



Establishing a Beachhead or Kicking up Sand?

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Abstract

NAASR President William Arnal invited several members to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the future direction of the organization, as part of a Presidential Panel at the 2012 annual meeting. My assessment, in the essay that follows, is that, since its founding NAASR and its related publications, have continued to play an important role in differentiating the academic study of religion from the more theologically minded work with which it is often confused. In my view, what makes the academic study of religion a discipline, as opposed to merely a field of study, is a shared sustained scholarly conversation on theoretical and methodological issues; NAASR is an important home to that conversation.

Keywords

NAASR, MTSR, Wiebe, academic study of religion

When, twelve years ago, I interviewed for my current position at the University of North Florida, I was asked to discuss whether Religious Studies is an academic discipline or just a field of study; what the difference between the two might be, and what might make RS one or the other. I had not thought about this in an explicit way and had only the most preliminary answer at the time. But given that the context was a job interview to build a religious studies program—and I did want the job—I decided my best tack was to “go big or go home.”

a discipline . . . yeah . . . um . . . a discipline; definitely a discipline.

Explaining why and how that was so, was much more difficult. What came out of my mouth at the time was the argument that Religious Studies is a shared, sustained, theoretical conversation about the nature and function of this phenomenon that gets labeled “religion;” and that that makes us a discipline. I had no argument for why it makes a discipline, nor explanations for all of those folks who think we are in the same discipline but don’t share this discussion. Lucky for me this was UNF’s *first* full-time, tenure track hire in Religious Studies

and the Philosophy colleagues conducting the interviews had their own disciplinary conversations but likely didn't know the conversation to which I referred.

My nascent theoretical and methodological commitments were clearly in the camp with those who, in simple terms, draw a distinction between the study of religion and the practice of it; those who see religion as a social construction a key function of which is to manage conflict and competition. I'm not referring to the view that religion serves as a mysterious "unifying social force," the alleged "glue that binds us all together," but rather that it manages conflict by legitimizing the winners to both winners and losers. I saw my job as a religious studies scholar, then and now, as "making the strange familiar and the familiar strange" such that people can see how religion functions in this way.

As a graduate student I was pulled toward David Chidester and Ed Linenthal, Jonathan Z. Smith and Bruce Lincoln. By the time I was interviewing for the job at UNF, though, I was already in a tenure track job at Southwest Missouri State and Russ McCutcheon was my friend and colleague. He had introduced me to MTSR, the CSSR bulletin and to NAASR. It was in this crucible that my own theoretical and methodological commitments developed and matured. But systematic application of those theoretical commitments has been a process; surely one that is yet ongoing; and more surely one that has been nurtured by NAASR.

In 2004, leading up to the 20th anniversary of its founding, the members of NAASR were having the same conversation we are having today: what is the future of this organization? As part of that conversation, NAASR founders Luther Martin and Don Wiebe revisited NAASR's founding in an essay entitled *Establishing a Beachhead: NAASR Twenty Years Later*. Citing the original mission statement, they wrote that the purpose of NAASR was:

[T]o encourage the historical, comparative and structural study of religion in the North American community of scholars, to promote publication of such scholarly research, and to represent North American scholars in the study of religion to, and connect them with, the international community of scholars engaged in the study of religion.

NAASR was conceived as "an alternative venue in which to work toward the establishment of a sound, academic study of religion" and I believe such an alternative venue remains crucially important.

As I have worked to build the Religious Studies Program at UNF I have come to think those early instincts about what it means to be an academic discipline weren't too far off the mark; and also to recognize how little I understood about what that meant. That insight has helped me in fielding requests from local ministers to teach in our program, requests often passed on by well-meaning

folks; recently I received a request from a person with a PHD in Religious Education with the suggestion that he wished to teach Religious Studies (I bet they didn't send that CV to the College of Ed). It's also helped in making sense of the difference between what we do in Religious Studies and what my History colleagues who include the influence of religion in their historical narratives often do and it's been crucial aspect of how I have worked to build our Religious Studies program and in how I have framed advertisements for additional positions when we've had the opportunity to hire.

The importance of this conversation, and the assumptions we start with in our scholarly discourse, is never so clear to me as when colleagues or students make untheorized assertions about what is, and is not, "religion." My philosophy colleagues often use the term "religion" and the term "belief" interchangeably. My students, in an effort to protect their own religions from analysis like to assert that some practices are "political" or "cultural" and not "religious."

To be an interdisciplinary field cannot mean that anyone and everyone has the same expertise as we do. Inter-disciplinarity does mean that people from various disciplines bring valuable work to the table but, for the most part, at our table, only after they have tooled up with that very important theoretical and methodological work that characterizes the academic study of religion. Even my students see this when in upper level classes, those, who have been introduced to this discourse feel derailed by their classmates who have not. They want to move beyond those simplistic divisions between "religion" and "politics" that protect "religion" from critique but, instead, too often feel stymied by the necessity of going over the same ground again.

What they feel, is what many of us feel in so many other settings, whether it be the larger AAR/SBL or even our home departments. NAASR is a place where I most consistently find work that is based in the shared conversation and one of the most important venues in which I have been able to think through these issues.

More recent than the essay cited above, in a podcast for *The Religious Studies Project*, Don Wiebe was asked if the effort to establish the non-faith based study of religion, "scientific" as he calls it, or a field in which religion is "the object of analysis," has been successful. He replied that in his view it has not:

The historical record shows that no undergraduate departments of Religious Studies have fully implemented a scientific program of study and research since such an approach was first advocated in the late nineteenth century—much less has there been any broad establishment of such a disciplinary field of study.¹

¹ <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/2012/02/06/podcast-donald-wiebe-on-theology-and-religious-studies/> accessed 10/15/2012.

Wiebe attributes this failure to natural factors in the human mind, which lead us to invoke agency and he suggests this default option of invoking agency is at work in both the meaning making systems of religious people as well as the academic work of too many of those trying to explain those meaning making systems. He says:

We argue—on cognitive- and neuro-scientific grounds—that such study is not ever likely to occur in that or any other setting. In our judgment, therefore, to entertain a hope that such a development is, pragmatically speaking, possible, is to be in the grip of a false and unshakeable delusion. And we “confess” that we ourselves have been so deluded.²

He says: “I may have wasted my life trying to establish the scientific study of religion.” Maybe he is only being hyperbolic, but his statement is only true if the standard by which success/failure is measured is the complete transformation (replacement?) of religious studies. Yet in the earlier essay, the stated goal was the establishment of a beachhead. Surely there is a beachhead and progress has been made.

There is a strong contingent of scholars committed to the study of religion as an academic discipline as opposed to as an exercise of “faith.” Moreover, as a scholarly society at the center of that effort, NAASR plays a crucial role in furthering the professionalization of its younger members and fostering both a community of scholars and an ongoing conversation. That conversation about what constitutes appropriate theoretical and methodological approaches is alive and well; thanks in no small measure to NAASR and its constituent journal *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* (MTR).

I see two central sets of issues that face this organization in the decades to come; one practical and one theoretical. On the practical side, when I mention the North American Association for the Study of Religion to colleagues in the larger field of Religious Studies there are two common responses: They do not know NAASR and its distinctive focus or they think of NAASR as an aggressive, argumentative group, made up mostly of men, who sit in sessions waiting to pounce on a newcomer who is not familiar with all of the nuances of the long-standing, shared conversation. These problems need to be addressed. The first can be addressed by continuing to promote the work of the organization and perhaps new, more innovative approaches can be found. To the degree that the second response is accurate, continued efforts at recruiting women and minorities to membership and leadership are crucial. I’ve seen many changes in this regard in the last decade: attention to the recruitment of women, at least, to leadership, the substantially broader conference program more

² <http://www.casr.cz/religio2012-1.php#toc>, accessed 10/15/2012.

inclusive of people new to NAASR, the NAASR reception that fosters a social dimension to the organization and efforts to include program offerings that differ from the traditional conference paper/panel.

But the problems with the way others perceive us are exacerbated by changes in AAR/SBL that muddle some of what have been distinct differences between AAR/SBL and NAASR and these considerations are, in my mind, harder to address. Of course there is the new affiliation of AAR with IAHR, with NAASR previously being the only North American affiliate. At least two groups organized for the AAR/SBL annual meetings seem designed to attract the same scholars as NAASR, making it harder to clarify an identity that is distinct from what is available at the AAR/SBL.

The Cognitive Science of Religion Group:

... dedicated to advancing cognitive scientific approaches to the study of religion in a critically informed, historically responsible manner. . . . The main goal of this Group is to bring together cognitive scientists, historians of religion, ethnographers, empirically-oriented theologians, and philosophers of religion to explore applications of cognitive science to religious phenomena, as well as religious insights into the study of the human mind.³

And the Critical Theory and Discourses on Religion Group, whose goals include:

1) Critical investigation of the categories generated and employed by the discourses on religion, such as experience, the sacred, ritual, and the various other 'isms' that can be found in classic and contemporary studies of religion; 2) Analysis of new and neglected theorists and works central to the critical study of religion, including those produced in cognate fields such as anthropology, political science, or literary theory; and 3) Theoretically-informed examination of elided and often neglected themes in religious studies, including class, race, gender, violence, legitimation, and the material basis of religion.⁴

Yet, in addition to the set of practical challenges, NAASR, and the academic study of religion in general (as distinct from the theological/apologetic approaches) also face a theoretical challenge, not entirely different from the identity crises faced in other disciplines. One need not be a thoroughgoing postmodernist to embrace the postmodern critique that modernist approaches to science and rationalism are not nearly as objective as they were once thought to be. We recognize that our own various subjectivities play an important role in what we see and what we miss; how we reason and what we take for granted,

³ http://www.aarweb.org/meetings/annual_meeting/program_units/PUinformation.asp?PUNum=AARPU173 accessed 10/15/2012.

⁴ http://www.aarweb.org/meetings/annual_meeting/program_units/PUinformation.asp?PUNum=AARPU018 accessed 10/15/2012.

including the taxonomies with which we order our subjects of study. All manner of academic disciplines are recognizing this.

Yet for those for whom the study of religion is an act of faith (whatever "faith" is) this blurring of the line between objectivity and subjectivity becomes an argument against what Wiebe calls the "scientific" study of religion.⁵ For those of us on the other side of that divide; those committed to a thoroughly academic study of religion, grappling with this insight is also crucial. It demands a level of tentativeness and humility; it means self-consciously reflecting on our methods and explanations, taking account of our biases and wherever possible correcting for them.

These critiques raised by postmodernism also challenge taken-for-granted disciplinary boundaries and subjects of study. To "set apart" the category "religion" as an object of study need not be to claim a *sui generis* status for it; by which I mean setting it apart to study it in no way claims a special status in which it exists outside of human history, culture and the natural world. Religion is, in all manner of ways, like every other form of human behavior and every form of social organization. It is also different; but not in a way that claims for it an essence with special status. It is different in the way that economics is different from politics; the way that biology is different from physics. Religion is one means of organizing a social world; of authorizing certain practices and delegitimizing others. But religion does this with a set of tools not mobilized by the other ways of organizing people (indeed, I suspect it's in the presence of those "tools" that defines the category). Religion claims for itself unique authority residing outside of culture and time; the fact that it claims that, and that people see it this way, warrants analysis that is not necessary in disciplines that are naturalistic in both the way they understand themselves and the way they are understood by others. Religion is especially effective in the way it constructs reality because it has powerful mechanisms for hiding that construction. If the cognitivists are correct, those mechanisms may prove to be hard wired in the human brain.

These factors make religion an important and distinct object of study without making claims that religion is *sui generis*. And in comparison to alternative ways in which human beings organize themselves and others; the ways in which they legitimate those social orderings and the allocation of resources and power within them, religion remains one of the most important. Indeed,

⁵ I put "scientific" in quotes here, not because I disagree with Wiebe's formulation of the scientific study of religion which I understand him to use interchangeably with the phrase "academic study of religion," but because the second phrasing is closer to my own. I am aware of the history of the term *Religionswissenschaft* and the translation of it a "science of religion," its just not the phrasing I use as, to me it has an archaic quality.

instead of becoming less important around the world in the way that many scholars a generation ago thought they might, religious discourses seem every bit as influential. What we do, in terms of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, is as important as it has ever been.

Crucial to the academic study of religion is an effort to push beyond the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity in a way that preserves what Wiebe calls a scientific approach (and which I call the academic study of religion but which I understand to refer to the same endeavor) and the need to continue to clearly articulate why, if religion is like every other aspect of human culture, it needs focused, specialized scholarly inquiry. We need to articulate how it is that religion is at the same time, like all other human social systems and different from them; but different from them in a way that retains the important theoretical and methodological commitment that that difference still resides inside human cultures and history, not outside them. These are next steps in what I naively called the “shared, sustained, theoretical conversation about the nature and function of this phenomenon that gets labeled ‘religion’ that that makes us a discipline.” I can envision few places where this conversation is likely to happen and NAASR and its related publications are at the center of it.