

RELIGION AS A HUMAN PHENOMENON

VS.

OPENNESS TO TRANSCENDENCE

An issue hotly debated within religious studies due to its importance for the discipline's identity and status, is the choice between, on the one hand, a study of religion as a purely natural phenomenon and, on the other hand, a perspective that not *a priori* rejects the truth claims of religious traditions concerning supernatural realities. In the following, I will discuss these two approaches and sketch a position of my own.¹

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION

During the 20th century, the openness to religious transcendence within religious studies has mainly been championed by the phenomenology of religion that advocate a sympathetic attitude to religion in general, hence favouring a *geisteswissenschaftliche* method of empathy – in this way, trying to map the world as experienced by the believer, though not committing oneself to any particular tradition. This has, however, never amounted to an attempt to erase the theoretical level, and, for example, the best known proponent, Mircea Eliade, constructed a general theory of religious thinking centring on the manifestations of the holy. This characterization of the unique (*sui generis*) religious way of thinking was then correlated to different religions, thus trying to make a case for the relevance of the theory.² The ontological reference of the phenomenological concept of the holy has though been an open question (Rennie 2006 [1996]). It could, on the one hand, be interpreted as a description of religious beliefs and practices, pointing to the fact that religious people act as though certain material things or processes are manifestations of something powerful located beyond the empirical world; or the holy as a notion could be interpreted as actually referring to a supernatural entity that manifests itself in natural phenomena. In the latter case, the phenomenology of religion endorses a basic supernaturalism; and some critics have, therefore, accused Eliade's theory for harbouring an implicit theology (e.g. Wiebe 1999: 60; McCutcheon 1997: 27–50).

¹ The reflections on religious studies presented in this article were formulated in relation to my work on the monograph *Ritualisation and Human Interiority* (forthcoming).

² For a caustic criticism of *inter alia* the methodological aspects of Eliade's work see Leach 2006 [1966].

THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION AND METHODOLOGICAL ATHEISM

The advocates of a purely scientific study, on the other hand, mostly espouse some form of methodological atheism as the only viable alternative, heavily criticising any scholar or study that venture beyond that stance. The study of religion as a natural phenomenon is then considered to exhaust all aspects of religion; there is no lees left in the bottle labelled religion when the scientist has drunk his fill. The methodological atheism at this point almost imperceptibly turns into an ontological one and quite easily becomes inimical to religion as a false form of consciousness (as e.g. in Marxist theory).³

We could as an example take the position defended by Russell McCutcheon in his book *Critics not Caretakers* where he emphasizes that religion is to be studied “as a *thoroughly human doing* /.../ without remainder” or with other words “with no mysterious distillate left over” (McCutcheon 2001: x, xi). At the same time, he asserts that this is a purely methodological principle, that he has no interest in any form of metaphysical reduction. The categorical dismissal of any ontological interest on his part seems though somewhat too strong as ontological features of course determine the accuracy of the methods used. If materialist monism is false, then that would quite naturally limit the usefulness of methodological materialism, and, on the other hand, if it is true, this would surely enhance its explanatory force (cf. Lopez 2001: 10).⁴

Secondly, the methodologically atheistic scholar studies religion as though religious thinking, morality and ritual are basically mistaken. It should then not come as a surprise that it is not well received by those thus analyzed; it would be the same as to study democracy with the basic methodological principle that there is no rational basis for democratic governance; the critical scholar in this way taking a methodological totalitarianism as his guiding principle, but at the same time insisting that this does not decide whether after all

³ The following quotation from Delos McKown’s presentation of Marx’s critique of religion, interspersed with quotations from Marx’s own writings, illustrates the basic ethos of this position: “To him ‘religion is the self-consciousness and self-regard of man, who either has not yet found himself or has already lost himself again.’ Born out of and sustained by alienation, religion is a mode of consciousness both false and perverted; the happiness it offers, bogus and illusory. It renders man a ‘degraded, enslaved, rejected, contemptible being.’ In order to progress from these irrationalities to rationality and from perverted consciousness to truly human self-awareness, religion must be abolished, its disastrous effects transcended. Atheism, on the contrary, affirms and frees man from religious repression and heteronomy. (McKown 1975: 17). Cf. with McKown’s own perspective of naturalism, as presented in the introduction and the conclusion. He slides without any greater caution between methodology and ontology; naturalism and materialism as in the following exhortation “Accordingly, those who would understand religion in its total context must welcome Marx’s materialist approach as the necessary antidote to the mentalistic strategies of theologians and apologists.” (McKown 1975: 161) Cf. McLellan 1987 a book on the same theme and with a very similar structure, but written from a Christian perspective. The final lines (p. 172) points to the unity of theory and praxis and has a certain prophetic tinge: “But Marxism’s whole *raison d’être* /.../ lies in worldly success. Failure there is liable to be ultimately dispiriting, whereas for most religions it would serve more as a salutary (literally) warning.” After 1991 this could be more bluntly stated and Marxism characterized as a failed quasi-religion as Smith 1994. A move which is though seen by Timothy Fitzgerald as “an ideological attack on an alternative ideology.” (Fitzgerald 2000: 104)

⁴ In the same manner, the bewilderment before the belief in the supernatural, as expressed by Pascal Boyer in the following opening lines, must be seen against a backdrop of ontological materialism, otherwise it loses its rhetorical force. The puzzlement is then (if atheism is merely methodological) not a natural reaction, but generated by the methodological rejection of the reality of gods and ghosts, for if they were to exist, clearly to have such notions would be evolutionary advantageous: “Interaction with imagined nonphysical agents (gods, spirits, ghosts, etc.) is a puzzling cultural universal, as it is of no straightforward adaptive value, indeed is often costly to individuals or groups. One promising research strategy is to evaluate to what extent religious concepts and norms may be a by-product of evolved brain function.” (Boyer 2005: 3). In the same volume, Todd Tremlin makes a similar statement which is hard not to interpret in an ontological mode: “From a cognitive standpoint, religion is neither revelatory nor enigmatic nor inexplicable. Religion is simply one outcome of faculties of thought common to all normal brains. (Tremlin 2005: 69)

democracy rests on legitimate grounds. The scholar of democracy working in this way would dig up all the evidence of the pernicious effects of democratic governance that he could find, and strongly object toward all colleagues that would see political studies at the university as being in the service of the democratic culture of the nation. I do not claim that these two domains, the (democratic) political and the religious are identical in all respects, but the analogy hopefully points to a lack of innocence in a methodological stance that *a priori* undermines the position of those individuals and institutions it scrutinizes.

Thirdly, this way of studying religion proceeds historically from an enlightenment criticism of religion as profoundly erroneous – methodologically naturalist scholarship of religion hence fits into a long tradition of scholarship that has not been excessively anxious to avoid the ontological dimension. So, if one could accuse Eliade of implicit theology, here the charge looms large that this approach builds on an implicit materialism. That in reality both the phenomenological *epoché* and the naturalist insistence on *only* method are ways of hiding, or insulating, an agenda for either promoting or counteracting religion in society.

METHODOLOGICAL AGNOSTICISM

A more modest approach is indicated by the concept of methodological agnosticism, which acknowledges the limits of scientific inquiry; that it by imposing on itself strict rules of jurisdiction cannot rule out that this analytical net cast over reality does not perfectly cover all that exists, or all aspects of what is placed under the microscope.⁵ Moreover, agnosticism as a methodological principle could be more than a humbler form of atheism, by actually allowing religious truth claims the status of competing explanations, as the sociologist Douglas Porpora argues in his analysis of Peter Berger's influential combination of social constructivism and methodological atheism (Porpora 2006). Then, the agnostic attitude is truly methodological, that is, only a way on which to proceed and not a description of the result. In this way, it distinguishes itself from epistemological agnosticism, which as atheism, precludes any possibility of a real knowledge of supernatural entities. The latter claim is though rather implausible if not backed up by some form of ontological materialism.

RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN SWEDEN

The reflections on religious studies in this article were formulated within the academic context of religious studies at a Swedish faculty of arts, and the natural attitude could hence seem to be a thorough secular, that is, a methodologically atheist perspective with an added marked emphasis on the cleavage between is and ought, and that between private and public. Sweden is after all famous for being one of the most secularized countries in the world. This is, though, complicated at several points. First, religious studies is, for example, at my university interwoven with Christian theology, though, exactly what is implicated by the latter label is sometimes unclear, but it mainly signifies a study of Christianity distributed over

⁵ Cf. Ninian Smart (1973ff) who makes a distinction between 'real' and existent objects; and it is toward the second quality, i.e. existence, that the agnostic (bracketing) methodologically agnostic attitude should be directed. What is treated as real (e.g. a god) in religious discourse could therefore be nonexistent, and what is existent could be treated as unreal (e.g. evolution), but we as scholars of religion should abstain from existential judgements. This entails a focus on religious meaning as a human creation without any transcendent partner. The stance is thus a retreat in this respect (openness to transcendence) when compared with the phenomenology of Eliade, while at the same time it keeps the door to metaphysics ajar. The abstention of existential judgements is, however, problematic as the explanatory power of scholarship is crippled when it cannot brace its feet against an ontological framework, and this applies equally to hermeneutical teleological explanations. Eliade by his stronger emphasis on the ontic dimension of the holy had such a Archimedean point, which a retreating form of phenomenology as that of Smart cannot have. The suspicion of methodological agnosticism as merely a way of insulating religious discourse and practice from critique then arises quite naturally (e.g. Cox 2004).

several disciplines such as church history, systematic theology and New Testament exegesis.⁶ The structure of theology is, moreover, formed by the task to educate priests for the Swedish Church, the former state church of Sweden. The semidetached nature of the Swedish Church from the state is, hence, reflected in the ambivalent nature of the study of Christianity at the department, hovering somewhat uneasily between a normative, constructive theology and a neutral analysis of the historical instantiations of the Christian religion.⁷

Furthermore, other forms of normative pressure are constantly exerted upon research and teaching. In being a governmental institution, the university is under obligation to conform to a basic set of values, often diffusely defined, a feature which becomes conspicuous in the education of teachers who have an explicitly normative task to perform (Lindgren 2003).⁸ We, as teachers of the teachers, cannot escape this injunctive mood without making our teaching irrelevant for the purposes of our students. And, as the financing system is directly correlated to the number of students and exams, it is not without impact on the institutional structure of religious studies.

These two normative dimensions are combined with an increased ambition on the part of politicians to make university subjects useful, that is, relevant for society, and not only to the international scholarly community in search for new knowledge.⁹ Religious studies is accordingly, not in a Swedish context at least, a value free exercise in pure research, but a state financed venture with multiple tasks to perform for the common good. This, of course, raises the question of whether the scholar of religious studies should act as a public intellectual or not. In Sweden, that aspect of scholarly work has been defined as the third task (assignment) of university professors besides teaching and research.

IS AND OUGHT

So, there are large, if not insurmountable, difficulties connected with implementing a positivist distinction between, on the one hand, description and analysis, and, on the other hand, different kinds of normativity. Christian theology constitutes merely one of many types of normative discourse and structures of power that exercise influence on the practice of religious studies. But is this only to give in to pressures that should be resisted? Could it be that religious studies is woven on an intricate web of normative concerns, but that it ought to resist this tendency and try to disentangle itself as much as possible from that state of affairs? One of the most persistent advocates of such a position is the philosopher of religion, Donald Wiebe, who in his book *The Politics of Religious Studies* programmatically postulates:

A study of religion directed toward spiritual liberation of the individual or of the human race as a whole, toward the moral welfare of the human race, or toward any ulterior end than that of knowledge itself, should not find a home in the university. (Wiebe 1999: xiii)

⁶ At its inauguration in 1973, the department was named the Department of Religious Studies and located at the faculty of humanities. Systematic theology was merely one of the disciplines that together with philosophy of religion and ethics formed the subdiscipline "Faith and world view science" (*Tros och livsåskådningsvetenskap*). Part of the education for priesthood in the Swedish State Church was though offered from the beginning. In 2006, the department was enlarged by adding Latin and Greek, and renamed to the Department of Religious Studies, Theology and Classical Languages. The students could hence, for example, graduate with either a bachelor degree in religious studies or theology. The tricky point being though that there had not to be any difference in content between these two exams: the label being more one of convenience and pragmatic value. In 2009, religious studies and theology fused with the history of literature and the history of ideas into a larger department.

⁷ For the Swedish context see Girmalm 2006 and Högskoleverket 2008; cf. the international discussion e.g. Oliver and Warrier 2008; Bird and Smith 2009.

⁸ Cf. with article 26.2 in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

⁹ For an example focused on sociology in a Swedish context see Jörnsten 2008.

This position entails a basic cleavage between is and ought in the sense that knowledge becomes a goal in itself, and any purpose with research and teaching outside of that is ruled out, both that of Eliade's New Humanism or those of atheists, or critics of religion, who want to expose and undermine religion (Cf. McCutcheon 2001: 142). Therefore, Russell McCutcheon, in his attempt at marrying modernist naturalism¹⁰ with postmodern metatheoretical criticism, in this way giving the scholar of religion a public role as a critic poised to deconstruct religious discourse, does not find mercy before Wiebe's tribunal of a disinterested science of religion:

To put it simply, McCutcheon seems to believe that if, as a student of religion, one "reveals" the falsehood of religion and shows that it is not therefore a solid foundation on which to establish society, as a student of religion one has fulfilled one's duties as a public intellectual. (Wiebe 2005: 22)

To this McCutcheon replied in writing by several arguments and manoeuvres, for example, by dwelling on their friendship and common vision of religious studies, being perplexed that his former supervisor would in this way undermine the position of an ally, hinting jestingly at some sort of Freudian motive on Wiebe's part. Furthermore, McCutcheon remarked that the article analyzed by Wiebe was a remnant of a past stage in his, that is, McCutcheon's intellectual development, and besides that his position was not adequately rendered by Wiebe. This is though not the most interesting part of the reply for our present purposes, but at the end of his apologia McCutcheon goes on the offensive and criticises the vision of a value free science of religion that stays aloof from the drama of public debate. First, he attacks the basic principle of the objective scientific study of religion by pointing out that this is not in itself scientific, but that its status is akin to the problem facing the principle of verification put forward by logical positivists in the early 20th century, a principle that to their dismay was non-verifiable, therefore invalidating itself (McCutcheon 2006: 123). The doorkeeper checking that no normative constraints enter into the study of religion is ironically himself animated by norms, goals and values: the value of no value.

The next criticism brought forth by McCutcheon is how it can be possible for political structures to create an apolitical sphere; an objection which is a variant on the old argument that the effect must somehow be present in, or be of the same nature as, the cause. The autonomy of the university system is, however, not in itself produced by the political will, but by the renouncement of interference enshrined in legally binding documents. Even when allowing for the possibility of such an apolitical arena, McCutcheon criticizes the concept of religion as a neutral signifier, pointing out that it is intrinsically value laden and hence not an unbiased description of reality, but merely a construction, a feature which leads to that the discrete discipline studying precisely 'religion' is not a self evident part of the academy (cf. Fitzgerald 2000). Finally, his conclusion is that a value free study of religion is a case of wishful thinking (McCutcheon 2006: 125).

Perhaps it could be helpful, on the basis of the discussion above, to distinguish between at least two ways the relation between fact and value confronts religious studies. The first is the normative context that science and scholarship are located within, a situation which is unavoidable, while it is debatable to what extent this is a good thing; how far these forms of normative pressure should be able to influence the constitution of religious studies – and to

¹⁰ Of course naturalism comes in many forms and guises, but the general features relevant here are the ontological commitment that all that exists is part of the natural world and the epistemological principle that it (i.e. the natural world) can be studied in its totality by the empirical sciences. This means that the inverted thesis also holds, if something cannot in principle be studied by empirical science then it is not a real object. Naturalism is thus a philosophical position somewhat ironically abolishing philosophy as a separate discipline. Cf. Moser and Yandell 2000.

what degree the values intrinsic to scientific work should be left free to structure the discipline: values such as the commitment to truth disregarding its usefulness and the freedom to choose research questions. With other words, we enter into the debate of academic freedom or autonomy, which is not simply a question of a dichotomy between a quest for pure knowledge contra the influence of values; but the tension is more precisely between conflicting set of values as borne out by the McCutcheon-Wiebe debate.

The second way religious studies enters, willingly or reluctantly, into the normative dimension, is concerned with how scientific knowledge should relate to instrumental solutions of problems (technology), and further what bearings that scientific (scholarly) knowledge should have for moral and political issues. In the case of technology, the goal is given, and the knowledge supplied by the academy is used as a tool; this could be a question of material construction such as the building of bridges, but also of social engineering as efforts to reduce the levels of poverty and illiteracy. Insights gained by religious studies could, for example, enter into a discussion of how to handle a multicultural, multireligious society, something to which I think very few would object. Not even Wiebe rules this out (2005: 34). But, when it comes to define the ends, that is, to outline what is good, and consequently what place religion is to have in the good, ideal society, the scholar of religion is open to the charge of committing the naturalistic fallacy: trying to derive values from facts (Williams 2006 [1985]: 121–131).

It is also telling that attempts to exorcise theology from the study of religion and religion from society, at the same time often include the construction of a new ersatz religion. For example, the father of positivism, Auguste Comte, actually started his own religion *La religion de l'humanité* that was intended to replace outdated forms of supernatural religion, being hence a religion of immanence (Wernick 2001). This drive of the radically secular study of religion to take over the function of the object it studies, that is, religion, in order to strive for a truly scientific society, runs as a red thread from the Enlightenment and the French revolution to our time, though some are not comfortable with that zeal, as witnessed by the mixed reception to Daniel Dennet's book *Breaking the Spell* (2006), even from scholars otherwise sympathetic to the study of religion as only a natural phenomenon (e.g. Geertz 2008).

If the presence of theology at the same institution as religious studies raises the question of the legitimacy of a constructive, that is, a normative theology in a secular academic setting; then the same problem (the fact/value distinction) arises within the methodologically atheist study of religion as the question of what status is to be given to the wholehearted acceptance of the political imperative of usefulness, and the consequent participation in the debate on how the good society is to be constructed. Is it, as Weber argues, only legitimate for the scholar *qua* scholar to lay before the public and the decision makers what ways of action are possible; what results certain measures probably will have; and which courses of action are the most efficient to reach a given goal? While, at the same time, not addressing the question what ends that are to be considered as good and which as bad, or even evil? Has the scholar when overstepping this boundary then left his or her professional role and consequently acts merely as a private citizen, who on the contrary has every right to argue publically for a position on such questions? (Weber 2005: 321–343).

THE POSTMODERN ERA WITHIN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

For me to enter into this discursive place of contesting narratives as a student in the 1990ies coincided with the increasing acceptance of a 'postmodern' position in the study of religion and academic theology in Sweden, a factor which further blurred the boundaries between

rational and irrational; between is and ought.¹¹ Within this new paradigm, scholars championed in different ways and degrees a relativism that dethroned the modernist form of scientific rationality, arguing as McCutcheon that there is actually no value free or neutral position, but that all perspectives come with their metaphysical premises and built in values.¹² This made it theoretically possible to radicalize the sympathetic attitude of the phenomenologist of religion, in that theology and the methodologically atheist study of religion merely became different bids on what should count as true and good (Paden 1994: 58). In that case, no rational objection is really possible for adopting an explicitly theological or normative position also within religious studies; the constraints being merely those exercised by raw power, institutional inertia and tradition. For a theology hard pressed by rationalism this held out a promise of renewed legitimacy, though at a high price, as faith could not amount to more than fideism in a world without rational foundations: but then also science was portrayed as a kind of faith (cf. Milbank 2006). The Postmodern scepticism and relativism both in regard to rationality (truth) and morality (goodness) in this way opened up for an interpenetration of postmodern Lutheran theology and religious studies.

However, as the latter half of the 20th century also was the scene of the transformation of Sweden from a more or less monolithically Protestant country into an increasingly multicultural and multireligious society incorporated in a globalized world, other important changes in my subdiscipline within religious studies, viz., the history of religions, were initiated. History of religions (science of religion) was from the beginning a project with several important sources: liberal Protestantism, philological investigations of old textual civilisations and a modernist critique of religion in general and Christianity in particular (Hjelde 2000; Molendijk 2005). This contextual position of the scholar has been largely eroded by the postcolonial critique and the move to a multireligious society – the discipline of history of religions could even in the future develop into a label for a set of non-Christian theologies. This is not a development alien to the government which, for example, has plans for a state financed education of Muslim imams.¹³ The present tendency is, consequently, not to disentangle the education of priests for the Swedish Church from the secular system of education, thereby finalizing the severance of church and state, but instead the intention seems to be to enlarge the project of state control of the education of religious specialists. If this is extended to religions from south and southeast Asia as Hinduism and Buddhism, then the relation between theology(-ies) and a secular religious studies will be even more complex. Furthermore, if the postmodern equalising of positions is embraced in a spirit of tolerance, this development could lead to a clash of academic theologies taking place within the institutional structure of religious studies, or, if one is an optimist, turn it into an arena for a fruitful interreligious dialogue.

With the postmodern wave came also a set of specific values of postmarxist criticism and emancipation, which mark a link of continuity with the modernist ethos of the Enlightenment tradition. This have motivated the second reaction to the phenomenology of religion, viz., a sharp criticism of its androcentrism, essentialism and conceptual, theological imperialism

¹¹ For a comment on this general transition from Marxism to postmarxism within the humanities in Sweden see Nordin 2008.

¹² For a volume that tries to discuss and meet this challenge of postmodern thought to the project of comparative religion see Patton and Ray 2000.

¹³ A committee of inquiry was initiated 2008-05-22 (to report at the latest the 2009-06-01) with directives specifying that it should find its point of departure in the basic principles governing the Swedish governmental support of religious organizations. These principles in short boils down to that “the religious organization should contribute to maintaining and strengthening the foundational values that the Swedish society rests upon /.../”. The next and final phrase is ambivalent and literally translated becomes: “that it is stabile and that it has its own vitality.” < <http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c6/10/57/84/8d4b5266.pdf> > 2008-05-23.

(e.g. Christ 1991; Shaw 1995: 66f; McCutcheon 1997). Instead of taking the plurality of perspectives and the lack of ultimate foundations as an invitation to a hermeneutical attitude of empathy, it motivated an ethos of deconstructionism, which aimed at exposing precisely the lack of rational foundation for religions and their dependence on structures of power, with other words, their ideological nature.¹⁴ If such a criticism in a Marxist context rested firmly on a materialist ontology, the postmarxist position could not invoke any such foundation for its criticism and the consequent will to emancipation – the latter to be achieved mainly through the denaturalizing of any religious moral or societal ideal (e.g. see Docherty 1996). The allure of this approach, thus, rests first in its softening of modernity's tendency to scientism, and secondly in its emancipatory potentialities. But the basic weakness lies in the relativism of truth and morality (and aesthetics), which in their extreme forms open up for a reduction of truth, morality and beauty to power and mere subjective opinion (cf. Milbank 2006: 318f; Eagleton 2003). Of course, for modernity the first of these relativisms was the more fatal, as morality and aestheticism in large measure already had been forced to retreat to the subjective sphere. In order for the postmodern critic of religion (or caretaker for that matter) not to lose his or her basis, this corrosive relativism has to be tempered, so at least one point of view, from where the criticism is to be launched, is less relative than what is criticised (Levy 2002: 18). Otherwise the criticism is only a case of one ideological position hammering away at another (cf. Porpora 2004).

We could see such a tension between the attractive and problematic sides of postmodernism reflected in the work of Gavin Flood, an Indologist and theoretician of religion. For example, his book *The Ascetic Self*, which revolves around the themes of interiority, self and ritualization, enacts this ambivalence as a balance between phenomenology and postmodern approaches. Flood recognizes his formation as a scholar within the phenomenology of religion, and though aware of the criticism levelled at that approach, remains loyal to it; his project is largely an attempt to reformulate the comparative approach of phenomenology, which rests on the idea of a common nature of the human person:

It [i.e. his book] also expresses a belief that goes against the grain of some contemporary thinking, that there are common features of human being that cut across historical and cultural divides – an insight expressed in earlier centuries as a belief in a common human nature. (Flood 2004: x)

This puts him into the same fold as the cognitive study of religion, though there the focus is on the common structure of the brain, while Flood, embedded in a hermeneutical tradition, is more focused on universals of human thought expressed in texts. At the same time, Flood has internalized a postmodern (postcritical) theoretical perspective, and as formulated in his previous book *Beyond Phenomenology* (1999), he advocates a form of dialogism between scholar and informant, taking the critique put forward by deconstructionism as an argument for a more humble attitude toward religious traditions and persons than the modernist one, though he, at the same time, tries to eschew extreme forms of cultural relativism (2004: 22). Conscious that this exposes him, as Eliade previously, to the charge of an implicit theology, he formulates the following answer:

In the sense that I do intend to take very seriously ascetic claims about the nature of the self and world, then the book is certainly implicitly theological, although it is not theology because it does not stand directly within a theological tradition of discourse. I do not explore the theological implications of asceticism /.../ (Flood 2004: xi)

¹⁴ I am here using ideology in the Marxist sense of false consciousness, see Pines 1993. But beside this use of ideology as a critical term there is also “the neutral conception” (Thomson 2001: 7173).

We could say that Flood tries to balance the comparative project of phenomenology, including its necessary prerequisite, a common human nature and its hermeneutically open attitude to religious truth claims, with a postmodern critique of exactly such essences and the uncritical affirmation of elite religious discourse. The result is that his work (and those inspired by it) has to live with strong internal tensions as that between universalism and relativism, and that between empathy and criticism.¹⁵

For my own part as a doctoral student, I tried, as Flood, a variant of the phenomenological approach, but rejected the basic principles of postmodern theory since they seemed to lead to (or presuppose) a tragic (or heroic) loss of the basic trust in human reason that is required when using it as a tool for exploring reality; a fall from grace that cultivates the suspicion that all scholarly work ultimately are baseless constructions. On the other hand, I perceived the phenomenological insistence on an exclusive hermeneutical perspective and the rejection of, for example, sociological or biological perspectives, as inadequate. I thus struggled with finding a point of departure in order to construct, as I saw it, a defensible version of the project of a rational study of religion.

COGNITIVE STUDIES OF RELIGION

Now some 15 years later, the landscape has changed somewhat on an international level, though not yet in the Swedish context, with the growing strength of the cognitive study of religion, reaffirming the modernist position of the rationality of science and the irrationality of religious thought, though the latter due to its natural character is almost inescapable.¹⁶ I really sympathise with the emphasis on the rational legitimacy of science, and consequently the study of religion, to which those working hard within this new paradigm bear witness; and in this sense I am most definitely a post-postmodernist (cf. Slingerland 2008). However, I cannot follow the political program of the so-called ‘brights’ that is based on this methodological and ontological reduction of religion to merely a natural, that is, a material phenomenon, and that hence labour for the reduction of the public influence of religion, (which anyway looks like a hopeless task if one is to take the statement of the innate nature of religion seriously).

A THOMIST PERSPECTIVE

This point of dissent is mainly due to that my trust in human reason, and the viability of a study of religion within the limits of reason alone, does not find its ultimate foundation in a materialist ontology. It is instead derived from a model of division of labour, as this is formulated in classical Catholic teaching, between, on the one hand, human reason proceeding without help from religious revelation, and on the other hand, theology based on revealed

¹⁵ This is similar to the McCutcheon’s project which by accepting postmodern approaches ultimately undermines his modernist naturalist position, as all discourses including social constructionism itself are social constructions, in the sense of arbitrary conceptualizations of the natural and social world. As Porpora writes “If social constructionist claims about science are also only social constructions, then they are deprived of all warrant. All assertions carry implicit truth claims that what is asserted is true (Habermas 1984). Applied reflexively to itself, social constructionism ends up denying the implicit truth of—or at least warrant for—its own assertions. Not only then do social constructionism’s assertions cease being anything that should claim anyone’s attention, they cease being even intelligible. Applied to itself, social constructionism becomes what Apel (1998) calls a “performative contradiction,” an utterance that contradicts the very performance of uttering it.” (Porpora 2006: 68). The most frequently recurring and devastating critique of radical postmodernism being its self-contradictory nature. See e.g. Monk 2004.

¹⁶ This is a point developed by Justin Barrett (2004) in his book *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* in the direction of a natural theology; hinting at the possibility that the innate inclination toward religious thinking can be read as providing material for an argument from design: God thus having created us so that we would in a natural way form ideas about his existence and qualities. Humans in this way being natural theists. For a review confounded by and critical of this aspect see Bulkeley 2006.

truths.¹⁷ My reason for resisting scepticism is then not the same as many of those now at work within the old, but at the same time new, paradigm of religion as *only* a natural phenomenon. But, does this difference in foundation automatically banish me from a study of religion as a natural phenomenon? I want to argue no, as the important dividing line is not to be found in the answer to the question of whether religion is a natural phenomenon, that is, created by humans due to innate tendencies or capacities. The theory of anthropomorphism of Stewart Guthrie (1993), is, for example, illuminating when considering how humans construct and interpret religious supernatural agents, but it does not decide the question whether any such being really exist. I do not see any principal problems with reductionism in the sense of exploring which natural causes that form and constrain the emergence and endurance of religious beliefs and practices. To argue for an exclusively hermeneutical perspective on religion seems to be irresponsible, as it ultimately has to rest on an ideal human being omniscient and omnipotent, that is, without constraints.

However, at certain points, there of course emerge distinctive differences between a study of religion as a natural phenomenon inspired by atheism, materialism and one motivated by a Thomistic philosophical position.¹⁸ The former sees religion in its belief in a supernatural world populated by gods, demons and ghosts as essentially mistaken, while the latter maintains that religions are basically, if not in all details, on the right track. When entering the political arena there quite naturally emerges a controversy regarding the position of religion in the good society. This does not, however, need to be detrimental, as the public arena of a democratic society provides an opportunity of respectful reasoned debate on these issues.¹⁹ And since, for example, my study of ritual interiorization (forthcoming) does not go into politics, and, therefore, does not advise the reader on any particular way of acting toward religious phenomena, but merely tries to focus on a particular spectrum of religious ritual activity and to discuss critically the tools for analyzing it, the different sources of inspiration for the project of a study of religion as a natural phenomenon, should not be of a decisive (or divisive) nature.

Another point besides the political one is that within the tradition of Thomistic philosophy, there is actually a special view of the scope of reason, a feature that puts it into conflict with philosophical modernity from the *via moderna* of the 14th century through Kant to logical positivism. The modern highly efficient reason with its focus on empirical verification, mathematical models and instrumental rationality is in large measure made possible by the

¹⁷ As expressed in, for example, the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*: "Faith therefore has no fear of reason, but seeks it out and has trust in it." <www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0216/___PA.HTM> 2008-05-23. This could be compared with the principle of NOMA (Non-Overlapping-Magisteria) as proposed by the late palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould (1999). According to Gould science and religion have different areas of competence, that is, magisteria. The domain of science is that of facts, while religion properly is concerned with the human need for values and meaning. When religious discourse proposes something factual about the empirical world, then it has overstepped its proper sphere of teaching authority, and the same is true for science when it tries to answer ultimate questions, and define values such as what is good or beautiful. The differences as compared with a Thomistic approach is first that religion is emptied of its ontological and rational dimension, it is only concerned with irrational values, second that there is no mediating discipline as metaphysics (first philosophy) to provide a bridge between reason and faith. These ought to be totally separated, but most cordially acknowledge each other's proper magisteria. The problem is where this act of separation of empirical fact from irrational value is to be located. Is it a fact or a value? If it is a value, a statement of how things ought to be, then this is within the magisterium of religion, and Gould as an agnostic scientist has clearly overstepped the border of his own making. Cf. Crick 2002. What is missing is thus a mediating metadiscipline such as philosophy.

¹⁸ I do not maintain here that Thomism exhausts the field of legitimate philosophical positions in Catholic discourse, but at the same time it has after Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) a privileged position e.g. in the central encyclical of pope John Paul II *Fides et Ratio* (1998), see § 43.

¹⁹ E.g. the volume containing the papers presented by Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger January 19, 2004 in a dialogue on secularization, reason and religion at the Academy of Bavaria (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006).

rejection of metaphysics. In contrast, the scope of reason in Thomistic philosophy partly overlaps with the revealed truths handled by theology (*sacra doctrina*), because according to Thomas some things though revealed, are also, though with great effort, knowable by human reason, as the existence of an ultimate being (Copleston 2003 [1950]: 312). The rejection of metaphysics on the part of modernity deprives religious discourse of its rational foundation, undercutting its legitimacy as knowledge by restricting valid knowledge to the aspects of the material world which are (at least indirectly) knowable through the human senses. This Ockhamian incision, however, also has its dangers as evidenced by the fate of logical positivism, as already alluded to, which insisted on verification as the criterion of meaning or truth, and because such a principle cannot be verified it was thus itself meaningless. It is difficult to argue for some kind of ontology, even a materialist one, without venturing into metaphysics. The same problem accrues to the foundation of first principles; one could even say that scepticism is the shadow of the absolute faith in a modernist down sized reason. Postmodernism and modernism being more like siblings than contraries (Delanty 2000). But, not even this point of divergence in philosophical outlook needs to become an insurmountable problem in the study of religion, as, for example, the discussion of whether the problem of infinite regress points in the direction of a prime mover does not necessarily arise within it.

Another way of proceeding would though have been to eliminate all traces of Thomistic inspiration from my (forthcoming) study, in an effort to privatize, in a secular context, my foundation for engaging in a rational reflection on a theme of religious behaviour. I have, nevertheless, decided not to do so, but instead chose to make this aspect of my reflections on ritual interiorization clearer by thinking through some of the implications in this prolegomenon. This is partly an act of intellectual honesty, but could also be important in that it points to the necessity that religious traditions within their own intellectual traditions construct arguments for a public arena of rational reflection, including the study of religion. The point here is that both the theist and the atheist need to formulate reasons and parameters for their participation in the study of religion, and that this motivation naturally proceeds from principles within their respective worldviews. Otherwise, the commitment to a reasoned investigation of the phenomena of religion is merely a façade hiding a more primary agenda, either the promotion of a particular religion or the marginalization of religion in general.

This does not mean that the different foundations for the study of religion will be without consequence for the actual work done; such differences are only to be expected in the same way as a Marxist, a Freudian or a Rational Choice theoretician differs; it is part of the game so to speak. It is also important to make clear that I am not advocating that the participants in the study of religion bring with them parts of alleged revealed theology regarding ontology, morality, jurisprudence and politics; this would make the discipline of the history of religions, and the larger field of religious studies, into a collection of different theologies. The main point argued here is that the participation in the project of a scientific investigation of religion should be given a foundation and legitimacy within one's own world view, and not merely be a condition to endure until one can shed this objective varnish. That demands that religious traditions recognise the legitimacy and importance of this kind of study and that atheist scholars acknowledge that a materialist ontology is not self-evident.

RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND POLITICS

There could thus be multiple valid reasons for engaging in the investigation of religion as a practice flowing from the natural constitution of the human person. But this agreement, of course, does not extend to the political domain, and, therefore, it is important to keep apart the

study of religion at the university and the political discussion of the value and place of religion in society.

There are several ways in which politics and religious studies should be distinguished. The first of these is when political correctness is required for teaching and doing research, then the common rational discourse, which does not exclude either religious or nonreligious motivations, will break down. Truth is subordinated to ideology, and, it all becomes a question of power, a not uncommon situation, but nevertheless I think, a sad one. Secondly, the search for accurate knowledge of religion, and the use of this knowledge in society, the technology of religious studies so to speak, have to be kept apart. The search for truth should not be subordinated to short-sighted functional criteria; the academy can, given a certain amount of autonomy, construct a sphere of free intellectual inquiry, though it is of course not an absolute freedom, but a relative one. This is actually the first 'fundamental principle' of the *Magna Charta Universitatum Europaeum* signed in Bologna in 1988 by a large number of European Universities:

The university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies differently organized because of geography and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by research and teaching. To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power.²⁰

But am I here not relapsing into a problematic positivist distinction between truth and goodness (values)? One could argue that knowledge about religion resulting from the scientific study of it will also quite naturally have normative consequences. That it is not only so that the study of religion as a natural phenomenon is located in a web of normative constraints, but that it is organically connected to the actual handling of religion in society (both national and global) – that religious studies is simply an integrated part of the larger society, and all visions of a disinterested study of religion are merely exercises in wishful thinking, constructing an intellectual utopia.

However, what I am trying to do is to differentiate between the question of the foundation of a rational study of religion, and the question of the relation between science and politics. The attempt is to open up for an investigation of religion as a natural phenomenon in which multiple ways of coming to that project are considered legitimate. At the same time, this examination of religion should abstain from venturing into politics, prescribing the ways religion ought to be, or the ways it ought to be handled by the authorities, while simultaneously trying to keep politicians and religious authorities from intervening into the core of this project, as it transcends the concern of a particular region, nation and religion.

I am thus here basically adopting the position of Wiebe, but this does not on my part amount to a total separation of is and ought.²¹ The scholar does not operate in a moral vacuum. As resting on a Thomistic foundation, I adhere to the notion of natural law, or in modern parlance, universal human rights and obligations.²² These should guide and structure

²⁰ <www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/880918_Magna_Charta_Universitatum.pdf> 2008-05-07.

²¹ Cf. the very interesting and ambitious attempt by David Weissman (2006) of connecting ontology and normativity within a communitarian framework. His argument inspired by system theory and having the notion of constraint as a guiding principle ranges from nature through praxis and morality to aesthetics. It fits very well with the critical realist approach chosen in this study of ritual interiorization, especially the concept of emergence in relation to systemic structure functions as a bridge. For a realist ontology, his work provides a healthy antidote to a positivist vision of a pure rationality, and makes the reflection of religious studies on its own identity less problematic, though it still remains a difficult and politically sensitive task.

²² For the sake of the argument, there is no great difference between maintaining that the scholar is obliged to obey the general principles of natural law, or that the scholar benefits from and has to respect universal human

also the academic study of religion. We as scholars are not value neutral or morally disinterested in this respect; research has to obey common principles of moral behaviour, when for example handling the anonymity or integrity of informants. This infuses the study of religion with a basic normative character, but nonetheless, it should – if it is true to its scientific nature – be primarily concerned with knowledge, and let politics be handled by politicians. These two practices could, of course, be combined in one and the same person, professionally active within religious studies and privately active in the public debate arguing about the role of religion or specific religions: something which is also true of all scholars in the field who are active in a religious organization, or an antireligious one.

The distinction sketched here between scholarship and politics is, then, not primarily based on a Humean separation of is and ought ('Hume's Guillotine', Black 1969: 100), but between different tasks and the circumstances that come with them (in a sense, a form of functional differentiation). For does that principle applied to itself not invalidate the very separation between fact and value? As one cannot, then, derive the norm that 'one should not draw normative conclusions from facts' from the factual *non sequitur* of value from fact (cf. Kainz 2004: 70f.). This normative conclusion presupposes the more general norm that one should be rational,²³ but as also that norm cannot be grounded in a fact as, for example, greater efficiency, we are led from value to value not coming to a halt until we reach an arbitrarily postulated final level of values.

Nevertheless, the political sphere cannot be a mere application of scientific knowledge (as in the scientist utopia), but is constituted by the rules of power (compromise, rhetoric, national interest, ideological position etc.) operative in the society in which the university, and hence the scholar, is situated. How scientific knowledge is to be used does not follow automatically from its nature, but is decided by inserting it into certain value systems, e.g. communism or neoliberalism. In order for a scholar to engage in a political discussion, he or she then has to step into such a value system or some more fuzzy value community.

There is though one more way for the scholar to proceed, since the work done within the university is to be governed by general moral norms, as proscribed by natural law or human rights. Then an opportunity (which in a sense is non-political) is opened up to enter into the public debate by combining the general principles of natural law with the more detailed scholarly knowledge. An avenue of critique is provided, a sort of *phronesis* of religious studies.²⁴ This could, for example, be a combination of the principle of the intrinsic value of the human person and the discovery of certain forms of oppression within religious circles, or

rights. In both cases, no area of amoral rationality is possible which only recognizes norms for their contribution toward scientific efficiency. One could even argue that the concept of human rights requires a foundation in a form of natural law in order to be more than contingent conventions (e.g. Maritain 2001 61f.). For a discussion see Perry 1998.

²³ The injunction to reason rationally constitutes the major premise of this particular practical syllogism (while Hume's guillotine is the minor), but it is also foundational for all scientific and scholarly activity, thus fulfilling the same function for reasoning as the first principle of natural law "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided" does for moral action. Cf. Kossel 2002: 174f.

²⁴ One can though distinguish between *phronesis* and critique as John Dunne (1993: 16) in his reading of Habermas. Dunne, furthermore, elaborates the Aristotelian distinction between *phronēsis* as praxis (the life as a citizen, the end is to be found within the action performed) and *technē* as *poiēsis* (production, the end of action is found outside the action, the technique so to speak). These conceptual nuances could be used to characterize three different ways in which the theoretical and empirical insights of religious studies can be put into non scientific practice. First in a Weberian sense as *technē* fitting into deliberations in which the goal is already given; second as critique (Habermas), and thirdly as *phronēsis* in the more positive sense of providing directions for the good life of the citizens. The two latter, however, require a foundation outside the discursive space of religious studies, such as natural law or universal human rights.

the inhuman treatment of a religious group by the state, as the Jews in Nazi Germany.²⁵ The problem, however, with such a way of reaching out into the larger society (the *j'accuse* of religious studies) is that it is not unlikely that the theories used within religious studies are already influenced by some ideological, or metaphysical position, which hence shapes the knowledge produced, and perhaps also influences the formulation of a specific version of what the natural law amounts to, or what is to be included in the catalogue of human rights. There is, hence, a probability that the social critique produced is predetermined by ideological positions, with other words, that it is already political in nature. I would though like to keep this form of normative application open together with the instrumental use of knowledge derived from religious studies, in so far as this is not in conflict with the basic principles of natural law.²⁶

MY POSITION

The position sketched above acknowledges that religious studies as a form of theoretical reason is founded in a context of practical reason, inserted into a social web of goals and normative discussions. This is not only an empirical fact, but an unavoidable and deeply human feature. My position, furthermore, takes to heart the basic moral character of all human action, that scholars are human persons also in their professional roles, not merely functionally differentiated bureaucrats bent on instrumental reasoning. The academic study of religion is hence not value neutral, but its service to the local nation and to humanity is to be found precisely in its possibility to freely search for knowledge. If the basic values of local politics or the economy, that is, power and economical gain, invade the study, the fundamental goal of scholarly work will be forfeited and paradoxically its usefulness lessened. At the same time, as argued above, the pursuing of the primary objective of science and scholarship is enabled by precisely normative systems such as positive law; the university in the Middle Ages was founded as a corporation granted special freedom in relation to the town and the local bishop guaranteed by the pope, emperor or king (Nardi 1992). The national state now has to guarantee this freedom in its statutes and by the distribution of tax money or by allowing private endowments and student fees. To this project of gaining knowledge about religion in general and about particular religions, both religious and nonreligious persons should be welcomed, but I insist on that they should not in a gesture of privatization leave their religious or nonreligious commitments behind them, but that they should derive from these the necessary inspiration and legitimization for participating in the study of religion. Otherwise the subject will be torn apart by more or less overt ideological agendas.

Nonetheless, this vision of religious studies could be considered fatally naïve, despite the reservations presented. The argument is then that a study of religion founded on a worldview which does not exclude supernaturalism, and a study based on a materialist ontology will look quite different. That, for example, the larger scope of reason constituted by the Thomistic philosophical perspective – which actually provides a foundation for a methodological theism

²⁵ The failure to do so is also a stance with moral value and political implications. For example, see the discussion of the connection between the philosophy of Heidegger and his involvements with Nazism (e.g. Rockmore 1992 and Phillips 2005).

²⁶ This reaching out into praxis is thus not as radical and political in nature as the phronetic social (political) science envisioned by Bent Flyvbjerg (2001). I would like to emphasize that the epistemic dimension (though not identical with that of the natural sciences) is primary and the phronetic together with the technical are secondary (but not unimportant) for religious studies. For a sharp critique of Flyvbjerg's position see Laitin (2006) and the refutation provided by Flyvbjerg (2006) in the same volume. The normative dimension of phronesis is, however, not provided according to Flyvbjerg by universal norms such as natural law, but by the common view among a specific group (Flyvbjerg 2006: 77). This postmodern reception of Aristotle seems to belong to the communitarian fold as implied by his references to Charles Taylor and Alasdair Macintyre.

– when meeting a modernist version of reason, which is more restricted, and therefore inclined toward a methodological atheism, will find itself in animated conflict. That the difference is really between a natural theology and a study of religion as merely natural, and that the two could never constitute parts of the same practice due to the demand of theoretical coherence. This would then be merely a variant on the drama unfolding in our societies: the clash between a radical secularism and different religions trying to influence the formation of society. My position, when outlined against that background, is intended to be part of the larger attempt to establish (and to uphold so far it already exists) a common arena of reasoned inquiry into the phenomenon of religion by abstaining both from fideism and antireligious sentiments. As religious thought and practice together form one of the most basic and universal human activities, the understanding of them are vital for any attempt at understanding the human condition.

On a personal level, one could also see my newly assumed position on this issue as a development toward a more integrated intellectuality. That is, as an attempt to overcome a strange dichotomy between, on the one hand, a private sphere comprising a personal faith and the inspiration derived from a philosophical tradition connected to it, and, on the other hand, a public role seemingly demanding a professional simulation of atheism. This intellectual consistency is not only important on a psychological level as a prerequisite for effective scholarly work, but I believe it also carries with it important implications for the nature of the work carried out within the institutional structure of religious studies. One could in this manner move away from the situation where a fictional privatization of religious and ideological positions is upheld while in reality the opposite is the reality. I hence reject the proposal by Edward Slingerland (2008) of a pragmatic double truth approach, in which professionally the human person is to be considered as merely an advanced machine, a container for selfish genes, and morality as evolutionary derived behaviour for the survival of the group (or more correctly its genes), and poetry the result of overactive anthropomorphism, while, privately and in society, we should act as we had free will, art communicates sublime truths and morality has a binding force besides that supplied by raw power. In short: we should professionally be naturalists and privately humanists.²⁷ But, if scientifically materialism is to be considered as superior to supernaturalism, monism to dualism, and religion is simply a delusion, then I see no reason why this could not be made the governing principle of private and public life. If, on the other hand, this is not only practically but theoretically impossible (e.g. self-contradictory), or has gruesome inhuman consequences,²⁸ this should be taken to indicate that something perhaps is awry with the theory. I will thus in contrast to Slingerland in my scholarly work, as in private, maintain a humanist (personalist) position, which resists the merging of the humanities into the natural sciences, while affirming the mutual benefits that could be gained from cooperation. At the same time, as Slingerland, I welcome that within the study of human culture and society (the human and social sciences) the impetus for leaving scepticism behind is growing.²⁹

²⁷ Cf. the Thomistic rejection of the Averroist *veritas duplex* (double truth) theory concerning the relation between theological and philosophical truth. A position which, however, was not contrary to the law of non-contradiction, but: "...one and the same truth is understood clearly in philosophy and expressed allegorically in theology." (Copleston 2003 [1950]: 198f.)

²⁸ An example would be what the French Marxist Althusser called "*Marx's theoretical anti-humanism*" (Althusser 2000 [1965]) which when taken to the practical level leads to results such as the crimes against humanity committed by communist regimes. On a more personal *ad hominem* level this theory-praxis nexus is played out in Althusser's own life story as he strangled his wife and claimed no memory of it.

²⁹ For example, Smith and Jenks 2006 within sociology. I find their criticism of modernist humanism including postmodernism in many aspects persuasive. It provides support for the position that any humanist position, in order to be taken seriously in the 21st century, has to free itself from idealism in order to be able to respond to the

I have tried above to make my newly formed point of departure as clear as possible without becoming too long-winded, though I must confess that I do not consider it as final; it is merely the temporary outcome of an ongoing part of doing research in religious studies, that is, to study religion is simultaneously a reflexive undertaking, a probing of one's own premises, religious or nonreligious.

growing amount of knowledge within, for example, the fields of human cognition and biology which paints an increasingly finer grained picture of the limits of human freedom.

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