 2. Binary 100 = decimal 4. Binary 1000 = decimal 8. So binary 1111 = decimal 15. In hexadecimal, 1 through 9 are the same as in decimal but A = 10, B = 11, and so on up to F, which is equivalent to decimal 15. In hexadecimal, therefore, 10 = decimal 16 and 100 = decimal 256 (16<sup>2</sup>). “10” always equals the base number, in these cases 2, 10, and 16. “100” is the base number squared, 1000 is the base number cubed, and so on.
6. ‘The essay challenges the elevation of a single authorial voice over the plurality of voices representing the plurality of phenomenal pasts and calls for a greater engagement with the pluralism and polyvocality of postmodern historiography’ (Rennie, 2003: 68).
7. It is worthy of note that even Mandair failed to avoid the homogenizing and monopolizing drive that tends to govern the production of authoritative academic narrative.
8. Compare this with the ‘charitable reading’ that Hess uses for science studies (Hess, 1997: 4) and the ‘principal of charity’ and ‘interpretational generosity’ that Jeppe Jensen applies following Denis Davidson (Jensen, 2004: 334).
9. ‘[H]istoricism arises as a decomposition product of Christianity; it accords decisive importance to the historical event (which is an idea whose origin is Christian) but to the *historical event as such*, that is, by denying it any possibility of revealing a transhistorical, soteriological intent’ (Eliade, 1959: 112, italics in original).

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